

Why are employers still not listening to their staff?

Featuring
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from e-trinity



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Technology means it's never been easier to assess how employees feel. So why haven't a new generation of tools and techniques helped us genuinely improve engagement?

'I hear what you're saying' ought to be one of the most comforting phrases in the English language. In the hands of Britain's managers, however, it has arguably become one of the most infuriating. Unable or unwilling to instigate real change, too many bosses have resorted to acknowledging rather than acting. And that means that while the rising interest in 'employee voice' – where everyone in an organisation feels they have a say, are listened to and have their views taken into account – is a welcome development, the metrics on actual engagement remain discouragingly slim.

Big claims are made for employee voice, not least by Engage for Success, which calls it "the cheapest smoke alarm you can ever install", and encourages employers to put in place mechanisms that foster various, ongoing conversations among staff at all levels.

Myriad corporate scandals and reputational disasters could have been avoided had bosses listened to and acted on what their people were trying – or were too frightened – to tell them, and the current interest in voice may be a reaction in part to the perception that staff haven't been listened to enough in the run-up to a crisis.

But giving employees a meaningful voice is about more than nipping problems in the bud, as Louisa Baczor, research adviser at the CIPD, points out. "Listening to people properly is as much about treating them with respect and dignity as it is about anything else," she says, adding that people who feel their opinion matters are likely to be happier and more productive than those who don't. And if people are encouraged to share their views and ideas, this fosters collaboration, creativity and innovation.

Voice is not new: the best organisations have always listened to and acted on (or explained why they couldn't act on) what their people tell them. Once, that primarily meant works councils or union-led consultations, which gave way in time to surveys and suggestion boxes. Today, things have undergone an exponential leap. Gated enterprise social networks allow employees to express their views in a safe environment, which also offers the benefit of giving quieter or remotely based individuals parity with their peers.

The CIPD's *Putting social media to work* report found the likes of Yammer, Chatter and Jive were being used by HR departments to gather insight (often by using sentiment analysis tools to pull out recurring themes), while Workplace by Facebook is slowly gaining its own foothold as a way of connecting people. Meanwhile, Pulse surveys and engagement dashboards offer a real-time sense of how people feel.

This all combines to make employees feel they are being listened to. One of the issues, however, is that technology is creating huge amounts of unstructured data and, as Richard MacKinnon, insight director at The Future Work Centre, points out: "More data doesn't automatically lead to better understanding."

A long-time “advocate for dialogue” rather than one-off events such as annual engagement surveys that provide only a snapshot of how staff feel, MacKinnon is nevertheless sceptical about the value of some of the current crop of tools, particularly those that monitor employee sentiment in real time: “You’re monitoring volatile emotion rather than stable satisfaction.” More context, he advises, is often needed: “It all depends on what you are expecting it to do for you, how you go about capturing it and how you use the information you get.”

Part of the allure of newer voice tools is that they appear to promise what Frazer Rendell, director of engagement specialist E-Trinity Consultancy, describes as “the Eureka moment”. But, he says: “It’s not about that – it’s about marginal gain.”

He cites the example of a company that was losing out on new business opportunities because its proposals weren’t being distributed quickly enough. When the manager in charge took time to listen to what his assistant was saying, he was able to put in place several straightforward actions to help fix the problem – which included something as simple as replacing a faulty hole punch.

Technology and good dialogue are a winning combination, adds Rendell, “but I’ve seen very few companies using the tools well enough to effect positive outcomes”. For example, a big supermarket chain ‘trawled’ employees’ ideas on how to improve the business, and got thousands of responses, “but filtered them for ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ideas based on existing preconceptions, which stopped really interesting ideas coming through”.

The starting point for capturing employee voice is “good conversations between employees and managers”, says Rendell. But this is easier said than done. Baczor says: “Line managers are key because they are the immediate ‘recipients’ of voice, and can facilitate open conversations and act on what they hear. But this often doesn’t happen because they say they don’t have the time. Also, they often lack the right skills – like the ability to listen with empathy.”

If you listen properly, you often realise that people do want to be involved in fixing the issues they raise, says Rendell: “They probably already have the solution.” But he thinks the terminology works against this. “Engagement – and voice is part of that – is still seen as something that you do after you’ve finished your day job, but it is your day job. We tell managers to ‘manage’ when we should be telling them to help their team perform at its best.”

A Spanish food business he used to work with is a case in point. “One of the managers said to me: ‘This employee voice stuff is hard work; they keep throwing ideas at me and I’m overwhelmed.’” One of the ideas was to introduce a new range of sandwiches, and Rendell advised the manager to throw the challenge back to the member of staff who’d come up with it. Three months later, sandwich sales were up 50 per cent, largely because of the enthusiasm and excitement of the employee who’d developed the range and was responsible for selling it.

But you’ll never capture and benefit from employee voice unless you have the right culture. Psychological safety is important, because, as MacKinnon points out, “you should be encouraging people to be honest”. When Google engineer James Damore posted a memo about the firm’s diversity initiatives last year to highlight what he saw as a left-wing bias that was silencing alternative views, he was fired.

Similarly, at a town hall meeting at a technology company in Ireland, the CEO claimed he wanted people to ask him questions, but when a male employee stood up and asked a question, he was asked: ‘Are you still here?’ The next day, he wasn’t.

HR can facilitate voice, but business leaders, and the CEO in particular, have to role model behaviour, and this includes being willing to hear and act on what may be 'inconvenient truths'. "You have to respond, because, if you don't, you will break the implicit promise you made to employees, which is arguably worse than doing nothing at all," says MacKinnon. Rendell adds: "CEOs feel vulnerable, but if they are reluctant to address certain things they need to work with others in the organisation to determine an appropriate response."

Jane Sparrow, author and founder of The Culture Builders, talks about a CEO she regards as exemplary in this area. "He believes that everyone, however senior, is a student forever and should learn from every interaction with people," she says. He has regular informal conversations with staff about how they feel, their ideas and what makes them proud – and this typically happens in one of the business's communal kitchens specially designed to foster informal chat and collaboration. As part of a new approach to performance management, he has replaced the formal annual appraisal with six-weekly catch-ups with his direct reports.

But such conversations are rarely serendipitous: you have to create the climate where they can happen. "You have to be very intentional about it," says Sparrow. "You have to create lots of little opportunities for voices to be heard. It's about sprinkling fairy dust rather than waving a magic wand." One of the challenges of capturing employee voice is listening to everyone, not just those who are most vocal, and one of the most 'difficult to reach' groups are younger employees, who may feel intimidated about speaking out. "They have a really valuable perspective, which leaders need to hear," says Sparrow, who points to the growing number of business leaders who get involved in 'reverse mentoring' to learn from this important voice.

Another hard to reach group is university academics, as the leadership team at Edinburgh Napier University has discovered. Around three years ago, the HR team embarked on an organisation and culture change programme to support an ambitious new strategy. The change has been uncomfortable, even overwhelming for some, says Pauline Miller Judd, dean of the arts and creative industries school.

"We've tried 'campus conversations', 'school forums' and 'open conversations' as a way of updating people, listening to their concerns and taking questions, but academics just weren't engaging that well," she says. Last June, she embarked on a programme of 'skip level' meetings with all of the 100 or so academic, technical and professional services staff in her school, in an attempt to capture all the different voices.

"It's very informal – there's no set agenda. I just wanted to find out directly from people, rather than through my direct reports, what they're doing, how they're feeling, how we can help them and so on, because people had become quite internalised," she says.

In the meetings, Judd is trying to help people understand how they contribute to the strategy, validate their ideas, help them make connections with people in other areas and address concerns they raise. "For example, people were worried about processes in some departments, and as dean I can feed some of those issues back and things start to get done." She's also found what she's learned beneficial for talent development purposes: "When you hear about what people are doing from their line manager or subject head, that can be tempered by their own view. Because I'm a step removed, I'm better placed to point out wider opportunities to them."

Is it working? "Informally, I've heard that these conversations have boosted some staff, who feel more positive just as a result of having been listened to," she says.

The growing army of gig workers is another matter entirely. They are on the frontline of customer interaction and, because their jobs often revolve around an app or online rostering tool of some kind, this seems to be the obvious way to seek their views. But, says Baczor, “we’ve done some work with gig workers and many of them have said that whenever they raised an issue they would get a standard automated response – which is arguably worse than not offering them the opportunity for feedback in the first place”.

More generally, organisations can tap quieter voices through things like anonymous online feedback or a conversation with an employee representative. But you have to promote these opportunities firmly. “You have to urge people to use the opportunities you have provided for them to make their organisation a better place to work,” says MacKinnon.

Recent research from Engage for Success found that 64 per cent of people at work say they have more to give to the business, but no one is asking them, which suggests that organisations are sitting atop a mountain of untapped potential. As Rendell points out: “Marketing spends a fortune on getting ‘customer insight’ – but no one is closer to customers than employees.”

How Danone used Facebook’s Workplace, and old-fashioned conversation, to improve its listening skills

Sometimes, tackling voice means taking the opportunities that are presented. Which is why, just over a year ago, when Danone UK centralised in a new building in west London, a move to agile working became a chance to start listening more concertedly to employees.

The food giant’s HR team cites three main tools it has introduced or enhanced: its intranet, the Workplace by Facebook social media network and a series of live events. “The combination of channels gives both senior leaders and employees a structured way of sharing news of their projects and successes with colleagues,” says Liz Ellis, HR director of Danone UK and Ireland.

“Apart from helping us maintain our culture of openness and collaboration, this also forms a vital part of driving commercial objectives. It helps our people to see the bigger picture and understand how their role fits with what the wider business is working towards. This is really important: if you understand exactly how you make a difference and how you can contribute to the success of the bigger team, you are much more likely to be engaged, creative and productive.”

The Facebook tool has been particularly successful, says Ellis, with 92 per cent of employees active on Workplace each week. It’s being used to share documents and minute meetings as well as issue information, and is popular with younger staff. This is complemented by regular line manager conversations – all senior managers in the business are externally qualified coaches – and an employee consultative forum with 15 members who have a remit to discuss policy, practice and employee relations issues.

“One trap that businesses can easily fall into is that they make assumptions about what their employees think, want and need,” says Ellis. “Based on experience, they believe they know what makes their people tick. It seems like an obvious truth that, to really understand what matters to your staff, you have to have a continuous dialogue, ask questions and be prepared to really listen to the answers. This is a simple insight, but it can get lost in the busyness of everyday life.”



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