

Engage, and your staff will reciprocate



Pascale Schuman, Fast; Monica Jonsson, CoachDynamix; Melanie Robert, Bank of New York Mellon; Cherry Hooper, Kremer Associates & Clifford Chance; Magali Maillot, Lombard International Assurance; Petra Buderus, KPMG

Photo: Steve Eastwood

Many businesses have seen their employees' 'engagement' fall since the crisis. When this declines, so does the quality of work, as employees become increasingly demotivated by having to rebuild a damaged business or even speculate on whether it is possible to pull out of an apparent tail spin. The British Chamber of Commerce Evening Business Forum on 22nd March brought together a panel of HR professionals to offer some solutions. There is no magic wand, they said, but only through honest communication can trust and motivation be fostered.

During the crisis, nervousness about businesses' financial health has been compounded by worries over job prospects. Benefits and training were cut, adding to concerns and feelings of dislocation. Pascale Schuman of training and recruitment firm Fast highlighted the danger of a vicious circle regarding engagement. If an employee feels semi-detached this will have a wider effect on the working atmosphere as errors and low performance take root and spread. The result can be the loss of key staff and client disaffection.

Why disengagement?

Monica Jonsson of coaching company CoachDynamix painted a bleak image, pointing to a recent study suggesting only 15-20% of staff in the EU are fully engaged with their companies, a figure she said "had never been lower". The panel agreed there was a widespread problem, suggesting some ideas why this was happening. "Generation Y" can tend to be less committed to corporate life, particularly, as Melanie Robert of Bank of New York Mellon pointed out, due to increased globalisation, specialisation and the creation of regional business 'silos' which can lead to a loss of identity.

Two way communication

Bi-directional communication was seen by everyone on the panel as key to turning this around. Kremer Associates & Clifford Chance's Cherry Hooper pointed to two common themes during exit

interviews. She hears complaints of a lack of information and insufficient recognition of concerns by senior management. Hooper was clear that senior management needs to do more than pay lip-service to dialogue through genuine, transparent and respectful communication. Staff need to know about vision and strategy, as this will build trust and make tough decisions easier to cope with.

Similarly, management needs to seek out views from across the organisation, not only for the information this provides but to make staff feel they belong. Working groups and more informal meetings can work, it was suggested. Boosting socialising amongst staff also brings team spirit too. Encouraging internal mobility within an office and an international organisation can also add to feelings of dynamism and belonging, it was suggested. An individual's personal engagement can vary but HR can instil the right breeding ground.

Managers must manage

Whilst accepting the general message, there is a danger that senior managers can even over-do the communication if this means that middle managers are by-passed. Petra Buderus of KPMG counselled against a one-size-fits-all approach, saying communication has to be tailored to each organisation with its own history. She added that bravery is also needed if current policies are not working.

Ultimately, staff are motivated by salary and the promise of career progression: factors which came easily to Luxembourg businesses during the 1990s and 2000s. Things will be tougher now that growth is likely to be closer to the EU norm. The panel agreed enthusiastically that the onus is now on managers to manage and lead by example. Even the majority of management time may need to be devoted to staffing concerns rather than technical matters if disengagement is to be prevented.

Text: Stephen Evans