



The doom and gloom is certainly upon us, with many organisations in the retail, property and finance sectors, to name but a few, who are facing significant amounts of uncertainty. With the media talking every day of increased unemployment and redundancies, how do you keep your employees engaged through the difficult times ?



Talk to them!!

Having worked on many significant change programmes in organisations large and small, we have recognised that the most undervalued and often forgotten activity is employee engagement. It is sometimes hard to remember to connect with your own feelings when you are in the middle of writing a redundancy programme or finding ways to craft messages with a positive spin. We often forget that we are also employees, and what would we want to hear if we weren't in the know. The critical way to connect with your employees is to engage with them. Give people the opportunity to not only understand what is going on, but also the chance to feedback their thoughts and concerns. This is verified by the CIPD (1) who suggest that the three main drivers of employee engagement are:

- having opportunities to feed your views upwards
- feeling well informed about what is happening in the organisation
- thinking that your manager is committed to your organisation

One financial services organisation going through a redundancy and selection programme did just that. A team was created specifically to manage the communications aspect of the programme, creating bi-weekly updates that were emailed to all staff, communicating real timelines so that people knew what to expect and when, and a dedicated email address where questions could be posed. Sometimes there was no news to tell, but people were told that. The timelines did move, but employees appreciated the honesty.

It is often easy to assume that because a big announcement hasn't been made, no-one knows what is happening. But people do notice when meetings are hastily re-arranged, pow wow's and mutterings in the stationary cupboard (and yes, I have seen it!) take place. The rumour mill can be a very effective tool at stirring anxiety and fear amongst your staff.

Case Study example:

When about to embark on a major reward initiative at a property based company, we worked with their employees to identify what would help people accept change and move in the direction the business wished to take. The answer came loud and clear – don't wait until the end to tell us what is going on. The frank and honest discussions helped us to guide this organisation to create some communication principles and an education programme that continued to update key messages and unveil myths whilst the project developed over a 12 month period. This included developing concise written briefings on topics such as pensions and pay structures, which helped to introduce quite complex subjects and explain how this company's practice compared to the external market. Lunch time sessions were also held, giving employees the opportunity to explore in more detail how, for example, market benchmarking worked in practice, which organisations they compared to etc. These

Top Tips:

- **Talk to your employees – and where possible do this face to face to make the most of the opportunities to appeal to their emotional sides.**
- **Don't wait – say something, even if there is nothing to say**
- **Give people the opportunity to have their say – regular forums or simply an inbox that people can email to will help increase levels of involvement**
- **Encourage your leadership teams to become more visible, spending some time talking and listening to staff concerns. Help your employees see their senior team are feeling the pain too.**

generic activities allowed conversations to take place and general reward knowledge to grow, and as the design of the new reward package came together, the HR team took opportunities to update the organisation on progress. Now, one year on, as the organisation plans to launch the new package, which will be a significantly different proposition for some employees, they know that there won't be any major shocks, and that managers, who have been briefed and coached individually, will be comfortable engaging with their teams.

Target your communications

Not everyone will hear the same message. When creating your engagement strategy it is really important to consider:

- Who are your different audiences ? Will senior managers hear the same messages as front line staff ? Are there different groups of employees, for example those who will be leaving the organisation and those who are staying?

- Which channels are most effective for the different audiences? How feasible is it for every team to meet and discuss issues? Will the intranet updates be seen by everyone?
- What communication mediums exist and how can they be used to best effect? Do you need to create new ways to communicate eg: specifically branded for this difficult message?

Supporting your managers

Organisations readily assume that all managers are able to cope in tough times. The reality is that managers will fear for their jobs as much as their teams, and having to be the strong one doesn't come easy to everyone. Assumptions are also made that because Senior Managers know what is going on, their subordinates do. In difficult times, a vital part of your engagement plan should not assume that cascades just happen. One of the strongest factors in keeping employees enthusiastic and supported is day to day contact with their manager. It is critical therefore that

you provide support to your line managers throughout. We encourage our clients in times of change to not only brief their senior teams, but take the time to brief their line managers as well. Lunch time surgeries are often great tools for managers to find out what is going on and get reassurance without having to take significant amounts of time out of their busy day. We have often found that the discussions with managers at these sessions not only give them the confidence to tackle sometimes difficult conversations, but also provide great fodder for Q&A material. They can also help to facilitate early appreciation to managers of worker anxiety, such as working longer hours to prove commitment, which can lead to of stress or ill health.

Survivor syndrome

A well known phrase relating to those left behind once the 'cull' has taken place. People often feel survivor guilt at having

.....an informative how to guide

not been selected, others might be frustrated that they weren't chosen as they were ready to leave the organization. It is critical that you continue to communicate with those who stay behind as these are the people the business needs to help transform its fortunes and regain its strength. People will want to know if there are further cuts to be made or if the business is now stable enough for no further redundancies to take place. If you want to keep your talent, you need to make efforts to show that you continue to value them.

Recognition strategies are crucial here to ensure that people continue to feel valued in the organization and motivated to turn it around. That does not mean you have to find big sums of money to make people feel valued and recognized. More often than not, it is the smaller gestures of appreciation that will motivate and go the furthest to engender continued loyalty. A good way to encourage recognition is to get teams to create a suggested recognition list

of things they would value. Examples that we have seen include:

- thank you cards – an opportunity to write your thank you message
- handmade coupons – inviting the recipient to coffee or to leave work early
- Invites – to a senior team meeting or company event that they wouldn't normally attend
- An email / letter from the CEO – recognizing the individual personally

It is important not to under estimate the impact that senior leadership figures can have on employees. Simply acknowledging and taking the time to speak to employees can have a significant effect on an individual's morale.

Recognising on a team basis is also important, especially if teams have been reduced significantly or merged. It is also really important to encourage people to let their hair down and have some fun. Putting time aside to bond as a new team will help people to put the recent weeks aside and set new goals for the future.

Think emotionally

Once you have communicated the difficult messages, how do you engage and inspire your employees to come through the other side? How do you instil confidence in the new business direction and future strategies? The answer is to change the focus of your communications from the rational, logical facts; to consider and appeal to your employees' emotional states. By helping your employees to identify with what your organisation is there to do, and understanding the full impact of their contribution by appreciating how people's lives are changed by what they do as individuals, you will help them to truly connect with the organisations' *raison d'être*. Companies such as Vodafone and Glaxosmithkline do this very well. GSK produce pharmaceutical drugs to help improve the lives of their customers – by showing their employees examples of real people whose lives have changed for the better, they are able to appeal to people's emotions, giving their work contribution a

true purpose. Vodafone have successfully done the same thing. They produced a video to show all their employees what a difference having a mobile phone / internet has on the lives of their customers – whether it is bring together families on the other side of the world or sharing special moments such as the birth of a child. This doesn't mean that you have to spend money on producing expensive tear jerking videos, but consider factoring into your messages what it is you are all there to achieve – it will help to emotionally connect your employees to the new journey. Using face to face communications, personal insights from the board, telling employee's stories, etc are all techniques that can be used to ensure that you are able to inspire and generate energy amongst your workforce. Encouraging your managers to discuss together in teams, for example giving them questions to facilitate will help to empower them and help people feel involved, as opposed to potentially disengaging them by simply presenting slides and talking at them.

Beyond the bad times

Engaging your people in difficult times is fast paced and reactive, but once the storm has been weathered, taking the time to stop and proactively consider your ongoing engagement strategy is vital. Spend time thinking about what are the critical factors in your organisation that motivate your employees to join, stay and contribute to business success. Share the new vision and most importantly, keep the lines of communication open.

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Innecto Reward Consulting 2008

Bibliography

- 1) Working Life: Employee Attitudes & Engagement (CIPD, 2006)

One of a series of articles on topical Reward issues – please see our website www.innectogroup.co.uk and register for resources for others.

Engaging with reward

- Ensure that your employees fully appreciate their total package – this doesn't have to be total reward statements but frequent reminders of what is available as an employee will raise awareness and remind them of any unique perks you offer. Many employers offer EAP programmes which are often forgotten about but in times of uncertainty can be a highly valued service.
 - Understand what it is your employees appreciate the most. If it is cost effective to maintain, can you do more of it? One example here could be offering more opportunities for flexible working.
 - Don't forget to engage your key talent – these are the people who will be first out the door. Involve them, make them feel special and reward them. When money is tight, this is where it should be directed first.
- Reinforce your key business priorities through your reward structure. Ensure that your bonus schemes for example are aligned to your key messages and not in conflict.
 - Focus on performance management. When business goals change, it is important to ensure that objectives are reviewed and aligned with the organisational plans. Your employees need to understand what they should be focussing on to enable performance to be managed effectively.
 - Generate energy by saying thank you when things are going well. Cable and Wireless recently announced an extra day's holiday to show appreciation for delivering a strong performance
 - Use incentives to encourage involvement and achievement of short term goals.
 - Recognise individual achievements. Make a concerted effort to thank or praise for a job well done.

About Innecto Reward Consulting

Established at the beginning of the Noughties, Innecto specialise in Reward Consulting.

We focus on building strong client relationships, and carry out a range of activities, from acting as an extra pair of hands on salary benchmarking projects to developing detailed Reward Strategy and building an employee proposition. Along the way we involve employees in the design of their new pay structures, performance management systems and recognition schemes.

Our consultants and analysts are highly customer-centric and user friendly, and as most of us have also worked in the 'real world' of line management, we do understand the difficulties faced in an operational setting, and so strive to ensure our solutions actually work in practice.

Finally, a quote from our most recent client case-study sums up what we try to deliver;

“One thing I especially liked about working with Innecto was the level of support we received; their consultants came over to Northern Ireland to meet with us on numerous occasions and their reward analyst worked extensively with us to ensure we had the understanding to interpret market data and manage different scenarios in the future.”

“They also did an excellent job supporting me in involving our workforce in the process design and in communicating our goals and plans for this project. I was impressed at the way they were able to reinforce our values and support us develop strong messages around pay and performance that really helped carry the project through to a successful conclusion.”

Ailsa McNeill – HR Manager – Schrader Electronics Ltd

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