



Increasing engagement

The formula for raising engagement levels is simple and it works, says John Laurent. Develop leaders who value finding out from employees what is wrong, and help leaders to help employees fix what is wrong.

According to a Towers Perrin study of 90,000 employees in 18 countries conducted in 2007-2008, “companies with the most engaged employees had a 19 percent increase in operating income during the previous year, while those with the lowest levels had a 32 percent decline.”

More than 100 studies have now demonstrated a strong relationship between employee engagement and organisational performance, according to a *Harvard Business Review* article ‘What it takes to be a great employer’ (January 3, 2011). Studies also show that in the USA only 20 percent of employees are fully engaged, 40 percent are capable but not committed, and 40 percent are disenchanted and disengaged.

This article sets out to illustrate a simple approach to increasing employee engagement. With the right toolkit and with support from

the top, a facilitator can apply the process and, where it is followed to its conclusion, a measured increase in employee engagement will occur.

Why are people disengaged?

Here are some general principles:

- People in organisations are only disengaged when they think something of importance to them in their workplace is wrong and they can’t influence it;
- This is the same as what makes people unhappy in general;
- The factors that stop people from influencing things in organisations are many, but are either under the influence of management or can’t be controlled at all;
- To begin to increase feelings of engagement, people in organisa-

tions need to be able to openly express the things that they think are wrong;

- In my experience, the factor that stops this happening is that some managers don't want to hear about things staff think are wrong;
- The process of encouraging staff to fix things they think are wrong has a 'double loop learning' effect—on the one hand people learn how to improve things and on the other hand attitudes change.

An observation about leaders

Leaders who are interested in finding out from staff what they really think is wrong and then acting on this are relatively rare. Too often, workforce perceptions are dismissed as "vague and woolly", "not relevant to improving the bottom line" or "critical of the leader or others and therefore embarrassing, contagious, hurtful, spiteful, disruptive, etc". In my opinion these leaders are misguided.

Over a 15-year period, I have worked with hundreds of leaders using the Human Synergistics Life Styles Inventory (LSI) as a 360° feedback leadership benchmarking tool. The advantage of this experience is that I have been able to observe the values and behaviours of effective and ineffective leaders in action and relate this to the data the LSI provides on how managers think.

The LSI feedback is displayed to participants in feedback programmes in the form of a 12-styles clock model. The tendency to use some styles over others is represented by their extension from the centre of the clock. Styles closest to the outside ring are the dominant behaviours as seen by others.

The data derived by Human Synergistics from the application of this development tool tells us that only 15 percent of leaders are actually seen by others as thinking the way the ones modeled in the LSI clock (right) operate. These leaders tend to have more engaged staff in any case and welcome the kind of engagement development process I recommend.

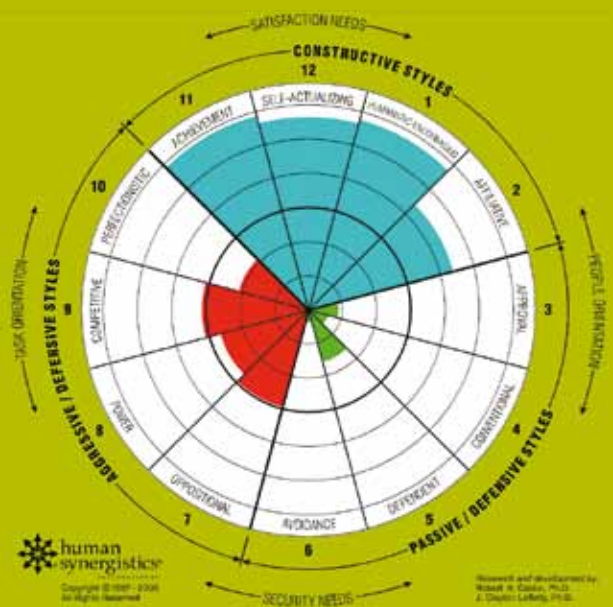
This also means that the majority of leaders and professionals (myself included) operate to some degree in a more defensive mode. Coaching and training will be required to move them in the direction prescribed by the ideal leader model. It is not my intention to explore leadership development in detail except to point out below how problem-solving facilitation supports leadership growth.

The problem with problems

Here are some more general principles to consider:

- The word 'problem' has a negative connotation. Many of us have a physical reaction when we think of the most difficult problems we encounter in our lives. Kiwi culture, being high on avoidance, would rather use the word 'issue' or even just talk about solutions. That way no one is offended.

Leaders with engaged employees



The orientations of the most effective leaders are:

- **High Achievement** meaning motivated by own goals, seeking problems to fix and wanting to understand problems before deciding, seeking excellence, acting to improve things.
 - **High Self Actualising** meaning non-defensive about self and wanting to understand what is real rather than phoney.
 - **High Humanistic Encouraging** meaning sees best in others, seeking to develop others and involve others in decisions that affect them.
- To an effective leader, a problem is merely an opportunity to make things better, and in fact the most effective leaders actively seek out problems to fix.
 - All organisations, even the best places to work, have problems. When staff complain about their problems, the difference between a healthy organisation and an unhealthy organisation is what they complain about.
 - A clever process can be used to openly bring complaints to the surface in a team session as 'problem statements' in a way that makes the problem the property of the team not the person who raised it.
 - All problems need to be on the table, including the 800 pound gorilla who sits in the corner. The leader's perceptions of the problems should also be included.
 - The facilitator then needs to teach and apply rational, adult problem-solving methodologies to work the team, face-to-face and involving the leader, through solving all the problems. This involves getting agreement on the exact nature, scale, size, cause,

etc of the problems in the first place and generating multiple potential solutions.

- As the team matures and learns to deal with ever more difficult problems, the leader needs to take over the facilitation. For many teams, dealing with lower level social problems enables a shift in focus to business-related performance problems later on.

What can be accomplished in this process?

The following examples are typical of problems that were sitting under the surface in actual teams. Once these were put on the table the teams were able to implement solutions that made a lot of sense and moved the organisations forward.

A manufacturing company supervisory team identified an unrecognised pattern of misunderstanding in the communication between the schedulers and supervisors. When remedied, this led to savings of half a day per month in production set up times. Opportunity grasped.

An inwards goods store team were concerned about the number of times they rejected consignments from a supplier owing to their own company's changing schedules. When they measured the frequency of the problem, they found it didn't happen as often as they thought and when they shared this data with their supplier they were told they were one of the more reliable customers. Problem disappeared.

A team identified the behaviour of one member as their biggest problem. The resulting uproar was uncomfortable at the time, but the disrupter left the company and performance improved significantly. Problem solved.

A senior team followed the process of dealing with their problems right through a long list. Not only did their own team's engagement (as measured in a survey) increase substantially, but their change had the effect of substantially increasing the entire firm's measured engagement levels—an unforeseen benefit.

A pull approach to leadership development

Traditional leadership development, either in training workshops or coaching or both, tends to rely on persuading the leader to use different approaches back on the job. I call this a 'push' approach to developing leaders.

While this is valuable, the principles of effective leadership can be actualised on the job by the bottom-up problem solving process. I call this a 'pull' approach to developing leaders.

Bottom-up problem solving, particularly where staff have selected the issues, is a powerful shaper of a constructive culture as measured by the Human Synergistics model. It institutionalises the constructive styles in the clock model. Culture operates in an organisation to legitimise certain ways of behaving. As teams become more open they will define, using a rational process, the way they will be led by making agreements between the leader and team members. This

Some points to note

- Emphasis needs to be on team members, not managers, implementing the actions wherever possible.
- Some problems, after discussion, are unable to be solved (eg, world economic conditions). However, sometimes just recognising this helps get the problem into perspective.
- I am always surprised how creative teams can be when they brainstorm solutions to seemingly intractable problems. In large complex organisations, many problems stem from the actions of other departments. This is not to say that teams are helpless victims of others' actions. Often the solutions involve simply talking to the other department, involving them in solving the problem or recording statistical data and providing feedback.

is not to say that we are driven by the lowest common denominator. Rather, the values defined in the clock model or articulated by the organisation act as guiding principals for how the team deals with the problems and each other and implements action. The team leader, as an active participant, comes to learn facilitative leadership while retaining ultimate control over the decisions made in the team meetings.

A final word

Bottom-up problem solving opens up the organisation to self examination and criticism. I see this as a healthy and necessary process to build more engagement from organisation members and give them a greater emotional stake in the success of the enterprise.

When people point out how difficult problem solving can be, I remind them of Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great* when he coined the phrase 'the Stockdale Paradox'—retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of difficulties, *and at the same time*, confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever that might be.

In a bottom-up programme, resistance builds as the team gets into the 'gorilla problems'. In my experience a tipping point is reached when people realise that:

- It's not a witch hunt;
- No one is going to lose their job;
- We can make things better.

A breakthrough happens as people realise they have much more control over their destiny than they thought. Nothing is more motivating for people than when they are encouraged to deal with a problem they thought was impossible and implement the solution themselves.

Happy problem solving.

John Laurent is the principal of Action Learning Ltd.
He can be contacted at john.laurent@action-learning.co.nz
or www.action-learning.co.nz

