



# Getting beyond the cynicism of employee engagement programmes

Employee engagement programmes involve a lot of energy. On the one hand there's the time spent developing them and ensuring they are effective. On the other, there's often time spent defending the value of them. Overcoming the cynicism relies on many things. Try these six top tips for getting it right:

- 1. Be clear, be realistic**
- 2. Avoid conflicting and confusing messages**
- 3. Reach everyone**
- 4. Define the right amount of standout**
- 5. Make the dialogue appropriate**
- 6. It's a business, not a programme**





## 1. Be clear, be realistic

Setting clear objectives and being realistic about managing expectations is essential. Overpromising and claiming that the programme is going to achieve something which isn't possible is certain to create cynicism.

What may have worked in one company, might not be appropriate in another. Having clear objectives helps set the tone for the programme, as well as providing a baseline to sense check how it develops. If the initiative is relatively low-key and will make a fairly small amount of change, perhaps having all the bells and whistles around it isn't a good idea. However, this doesn't mean a programme can't be effective. Start by understanding the problem. Talk to employees to ensure you understand their perspectives. Use these insights to help shape the answer.

**A case in point:** a large company selling off part of the business knew their people were feeling unsettled. They wanted to boost morale during this difficult time. Speaking to their employees revealed that the lack of morale was less because of the sale, rather the lack of gratitude and recognition for the effort people were putting in. This led to the objective and idea to celebrate and reward everyday achievements, and an understanding of what rewards would motivate people. Understanding what the employees really thought, led to a different solution than one initially planned.

## 2. Avoid conflicting and confusing messages

Employees tend to become cynical when they are bombarded with lots of different messages that lack coherence. Missions and visions endure. It's the strategies and the initiatives that support that change and often create the problem. This is normally because organisations operate in silos. Messages disseminate, but don't always support each other. Brand engagement is a prime example. Brand is owned by the marketing department, people by HR, and never the twain shall meet. Organisations can spend a lot of effort defining their corporate brand; having a narrative; a new identity; a new set of values; an engagement programme to support. But unless HR are involved up front in developing the values, and more importantly the behaviours to support, the whole programme can unravel quickly. To avoid conflict and confusion, ensure different functions work together as one to create one narrative and one coherent message.

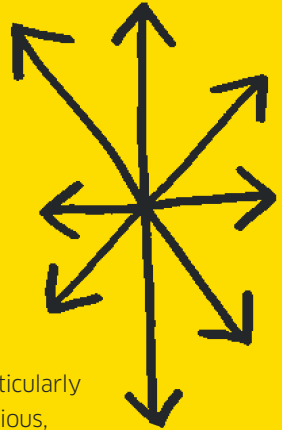
- Establish a steering coalition with representatives from different functions at the start
- Have regular check-ins throughout
- Involve influencers at key stages
- Agree to one core narrative from which all other messages are derived



### 3. Reach everyone

Reaching everyone is a key challenge for employee engagement programmes. How do you reach people in remote locations or that work off-site, as effectively as those in key office locations?

The programme needs a good dose of scrutiny up front particularly around communication channels. This may sound really obvious, but it doesn't happen very often. What is it that you're currently using? What is it that actually works? What is it that doesn't work, and properly scrutinise this at the outset. If you don't know, then go out and ask your people. There's a general misconception that the communications function instinctively knows the best way to engage with their people. It's not always the case.



#### **Run a workshop**

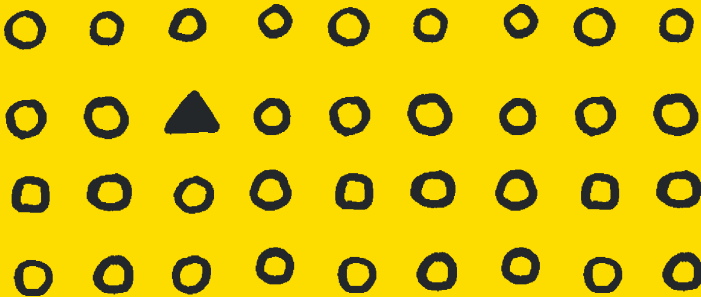
*Digital is often considered as the solution to engage hard to reach employees. Discussing digital channels with remote call centre staff revealed that they wanted to keep their use of digital for friends and family, not work. They wanted to be engaged in more immediate and physical ways using the environment they worked in.*

#### **Ask line managers**

*A recent programme for a global company to change mindsets needed a different approach. Line managers were asked to find out what their people wanted. Rather than another WebEx or a typical off-site event with speeches and cheerleading, they wanted face to face interactive pick-and-mix activities in small groups, in normal office locations.*

## 4. Define the right amount of standout

When, where and how should a programme stand out? Does it need its own look and feel, or does it need to feel like business as usual? It comes back to the objectives and what's best to support the business. Being creative for the sake of it carries the risk of labelling the team in charge as the 'fun department'. For agencies, it's about working with clients and to a budget. It's about being very mindful of the corporate climate and thinking about what's happening in the organisation. If there's a whole redundancy programme, spending a lot of money is only going to create the wrong impression. These are common sense things. Ultimately, getting a feel for the true culture (not the one written in the manual) and developing something fit for purpose is key. If a distinct look and feel is needed and relevant, it's essential to create guidelines that make it very clear where it should and shouldn't be used.



## 5. Making the dialogue appropriate

Successful programmes contain an element of dialogue. Engagement after all is not about a one-way broadcast. But again, setting expectations about the level of dialogue is key. For example, if you are running a whole series of workshops to actively engage people, you need to provide feedback afterwards and explain what happens next. A sure-fire way to cynicism is to ask people to take a full day out of a very busy schedule to a really important workshop, and then they never hear anything else again. It's also about thinking what the right level of dialogue is. Are workshops required? Or is it more about good, clear communication, a fantastic set of FAQs and a clear point of contact about where to go if you've still got any questions?

*Dialogue can also help build a meaningful and enduring strategy. Consider involving employees at the start of a brand project so they are informing the proposition, engaged in the process and are aware from the outset about how it links to your business strategy. When it comes asking them how to bring the brand to life they are likely to be more receptive and contribute. They will understand the true business value rather than seeing it as purely marketing spin.*



## 6. It's a business not a programme

There's no silver bullet for employee engagement programmes. Successful engagement is part of everyday business. No matter how good the strategy, if the organisation and the people are not behind it, that strategy will fail. The role of employee engagement is to help the organisation align to the strategy. It's a journey that takes time.

Many programmes fail as the organisation doesn't commit to the necessary support to embed behaviours, actions and values. If the business climate changes, the initiative can rapidly disappear, the effort is wasted, and the workforce become cynical. You can understand why people put their heads down and say they've seen it all before when the next initiative comes along. Programmes need to be lived by all to create lasting change.

Business	✓
Programme	✗



## Conclusion

There are many ways to overcome cynicism towards employee engagement programmes and each programme, situation and organisation must be treated individually. Whatever you do, set really clear objectives upfront about what you're trying to achieve. Avoid conflicting and confusing messages. Think about how to get out there and reach all of the different people in your organisation. If you don't know, ask them. Make sure your programme is fit for purpose and in tune with the culture and climate of your organisation. Ensure employees have a voice, and above all, make sure it supports business as normal. If this is a hot **Topic** for you, then please get in touch...

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