



Focus on employee attitudes

With employee engagement programs overly focused on measurement rather than action, there is a need for organization to rethink their engagement strategies

By **Lewis Garrad**

Employee engagement has been a popular focus area for both HR function and people managers for the last 10 years. For leaders, the promises of improved talent retention and enhanced organizational performance are attractive, particularly as drivers of tangible business outcomes like productivity, innovation and customer service. The logic behind this focus is fairly simple – if employee performance is the combination of individual talent and engagement, then the best way to maximize talent is to ensure that it is engaged.

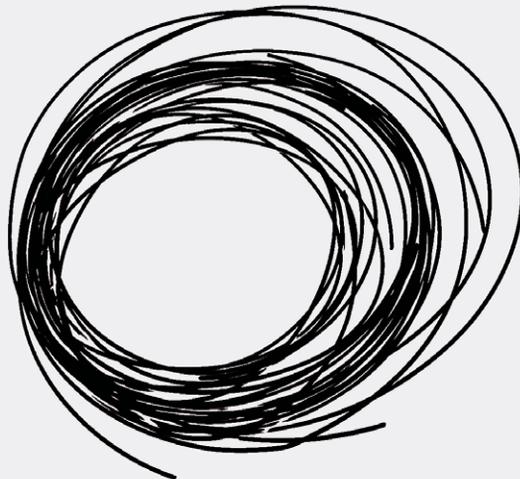
While this sounds reasonable, and perhaps a little obvious, the reality is that many companies chase improved levels of employee engagement without considering the broader science¹ of employee attitudes and motivations at work. This leads to incorrect assumptions about engagement

(and its outcomes), which could be the reason why so many companies have found it difficult to realize the benefits they would expect.

To address this, a deeper understanding of the science behind engagement and other key employee attitudes is needed. In my opinion there are three key points to consider:

- While it is common for HR to hold the view that employee engagement can be described as any positive experience at work, the reality is that most organizations actually measure (and therefore manage) some combination of employee motivation, commitment and job satisfaction². This is important because we know all of those constructs have a range of short-term benefits, but not so many long-term ones. In a meta-analysis exploring the links

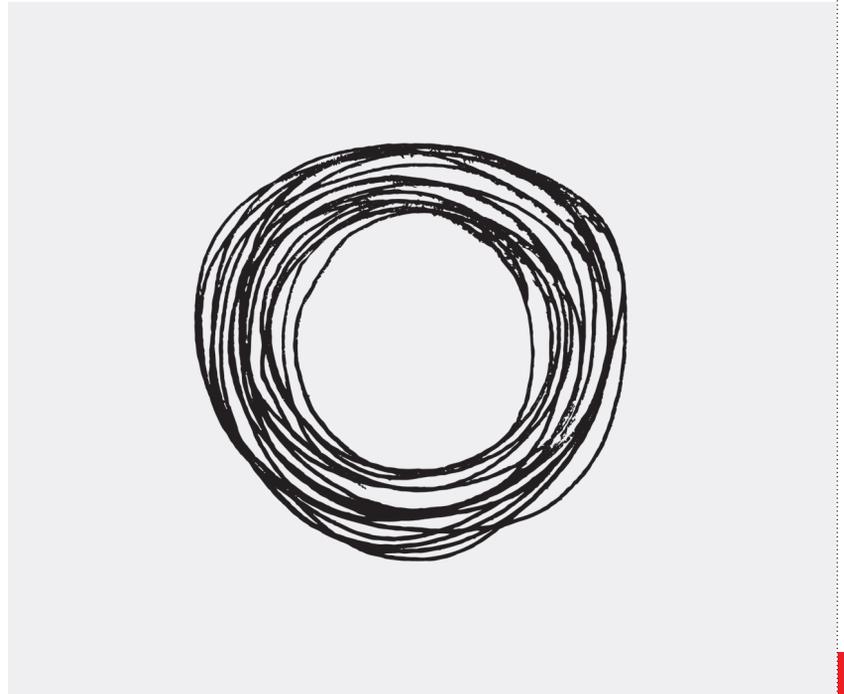
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between employee attitudes and performance at work, Michael Ricketta³ at Aston University found that positive attitudes led to higher levels of performance. However, the analysis also showed that the connection between what employee said in a survey and how they performed actually became weaker over time. The implication is that that engagement, motivation and commitment are more likely to be related to performance now than in the future. The consistency of engagement is therefore key.

- Next, although researchers have shown that feelings of commitment such as pride (a concept often measured as part of employee engagement indices) have a positive impact on how persistent⁴ and dedicated someone is, they have also shown that they can be problematic at high levels leading to overconfidence or stubbornness. Psychologists have also shown⁵ that people who are overly confident or satisfied with how they are doing tend to stop trying quite as hard in future. The message here then is that it is not just important to be engaged and committed, but also perhaps paranoid enough to avoid complacency. For leaders, this requires not only being an organization's greatest cheerleader (to drive engagement), but also its greatest critic (to drive change); perhaps at exactly the same time.
- Last, while the way we measure employee engagement is well established, and the technology we have to measure it is advancing rapidly, the most common issue that organizations face is a complete lack of action and follow up on employee feedback. Indeed, this is a great way to frustrate people — ask them for their ideas about what they would like to improve and then proceed to do nothing with them. The reasons that organizations struggle with follow-ups range from issues related to management capability and intention (managers ignoring feedback because they don't know what to do with it) through to challenges with coordination or business relevance (managers getting distracted by other priorities and failing to follow through). The most effective way to address this though is to stop designing employee feedback and engagement survey programs as measurement tools, and start designing them as programs to drive better people management and a more adaptive workforce. When looking at it this way, it is easy to see that very positive feedback can be just as disappointing as negative — because without constructive criticism about leadership, operational efficiency and talent issues, how will the organization improve?

In sum, my view is that measuring and managing engagement has had a tremendously positive impact, mostly because it has brought focus and attention to the quality of people management in many organizations. However, most programs



There is a need to stop designing employee feedback and engagement survey programs as measurement tools, and start designing them as programs to drive better people management and a more adaptive workforce

do not really reflect what research tells us about employee attitudes. They are also overly focused on measurement rather than action. If the next 10 years are spent addressing such issues, then we might actually see some progress on making companies a better place to work. 

References

- ¹ Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Lewis Garrad, "If You Want to Motivate Employees, Stop Trusting Your Instincts", *Harvard Business Review*, February 8, 2017.
- ² For example, Gallup has shown that their measure of engagement has a very high correlation with job satisfaction scales — suggesting that is very closely related.
- ³ Michael Ricketta, *The Causal Relation Between Job Attitudes and Performance: A Meta-Analysis of Panel Studies*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2008, Vol. 93, No. 2, 472–481.
- ⁴ David DeSteno, *The Connection Between Pride and Persistence*, *Harvard Business Review*, August 22, 2016.
- ⁵ Ibrahim Senay, Dolores Albarracín, Kenji Noguchi, *Motivating Goal-Directed Behavior Through Introspective Self-Talk: The Role of the Interrogative Form of Simple Future Tense*, *Sage*, March 9, 2010.

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