



Line Manager Thought and Action Group
Engage for Success

Case Study Report: Exploring Employee Engagement in the Police Force

Anonymised Report

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of Engage for Success. The authors are responsible for the accuracy of its content.

Executive Summary

Employee engagement is one of the most significant concepts in the management field (Crawford et al 2014; Fletcher et al 2018). Its importance was emphasised in the MacLeod Review (2009) and led to the voluntary movement, Engage for Success. Tasked by the UK Government to start conversations on issues of employee engagement, the movement focuses on developing our knowledge of engagement through topic specific groups, and our understanding of engagement through regional and national events.

In 2016, Engage for Success launched the Line Manager Thought and Action Group (TAG) with the aim of conducting case study research around the role of line managers in developing and sustaining employee engagement initiatives.

The following report focuses on research conducted at PFX using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with participants from senior management to front line officers. Participation in the research was voluntary and confidentiality was ensured. As a result, quotes used in this report have been anonymised.

Findings are structured around the four enablers to employee engagement highlighted in the MacLeod Review, specifically strategic narrative, engaging manager, employee voice, and organisational integrity.

A persistent theme across interviews and focus groups was the need for a collaborative and consistent strategic narrative on employee engagement. As a concept, it is currently considered as a transactional process, or 'add on', and is not integrated as a key focus across the organisation. Instead, there is an apparent 'them and us' culture, with a strong divide between front line officers and senior management. In addition, there is a lack of training and support on issues of engagement and leadership. Coupled with issues of miscommunication and a lack of employee voice, a negative impact on organisational integrity and trust is apparent.

Our research across all case study organisations 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. It needs a strong, consistent and collaborative strategic narrative, engaging managers that have the necessary skills and training, and an employee voice that is heard and enacted upon.

Although there are several areas that are contributing to a negative staff experience, there is a strong sense of purpose throughout the organisation at all levels that is commendable.

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Employee Engagement

In 2008, David MacLeod and Nita Clark were commissioned by the UK Government to examine the concept of employee engagement by reviewing prominent research and working closely with leading organisations. The subsequent MacLeod Review (2009¹) highlighted the positive links between employee engagement and organisational outcomes prompting organisations, policy makers and academics to focus their attention on issues of employee engagement (Bailey et al 2017). As a result, the voluntary movement, Engage for Success, was launched in 2011 at No.10 Downing Street.

The MacLeod Review highlighted four key enablers of employee engagement that were present in organisations who were successful in engaging their people.

Four Enablers of Engagement²



Visible, empowering leadership, providing a strong **strategic narrative** about the organisation, where it has come from and where it is going. The story is communicated clearly, consistently and constantly.



Engaging managers who:

- Focus their people and give them scope
- Treat their people as individuals
- Coach and stretch their people.



There is **employee voice** which permeates throughout the organisation, for reinforcing and challenging views, between functions and externally, employees are seen as central to the solutions.



There is **organisational integrity** – the values on the wall are reflected in day-to-day behaviours. They are explicit and bought into by staff. There is no ‘say-do’ gap. Staff see through corporate spin.

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

Engage for Success is mandated to increase awareness and understanding around issues of employee engagement and achieves this through the development of Thought and Action Groups (TAGs)³ designed to undertake research around specific themes. The Line Manager Thought and Action Group (TAG) was established in 2016 to examine the role of line managers in developing and maintaining employee engagement levels. Although line managers are increasingly responsible for the implementation of organisational policies⁴ and have a ‘crucial impact’ on engagement,⁵ there is limited research on how line managers’ behaviour and actions influence employee engagement.

‘Line Managers’ can have a crucial impact on engagement as they are the interface between the organisation and its workforce’ (CIPD⁶)

Although line managers are central to the focus of the research, the group believes that it is a misconception to consider line managers in isolation, or as barriers to engagement. Line managers need the help and support of senior leadership, HR, engagement champions and unions. In addition, it is also vital that staff are part of the conversation. Although line managers have a role in developing and sustaining employee engagement, engagement is a two-way process⁷.

In 2017, PFX approached the Line Manager TAG to undertake research on issues of employee engagement. 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 officers were completed. In addition, four focus groups with front-line officers were undertaken.

Data Collection at PFX

Data was collected in two stages.

Stage one involved telephone interviews between June and September 2017. Inspectors, sergeants and constables were selected using a sampling framework and were conducted via email by a PFX engagement champion. The email provided information about the project and asked the participant to either contact the engagement champion or the research project lead directly to organise a telephone interview. The research underwent a rigorous ethical approval process and was approved by Nottingham Trent University Research Ethics Committee and by PFX. Further details of this process are available if required. Interviews were conducted with:

| <i>Rank</i> | <i>No. Interviews</i> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Senior Management</i> | 5 |
| <i>Inspectors and Sergeants</i> | 15 |
| <i>Constables</i> | 2 |
| <i>Total</i> | 22 |

During phase one it was apparent that telephone interviews with constables was not an approach that was working well. As a result, it was decided that face-to-face focus groups during working hours would be a more appropriate method of data collection.

Stage two involved 4 focus groups with constables over a period of two days in January 2019. Constables were detailed to a focus group therefore allowing them to take part in the research during work time. Participants were informed about the aims of the research and were given the opportunity to do desk work if they did not wish to participate.

| <i>Rank</i> | <i>No. Focus Groups</i> | <i>No. Participants</i> |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Constables</i> | 1 | 13 |
| <i>Constables</i> | 2 | 8 |
| <i>Constables</i> | 3 | 8 |
| <i>Constables</i> | 4 | 8 |
| | Total | 37 |

Employee Engagement at PFX

Analysis of the interview and focus group data highlighted several common themes across all respondents. On reflection of those themes, there was a connection between themes and the four enablers proposed by the MacLeod Review. The following section looks specifically at data collected at PFX and provides a summary of the key issues. Findings were consistent over the two phases of data collection.



Strategic Narrative

Organisational Divide between Officers and Management

Consistently across interviews and focus groups, it was apparent that participants felt there was an organisational divide. As one participant described, the divide was akin to two organisations working in the same space but without being able to see each other. As a result, this created a **'them and us'** mentality.

Participants believed that individuals above Sergeant level had no real interest in notions of employee engagement. Instead the focus was on targets and developing their own careers. The overwhelming perception is that once individuals raised through the ranks, they forgot their experiences of life *'on the ground'*.

'I think there's a disconnect between senior management and what actually goes on in stations. I think probably engagement is better at a local level than what it is overall... I think there's complete disconnect with the senior management ... compared to what is actually going on, on the ground.'

Participants believed that due to the nature of the job, senior officers were desk based and were away from the front line. Although officers are required to work up the rankings, many participants felt that there had been significant changes since senior officers had worked at a Constable and Sergeant level, and as a result the challenges and demands of the job had changed. Consequently, there is a perception that senior officers are too distant and have no real understanding of the day to day demands of the job, specifically with reduced budgets and increased workloads.

Views on the divide in the organisation were expressed by participants across all areas of the organisation.

Engagement as a Low Managerial Priority

The belief that employee engagement was not a priority to officers above Sergeant level was also reinforced when discussing issues of responsibility. Currently, although engaging employees was implicit in their duties as part of people management, responsibility for employee engagement was not apparent in workload planning for officers fulfilling middle management roles. As such, part of the role of a middle manager was to engage staff as a supervisor, but there were no specific timescales, targets or timelines.

Although engagement was often given a low priority, it was not due to a belief that engagement was unimportant. Rather, it was the consequence of competing priorities and demands that pushed engagement to the bottom of the list.

'we get very caught up with reacting and managing what we have in front of us...as a consequence sometimes engagement and taking the time out and investing in engagement falls further down the list... the practical reality of policing will always take over and engagement sometimes gets pushed further down the bottom of the to do list because you don't have any choice.'

When asked who was responsible for engagement, responses were in line with findings across all the case studies involved in the Line Management TAG. Engagement was everyone's responsibility. However, to ensure it was a priority, the focus on engagement needed to **'start at the top, and once the example's set and things look like they're rolling, I think that filters through'**.

Lack of Communication between Officer and Senior Management

Participants believed that PFX was great at external engagement, but poor at internal communication and engagement. This was emphasised by the lack of awareness over the term employee engagement. Engagement was a concept that was considered in relation to the community and was not something that was internal. Whilst this could be attributed to terminology (for example, in the NHS, the emphasis is on staff experience rather than engagement), a variety of terms were used to describe the concept and were often met with a lack of awareness.

In line with previous comments about the disconnect between management and officers, there were persistent references to the lack of communication and/or miscommunication within the organisation. Research has shown that organisations that experience gaps in communication often encounter the 'silence' being filled with rumour and speculation⁸.

'there's a lack of communication there, I think, between the hierarchy and those of us on the ground, which maybe leads to a bit of mistrust, or a lack of morale and a lack of engagement with them'

During interviews and focus groups, numerous examples were given about the lack of clear communication. It was evident, that there were inconsistencies in communication. For example, issues around uniform, the purchasing of new cars, working hours, and employee suggestion schemes provided illustrations of miscommunication. Participants were receiving (or engaging) with communication through different channels and there was a lack of clarity.

Although there were cases of internal miscommunication, there was a strong external strategic narrative around the importance of community engagement. Whilst this is commendable, and a stance all participants agreed with, it was also evident that many participants felt this was more important to the organisation than their own health, safety and overall wellbeing.

The disconnect is exacerbated by the perception of a continued turnover of senior staff. New people are regularly moved into positions at all levels and participants expressed fatigue trying to keep up to date with the changes. Consequently, participants felt that they

were constantly having to establish trust and working relationships with senior managers, but that once this was established, they would suddenly move on and a new individual would take up the position, and the relationship building had to start all over again.

Focus on Transactional Engagement not Transformational Engagement

The MacLeod Review highlighted differences between transactional and transformational engagement.

Transactional engagement is the first level of engagement and is essentially a set of activities or targets.

'The Board takes the engagement strategy seriously...[but] in this model, employee engagement is still an 'add-on'. It is not integral to the overall business approach. It is essentially a set of transactions.' (MacLeod Review, 2009: 72)

When discussing engagement activities, it was evident that these focused on transactional engagement, for example, managing sickness and absence and the general work environment.

One explanation for the focus on transactional engagement is the issue of constant transactional changes within the organisation. Participants expressed exasperation at the focus of individualistic need to implement changes to enable career progression. Consequently, participants felt that there was a desire for change, for change sake, used by individuals to progress up the career ladder resulting in a focus on the appearance of implementing change rather than the feasibility or the effect of the change.

In contrast, transformational engagement places employees at the centre of the engagement strategy.

'The insights and ideas of employees, wherever they work, about how products and services can be improved, are harnessed, listened to and acted on... This is transformational engagement.' (MacLeod Review, 2009: 73)

It was clear from interviews and focus groups, that participants did not feel that they were central to the organisation or its engagement strategy.



Engaging Managers

Lack of training

It was acknowledged that management/team leader styles and approaches had a big impact on the level of activities around engagement.

'how I conduct myself with my immediate team, how I conduct myself in my organisation, how I conduct myself externally in terms of engagement I think sends a really powerful message. And if I build principles of employee engagement and engagement into my day-to-day work then I think that sends a very strong message.'

Participants recognised managers who focused on development and were proactive in communicating with their teams to ensure their needs were met. However, there was an inconsistency across divisions and departments. Managerial style was attributed to the personal style or personality of the manager, rather than a managerial approach attributed to the organisation.

Further discussions highlighted the cause of the inconsistency. Namely a lack of training and development of managerial skills. The emphasis on training and career progression was on the law and was very academic in nature. The practice of policing and dealing with the nature of the job occurred on the job. For example, the route to Sergeant was very legally driven without any training and development in the managerial aspects of the role. At the time of the interviews and focus groups, numerous participants were studying for their Sergeants exams. Several expressed that whilst their knowledge of the law was good and they were at the right stage of their career to go for their sergeant's exam, they did not feel ready or capable to manage a team. Instead, they were taking the exam as it was ***'what is expected'***.

The lack and need for managerial and leadership training were acknowledged at all levels throughout the organisation.

'You don't really get an awful lot of any training in leadership... and leadership and engagement go hand in hand... we don't really have any formal training on even the expectations, you just kind of get promoted and it's like, well off you go and be a sergeant, off you go and be an inspector or a chief.'

Some participants believed training was offered after you had attained the rank, but there was uncertainty about how this happened or even whether this was just a rumour.

Limited support

Coupled with the lack of training, participants felt there was a lack of support on how to be a good manager and consequently an overemphasis on hard managerial skills at the cost of soft skills.

I think if everybody cared a little bit more as to the human side of things and worried about, well how does that make him feel or her feel? Or if I was in that position, what would I want to support me? Then this organisation would flourish.'

This was largely attributed to the centralisation of HR and HR services. The move was argued to have had a negative impact on the relationship between officers and HR personnel. The lack of a familiar face to informally ask questions created barriers to being an engaging manager.

'I just think there needs to be from an organisation some sort of, you know, directive that explains how you can do this and how you can assist your officers to actually develop themselves.'

Going through 'The HUB' was a formalised route which participants were uncertain to undertake in case of any repercussions. As a result, participants did not see how HR contributed towards the service or to engagement. Instead, it was considered 'invisible'.

Local engagement with Line Managers

The importance of an officer's line manager was emphasised by all participant.

'I think day to day engagement's really good, because it is at that lower level with your sergeant, inspectors...But beyond that...there is no engagement.'

Given the argued lack of support and training by participants, all levels saw their line manager as their source of support and guidance. However, depending on the line manager's style and managerial ability, the outcome could be both positive or negative.

'the line manager...plays a big role. He's probably the most important person... Bad management at my level can make lives miserable coming in to work.'

Due to the focus on a command and control approach adherent in the police force, a poor manager could have a very negative long-term impact. However, all participants agreed, even when faced with a poor manager, you did not complain or go beyond the clearly defined lines of authority. Regardless of day-to-day issues, it was important to consider the long-term implications of going outside the line of command as, ultimately, they would suffer.



Employee Voice

Lack of Voice

A persistent theme across interviews and focus groups was the lack of voice. When opinions were sought, it was through surveys that participants expressed negativity towards. Although participants acknowledged there were occasions where their views had been asked, they felt that this was due to individualistic focus on career progression and personal gain.

'it looked great, we were thinking brilliant, our voices are about to be heard...for nothing to happen and then the boss to get promotion out of it. And that can be frustrating.'

There is perception from front-line participants that their 'voice' does not reach senior level, or if it did, that there was any indication that their views were being considered.

'I think that they'd like to believe that they're engaging. I think if you have a group of bosses around this table, they would tell you oh, we engage, and we speak, and we do this, and we do that. But when you ask, do they listen, that's a different question.'

This was attributed to a lack of feedback around the process. The lack of feedback created significant negativity amongst participants. Participants agreed, receiving disappointing or negative feedback would be better than no feedback at all.

'To know that you're being listened to, and that your concerns are being considered... and they've said well yes, okay, but we're doing something different and this is why, that indicates that they have at least shown you that level of respect, to value your opinion.'

The issue of not feeling heard was very evident when discussing the perennial issue of uniform. Participants at the front-line strongly felt that the uniform was not fit for purpose. A view they believe they had persistently expressed to management but was never heard due to the lack of feedback. Participants frequently speculated on why their opinions were being ignored. Whilst there were a variety of expressed explanations, all revolved around a lack of concern for their welfare. This was made more apparent by front-line officers feeling singled out with other departments and divisions being allowed to wear a uniform that they believed was more appropriate and fit for purpose. Their perceived lack of appropriate justification for having to wear this uniform negatively impacted engagement.

Although participants acknowledged mechanisms had been put in place, there were issues about their implementation. For example, participants spoke about an employee suggestion scheme. However, how it was used, its location and its impact was often questioned. Most participants were sceptical whether anyone read or acted upon the suggestions. There were a few participants who were more knowledgeable about the process, yet its impact was still doubted



Organisational Integrity

Lack of Trust

A persistent theme surrounded issues of trust and there was an awareness of this at all levels.

'engaging with [officers] is important, and they need to understand that. But one of the challenges is that people don't just see it as topical at the minute... it's getting that acceptance from people and that sort of trust that we do it for the right reasons.'

Senior Management were aware that officers lacked trust in the integrity of the organisation undertaking employee engagement initiatives, which was confessed by officers in other ranks. Due to the nature of policing, there was a very strong command and control leadership approach which exasperated issues of trust. Consequently, participants believed this impacted on the confidence of officers to do the job, as they began to question their decision-making processes. Whilst participants stated that they knew the 'right thing' to do, they found themselves questioning how their actions would be perceived by management and subsequent consequences. As a result, the lack of trust, recognition and support had a detrimental impact on employee engagement levels.

The lack of trust was frequently attributed to a lack of action on the issues that participants argued mattered.

'Well it really just needs somebody at a reasonable level in management to actually make them follow through with the sincere side of things.'

Subsequently, participants felt there was a 'say-do' gap and day-to-day behaviours did not reflect the values that participants believed were once an integral part of the organisation.

Recommendations

The following recommendations highlight the key issues that have emerged from the Line Manager TAG research. Detailed recommendations on how to improve employee engagement levels, case study examples, and guides can also be found at the Engage for Success website⁹



Engagement is everyone's responsibility

There is a need for a strong strategic narrative emphasising the importance of employee engagement within the organisation. An emergent theme across all the case studies involved in the Line Manager TAG was the agreement that everyone has 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 experiences of engagement. The approach follows a transformational engagement approach, moving away from transactional engagement where HR (or equivalent) are tasked with responding to annual engagement surveys, but without any real authority to make changes, or the time to do so before the next survey is rolled out. The concept of employee engagement being everyone's responsibility was also expressed by all PFX participants.

'Engagement, by its very nature, engagement is a two-way process. That's what engagement is, you know. You can't engage with somebody if they're not going to listen.'

As a result, a strategic narrative is needed that focuses on engagement as everyone's responsibility.

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

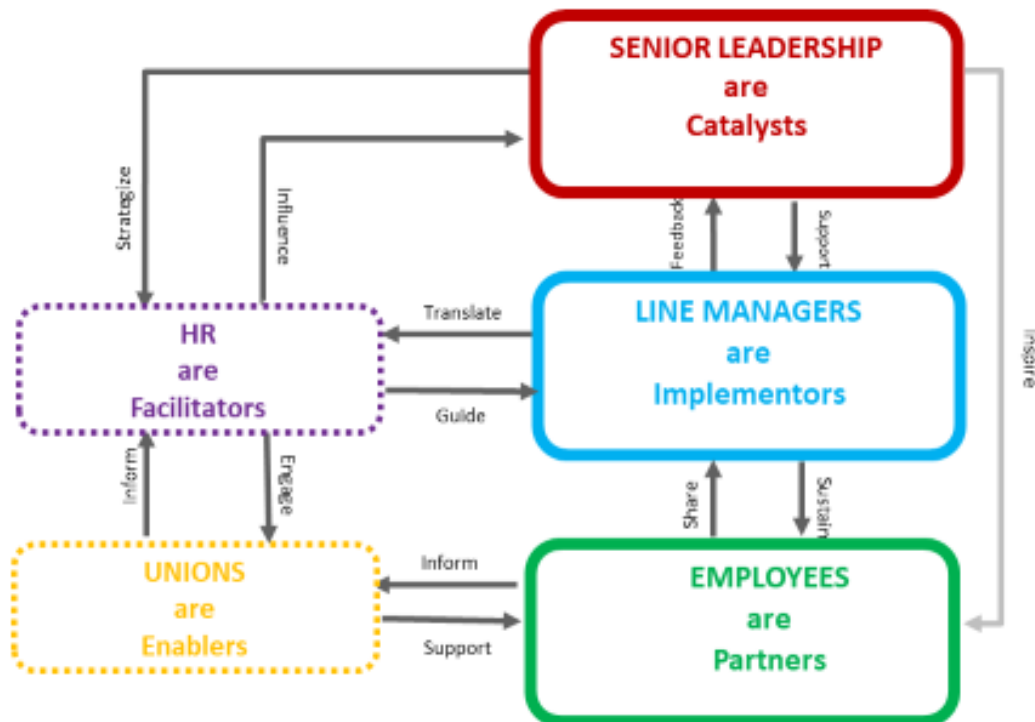


Fig 1. Roles and Responsibilities for Successful Implementation of Engagement Initiatives¹⁰

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.



Building voice

A consistent theme across all elements of the research was the feeling of a lack of voice and inconsistencies in communication.

Whilst practices to enable voice were evident, how they are implemented and enacted impacts on officer perceptions. If practices are not implemented consistently in an open and fair manner, then any positive impact can be quickly eroded. Voice mechanisms need to be developed in

collaboration with officers to assess the most appropriate methods. This may result in multiple methods.

To ensure officers engage with the voice mechanisms in place, it is important to ensure voice is heard and actions are enacted. Given the degree of disengagement and mistrust, this would essentially require a significant act of listening and responding. The most significant action centres around issues of uniform. Changing the uniform would give a significant boost to the moral of front-line officers. If a change in uniform is not feasible, then a clear and consistent message on why needs to be expressed. As this is an on-going persistent issue, then it is likely that the message about why it can not be changed needs to be frequently expressed. A similar approach was undertaken by Chief Superintendent Glenn Tunstall at Kingston upon Thames¹¹. By implementing a 'visible example of something that needs changing', it showed officers at all levels of the organisation that engagement was important.



Developing trust

Issues of miscommunication and a lack of voice have had a negative impact on levels of trust within the organisation. As a result, a 'them and us' mentality has developed with officers feeling disconnected from senior management and questioning the organisational integrity. Consequently, there is a say-do gap, with officers believing any initiatives are solely for individualistic gain for career progression. Frequent turnaround in leadership and transactional changes have impacted on promises being broken and a lack of explanation. Trust is built through the development of relationships, but with persistent change, it is hard for relationships to grow. As highlighted by one participant, during their career at PFX, they had experienced continued turnover in line management. On reflection, they could recall over 20 different line managers with few staying longer than six months in post.

Trust will take time to develop and grow. By developing a strong and collaborative strategic narrative around engagement being everyone's responsibility and providing a visible example of voice, some bridges may be built.



Leadership development and support

Officers at all levels expressed the need for training and development in leadership skills and the support to be an engaging manager. Good leaders were frequently the result of individual personality. For most managers, at the lack of guidance, they followed the example that they had experienced. Coupled with the separation of HR and a lack of a familiar face to ask personnel questions, officers often found themselves unsure how to proceed or what areas they needed to focus. Consequently, they concentrated on transactional areas that they were tasked to monitor.

Participants expressed the need for focused and developmental training that enabled them to see the strategic importance of their role, whilst also undertaking shadowing of current managers to see the role in practice.

Summary

The Engage for Success Line Manager Thought and Action Group (TAG) was asked to undertake a series of interviews and focus groups with officers across all rankings of PFX. This report highlights the main issues that were expressed by participants.

Whilst it was apparent that participants were experiencing disgruntlement with the organisation, they had a strong sense of purpose and an unwavering focus to ensure a good level of service and engagement with the community. It was their individual drive to serve and protect that enabled them to work around organisational barriers and maintain a level of engagement.

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 or go to <https://engageforsuccess.org/line-manager-thought-action-group>

Notes

¹ MacLeod, D. and Clarke, N. (2009) *Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

² <https://engageforsuccess.org/the-four-enablers>

³ <https://engageforsuccess.org/thought-and-action-groups-topic-and-sector>

⁴ Purcell, J., Kinnie, N., Swart, J., Rayton, B. and Hutchinson, S. (2009) *People management and performance*. London: Routledge.

⁵ CIPD. (2015) *Employee engagement*. Factsheet. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/employee-engagement.aspx

⁶ CIPD. (2015) *Employee engagement*. Factsheet. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/employee-engagement.aspx

⁷ MacLeod, D. and Clarke, N. (2009) *Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

⁸ MacLeod, D. and Clarke, N. (2009) *Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

⁹ <https://engageforsuccess.org/>

¹⁰ https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/employee-engagement_tcm18-59083.pdf

¹¹ <https://engageforsuccess.org/metropolitan-police-kingston-branch>