

At the simplest level, it's generally agreed that employee engagement is critical to business success. But many organisations fail to remember that engagement really lies with the leaders within the business, and that those leaders need to be guided and truly understand how to get their people inspired and energised to achieve common goals.

In this article, we will look at the kind of leadership skills needed to build commitment, development and consistently high achievement.

Paying attention to your people is paramount, as they are your most valuable asset. For the majority of organisations, people are the most costly expense (hiring, firing, payroll, disciplinary), so it is well worth maintaining them. Even more so than your car or office machinery, people too need oiling, tuning, greasing and synchronising for optimum performance.

The problem is that people are often just left to get on with their job without the right level of guidance or support. Although some organisations would say they provide employees with every opportunity, employers usually align their monetary investment to training that ensures employees can perform tasks or use the latest technology. While this type of training does have its place and is important, those organisations are simply paying attention to their human 'doings', perhaps spending relatively little time on them as human 'beings'.

"15% of your earning potential comes from knowledge and direct skills... 85% comes from your leadership and interpersonal skills"
– Dale Carnegie

Employee engagement means different things to different people, but ultimately it's about the relationship between the individual and the organisation they work for. An engaged employee is highly motivated, absorbed and energetic about their work. As a result, they often put more effort in, go above and beyond what's expected of them and truly care about the success of the business. They are willing to put in discretionary effort to achieve the goals of the organisation.



It starts with the leaders

An organisation may have an Executive Board, high level managers, or even an HR department with very good intentions of increasing employee engagement over time, but as the saying goes, people leave managers, not companies. Unless increasing employee engagement translates into changes in the day-to-day operations and actions with direct managers, there is unlikely to be a change.

So organisations have a responsibility to make sure their leaders know what skills they need to have to get their employees engaged, and give them the tools and knowledge to make it happen.

Shared purpose

The way to keep employees engaged is to lead them through a shared purpose and vision – a shared way of doing things. It's about inspiring their passion to do the work the way you want it done, or at least achieve

the outcomes you need. Engaged employees want to come to work and consistently give 110% effort, so attendance is high, they are rarely off sick and they produce above average standards of performance.

Sometimes this happens by itself, which is a dream and you know when you're there, because everyone realises it is special while it's happening. More often though, if employee engagement is anything less than 100%, this process has to be led with purpose and intention.

Vision and boundaries

Imagine if you will:

"You are a leader. You take your team to the top of a tall building, a skyscraper in fact. It has a flat roof, it is dark, there is no barrier round the edge of the roof... and the team members have roller skates on. You ask them to skate around, but they huddle together in the middle not daring to go far – it is very scary for them. But now, if you floodlight the roof and put railings round the edge then the team will skate to the edges, using all the space, they will put on a magnificent display exceeding all your expectations." – Dr Derek Biddle

If you fail to shine the light (which is your vision), fail to put up the right railings (which are your boundaries), or fail to spot when some members of your team are skating exactly the way you want and are encouraging it, that's when things go wrong. It is hard work and stressful.

To achieve this clarity of purpose, to authentically shine the light and set the boundaries, a leader needs specific skills. And one of the most under-emphasised skills to keep everything fluid and working, like in any good engineering process, is explicitness. It sits best in the early stages of the leader's journey in developing an individual or a team.

"Explicitness is... specifying in clear, unambiguous, behavioural terms, what is required for successful operation, and what will be regarded as poor performance"

– Dr Derek Biddle

It has been observed too that when a group of children are in a big, unfamiliar field and you tell them they can play anywhere, typically they won't go far from the 'base' or where you are. However, if you put a fence round the area near to you or even quite a way away, they have a sense of boundary and security. If you tell them they can play anywhere within the fence, they will use all the available space and may even try and climb over the fence, just to see what happens and test the boundary.

For a leader then, the boundary you put up is about developing a strong, clear vision and setting the 'rules of engagement' for working as part of this team. It includes the overall organisation goals, the way we relate to each other, the systems we use, the time we keep, the way we dress, what we say, the way we deliver our service.

Being explicit in this way requires the leader to be 'present', to be visible, to notice when things need to be done and how, to especially notice when things are being done well, and when they are not. This becomes all the more acute when offices are virtual, you all work at different locations, or you are constantly travelling. Your 'being visible', the light you are shining, and being able to lead with clarity and explicitness requires attention, commitment and passion. It is easy then for people to engage and support the leader.

The ability to motivate and inspire others

'Recognition' is a primary motivator for people generally. Indeed negative feedback or even abuse means someone is giving you attention, and it is 100 times better than being ignored. So giving recognition in the form of feedback little and often, every day, is a fundamental leadership skill, and is part of establishing strong commitment and engagement.

Here the old adage 'what gets measured gets done' springs to mind, and you know wherever you place your attention, things start to happen. Rewarding people for good performance (remember about seven times more positive than negative feedback is needed!) is part of driving high achievement, people feel better if they know what they do matters and it is appreciated.

Self-awareness

The step change for leaders is the recognition that before they can lead and engage others, they first need to lead themselves. This starts from a platform of heightened level of self-awareness – or leadership from the inside-out. Leaders who are self-aware will align their core identity and purpose to their behaviour and results. This frees them up to express themselves authentically in everything that they do and say and to act in alignment with their purpose and values. It is only after this is accomplished that they can effectively tackle the challenge of leading others.

Where it can lead

Research from Hay Group tells us that highly engaged workers create better business outputs, more loyal customers and better financial performance. From this data Hay Group maintain that highly engaged employees "can improve business performance by up to 30 per cent and that fully engaged employees are 2.5 times more likely to exceed performance expectations than their 'disengaged' colleagues." This is why enlightened business leaders recognise that against a backdrop of cost cutting and scant resources, the single most effective way to drive results is by proactively and systematically pursuing a strategy of employee engagement.



Conclusion

The majority of employees want to work – and want to work hard. This is what human beings are naturally pre-programmed to do. The skill of a leader is to harness this effort and create a working environment where individuals develop a 'habit' for putting extra discretionary effort into everything they do. Cumulatively, this new habit of going the extra mile, builds a culture of high performance.

Often leaders are not aware of the impact they make, and their part in creating the right environment for developing employee engagement. So being clear about their own personal style, setting their vision, putting the boundaries in place and being explicit about what's required, is a perfect starting point. Then giving strong, clear feedback, resiliently maintaining direction, understanding their own and each individual's motivations, resolutely going about leading and developing people, builds an ethos of continuous improvement and engagement.

When individuals experience this laser focus of attention into them as people, they can't fail to shine, they want to develop, support the leader and excel. Organisations then truly appreciate that their only business advantage is their people.

About the contributors

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She set up Ali Stewart & Co in 2004 to develop in people their true leadership potential, and is the accrediting body for the acclaimed Leading & Developing High Performance programme by Dr Derek S Biddle.

Ali is also an Insights Licensed Practitioner and uses Insights Discovery to develop individuals, teams and leaders. She is twice national award winner with Insights for outstanding knowledge and is an Insights Regional Mentor. In 2012, she became one of the first accredited practitioners in the world able to deliver Insights Deeper Discovery.

The Self-Directing Professional is the latest Ali Stewart & Co product, and is key to helping people achieve their own personal excellence. Ali works with clients from a variety of market sectors both in the UK and abroad, including the Meningitis Now, The Royal Society of Medicine, NHS, Environment Agency, The National College for School Leadership, The Jelf Group, The Bateman Group, Sunswept Resorts and St Lucia Distillers.

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The projects that Joanna has been involved cover a broad spectrum of needs such as improving customer experience, increasing sales performance, leadership development and organisational effectiveness. She is passionate about helping people unlock their potential, developing transformational leaders and building highly cohesive, productive teams.