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SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT

Enhanced engagement is a powerful driver of business performance delivering real top- and bottom-line results. How do you turn it from a 'buzzword' into a sustainable process that you can practically implement in your business?

Have you conducted your annual staff opinion survey and found that your employees are less engaged than you had hoped? Did you spend big on engagement and team-building activities, only to find they had no impact on the way people really felt? Too often, organisations fail to sustainably engage their employees and customers, and miss out on the long-term benefit this can create.

When individuals are engaged, they are more likely to demonstrate high-performance behaviours leading to tangible business benefits, including enhanced safety behaviours, increased customer-centric thinking, and resilience.

Employees can be regarded as having three potential levels of engagement—fully engaged, transactional, or disengaged. Employees who are fully engaged have a passionate drive to add

value to the business, while transactional employees are the type who trade their time for your money—they are still important to your business, but lack that observed passion for the business. Those who are disengaged can range from passively disengaged to actively disengaged. The passively disengaged simply do the absolute minimum, while the actively disengaged are the ones who sabotage the organisation from within through gossip,

misrepresentations, vandalism, neglect, and wilful damage.

A recent Gallup survey showed that for the average organisation, the split was approximately 30 per cent highly engaged, 50 per cent transactional, and 20 per cent disengaged.

How would you characterise the employees in your business?

People's individual level of engagement will vary according to many factors, arising from both what happens inside the business and what they bring in to work from outside. For example, a person may be struggling with issues at home that interfere with their ability to be fully engaged at work. Things change at work and at home, so it should be no surprise that people can move between the categories proposed by Gallup. Leaders can also do real, tangible things in the business to enhance overall engagement, as well as to change the engagement that individuals feel.

An interesting study highlighted the things that correlate with feeling engaged in the Australian workplace. When we consider that it is what an individual *feels* that determines their engagement, then consciously working to enhance these feelings in employees—by putting in place programs, policies, and cultures that entrench the opportunity to feel them—contributes to making sustained engagement possible.

The key engagement feelings are justice (things are procedurally fair), reward (they receive appropriate reward for their effort), support (they receive adequate support), and agency (they have an appropriate amount of control over choices in their job function).

What can we do with these things?

Because these are feelings within individuals, leaders and organisations can do several important things to enhance their engagement in a sustainable way:

- When you review your engagement survey data, ask about these four characteristics, and sort the data on this basis. It will tell you immediately what you can easily impact to improve engagement.
- Train your managers to listen for the four engagement feelings in conversations, and to use them proactively to discuss processes and business issues with staff.
- Watch out for people who are becoming disengaged, and actively have conversations with them to help them move back up the engagement ladder.
- Give the workforce something to engage with. The most engaging thing an organisation can do is have a compelling purpose (whom do you serve, and how do you serve them?). This is far more powerful than a mission or a set of values. It gives people a reason to do their work, which is compelling and engaging.

From a leadership perspective, it often means changing the nature of the conversations in the business. By engaging in 'coaching' style conversations (as opposed to command and control conversations), we are more likely to engage the individuals and create the opportunity for valued conversations including these pillars of engagement to arise.

An organisation needs to take an empathetic stance—by stepping into the shoes of the employees—to understand what employees need to see and hear from the leadership to encourage their engagement and enhanced performance. Often, workforces are doing so many things well, yet managers and leaders seem to focus only on what is 'broken'. Using appreciative inquiry approaches can be incredibly engaging for workforces (they enhance the feeling of reward, justice, and agency immediately).

From a larger organisational perspective, there are four key actions that an organisation can take which are directly linked to

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sustained high performance and engagement. These are:

Enhanced communication: In general, leadership undercommunicates at a ratio of about 10:1 on key topics that impact engagement. Think about the spread of channels and consistency of message as you communicate with your teams.

Prioritisation: Don't start every meeting off with figures or problems. What leaders prioritise will focus the workforce, and it will become their priority. Ensuring that you prioritise engagement issues (purpose, empathy, people issues, and the four feelings) will demonstrate its importance to the organisation.

Commitment: Simply, a leader has to walk the talk. The leaders are the most visible and salient members of any group, so if the leaders are not committing to enhanced engagement practices, then this will send a negative signal about engagement straight through the organisation.

Participation: Encouraging appropriate participation immediately makes people feel that they have a say in what is going on, and are therefore more engaged. This does not mean 'letting the inmates run the asylum', but rather finding ways to get staff to participate where it is appropriate. A good way is for leadership to define the 'what' and engage employees to design the 'how' that will be achieved.

Engagement is more than a buzzword. It is a critical element in developing and sustaining high performance in any organisation. By understanding what you can do as a leader, it is likely that small changes can lead to significant and sustainable gains in engagement and performance, with tangible bottom-line benefits. •

About Phil Owens
Phil Owens of The Bigger Game (thebiggergame.com.au) is a high-performance coach and leadership specialist who works with organisations through consulting, coaching, facilitating, and training, focusing on the culture, processes, and practices of high performance in business.