

The importance of involvement when creating a powerful engagement process

A fairly standard definition of engagement is, “*an employee’s involvement with, commitment to, and satisfaction with work*”. Studies have connected high levels of employee engagement to better organisational performance. For example, UK researcher Nancy Lockwood found that employees with the highest level of commitment performed 20 per cent better than their colleagues, and were 87 per cent less likely to leave their organisation.

In change implementation, engagement processes are designed to foster commitment, encourage new behaviours and teach new skills. We have rarely seen commitment built without engaging people in some way or other. The exceptions are where the organisation has an extraordinarily strong imperative. This is usually seen at either end of its lifecycle – in other words, at start-up or when the operation is going out of business unless rapid radical action is taken. Forming a powerful engagement process is central to successful change because it affects all other areas of your change management plan.

We believe there are four components of a powerful engagement process:

- Involvement
- Learning
- Rewards
- Communication

In this article we take a close look at involvement.

Involvement

In 1975 a famous study led by Ellen Langer demonstrated the importance of self-selected involvement. Researchers sold \$1 lottery tickets to a selection of participants. In one group the tickets were handed to the participants randomly while people in the other group were allowed to choose their own. A few days later Langer returned to the subjects and asked to buy back the tickets. The ticket holders who had been given a random ticket were willing to sell their ticket, on average, for \$2. Those who had chosen their own ticket, on the other hand, wanted on average \$9 for their \$1 ticket. Langer attributed this to an illusion of control caused by “*an expectancy of a personal success probability inappropriately higher than the objective probability would warrant*”.

We could draw two conclusions from this study. Firstly, people value what they get to choose more highly than something given to them without their input by a ratio of about 4 to 1. Secondly, illusion or not, control matters and involvement can be a very powerful way to give people that sense of control. And this is what involvement creates in change: ownership and control.

As well as helping people to maintain a sense of control, involvement is important for successful change because you can create buy-in to the change. People are far more

likely to adopt a process that they have had a part in designing. Years ago we used to do more consulting than we do now. One of the services we used to offer was a “*change repair shop*”. Basically organisations would come to us if their change was not working and ask for assistance to get it back on track again. We would always ask the client if they had consulted with the people affected by the change to see what difficulties they were having and why those people thought the change wasn’t working. Almost without exception the answer was “*no*”. Invariably the client was unwilling to go back and take this crucial next step, so we would do it for them. We would go straight to the people most affected by the change and ask them, in small groups, what difficulties they were having and why they thought the change wasn’t working. They would almost always be able to tell us very clearly what was wrong with the change and – more importantly – how it could be fixed. In about three-quarters of the cases all we had to do was build an implementation process around their views. So we have had warehouse staff designing their own implementation programme, sales people designing a CRM roll out, cross-functional teams re-designing business processes and executives analysing what went wrong. That’s what involvement is all about. It’s about engaging people to own and accelerate the change. Plus, this has the positive knock-on effect of making employees feel more valued and engaged with the organisation. And incidentally that’s why we moved out of the consultancy space.

These organisations and the people in them already knew what needed to change; we didn’t need to ride in on a white charger and save the day. Sure, we could have taken the credit and the cash and left in a blaze of glory, but the true credit belonged with the people in the business. They knew the solutions before we even arrived; it was just that no one had asked them. Why employ consultants to tell you what your people already know? What organisations really need is to develop change capability so they can structure a proven system around any change and achieve success. And that’s exactly what PCI does.

As well as improving buy-in you can actually improve the quality of the change. Two heads (or more) are almost always better than one. Trying to implement a change on your own by telling people doesn’t account for other perspectives that could be really crucial in the success of the change. Assuming you know all the answers is rarely useful in creating lasting change or creating a lasting business.

The assumption is that involvement takes forever, but involvement can actually be quicker than telling people – although it took me a long time to realise this. My epiphany arrived one sunny afternoon in San Diego. I was on the harbour with my old company. We were to spend the afternoon racing the America’s Cup yachts ourselves; half of the crew of each yacht was replaced by company employees. I was given the job of “*strategist*”. As the strategist I wasn’t to worry about how the boat was going or how fast it was travelling, but had to work out our general racing strategy and plan the turns. On the first race we were ahead and we were coming toward the harbour wall. So I signalled to turn – “*30-20-10-turn!*” – but, out of nowhere, the other boat which had been behind us suddenly landed up in front of us coming back. The afternoon was the best of three races, so after the first one the captain called everyone together to regroup and analyse what had gone wrong. A key factor in this sport is that you only have about thirty seconds to make a decision to turn. As the post-mortem began the captain asked me, “*What went wrong?*” I said, “*I don’t know; we just seemed really slow to turn.*”

Then the captain went around everyone else in the team and asked them the same question. The answer, to a person, was “*David didn’t consult with us*”. The captain then asked, “*So what are the implications of that?*” Everyone agreed that it meant they’d not

been ready. I was obviously on the back foot a little so I asked, *“But how can I consult with you in thirty seconds?”* The suggestion was made that I simply went round the boat and asked everyone if they were ready and whether the time was right. I agreed to try it.

We set off for race two and as we were approaching the harbor wall, about sixty seconds out, I went round all sixteen crew members and asked if they were ready. Then *“30-20-10-turn!”* – and we won the race, and we won the next race as well. It was a good lesson for me about engaging people. It wasn’t about lack of time or ease, it was all about my mindset and willingness to listen. In truth, I didn’t consult with them, I didn’t engage in a long debate about what needed to be done – I just involved them and made them feel part of the process. And that’s the same in business. Often change agents shy away from consultation because it sounds too much like hard work. But, as my experience on the yacht showed me, it doesn’t have to be that way.

Time and again we have seen change accelerate through involvement, rather than slow down. Involvement creates momentum that in turn keeps the change moving forward. This is supported by some Ernst and Young research into process re-engineering from the late 1990s. It showed that when involvement was high at the design and implementation stages of the change then change implementation was faster.

Involving people creates higher overall levels of employee engagement and probably adds to people’s sum total of feeling engaged with the organisation. In other words, their loyalty and *“stickiness”* to the company is developed, their sense of belonging is assisted and they feel valued. This can be particularly important during change when feelings of uncertainty are high. If people feel a degree of loyalty to the organisation and feel valued and appreciated through the design process, they are far more likely to accommodate the changes and help others to do the same. They get on your side.

How to involve people successfully

There are some critical factors or principles to think about. Let’s run through them.

Are your sponsors willing to involve others? For involvement to be successful, leaders have to enter into involvement strategies willingly. In the worst case you have to accept that some people will never get it; they will always consider involvement to be a complete waste of time. They believe that people will tell them what they want to hear, that it will take too long, that people won’t have the skills or that involvement will just be too difficult. These are attitudes that might be hard to shift. If you expect the process to be a waste of time, then the chances are it will be. It was sociologist Robert Merton who coined the term *“self-fulfilling prophecy”*. In his book *Social Theory and Social Structure* he states, *“The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the original false conception come true. This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.”* In other words, if you make up your mind that involvement and consultation is a waste of time you will inadvertently alter your behaviour and actions. You’ll engage in it half-heartedly or loaded with cynicism, which will ensure that it’s a waste of time. Then you will happily preach to anyone who will listen just how *“right”* you were all along.

Is the timing right and is this an issue that people can help with? If you are going to make an acquisition then you probably don’t want to go and ask all the employees in

the company their opinion: *“Should we make this acquisition? What do you think about our growth strategy?”* But, time and again, post-merger joint teams from both organisations coming together on specific issues have proved to be highly effective.

Do you have a business issue or problem that needs resolving? In the course of my work I attend quite a few company conferences. There’s always that horrible moment

when a facilitator says, *“Right, we assigned each table a flipchart and we want you to write down all your ideas for X, Y or Z and we will feed these into the organisational planning process.”* Everybody in that room over 30 years of age knows they are about to waste an hour of their life. They will never see or hear about that list again. What’s worse is that they could be asked the same question next year. This is typical of where involvement can go wrong. It needs to be focused on a real business issue. People should be asked to produce something that will solve that issue, and they should be told what happened to their work if it’s not immediately obvious. Trying to involve people in generic *“room for improvement”* discussions is a waste of time. Only involve people when it’s meaningful and something concrete is going to come out of the discussions. Research at the end of the 1990s by the UK’s Business Intelligence organisation showed that about 90 per cent of Total Quality Management (TQM) initiatives failed to deliver benefit to the organisations concerned. The main reason was too many projects, too many ideas and too few of these ideas implemented by the organisation, leading to employee cynicism and management resistance.

In his 1990 book *“Hocus Pocus”*, Kurt Vonnegut wrote, *“People are never stronger than when they have thought up their own arguments for believing what they believe. They stand on their own two feet that way.”* Somehow there is a simple human truth that people want and like to be involved in issues that affect them. Successful involvement increases ownership and the perception of control, and builds real commitment. Our challenge is to find ways to achieve this in major change.

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