



## **Improving Employee Engagement in the Voluntary Sector – a guide for and by Chief Executives**

### **A little background**

Employee engagement is vital at the best of times, but more crucial than ever in times of economic uncertainty and public spending cuts. It is also, quite simply, a key part of any Chief Executive's role.

It is a cliché, but no less true for being so, that employees are an organisation's greatest asset. But they are so much more than an asset. They are your brand, your front-line, your ambassadors, your fundraisers, your back office and your strategy all rolled into one. And if that was not enough they also have absolute choice on whether to work, how hard to work and how much they want to engage with the mission and plans of the organisation.

If as a Chief Executive, you didn't think employee engagement was important, hopefully the previous paragraph has convinced you!

This article has been created by a group of Chief Executives of voluntary sector organisations, thrown together only because they were known to be interested in one way or another in employee engagement. None of us claims to be the expert, and we are all taking a risk in even saying we have something to say on the issue; because committed or not and skillful or not, the current climate tells us there is always something unexpected around the corner. If we set ourselves up as experts we may well end up with egg on our face. However, we think this issue is important, we think we have something to say from our various experiences and we hope that other Chief Executives may benefit from our experiences and the things we have tried and found to work.

### **Who are we?**

This article is about employee engagement in the voluntary sector, and the role of Chief Executives in improving matters; it is not about our individual organisations. We represent large and small charities involved in a wide range of different activities (see end of article for list).

In addition to our own contacts, the only reference point we need to give is the excellent ACEVO publication, 'The Way Ahead: Trade Unions and the Third Sector'

written by Nita Clark and supported by Action for Children (under their former name NCH).

This report was the inspiration for convening this group of voluntary sector Chief Executives to see if there was anything we could offer in terms of stimulating, encouraging and improving the way voluntary sector organisations engage with their staff.

From 'The Way Ahead' it seems that all isn't well; for example:

While 84% of respondents to the 2007 Charity Pulse survey by Birdsong were proud to work for their charity, only 70% would recommend their charity as an employer. And, staff turnover in the voluntary sector was 22%, according to the 2007 Voluntary Sector Almanac, compared to 15% for all organisations. With 64% inspired by their charity, 86% enjoying the work they do, and 78% feeling they make a difference we must find a way to do better in staff turnover, recommendations as employers, and the all important figures on percentages of staff involved in Employment Tribunal cases against their employers. Just a 1% improvement in staff turnover would save the sector from recruiting over 6,000 people this year and all of the associated financial and disruption costs.

One thing uniting the group of Chief Executives looking at this issue on behalf of ACEVO is the belief that improved employee engagement will bring tangible benefits to our organisations and to the sector as a whole.

### **What is employee engagement?**

Having searched for some time for a satisfactory definition of employee engagement it is apparent that this is not something that has been pinned down by the experts as having one definition yet. The one thing that is very clear is that whether or not an employee is engaged is within their gift. An employer cannot create engaged employees. However, we can set an organisation's tone and provide the opportunities, impetus, and culture that encourages employees to be engaged. To be passionate about their organisation, to have a real psychological contract with their organisation, to go the extra mile, to really help their colleagues and to be a real ambassador for the organisation, its cause, and what it is trying to do.

Both the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) have had a go at defining those things that drive employee engagement. This should give us some clues about how we as leaders can improve employee engagement. The CIPD cites:

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

The IES provides the following list of drivers of employee engagement:

- involvement in decision-making
- freedom to voice ideas, to which managers listen
- feeling enabled to perform well
- having opportunities to develop the job
- feeling the organisation is concerned for employees' health and well-being

Both give us a strong sense of the things we can do in leading organisations to improve engagement.

While it is certainly worth looking at the research, and it is reassuring that there is a growing body of research to support the need for and means of achieving improved employee engagement, this article is about a small number of Chief Executives sharing their thoughts.

### **Achieving improved employee engagement**

Our 12 tips for Chief Executives determined to improve employee engagement in their voluntary sector organisations are:

1. Face-to-face time and contact
2. Practical responses to survey feedback
3. Formal consultation embedded in day-to-day communication
4. Role-modeling behaviours consistent with values
5. Conversation: listening and responding - not telling and imparting
6. Trusting relationships need groundwork and take time to flourish
7. Size, structure and geography matter – there is no one-fits-all
8. Design for the future of day-to-day communications
9. Training is engaging
10. Engage with everyone; not just the loud shouters
11. Celebrate!
12. Keep managing performance

Expanding on each of these, while keeping it brief, we hope you find some of this useful in improving engagement in your organisation.

#### **1. Face-to-face time and contact**

There is no substitute for this. It is all too easy to talk in terms of an employee being engaged with an organisation, but an organisation is just a collection of people and it is critical to manage relationships between people. It may be more difficult in large, geographically dispersed organisations, or it may be more difficult to maintain a

consistent dialogue in smaller organisations. Either way, getting the Chief Executive and other senior people up close and personal with employees from across the organisation is an essential channel for many of the drivers of employee engagement.

## **2. Practical responses to survey feedback**

The literature on staff surveys is extensive. Let's be clear, surveys alone do not improve employee engagement. They have a value in telling you about patterns that are important to significant numbers of people and things which change over time. They also give some opportunity for employees to input their thoughts (to the extent that a tick in a box is at least an expression of opinion). So they do have a value and should be encouraged, at least in organisations of a certain size.

However, they can also be a tool for employee engagement. If you are able to demonstrate that input to the survey resulted in something changing, then you may well be able to improve employee engagement. Why? Because this is a strong indicator that management is actually listening. We all know that feeling you are being listened to makes you feel valuable, and we all know that someone doing something as a result of an idea you had or a comment you made makes you feel valued. The same is true in our view of staff surveys.

Why not go further than asking the questions? Involving and engaging staff in the development of the survey in the first place can boost the overall impact.

## **3. Formal consultation embedded in day-to-day communication**

Whether you are unionised or not, there will be times when you need some kind of organised or formal arrangement for discussing important matters with employee and/or their representatives. It may be to do with a transfer of undertakings, it may be to do with a significant number of redundancies, or it may simply be that you want to be able to take the temperature on certain matters and cannot speak to everyone at once.

What is certain is that there are issues around which employees have a right to be represented. The question for Chief Executives is the extent to which they embed these representation rights in the core of internal communications and employee engagement or on the periphery. At its most basic, if someone is representing an employee in a grievance or disciplinary matter, is it better that the representative has a good understanding of the organisational context? We suspect the answer is yes. Similarly, if you have a works council, or a negotiating committee, or a staff representative body of any kind, they are certainly going to be of greater value if they are considering big organisational matters rather than just pay and rations. Talk to them about pay and rations and they will ask for better pay and rations; talk to them and share with them the challenges and stresses of the organisation and they will come up with solutions you never thought of.

#### **4. Role-modelling behaviours that reinforce values**

This is good old fashioned leading by example, or actions speaking louder than words. The means for achieving it are different in different organisations, but we have all found that having a clearly defined set of values for the organisation, and converting those values into consistent actions from those people who lead the organisation helps staff to believe firmly in what the organisation stands for. For example, engagement by an organisation that says it believes in honest and open communication is heightened if staff see managers, leaders, the Chief Executive displaying this consistently – whether things are going well or badly.

In modern organisations people do not simply follow the leaders, but they are more likely to embrace values if they see there is definitely not one rule for us and another rule for them. The responsibility of the Chief Executive in setting the tone is ultimate, especially in smaller organisations.

#### **5. Conversation: listening and responding - not telling and imparting**

This one is obvious really, but how many of us can say honestly we put as much, if not more, effort into listening and responding to what employees want to know about as they do into telling people things or sending out information or newsletters or updates? Why? Because it is more difficult and risks us being taken outside of our comfort zone.

We think employee engagement is driven by the sense of an ongoing conversation between those tasked with leading the organisation and everyone else involved in it. Thinking of employee engagement in terms of a conversation helps to establish the balance of effort – put as much effort into listening and demonstrating listening as you do into refining your message and informing people, and they are likely to find you and the organisation that bit more engaging.

#### **6. Trusting relationships need groundwork and take time to flourish**

The relationship between the Chief Executive and the rest of the staff team takes time to work. There is no automatic right to a positive relationship, and employee engagement does not happen overnight. Like all relationships it is going to take time, but that is not a reason to put it off; it is a reason to work on it right away. This will require a range of interventions which build a consistent picture of the Chief Executive – visiting different parts of the organisation regularly, making sure what we say in the corridor is matched with what we say and how we say it in the more formal communication channels we use, ensuring that we are seen to listen and take concerns, praise and criticism all equally seriously, in good grace and with a degree of humility.

This doesn't mean it needs to be contrived; it is about ensuring that the approach adopted by the Chief Executive suits the way the culture of the organisation needs to be moving, and that the formal communications match the real person. Just don't expect it

to all work straight away – start small, get some early wins, ensure you see it as part of the day-job and keep plugging away.

Our most simple message is that an honest and approachable style works best, whether times are good and the messages positive or times are tough and the messages difficult. Most people respond well to clear and consistent explanations of what is happening and why.

## **7. There is no one-fits-all**

While the principles and ideas we have discussed do seem fairly universal, there is a need to stress that there is no one-fits-all approach to good employee engagement. Size, structure and geography do matter. Smaller, single-location charities are likely to adopt approaches to employee engagement which are about the relationship between the Chief Executive and all of the staff individually. Larger national charities need to adopt approaches which recognise that the Chief Executive may well never meet many of the staff, and will have to work both through the necessary hierarchy of managers and leaders as well as through direct face-to-face or written communication.

Like many of our thoughts on employee engagement, this is fairly obvious. But it does not mean that the Chief Executive of a large charity does not need to do a good deal of face-to-face communication, and it doesn't mean that in a smaller charity there isn't room for well-organised methods of engagement such as newsletters or team meetings.

We also recognise that time moves on and things change. Many charities may start in one locality then grow into others. This brings the danger of the head office being seen as distant from those who do not work there, and even a sense that there is one rule for the favoured centre and another for everyone else on the "front line". We need to be ready to change the approach we take, the channels we use, and where we spend our time and how hard we work on particular relationships. It is particularly important to ensure that people outside of the head office do not end up feeling hard done to. This isn't just about the relationship between the Chief Executive and the staff; it is about the Chief Executive setting a tone for all sorts of other relationships throughout the organisation.

## **8. Design for the future**

A few years ago, the idea of a Chief Executive sending an email to every member of staff at the same time, and every member of staff being able to send a direct email to the Chief Executive, was unimaginable. The technology underpinning social networking, blogs, texting and so on is accessible to pretty much any organisation. There is no point investing huge amounts of time and effort in employee engagement if we cannot and do not communicate in the ways that are increasingly becoming the norm.

This is full of pitfalls, as anyone who has accidentally pressed send on an email will know! We have also heard the nightmare stories of people made redundant by text

message. The protocols are often fuzzy and need re-inventing – a blog cannot use the same protocols as a written letter, but at the same time we have to remember that once it is out there it is recorded forever and can be transmitted to anyone. Our note of caution is to give much thought to the use of these tools from a legal point of view as much as a cultural one.

Having given a cautionary message, however, we are all big advocates of designing employee engagement and communication for the future. The days of memos and traditional team briefings being the only channels are long gone. Modern communications approaches make us more and more accessible and are a great opportunity to build that relationship of trust that we all aspire to. Try them!

## **9. Training is engaging**

The need to train ourselves and our workforces doesn't need reinforcing here. We know as Chief Executives that we have to keep investing in the skills of our staff if we are to do our best to deliver our various missions. However, we need to keep in mind the spin-off opportunities that training brings – how often does the organisation have the opportunity to transmit clear messages about what they are about and how they need to operate to groups of employees, and how often do your employees get the opportunity to spend time together outside of their day-to-day jobs?

It doesn't have to be formal, classroom training; it can be working groups which are learning-by-doing, it can be an internal mentoring or coaching scheme, and it can even be those dreaded team building or team development sessions. The point is that the opportunity to engage with staff in different groups, and not only in there formal groups defined by the vertical management hierarchy, has many benefits over and above the specific thing they are learning about. So, we recommend creating these opportunities as well as taking them when they arise.

One example is that of a large charity with a need to build the financial skills of its managers and administrators as well as a relationship of trust between its finance department and the operations they supported (in the head office and the regional offices). The answer was an internal training programme designed by finance professionals and experienced managers together, run by the finance managers and simultaneously building skills and working relationships. This not only built relationships between the people in the training room but caused a knock on effect of breaking down barriers more generally across the organisation.

So, we definitely recommend fostering a culture and creating opportunities for building skills and breaking down barriers through training.

## **10. Engage with everyone; not just the loud shouters**

This is crucial. Breaking down barriers and finding you have built more than you have broken is wholly counterproductive! Different groups engage in different ways – whether

this is about disabled people with a wide range of different impairments and support needs, people from different cultural backgrounds, or simply some people being less gregarious and some people being more demanding. It is the Chief Executive's responsibility that they improve employee engagement for and with all of the team or workforce, and this needs thinking about and designing in; it does not just happen.

There are many approaches, and of course it works best if you personally start from the assumption that there is huge benefit for the organisation to be derived from diversity. Don't treat everybody the same, but do strive to ensure engagement is as effective for everyone. Use different approaches and channels so the opportunity to engage is there. In workshops and briefings remember that not everyone thrives in the hurly-burly of group work. When inviting people to give feedback, ensure they can do it in writing, by telephone, by email, face-to-face or in whatever way suits them.

Also, recognise the right to self-organise provided it doesn't interfere with the day-to-day needs of the organisation and that the costs are reasonable and sensible in the circumstances. Disabled staff groups can work well, as long as we and they remember that not everyone wants to go along to a group. On-line forums can work well as people are often more confident when typing their comments into such a forum than having to deliver it face-to-face, as long it does not become inappropriate or on-line bullying.

The point is look at the make-up of your workforce from every angle and ensure that you find ways to engage which are designed to engage with everyone, not just the ones that shout loudest or work the closest to you.

## **11. Celebrate**

This is another fairly obvious comment, but it is really important. Saying thank you privately or publicly has an impact, says a lot about the tone of the organisation, breaks down barriers, and gives the opportunity to reinforce positive aspects.

There are lots of ways to do this whether a simple thank you message, team or employee of the month awards, cutting the ribbon at a new service, or a cake and a cup of tea (or something stronger) to celebrate a fundraising achievement. All of these have an impact, even if some of them might seem frivolous to you or others in your team. But people remember positive feedback and celebrations for a long time. This is, perhaps counter-intuitively, especially important during tough times even if we have to be careful to keep things at an appropriate level. However, when you are making changes or cutting back, there are still things that will happen in your organisation which signal that the ongoing sustainability and business of the organisation continue.

People will still pass ten years service and should get the certificate, milestones in projects will still be achieved and need recognising, and people will do remarkable things which take the organisation forward. We say celebrate these things as they signal stability and progress and there is no more important time to do that than when things are difficult and uncertain.

## **12. Keep managing performance**

And finally, employee engagement is absolutely not about being nice to everyone all the time, and is absolutely not about forgetting what our organisations are trying or striving to achieve. Nothing breaks down engagement and relationships like the feeling that someone else isn't pulling their weight and are getting away with it.

So, an important part of employee engagement is good, fair, legal and consistent managing of performance, whether rewarding great performance or dealing with poor performance. Think of your appraisal process, your probation process, your disciplinary procedure and so on from an employee engagement point of view as well as from a legalistic or mechanistic point of view and it may well change how you do it. There is a balance of course – much as team member A might want team member B to be fired immediately, they will also want to know that if it were them they would want to be treated fairly and given the opportunity to explain or improve.

Also, through an employee engagement lens you will be more likely to remember that poor performance or conduct can be a symptom of something else and we would encourage you to think about the cause as well as responding to the effect. An employee who is always late who has a child to take to school, an elderly relative to look in on, or who is actually frightened by the rush hour is not necessarily an employee you want to lose. Of course there are some jobs where flexibility might not be possible, but these days most jobs can be flexed, and your employee will be motivated by the fact you are bothered enough or human enough to look at this.

So, our final point is that from our experiences, taking an employee engagement perspective to performance management will pay dividends for you, for the individuals concerned, for their team and for the culture of your organisation as a whole.

### **Closing Remarks**

As we say at the beginning, this guide is not written by the experts who never get anything wrong; it is written by a group of charity Chief Executives who have tried things and found that some work and some don't. We hope it is useful.

Our final comment would be – pick the phone up to other Chief Executives in the sector, whether they are in your locality or town, in your particular area of the sector, or you just happen to know them. We all have different experiences, and our experience is that most of your colleagues, even if they are competitors for funding, will find the time to listen or talk about their own experiences of what works and what doesn't. Employee engagement from the perspective of the Chief Executive is often something that only another Chief Executive will be able to help with. Give them a call!

**Contributors** (all members contributed in a personal capacity):

Jon Sparkes, NHS Cornwall & Isles of Scilly (formerly at Scope) [Chair]

Susan Bickerton, Norcare

Fiona Black, National Youth Agency

Nita Clarke, IPA

Craig Dearden-Phillips, Advocacy Partners Speaking Up

Mark Lever, National Autistic Society

Peter Little, Outward

Martin Kinsella, P3

Patrick Nash, Connect Assist

**Further Reading**

Click [here](#) for the MacLeod Review on employee engagement.

Click [here](#) for Business Link resources on employee engagement.

Click [here](#) for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills reports and policy publications on all employment matters.