The limits and possibilities of employee engagement

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Editors' Foreword

The Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations series publishes the work of members of the Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU) and people associated with it. Papers may be of topical interest or require presentation outside of the normal conventions of a journal article. A formal editorial process ensures that standards of quality and objectivity are maintained.

This paper publishes the text of the eleventh Warwick-Acas Lowry Lecture, given to an invited audience in March 2012 by Professor John Purcell, Associate Fellow of Warwick Business School's Industrial Relations Research Unit, a Deputy Chair of the CAC and former Academic Advisor at Acas.

The annual lecture is organised in honour of Sir Pat Lowry. A former chair of Acas, Sir Pat was for many years an Honorary Professor at the University of Warwick, a long-standing member of the Business School's Advisory Board, and a source of valued counsel to IRRU in its work. His outstanding contribution to the practice of industrial relations commenced when he joined the EEF in 1938. He went on to become the Federation's Director of Industrial Relations. He left in 1970 to join British Leyland as Director of Industrial Relations. In 1981, Sir Pat was appointed as Chair of Acas. He stepped down six years later with Acas' reputation for impartial and constructive advice enhanced, in the face of an often turbulent industrial relations landscape.

In this 2012 lecture John Purcell addresses a theme which is the focus of a Government-instigated task force, aimed at harnessing the potential of employee engagement to raise organisational performance and, at the same time, enhance employee well-being. He asks if there is anything new in the concept of engagement, and whether it holds the prospect of reclaiming a central role for employment relations in successful management behaviour. His answer is a conditional 'yes', but that significant limitations needs to be overcome for the full benefits for both organisations and employees to be realised. Building trust, perceptions of fairness and of organisational justice are, Purcell contends, key pre-requisites. Representative-based employee consultation arrangements can make a substantial contribution to doing this.

Trevor Colling and Paul Marginson

The limits and possibilities of employee engagement

Preface: Sir Pat Lowry

A few days ago I was asked to meet two senior managers at Royal Mail to talk about approaches to building and sustaining a partnership with the CWU. This took me back to the early 1990s when Sir Pat Lowry and I worked together to help Royal Mail find ways to build better relationships with the union and with staff in sorting and delivery offices. It was a great privilege to work with Pat and learn from him about listening before talking, and helping people find their own solutions, even when he had planted the idea. He would never take credit for that. I had met him a few times before: he always remembered me and somehow seemed to know what I had been working on and showed interest in it. Ever since I was a student at LSE in 1968 I had admired him: his writing of an EEF paper on what the UK could learn from American approaches to industrial relations; grappling with the curse of piecework payment systems at British Leyland; sitting on numerous courts of inquiry; and as Chair of Acas in its most difficult period in the 1980s, let alone his work in the CBI, and with the IPM (Institute of Personnel Managers), now CIPD. It is about time someone wrote his biography.

What would Sir Pat have made of policy makers' current preoccupation with employee engagement? He would want to know a lot more about it and certainly would not dismiss it as yet another fad. In his gentle and polite way, he would ask 'so what?': what are the practical implications, especially for managers? He would, undoubtedly, have been co-opted to the task forces now assembled to take the engagement movement forward. He would eschew the so called 'guru' group. I can see him shaking his head and denying he was ever a guru, but of course he was, and a very fine one, too.

Introduction

In this lecture I want to take a close and sometimes critical look at the engagement 'industry', a term used by some writers (Welbourne 2011), for want of ever finding an accepted definition, to try to explain why it has become so popular and the dangers associated with that. To understand the significance of the engagement 'folk theory', another term used to avoid a definition (Macey and Schneider 2008), we need to unravel the different approaches to engagement and assess their usefulness. The importance of employee engagement only really becomes clear when we look for its antecedents since these hint at policy implications

and allow a consideration of next steps that are required to promote management action to foster employee engagement.

David MacLeod and Nita Clarke did a fabulous job in 2009 in their report (MacLeod and Clarke 2009) based on numerous visits around the country and a trawl of all the available evidence. In the process they came across 50 or more definitions of engagement and sensibly avoided providing yet another. Almost a year ago a task force of the great and the good from leading companies, the CBI and the TUC was established, with the Prime Minister's blessing, to take the ideas forward, backed by a guru group of consultants and academics. The hope is to generate sufficient enthusiasm to spread the logic of employee engagement into managerial practice as a social movement. As fads go, this has more chance of taking root than most since it resonates with long recognised principles of effective employment relations.

The growth of employee engagement

The first substantial paper on the topic was by Kahn in 1990. Interestingly, the topic of engagement in the early days was focussed on disengagement and especially the study of work-based stress and associated problems of sickness absence and labour turnover. It was only when consulting companies began promoting engagement surveys, which purported to show a link between levels of engagement and employee performance, that attention turned from dysfunctional employees to everyone at work. At the same time there was a hunt for theories that could explain why some employees appeared to be more engaged than others and what action could be taken to improve the number of fully engaged employees. Employee surveys are now big business and all of the leading consultants and survey companies, like Gallup and Mori, want their survey work to lead on to profitable consulting, advising clients on what action needs to be taken.

I have written before about some of the limitations of relying on engagement surveys (Purcell 2010). These can be summarised in three ways: there is a tendency to treat the survey in isolation, tick the box and that is engagement over for the year; there is pressure to boil engagement down to one summary score, the engagement index, which can then be used in management appraisals, sometimes in a punitive way; and finally this summary score really does nothing to explain why levels of engagement are what they are. In the main, they relate to organisational engagement, giving the impression that this is the only, or most important, type of engagement. Decent engagement surveys will look for evidence of engagement at different levels: the job itself, with co-workers, with customers, with the immediate manager

and with senior managers as well as the organisation. This can be very revealing, but in creating the overall score the tendency is to sum all the objects of engagement together. This means that for an employee to be fully engaged the person has to meet all of the requirements. I vividly remember a few years ago interviewing ward managers in five NHS acute hospitals. Their level of commitment (a better term than engagement as I will explain later) to their patients, their co-workers and to their profession was very high but most had a low opinion of senior managers and the NHS Trust (Hutchinson and Purcell 2010). They would not show up well in an engagement index even though they were passionately engaged in their work.

I am not against engagement surveys. Indeed, they can be very powerful as part of a suite of HR and performance metrics and can throw light on problem areas, for example variances in labour turnover and customer behaviour. The MacLeod report provides some data from the Nationwide Building Society. Some years ago my team at the University of Bath worked with the Nationwide on their data. I presented the findings at a conference of senior regional managers showing the relationship between employee attitudes, labour turnover and mortgage sales, implying a causal chain much as in the famous Sears 'employee-customer-profit chain' (Rucci *et al* 1998). The conference was electrified: 'You mean the way we treat employees has a direct relationship with the business?' Exactly that.

The promise of employee engagement is that it puts the employee centre stage but what then follows has to be a careful analysis of the factors that lead employees to be engaged. It is all too easy to jump to conclusions. Following the MacLeod report, according to Arkin (2011), it appeared that most action focussed on the use of 'suggestion schemes, recognition rewards and getting employees to buy into corporate values'. The attempt to get employees to buy into corporate values is especially worrying since the topic is relegated to brand management and 'employees are viewed in a passive role (with) engagement seen as something that is driven by the organisation, rather than something that is largely under the control of employees' (Francis and Reddington 2012:272).

What is engagement?

We need to try to get to some sort of definition of employee engagement. One way to do this is to profile the 'engaged employee'. Here is one definition by Rich, Lepine and Crawford (2010:619 emphasis in the original):

In engagement, organisation members harness their full selves in active, complete work role performances by driving personal energy into physical, cognitive and emotional labours. Engaged individuals are described as being psychologically present, fully *there,* attentive, feeling, connected, integrated, and focussed in their role performances. They are open to themselves and others, connected to work, and focussed in their role performance.

Wow! I'm not sure I would want to sit next to such a driven person at a dinner party! And that is not all. It is not just role performance that matters. As well as having 'feelings of persistence, vigour, energy, absorption, enthusiasm, alertness, and pride' (Macey and Schneider 2008:12), the engaged employee will 'demonstrate initiative, proactively seeking opportunities to contribute, and going beyond what is ... typically required (ibid:15). And just to emphasise the need to be totally focussed there is clear evidence that 'participation in outside activities [is] a negative predictor [of engagement] (Saks 2006:602).

Not surprisingly we find reference to 'depletion theories' (Macey and Schneider 2008:13) or the 'dark side' of engagement where employees who try to do all of the roles are 'experiencing burnout, health problems and disengagement (Welbourne 2011:97). Welbourne identifies five core roles which the engaged employee is expected to contribute to: as a job holder, an innovator, a team member, a person with a career and as an organisational member (ibid:91). These are all areas where employees are expected to exercise their discretionary behaviour (Caza 2012: 153-6). This leads her to ask 'can leaders expect employees to do more of the non-core job roles and still keep doing more of the core job role? ... And are today's organisations asking employees to be super people who go above and beyond in everything?' (ibid 94). Well, if 'going beyond' in every role is what engagement means then we certainly are expecting too much, and dangerously so. Not surprisingly, there are fears that 'engagement can drive work intensification with employers coming to *expect* employees to "go the extra mile" as a matter of course [with] overtime becoming normalised [and probably unpaid]' (Rees *et al* 2011 emphasis in the original).

Under the definition of engagement as exceptional work attitudes, feelings and behaviour – which must mean it is always a minority activity - 'average task performance does not typically define engagement, nor does coming to work on time or doing what the boss expects' (Macey and Schneider 2008). But Newman and Harrison (2008:35) point out in a refreshing paper titled 'Been there, Bottled that', good attendance, doing one's job well and being a good citizen 'is precisely what it means to be engaged'. Using a car driving metaphor,

they suggest that to be engaged is to be 'in gear', and, of course, when the engine is not in gear it is 'idling', running slowly and disconnected. What evidence of the extent of engagement we have gives some support to this more sensible approach. In an employee survey in the companies belonging to the engagement consortium at Kingston business school, led by Katie Truss, 43 per cent were nearly always strongly engaged while a third were rarely engaged and never strongly so- the so-called 'flat-liners'. Ten per cent were reliable and consistent while 14 percent became engaged in episodes when undertaking a particular task (Truss and Soane 2010). In the Civil Service the overall level of engagement was 56 per cent in 2010 (Bach and Kessler 2012: 137). It would seem generally the case that around a third of employees are not engaged, or disengaged, with the remainder showing some attributes of engagement. This will vary according to the job performed. Managers and professional workers are expected to have higher levels of engagement than those in jobs which emphasise routine efficiency where there are low levels of involvement and little opportunity for discretionary behaviour, often found among front-line service workers in fast food outlets, supermarkets and high-volume call centres (Boxall, Ang and Bartram 2011:1527)

Psychologists seem to get particularly excited about 'state' engagement meaning the psychological feelings and emotions of doing the job in terms of involvement, commitment, attachment, and mood (Macey and Schneider 2008:5) but this is not much more than the familiar territory of 'overall job attitude' (Newman and Harrison: 2008:35). There is also 'trait engagement'. Here, it seems, people with an autotelic personality - who are inclined do something for its own sake rather than for specific rewards - are more prone to be engaged. This is a managerial wonderland! Mind you, using psychological profiling in selection might be the answer to bankers' bonuses. Getting them to do something for nothing would be a good first step, as other workers 'going the extra' mile seem expected to do. More seriously, it does raise one of the perennial problems with engagement which can imply that the sort of extra behaviours expected are beyond the scope of most remuneration schemes (Macey and Schneider 2008:15-6). What do employees get in return for expending discretionary effort?

Behavioural engagement is of more interest than work-related attitudes (Newman and Harrison 2008:34) since this is where engagement is most obviously related to outcomes. These can be seen in job performance, adaptability, lower levels of sickness absence, less labour turnover as well as broader behaviours coming under the general heading of organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), or pro-social behaviour, and voluntary

cooperation. Good examples would be taking part in problem-solving groups, helping new starters and even becoming an employee representative, although, sadly, I have never seen that listed as an OCB.

A more useful distinction than state and behavioural engagement relates to the objects of engagement: engaged with what? While it is possible to generate quite a long list covering the job, co-workers, customers, the immediate line manager and senior management, it is more helpful to delineate between job engagement and organisational engagement, in a sense between the immediate and the more remote. When you look at measures used to rate job engagement you find they are remarkably similar to those used to assess job satisfaction, job involvement and job challenge: old wine in new bottles. This does not diminish the validity of job engagement, indeed it adds to it, since these aspects of jobs have been studied exhaustively over half a century or more. It is no surprise to find that, according to Saks (2006:603), 'job engagement is associated with a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, a supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work'. The obvious policy implications, according to Saks, are 'training for line managers and job design interventions' to build in autonomy, challenge and variety. How long have we heard that? It is right, but it does little to touch deep-seated problems of job fragmentation and insecurity let alone intensification.

The value of organisational engagement is that it recognises the firm as a social entity, a source of identification beyond the job. This is where I find the notion of organisational commitment more helpful than engagement since it is of long standing and has been extensively studied. In particular the distinction between three forms of commitment is valuable (Meyer and Allen 1991). Affective commitment concerns the feelings of affection or belonging that a person has towards the organisation and the line manager and is positively associated with citizenship behaviour. Normative commitment relates to employees, like my nurse managers, who feel they should be, and are, focussed on their job for its social value. Continuance commitment is not really commitment at all in these senses, but refers to people trapped in their organisations since the cost of leaving is too high. They are more likely than others to be disengaged.

Alongside organisational commitment is the idea of the psychological contract: an individual's beliefs about the terms of their relationship with the organisation that employs them (Rousseau 1995). Employees reciprocate the kind of treatment they receive from management as the employment relationship unfolds. This is where perceived organisational

support (POS) comes in as part of social exchange theory (Eisenberger *et al* 1986). 'The argument is that employees who perceive good organisational support in their employment relationship respond with increased trust in management and greater commitment to the organisation. They are more engaged ... Trust and commitment can be very valuable intangible assets for organisations' (Boxall and Purcell 2011:224).

Saks (2006:613) reports that perceived organisational support was the only significant predictor of both job and organisational engagement, while organisational engagement was a much stronger predictor of all of the outcomes than job engagement. He then goes on to assert that 'managers need to provide employees with resources and benefits that will *oblige* (my emphasis) them to reciprocate in kind with higher levels of engagement' (ibid:614). This is a dangerous reduction of social relationships to the level of transactional contracts. You cannot oblige a person to be engaged cognitively, emotionally and physically: it is something they give and do as part of discretionary behaviour. A basic tenet of social exchange theory is that 'relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal and mutual commitments as long as the parties abide by certain "rules of exchange" and engagement is a two way relationship between the employer and employee' (Saks 2006:603). It is not a short term fix and, as the psychological contract asserts, it is most often found where people have more open-ended, relational contracts. One logic of this is that people on short-term contracts such as agency staff, and those in closely defined and controlled routine work, are likely to have transactional contracts and be less inclined to become engaged.

The antecedents of engagement

Since perceived organisational support is the only significant predictor of both types of engagement it becomes much easier to hunt for their antecedents. We find ourselves, as specialists in employment relations, on familiar ground at last. There is widespread agreement that fairness, justice and perceptions of trust are crucial causal influences both at the level of the job, thus drawing attention to the role of the line manager, and at the organisational level where the spotlight falls on top management.

Let me start with fairness. In a summary of the available research by the Rutgers Centre for Human Resource Strategy, Castellano (no date) focuses on fairness. 'When employees feel that they are being treated fairly, they reciprocate through the performance of citizenship behaviours ... To be fair, procedures should be applied consistently; be free from bias; ensure accurate information is collected; a mechanism exists to correct mistakes; conforms to

standards of ethics and morality; and ensure that opinions of groups affected are taken into account ... Fairness of procedures that determine the amount and distribution of organisational resources are particularly important ... as well as favourable treatment from supervisors' (p10-13). We can recognise this as a statement of good employment relations practice. I will explore the implications of these prescriptions later but it is worth adding an extra twist about the sources of fairness. It has long been observed, for example by Tyler and Blader (2003:351), that people will still rate a procedure as fair 'if they had a voice, even if they knew that what they said had little or no influence on the decisions made ... voice has a value beyond its ability to shape decision-making processes and outcomes', a conclusion supported by Farndale *et al* (2011) in their research.

The problem with fairness, like engagement, is that it can be a bit too vague. The idea of justice in organisations (Folger and Cropanzano 1998) has more bite since we are able to distinguish four types of justice: distributive, procedural, interactional and informational. Distributive justice is the perceived fairness of the outcome of a decision, like the distribution of performance related pay. Procedural justice concerns the way in the decision came to be taken, the information collected, the openness of the process and the extent to which people's views were taken into account. This could be work allocation among team members or the management of redundancy, to give but two examples. Increasingly procedural justice is linked to interactional justice, the interpersonal quality of the interaction between the employee and the immediate manager, or higher level manager, and with fellow team members. Thus, 'procedural justice judgements play a major role in shaping people's reactions to their personal experience ... in particular about being treated with respect' (Tyler and Blader 2003: 350).

Increasingly procedural justice research focuses on pro-social outcomes such as how to build trust, encourage responsibility and obligation, generate intrinsic motivation and creativity and stimulate voluntary cooperation (ibid:351). A distinction can be made between the formal quality of the decision making process, the informal decision making, the formal quality of treatment and the informal treatment. 'People focus heavily on issues of procedural justice of their group because they find procedural justice information to be the most useful identity-related information they have about their groups' (ibid:356). 'Group' means both the work team and the wider organisation. To be able to identify with something or someone is part of belonging and closely related to affective commitment. Thus it is argued that procedural justice, intertwined with interactional justice, provides identity security (ibid:358), a rather

obscure term for a good job, in a good work environment run by a good organisation. The importance of this is that it can provide a realistic meaning to perceived organisational support. In some quarters perceived organisational support is seen as the employer providing good pay, secure jobs and career opportunities – the classic staple diet of the HR department. Procedural justice points the finger at processes of management, the behaviour of line managers and of senior management, the way they treat people with respect, the transparency of their decisions making processes and their openness to employee views and voice.

The final type of organisational justice is informational. Fuchs and Edwards (2012:41-2) suggest that 'informational justice perceptions are shaped through accounts and explanations provided by organisational authorities about reasons as to why certain procedures were chosen and why certain outcomes were distributed in a certain way'. This is central to the generation of trust. Informational justice can be especially important in positively influencing employees' attitudes and behaviour in change initiatives (ibid:42). It flows through to procedural and interactional justice since 'accounts and explanations' are provided by middle and lower level managers who will also be involved in taking action at the local level, for example in a corporate restructuring exercise.

It is trust which links the four forms of justice together especially where there are more open-ended, or relational, expectations. In an occupational analysis of factors associated with high levels of organisational commitment the Bath university team, using WERS data, found that 'trust in management' was the dominant factor for each of the eight major occupations studied (Purcell *et al* 2009:102). No other factor had the same power. Trust, like engagement, is a risk since it requires hope for the future and expectations of others, especially leaders, that they have the ability to do the right or best thing, are guided by some principles of benevolence or well-meaning, especially in treating people with respect, have integrity and honesty and are predicable (Hope-Hailey, Searle and Dietz 2012).

This is where we should be worried. It has been suggested by Arkin (2011) that there is 'a growing trust deficit between people at the bottom and the top of organisations', what Saks (2006:600) calls an 'engagement gap'. The evidence from the Civil Service engagement survey in 2010 is not very encouraging. Only just over a third (36 per cent) agreed that 'overall I have confidence in the decisions made by my organisations' senior managers' and an even smaller proportion, 27 per cent, felt that 'change is managed well in my organisation'. As we have already noted, having a voice, even if the decision is not changed, is strongly linked to perceptions of procedural justice, but in the Civil Service only 32 per

cent agreed that 'I have an opportunity to contribute my views before decisions are made that affect me' (Bach and Kessler 2012:138). This negativity is shown in the 2011 CIPD employee outlook survey. The survey reports net scores: the proportion of people agreeing with a statement minus those disagreeing. The minus scores were found in relation to questions about trust in directors/senior managers (-4), and having confidence in these top people (-4). There were positives concerning treating employees with respect (+6) and having a clear vision of where the organisation is going (+12). But the most negative score came in answer to the statement, 'Senior managers/directors consult employees about important decisions'. Here the net score was -29.

There is one final dimension to engagement which is often neglected. I find it amusing to read the psychology experts in this field suggesting that 'one potential avenue is whether engagement manifests itself as a property of work groups or teams ... facilitating the development of a common purpose and cohesiveness' (Rich, Lepine and Crawford 2010). Of course it does! You can find references in the literature to 'collective efficacy: peoples shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results' This is 'not simply the sum of efficacy beliefs of individual members but as an emergent group-led activity' (Francis and Reddington 2012:273). This is collective engagement where people are recognised as social animals with group dynamics and identities, not the atomised individuals studied by psychologists. This is why we find reference to 'work climate' or 'organisational culture'. As Chris Rees and colleagues put it, 'trust in senior managers and strong employee-line manager relationships thus constitute key components of the "organisational climate" required for engagement to flourish' (Rees *et al, 2011).*

Engagement in the recession

I do not yet have a clear impression of what has happened to employee engagement in the recession. It was reported in 2006 that engagement levels in the USA were on the decline and 'there is a deepening disengagement among employees today' (Saks 2006:600), but this was before the financial collapse in 2008. I hope some of you will have views and information which you will share in a little while.

There is some evidence from Ireland where the recession was, and remains, profound. Bill Roche and his colleagues published a study last year based, in the main, on surveys and focus groups with HR professionals. The results are not very encouraging. 'Specific programmes for engagement', they report, 'were not much in evidence ... and it had sometimes been

necessary to park employee engagement initiatives' (Roche *et al* 2011). In terms of management action 'the dominant pattern involved, in the main, one way (top-down) communication, more intensive work regimes, a new concern to manage under-performance and discipline and the suspension of profit sharing or performance bonuses' (ibid 121-2), none of which will do much to boost engagement. In terms of best practice identified by the HR managers by far the most prominent was 'the importance of intensive communications with staff and unions regarding the commercial pressures confronted by firms and the responses deemed appropriate' (ibid:119). This would fit with informational justice and it did seem to be a new approach, but it did not include employee voice.

In our book, *Consultation at Work: Regulation and Practice,* to be published in October, Mark Hall and I have a fascinating case history of an American owned multi-national which, early in the recession, decided to cut its Welsh plant by two thirds and move work to lower cost countries. It had a 'hybrid' staff council where unions represented the manual workers and non-union staff representatives spoke for the administrative and professional staff. The council was closely involved in the redundancy and restructuring plan to a remarkable extent over a long period, including direct communication with the workforce in teams or small groups. We had conducted an employee survey before the troubles and did so afterwards with those staff that remained on site. The results were startling: 'How good are management here at seeking employees' views?' Up from 41 to 79 per cent. 'How good are managers here at keeping their promises?' Up from 37 to 77 per cent. 'How fair are managers?' Up from 50 to 76 per cent. Organisational commitment increased from 70 to 90 per cent. One respondent wrote in the survey form:

> The past 14 months has been a huge challenge to the company and its employees.
> Levels of consultation and communication reached unprecedented levels following
> the announced closure of two-thirds of manufacturing operations. Workplace
> consultation has delivered an amazing result considering the scale of job cuts. Levels
> of quality, productivity, safety and attendance all exceeded the average run-rate for
> the previous two years.

We need a lot more stories with good evidence like this since too much negativity reduces people's imagination for what might be achieved. In this instance collective consultation procedures – often ignored by some proponents of the engagement agenda – made a major contribution to boosting levels of employee engagement, even in adverse economic circumstances.

We need evidence, too, on how the work of front-line managers can be improved to provide the basis for building employee engagement and commitment. My colleague Sue Hutchinson and I published one a few years ago based on the research we did at Selfridges in Manchester. Again, we surveyed employees twice. At the end of the first year survey the company took the view that the results showed the front line managers were not providing staff with enough support and attention, for example they did not meet the employee standards in the company value statement 'I know my opinion and contribution is welcomed'. Much training, some weeding out of poor performing front line managers, and the introduction of a development-based appraisal scheme took place. In our second year survey, organisational commitment had increased substantially as had people's perceptions of job influence, and their views on management conduct, especially in 'responding to suggestions from employees' (Purcell *et al* 2009:31-36, 67-75). There is nothing particularly remarkable in these case studies. The key in each was the imagination and foresight some senior managers, and in one case a union leader, to see what was possible and to drive it though in a way that built on fairness, justice and trust as well as contributing to performance improvements, as it did in both cases.

Can levels of engagement be improved?

Let me sum up. I don't think it matters that employee engagement is a term capable of many shades of meaning. At its heart are employees' feelings, beliefs and attitudes concerning their job, their co-workers, the customers, their manager, and concerning the organisation as a whole and especially the senior management team. We know that if employees believe that the organisation and its management, at the local and top levels, provide support to them as a person, a person with feelings and beliefs about fairness and wanting some development, they are likely to respond with cooperative behaviours of benefit to the firm. The key players are line managers, especially front-line managers and the top management. While there are limits to how many employees are likely to be engaged, or 'in gear', given the prevalence of bad jobs, and reluctance by some to devote much energy to their job, the overall level of engagement or commitment could grow. Employee engagement is best seen as an outcome of managerial activity to build perceptions of trust, fairness and organisational justice, especially procedural and interactional or interpersonal justice. These are the antecedents of engagement.

The question remains on how trust, fairness and justice are built. Each are essentially processes of the quality of interactions between management and employees. MacLeod and Clarke recognised this and homed in on leadership, engaging managers, employee voice and

integrity (2009:74-116). I agree with them completely. But I would give a lot more emphasis to employee voice since it is this multifaceted activity which is most obviously connected to the generation of trust, fairness, and procedural and informational justice. These days, virtually all of the emphasis on employee voice is focussed on direct communication and involvement through team briefing, workforce meetings, problem solving groups and, to a much lesser extent, via employee surveys. Employees get most information from their line manager and well run briefing group meetings allow for questions, discussion and some dialogue. The good line manager will, in any case, spend time talking informally with their staff, for example in task allocation, problem solving, and work issues especially in coping with change. Procedural justice means understanding the need for decisions and why certain actions were necessary, as well as judging how fair they were. Explaining, sharing, and justifying takes place through dialogue, or voice.

There are limits, however, to how far direct communication and involvement can meet the requirement for informational justice. Top managers are out of the loop, and while they may use a wide array of communication methods, including social media, these are in the main top down forms of communication. They do not give employees a voice. Collective consultation is curiously out of fashion, if it ever was in fashion - except during the Second World War. So too, is partnership with trade unions, after a flurry of enthusiasm some ten years ago. In both, the distinctive characteristic is senior managers briefing employee representatives on major plans and strategies and exploring the need for the decision and especially working through the consequences and how best to ensure a fair and just implementation. This is where informational justice can be achieved. Mark Hall and I explore how this is done in our book paying particular attention to the role of management in bringing big issues to the consultative committee or staff council, noting that many are reluctant to do so. Two other key activities are building an effective group of staff representatives able to forge a common purpose, and linking the staff council to the direct communication and involvement practices at shop floor level so that they do not become isolated.

Recently, Vince Cable, the Secretary of State for Business, said in the House of Commons that Information and Consultation committees, established under the 2004 ICE Regulations, are 'a potentially powerful mechanism which has been underutilised to date'. Well, he was right to say that they are potentially powerful, and correct in noting that they are underutilised 'to date'. He was quite wrong to suggest that ICE committees could debate executive pay. What he did not say was how the government intended to help improve the take up and work

of ICE committees which, in theory, employees can insist on in every enterprise with 50 or more employees. This is not the place to tell him how government should strengthen the regulations, but Mark and I will send him a copy of the book which spells it out, as well explaining why the current regulations are inadequate.

I hope you do not feel I am digressing too far from my theme of employee engagement. The point here is that when embedded voice practices on the shop floor, led by front-line managers, co-exist with top level consultative committees, run by senior managers, the effect on employee engagement and commitment is greater than each by themselves (Purcell and Georgiades 2007). What is more, I do not know of other initiatives with the same positive outcomes. Employee voice really is important for organisational climate and engagement.

What concerns me is how the cause of engagement can be advanced. We always have a problem of how to diffuse good practice in Britain. While I admire and support David MacLeod and Nita Clarke in their efforts to create a social movement promoting engagement, I have to be sceptical, having seen so many social change initiatives fall away. I do not think it good enough for the government to just give its blessing and then sit back and do nothing.

Employee engagement is worth pursuing, not as an end in itself, but as a means of improving working lives and company performance. The evidence of positive business outcomes is as strong as you can get it, even if it is never conclusive. And employee engagement is a classic win-win initiative since it is associated, when done properly, with better employee well being as well as wealth creation. It puts employees at the heart of the enterprise since it is they who judge their managers for their fairness, trust and acting with justice and who, in return, work better in their job, cooperate in innovation and change, and support the organisation which employs them. As such, if we ever doubted it, it returns employment relations to its proper place in business. Pat Lowry would have approved of that. Thank you.

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