

ENGAGEMENT – It Should Come Naturally

I have just finished reading some very moving tributes to a man I have admired for a long time - Sir Bobby Robson, who sadly died on the last day of July. I am hugely impressed by this man and the way he touched the lives of so many people, both within his chosen profession and beyond. What was it that made this humble man so compelling and why did I, along with 35,000 other souls, turn up on a Sunday evening in the middle of summer to see his last public appearance at St. James Park, shouting his name to the rafters in tribute to all he gave us? I believe the answer to this is simple; He shared our dream, and his enthusiasm and drive to make this dream a reality in the face of all the difficulties he faced, made him a true 'Geordie Gentleman'. As such he will remain a real legend in our part of the world and throughout the world of football.

Sir Bobby seemingly had a natural way with people - some called it a gift, the ability to get the best from the people around him. This trait above all others resonated from all of the tributes I read. It is difficult to identify one aspect of his personality that was responsible for this 'natural way'. Clearly though, when people are stirred, engaged and aligned behind a common dream the resulting energy released can be powerful to behold. Is this passion only displayed in sport or can we get access to at least some of this energy at work?

In preparation for this article I read what others have written on employee engagement. I was astounded by the number of pieces of research that have been carried out to 'prove' engaged employees deliver better results. Numerous very eminent academics, consultancy and research organisations have conducted many 'surveys', which all conclude that engaged people are more productive, deliver better results, are more likely to turn up, work harder and be more 'productive'.

My astonishment comes not from the survey results but from the fact that this has to be proven at all? Surely if you are faced with a 'result focused' leader who is wondering if it is worth investing the time, effort - or more likely the cost - to engage your people effectively, I suggest you do not turn to the research results for proof, despite the compelling evidence they provide. Simply take said leaders out of the communication loop and lock the leadership team meeting door when meetings are taking place and see how long it takes for them to be convinced. Not long I can assure you!

I also find it bemusing to see how the 'current economic crisis' appears to be increasing the calls for more employee engagement. It is as if engagement is suddenly necessary now times are tough and people are working harder and feeling less secure. Leaders in many large organisations are commissioning internal surveys to 'benchmark' their employee engagement, then fretting about how to increase their inevitably low scores. It's as if by doing enough analysis we will find the key to unlock the door to hidden productivity and as if the discretionary effort people deploy when they are truly engaged will automatically be released. I beg to differ!

The ingredients required for employee engagement are not well hidden secrets and have been known for a long time. Respect for the individual, opportunities to contribute, support to grow and develop, flexibility of work contract, being involved in decisions that affect me, being cared for and listened to and clarity of purpose - these are the most common ingredients listed in the research I scanned. However, I will be surprised if Sir Bobby ever read any of this research to achieve what he did. He seemed to engage people around him quite naturally, deploying his infectious enthusiasm and clear determination along with undoubted skill, knowledge, a sense of fun and perhaps most crucially of all, a humble

touch!

So how can we tap the latent energy and enthusiasm in all of our people at work? It has to start with crafting a compelling 'purpose'. As a leader you need to be able to answer the oft asked question 'Why are we doing this again, remind me?' Everyone wants to work on something that is worthwhile and there needs to be a clear line of sight between people's day to day operational work and a compelling organisational purpose. An organisation without a compelling purpose is like a person without a personality; they do exist but they are very dull to be around. By the way, if at the end of this clear line of sight the words 'to enhance shareholder value' appear then you have a problem, as you are basically saying you need to work hard to make someone else rich, and no matter how hard you try this is a very tough sell if you are after the elusive productivity rewards real engagement can deliver!

Once a compelling purpose is formed, the ability of a leader to help bring this purpose to life and align people in a compelling way requires personal enthusiasm,



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determination, humility and highly developed communication and facilitation skills. The good news is that at least some of these skills can be learned and we have seen great improvements in engagement from leaders brave enough to try authentic conversations rather than pre-scripted, PowerPoint- laden 'tell' sessions. What is self-evident is that a latent desire to be part of something really worthwhile clearly exists in all organisations; it does not have to be created. Most people, when asked - and more importantly listened to - say they want to do a great job; they work long and hard delivering what they consider to be the best they can do. Yet what they often hear from their leaders is variants of 'not good enough, more is needed'.

Interestingly I do see and hear leaders saying 'well done and thanks' a lot more now than ever before, as people are clearly working long and hard at this time. This has taught me that simply saying thank you and well done is not the only answer. Leaders have to go beyond simply talking; they have to use a more facilitative leadership style. It is authentic communication that gets people really engaged. So, if you are about to reach for slides to help you communicate your purpose, stop! The days of simply telling are coming to an end. 'Superman' leaders, decisive personalities who seemingly leap tall buildings in a single bound, are quickly becoming extinct. They have had their day and a more humble, facilitative leadership style is beginning to emerge, one which has always been present but rarely to the fore.

Speaking as a father with two daughters in their late teens and early twenties, I am encouraged by their desire to have a balanced life, one with purpose as well as reward. In common with many of their highly educated and better connected generation 'Y' friends, they have no intention of working long and hard for an organisation simply because they may get well paid. They want more than this and if they don't get it, they will simply take their talent elsewhere. Leaders beware, these well connected graduates will be entering your organisation very soon and you need to be ready to get the best from them.

If you want to know more about how Sensei can help you engage your people in genuine authentic conversations and gain access to the discretionary effort available from fully engaged people, then please let us know.

Malcolm Follo, August 2009