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The shifting landscape of work and working lives

# **‘All for one and one for all’: Line managers might be the catalyst but ‘everyone’s responsible’ for employee engagement**

Conference paper

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## Summary

Issues of employee engagement have traditionally landed at the door of HR, tasked with undertaking annual employee engagement surveys and responding with initiatives devolved to line managers. However, recent research conducted on behalf of Engage for Success has highlighted that engagement is everyone's responsibility. Improving levels of engagement requires a series of roles fulfilled by all stakeholders in the organisation: from senior management to front-line staff. Employee engagement is a two-way process and is not something that HR, or line managers, can change in isolation. To coin a well-known phrase, when it comes to employee engagement, it is 'all for one and one for all'.

## Background

The MacLeod Review<sup>1</sup> propelled the concept of employee engagement into the consciousness of organisations, practitioners and academics. Findings from the review highlighted the positive links between employee engagement levels and organisational outcomes. In response to the need for greater awareness and understanding around issues of employee engagement, the voluntary movement, Engage for Success was established in 2011. With the decision to leave the EU shifting the landscape of our working lives, post-referendum uncertainty has resulted in unprecedented challenges.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there is an even greater need to make fundamental changes to the way we work and how organisations engage with their employees.

According to Gallup, there has been a global decrease in the number of actively disengaged employees since 2009.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not mean there has been an increase in engagement. Although the UK has experienced a similar decline in the number of actively disengaged employees, there has also been a drop in engagement levels. This equates to the majority of employees in the UK not feeling engaged at work.

**Table 1: Engagement levels in the UK**

|                     |     |
|---------------------|-----|
| Engaged             | 11% |
| Not Engaged         | 68% |
| Actively Disengaged | 21% |

Source: Gallup (2017, p86)

The UK is not alone in its struggle to address problems of engagement, and think tanks have been launched in the US and Europe. It is evident that issues of engagement are a global problem. The Gallup results do not reflect the full impact of Brexit and it is unknown how it will affect employee engagement levels. However, it is clear that the uncertainty associated with our decision to leave the EU is placing pressure on organisations and their employees. Consequently, the concept of engagement has arguably become increasingly important to counteract the Brexit fallout.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with increasing low productivity levels and disengagement in the UK, employee engagement requires renewed focus.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the concept of employee engagement being popular with practitioners and consultants, there are still many unanswered questions. Research on engagement has focused on an overarching notion of engagement, with issues of implementation, and the actors involved, often remaining a secondary consideration. Consequently, we know little about 'doing' engagement and 'being' engaged.<sup>6</sup> A central part of this question is the role of line managers. Although line managers are increasingly responsible for the implementation of organisational policies<sup>7</sup> and have a 'crucial impact' on engagement,<sup>8</sup> there is limited research on how line managers' behaviour and actions influence employee engagement. Despite their salience, it would be a misconception to consider line managers in isolation, or as barriers to engagement.

## Engagement in practice: NHS Scotland

In 2017, NHS Scotland rolled out an Employee Engagement Index, known as iMatter, across NHS Scotland and several health and social care partnerships. Although measures of employee engagement are commonplace, what made iMatter different is how it was developed. Focusing on a method of co-production, front-line staff were heavily involved in its development from the beginning. Considered a continuous improvement plan, iMatter consists of a cycle of stages involving an in-depth questionnaire, team reports, and 12-month localised actions plans.

It is safe to say that the implementation of iMatter has been an in-depth and lengthy process; its long-term plan is to reach all staff across NHS Scotland, Health and Social Care. For the measure to work, it has required a large-scale training programme, local operational managers, and staff buy-in at every level. Employee engagement is central to the key principles of the NHS Constitution that acknowledges the links between staff experience and patient experience. Research conducted by West and Dawson<sup>9</sup> drew attention to links between engagement and NHS outcomes (especially around patient satisfaction, infection rates, and mortality rates). Subsequent research has highlighted the impact of poor engagement on the quality of care.<sup>10</sup> The drive and ambition of iMatter emphasises NHS Scotland's national focus on employee engagement as fundamental to its health strategy and legislation.<sup>11</sup> Although co-produced and endorsed by the Scottish Workforce, Staff Governance Committee, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, local implementation of iMatter has had its challenges.

## Engage for Success: Line Manager Thought and Action Group (TAG)

NHS Scotland approached the Line Manager TAG to undertake research on the implementation of iMatter. Even though the measure had been statistically validated,<sup>12</sup> NHS Scotland was interested in qualitative, case study research to gather in-depth analysis of the implementation of the measure in practice. The research sought to answer:

- *Who* is responsible for engagement initiatives?
- *What* role do key stakeholders have in implementing and sustaining employee engagement initiatives?

Although the focus of the TAG is on the role of line managers, it was important to include other key stakeholders in the research. Consequently, semi-structured interviews with senior management, HR professionals, line managers, trade union representatives and front-line staff were completed.

## Research findings

When asked who was responsible for employee engagement in general, it was widely acknowledged by all respondents that '*absolutely everybody is responsible for employee engagement*' (Respondent 5.14).

*'I think there is a role for, for everybody. I think, obviously your chief executives, your board, your senior leadership team, have a role. Your middle managers have a role; your direct line managers have a vital role. But as an employee, when I come to work, and I enter employment, I have a role, to take part, to engage.'* (Respondent 5.3)

With the ethos that employee engagement was everyone's responsibility, the successful implementation of an engagement initiative required involvement from all levels and acknowledgement that iMatter was '*not one of those top-down initiatives that you can just roll out and cascade down ... everybody has to be on board with it*' (Respondent 5.4). Although it was clear that everyone had a part to play, it was evident from analysis that it was not the same role. Instead, different stakeholders had distinct responsibilities, or tasks to complete.

## Senior management as catalysts

Employee engagement *'has to start at the top'* (Respondent 5.1):

*'It's critical that senior managers place value on employee engagement and role-model that in the organisation.'* (Respondent 5.14)

The attitudes and behaviours of senior management filtered down the organisation, arguably to shape the behaviours of other managers. Consequently, if senior managers did not embrace both the concept of employee engagement and the initiatives implemented to measure and improve levels, it was increasingly challenging for managers to persuade staff that it was important.

While considered catalysts in developing and maintaining employee engagement levels and initiatives, senior managers were not solely responsible.

## HR as facilitators

Respondents from HR believed the HR function should be able to understand and advise on issues of employee engagement, but not take full ownership of employee engagement. Instead, their role was to *'support and provide skills, provide encouragement, and share learning ... we have a part to play I would say, but I don't think [engagement] should be owned by HR'* (Respondent 4.7).

Although HR was influential in facilitating employee engagement, it was not their responsibility, but rather the job of managers. Instead, the HR department's role was to ensure *'that all the building bricks are in place'* (Respondent 4.1) and to *'direct the service and construct the service in a way that it enhances engagement levels'* (Respondent 5.14).

However, at times, HR took on the task because of a lack of engagement from managers. Successful implementation occurred when the HR team took accountability for facilitating engagement and developing relationships and connecting people.

## Line managers as implementers

Respondents at all levels agreed that line managers were responsible for developing and sustaining employee engagement. In essence, they had a vital role in implementing engagement initiatives:

*'Line managers I think are critical ... They're hugely influential ... although we are all responsible for employee engagement, line managers have a particular responsibility.'* (Respondent 5.14)

For line managers to do this successfully, it required the rest of the organisation, especially senior managers and HR, to provide guidance and clear expectations on what to do and how to do it.

However, not all line managers saw the importance of employee engagement. Respondents attributed the lack of interest from line managers as a result of senior management behaviour. If senior managers were not driving engagement initiatives and embodying its principles, line managers were less likely to do so themselves. When this happened, it had a detrimental impact on staff who would follow the example set by the line managers. In essence, a domino effect would occur down the organisation.

## Employees as partners

Employee engagement was everyone's responsibility, including, and especially so, the employees themselves, who were considered partners in sustaining employee engagement. As such, it was the expectation that employees reciprocated the employment relationship, taking action to engage with the work that they were doing.

Considered key in developing and sustaining active engagement, the relationship between the individual and their manager enabled good working relationships. Participants frequently repeated the statement that it was a ‘two-way’ relationship and both sides had to be actively involved. Without both sides interacting, employee engagement broke down. The emphasis was not purely on the manager, *‘because you can have a manager who is really trying hard to engage with their staff, but you can’t force someone to be engaged’* (Respondents 5.3).

## Unions as enablers

The research examined the role unions had in employee engagement, and iMatter specifically, with respondents. Experiences varied according to the team and department, although all agreed unions had a position that could enable successful employee engagement.

Even though union involvement was ad hoc, participants agreed that unions *‘do play a key role’* (Respondent 4.12), and that they *‘wouldn’t be able to take this forward without their input, or their support in it’* (Respondent 1.6).

## Discussion

The research surfaced perceptions about the ownership of employee engagement. An emergent theme was the underpinning agreement that everyone had a responsibility for employee engagement. This theme suggests a shift away from employee engagement as something that is ‘done’ to employees, to a place where every employee shapes their own experience of engagement.

The success of engagement initiatives rests on everyone being on board and fulfilling specific roles (see Figure 1).

Our research supports previous findings highlighting the crucial role of the line manager in the implementation of policies on the ground but emphasises the need for all stakeholders to take ownership. Specifically:

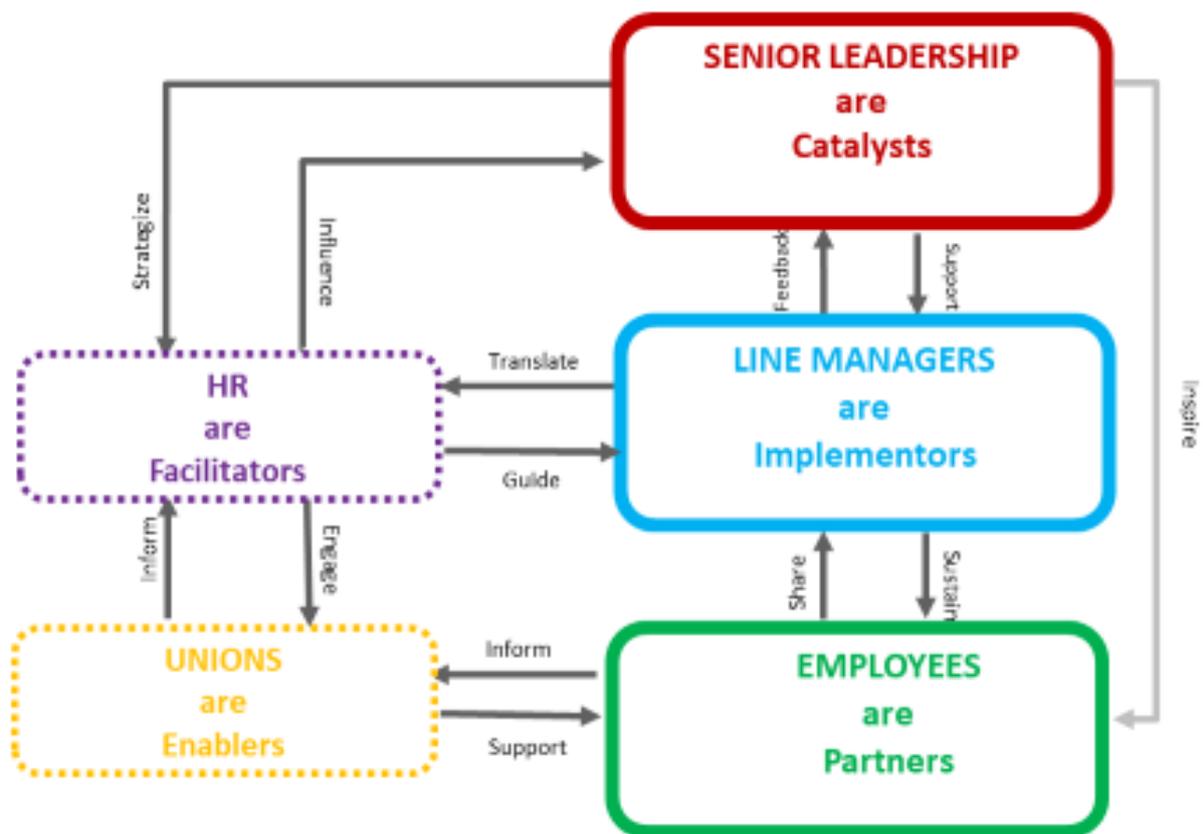
- Line managers were the medium between different stakeholders, and the implementers of engagement initiatives.
- HR’s role was to facilitate the process and transactional aspect of employee engagement.
- Senior management need to be the advocate of engagement and are accountable for leading and driving it.
- Union representatives supported and encouraged engagement between front-line staff and organisational initiatives.
- Engagement required employees to be partners and engage in initiatives.

While identifying the criticality of line managers as being the catalyst for implementing employee engagement initiatives, the process also demands ‘collaborative’ relationships across all stakeholders. To address these relationships, we propose the need to develop a multi-partite engagement model to ensure employee engagement is at the centre of the organisation and not an add-on.

## Implications for practice

While there is no one ‘right’ way of ‘doing’ engagement, our findings show that everyone is accountable for engagement. The findings have a significant importance for practitioners by emphasising the need for organisations, and all those within them, to take responsibility for employee engagement.

**Figure 1: Roles and Relationships in the successful implementation of employee engagement initiatives**



Employee engagement is not a concept that HR can solely address; it needs the involvement of all stakeholders in the organisation. Senior managers not only need to support engagement initiatives, but they need to embrace them and ‘live’ them. If they do not, it is unlikely that other stakeholders in the organisation will take the initiative seriously and give it the time and attention required to embed it. If it is seen by employees as simply a tick-box process, it will have a detrimental effect.<sup>13</sup>

The research emphasised the critical role line managers have as the mediator between the different stakeholders. Line managers were the linchpin to successful implementation and it is imperative to provide them with the training and support to fulfil this role. For the implementation of engagement initiatives to be successful, a multi-partite relationship model (see Fig 1) is crucial.

## Further information

The research presented is part of a portfolio of projects undertaken for Engage for Success – Line Manager Thought and Action Group. To learn more about the research, please email [sarah.pass@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.pass@ntu.ac.uk) or go to <https://engageforsuccess.org/line-manager-thought-action-group>

More information about iMatter, its development and implementation can be found at: [www.staffgovernance.scot.nhs.uk/monitoring-employee-experience/imatter/](http://www.staffgovernance.scot.nhs.uk/monitoring-employee-experience/imatter/)

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Bevan, S. (2016) *Post-referendum uncertainty demands a focus on employee engagement*. Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies. Available at: [www.employment-studies.co.uk/news/post-referendum-uncertainty-demands-focus-employee-engagement](http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/news/post-referendum-uncertainty-demands-focus-employee-engagement).
- <sup>3</sup> Gallup. (2017) *State of the global workplace*. New York: Gallup Press.
- <sup>4</sup> MacLeod, D. (2016) *True employee engagement is only way through Brexit fallout*. Milton Keynes: Institute of Internal Communication. Available at: [www.ioic.org.uk/brexit/true-employee-engagement-is-only-way-through-brexit-fallout](http://www.ioic.org.uk/brexit/true-employee-engagement-is-only-way-through-brexit-fallout).
- <sup>5</sup> Taylor, M., Marsh, D., Nicol, D. and Broadbent, P. (2017). *Good Work: Taylor Review on Modern Working Practices*. London: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy.
- <sup>6</sup> Truss, C., Shantz, A., Soane, E., Alfes, K. and Delbridge, R. (2013) Employee engagement, organisational performance and individual well-being: exploring the evidence, developing the theory. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Vol 24, No 14. pp2657–69.
- <sup>7</sup> Purcell, J., Kinnie, N., Swart, J., Rayton, B. and Hutchinson, S. (2009) *People management and performance*. London: Routledge.
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- <sup>12</sup> Snowden, A. and MacArthur, E. (2014) IMatter: validation of the NHS Scotland Employee Engagement Index. *BMC Health Services Research*. Vol 14, No 1. p535.
- <sup>13</sup> Jenkins, S. and Delbridge, R. (2013) Context matters: examining 'soft' and 'hard' approaches to employee engagement in two workplaces. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Vol 24, No 14. pp2670–91.