



## Nita Clarke and The Art of Engagement

If you're experiencing an employee engagement problem you may be able to take some comfort from the fact that you're not alone. It's an issue that's larger than any one industry. Indeed, with only one third of the UK's workforce describing themselves as 'engaged', it's a shortcoming of national importance – and one that Nita Clarke, Director of the IPA and joint leader of Engage for Success, has spent years tackling.

Speaking at Oracle's recent Modern HCM Experience event, Nita Clarke gave us the benefit of her expertise. Here we look at what her thinking means to HR practitioners.

### Where are we going wrong?

In a recent study by ORC International the UK ranked 18th out of 20 countries surveyed with regards to employee engagement. Clarke points out, this has severe repercussions for the economy as a whole. On the one hand, she tells us, the French could take their Fridays off and still achieve more than we manage in the UK thanks to their better engaged (and therefore more productive) workforce. On the other, if we were to raise levels of engagement to the levels achieved by another one of our European neighbors – the Netherlands – it's projected we'd add £26bn to our GDP.

The motivation is clearly there for organisations. So, why isn't it there for their people?

Trying times are an undeniable part of the problem. When budgets are squeezed it can be hard to make the argument for investment in the somewhat intangible concept of igniting your people's spark. But the reality is that whatever you invest in, whether it's a restructuring programme or some new technology, unless it's contributing to engagement it's unlikely to prove money well spent. As Clarke says:



"People aren't your biggest asset, they're your only asset. And if they aren't enabled or aren't motivated to do what you need them to, you might as well be stood on the roof of your building throwing money away."

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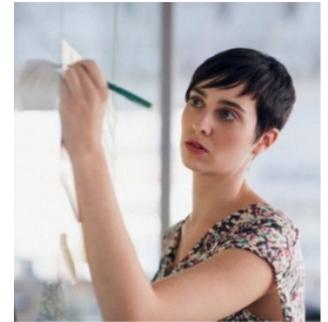
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In a variety of sectors, it's not just budgets that are stretched. Workers themselves are being forced to spread themselves increasingly thin – a condition that's hardly conducive to engagement.

But it's not just that having to work harder with little hope of an equivalent rise in remuneration is demotivating – it can also skew your organisational sense of purpose. For Clarke this is one of the worst things that can happen with regards to engagement. In her view:



“You need a story, a strategic narrative about the purpose of the organisation, its history and particularly its future. That gives a line of sight for the individual between the job that they do and the overall purpose of the organisation.”

Without this ‘line of sight’ it's hard to get people fired up. And, worryingly, even if your organisation has a purpose even the most stony hearted cynic would want to rally to – say for example offering vital health services to the public – financial pressure can obscure it. Clarke tell us:

*“It's really important that organisations decide why they want to do it [undertake an engagement change journey] and what it means to them...if you don't know your DNA, you can't change it.”*

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“In a recent survey, half of NHS employees answered that the mission of the organisation was to serve patients. Half said it was to balance the books.”

Your story is a huge asset. If you fail to tell it, you're inviting trouble. Sir Dave Brailsford, general manager of Team Sky – who was also speaking at last week's event – says that in his experience ‘goal harmony’ (having a clear, unifying sense of purpose) is more important to success than ‘team harmony’ (a group of people simply getting on well).

### **But there are people to whom narrative doesn't seem to matter...**

Undoubtedly, many of you are nodding along as you read, thinking ‘Yes. That makes perfect sense to me. But...’ and it's the eternal ‘but’ of HR ‘...how do I get buy-in from the board?’

Approaching the C-suite with abstract sounding ideas about ‘lines of sight’ is going to be a tough sell unless you have some hard numbers to back them up. That's why it needs to be remembered that engagement is all about enabling business outcomes.



As such, gathering high quality data on engagement is just as important as it is when examining performance in any other area of the business. Once you've got it, HR needs to be responsible for taking data around your outcomes and providing the causal link with your data on engagement.

And, no, engagement data doesn't just mean your annual surveys – the value of which continues to fall in the eyes of our industry's thought leaders. In fact, there's a strong likelihood that you'll find greater value in tapping into unstructured data.

For instance, by assessing what goes on your channels of internal communication you can find out a lot about what's going on with regards to the current sentiments within your organisation.

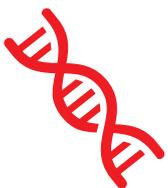
Of course, surveys still have a part to play. But there's no reason not to offset them with the "frequent, strength-based check ins" advocated by Heidi Spirgi.

Wherever it comes from, you need to unsilo this data and provide the interpretive link demonstrating its impact on the business outcomes. Because as we've stressed before, if you aren't getting engagement right the chances of any other initiatives bringing dividends are ultimately low.

### First things first. Who are we?

Before you can set about redressing this engagement gap and establishing these 'lines of sight', you need to decide what it is exactly people are supposed to be looking at.

We're seeing the idea of a definitive 'best practice' being rapidly devalued in the world of HR, and engagement is certainly an area lacking in anything remotely resembling a 'one size fits all' solution. The approach an organisation takes has to reflect its identity and wider purpose. What works for the MOD is unlikely to fly at Google and vice versa. To quote Clarke again:



"It's really important that organisations decide why they want to do it [undertake an engagement change journey] and what it means to them... if you don't know your DNA, you can't change it."

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*"Are the values up on the wall reflected in day-to-day behaviors? If they're not you'll have mistrust and there's no engagement in a mistrustful organisation...Deference is dead. These days trust has to be earned."*

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Self-knowledge is therefore of the utmost importance. Unfortunately the ancient injunction 'know thyself' is one too many businesses have ignored. Too often there's a big disparity between the picture you get of a company when viewed from the top as opposed to the bottom.

Of course, many of those in command have reason to believe everything is fine. They may have been told so. They may be ready to believe that their policies – which sound great in theory – are brought to life exactly as imagined on the 'shop floor'. We all know that in many cases they aren't.

A large part of the problem is making sure that the managers – who play such a huge role in defining the day-to-day experience of the workforce – are given the tools to ensure these experiences match the ones imagined by the board. As Clarke suggests, the way we traditionally fill these roles can be unhelpful:



"We tend to make people managers on the basis of the job they last did, which was probably quite technical, then we don't support them in learning to manage people and with honing their people skills."

This can lead to a gulf between an organisation's vision and its reality – a gulf nicely summed up in Clarke's phrase "People join organisations. They leave managers."

But talent heading out of the door is only half the problem. In this hyper-connected age, it's not just the talent within your organisation that will go to waste if you fail to address the problem. Because while the board may not be hearing what staff think of their working conditions, thanks to resources such as glassdoor.com, prospective employees certainly are.

Josh Bersin told us "The war for talent is over. Talent won." If we've accepted that to attract the talent that's going to win the day organisations need to meet their expectations of work, it makes sense to start meeting the expectations of those who already work for us. If we don't, the war for talent will be lost on both fronts. By the same token, battling to close the engagement deficit will help bring out more in the people you have and bring in more of the people you want – especially in a landscape where referrals and social sourcing are increasingly important.

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So, to borrow from Clarke again, the question businesses need to be asking is:



“Are the values up on the wall reflected in day-to-day behaviors? If they’re not you’ll have mistrust and there’s no engagement in a mistrustful organisation...Deference is dead. These days trust has to be earned.”

### To change people’s perceptions, change your perception of people

Engagement isn’t something you can do to people. If you’re being held back by a workforce that’s overly passive or reluctant to take the initiative, it may be because your view of engagement sees people as being a problem, rather than the solution.

As we’ve said before, there’s no separating the issue of business outcomes from that of engagement. So if you’re looking to reconnect to your people, gathering their input on how these outcomes could be improved is the logical place to start. Clarke tells us:



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That’s why managers should frequently be taking the pulse of their organisation, checking on a daily basis on their people’s wellbeing, their frustrations and – most importantly – their ideas on how to overcome them. And what do you do when you’ve listened to this expertise? You act on what it tells you. As a HR practitioner, this is the business end of engagement: enabling people to make the improvements they see the potential for.

This can mean giving them the tools to work in new ways, breaking traditional structures to form project-based teams of their own. It could mean allowing them to work at different times or from different places. The specifics won’t just vary from organisation to organisation, but from employee to employee. As thinkers such as Lynda Gratton have taken pains to show us, with increasingly diverse sets of demographics (with very different expectations) working under the same leaders, understanding and responding to differences will be key.



It sounds like a tall order, engaging groups that may superficially have little in common, but this is where your organisational sense of purpose will again prove vital. As long as you have Clarke's 'lines of sight' in place, you should have a unifying principal to work from – and this ultimately has to be the foundation of any changes you make. As Costas Markides has said:



“Emotional appeal will be the incentive of the future. Values rather than rules will be the control mechanism.”

If you can understand this – and make your board understand it – you'll be well placed to reap serious rewards. After all, as Clarke bids us to remember, “If only one third of the workforce is actively engaged, then that just means two thirds see themselves as having more to give.”

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