

People Power

Are we finally reaching the point in the information revolution where there is greater acceptance that people make the difference, that human capital is the big differentiator?

Indian businesses and organisations feel the heat from global markets and intense competition, as customers and shareholders become more demanding. Increasingly, it is to their people (not just technology) that they have to turn for answers.

Stephen Manallack

The author is a communication consultant and trainer. He is a member of the Committee of Management of Australia India Business Council in Melbourne, Australia. He can be reached at stephen@manallack.com.au

With something like 69 per cent of all employees not being really “engaged” with their organisation, much can be achieved by action to switch this group on. Making sure employees become the engine room of profit – and a key to India’s competitive edge

Leaders around the business world are under pressure for results. Everyone around them is demanding “better, faster and cheaper”. And as leaders turn to their employees, they find that loyalty has been replaced by a free market where employees perform conditionally (am I acknowledged?, what do I know?, will I be rewarded?, is it worth it?) rather than as a matter of course.

Every day these employees make the choice to either

engage or not engage their talents in serving customers and the organisation. Yet many organisations still regard employees as interchangeable units of cost.

The challenge is to switch these employees on by informing and motivating, and many in management are not up to it.

The jury is not out on the question of the power of engagement of employees. The data shows engagement creates more sales, more market value, higher return on capital. On the other side, it shows reduced absenteeism, fewer accidents, greater customer loyalty and retention. These are all direct drivers of profit and success.

The Gallup Organisation over at least two decades of research in the USA has found that as many as 69 per cent of employees are “not engaged”, that only 16 per cent are engaged. This engaged group, drive organisational success. The vast majority is not engaged; they drag performance down. This sends a signal to the rest of the world, including India: check the motivation of your people and do more to switch them on (engagement).

The good news is that most people see their workplace as full of potential; they want to learn and make a worthwhile contribution. They also want recognition for that contribution. Most importantly,

people want face-to-face communication so they can better understand their place in the organisation.

Who is going to provide the drive for more and more employees to switch to engaged? How do you motivate people to make the right decisions for customers and the organisation, and how do you unlock the discretionary effort that the “not engaged” might withhold?

We have real trouble with this, where some seek charismatic leaders at the top while others pursue teamwork or “let’s restructure” as a way to switch people on.

We know from research in a variety of companies exactly what are the communication needs of employees; things like timely and accurate information, coaching and feedback, real communication, a feeling of being valued, understanding of the business and real human contact.

And if you think about how employees move to greater loyalty and engagement, it is typically a shift from the personal (“I”) to a sense of team (“We”).

Leaders at all levels are obviously the critical link, rather than just the one at the top. “Leaders” includes managers, supervisors and team leaders. In the day-to-day of the workplace, they are the ones who win or lose discretionary effort and engagement.

Unfortunately, in the USA



and many countries including India, most of these leaders, despite their best efforts, have never been trained in communication and have little understanding of it.

We all pay lip service to how “vital” communication is; but really more often than not among business leaders communication is poorly understood and badly executed. Many of the people who gain promotion to management are not chosen because they have

outstanding communication skills; they are chosen because of professional expertise or simply for being good at their job.

On the employee side, a major problem is the sheer volume of information they receive, meaning that they often do not know what to do with it and what it all means. This is the result of communicating without a strategy. Strategic communication is the reverse of this chaotic

approach: It brings focus and understanding.

Research has shown that what employees are really looking for is “communication” that helps them do their jobs well. They also mostly say that they prefer to get this kind of information from their managers, supervisors and team leaders. So the challenge is how to unlock the power of this opportunity.

There are six imperatives for those who seek to

use communication as part of real leadership.

Make the time

To say you don't have time to communicate is to say you don't have time to lead. This communication is more than a few memos, e-mails and meetings. It is vastly more than "my door is always open." A good leader needs a strategy to shape their communication, and then the ability to see it through. Time, persistence and repetition are essential ingredients of good communication.

Relate it to them

Naturally employees want to know how information and news relates to them, yet mostly they get swags of information and no help in differentiating it. Information overload and communication failure are teammates. A discussion of developments within your company or organisations should include what these developments mean to your team and to their customers. Your people want to know the "why" of things that happen, because with the "why" they can become engaged.

Don't wait to communicate

A massive leadership problem is secrecy. We are not comfortable as leaders if we do not have all the answers, so we wait until it is too late. The result is always rumour, gossip and declining engagement. For many, the first step to good leadership is a public

acknowledgement that you don't know everything. Being comfortable with not having all the answers provides real integrity to your messages. So tell them what you know, tell them what you

don't know and tell them when you should know more.

Be open and honest

People have inbuilt lie detectors. Nothing switches people off quicker than a lie, but this also extends to gossip and "talking big," a failing of those managers who desperately want to impress and think that, "if I am a leader I should know everything and be in everything." Much better instead to communicate in a real, open and human way.

What you "say" should match what you "do"

Words without matching action are worse than no words at all. You cannot be a leader if you cannot lead by example. Actions speak louder than words. For example, if you promise to do something by a set time, always deliver. At the least, if you cannot deliver explain what has changed and therefore means you can-

not deliver as expected – it is worth going out of your way to get this understood. Failure to live up to your promises is a signal to others that they don't need to either.

Employees are not dummies

Listen to employees. Make it a real two-way communication. In most organisations, there are ordinary employees who have already identified the problem and know how to solve it; if you would just ask them. Encourage them to be forthright, even where there may be disagreement; communication has the goal of understanding.

Organisations spend a fortune on measuring customer satisfaction and trying to find out what they want and need, yet few have a clear idea of the communication needs of their employees.

We know the stages that an employee goes through from the initial, "What's my job?" to the fully engaged and switched on employee who asks, "How can I help?" With planning and the right strategy, India's managers, supervisors and team leaders can communicate so successfully that more and more employees move over into the engaged category – then India would have a real competitive advantage. □

