

Generating employee engagement: the role of management communication activities

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Abstract

In the current economic climate, managers have to find ways through which they can increase their organisation's productivity from within. Employees have a pivotal role in this through their engagement with the organisation. But how do managers engage employees and reap benefits like increased satisfaction, commitment, retention and organisational performance?

Recent research shows that communication activities enable managers to create opportunities for engagement. Directive communication allows managers to disseminate information to give employees a better understanding of strategic and operational concerns. Discursive communication allows managers to interact with their employees and to establish a meaningful professional relationship. Both directive and discursive communication are required for the generation of employee engagement.

This article reports on the management communication activities through which managers of a public-private partnership sought to engage employees with the organisation and how the employees responded to them. The findings are of interest to managers from a variety of organisational settings who are dealing with ownership transition or large-scale change, and managers who wish to understand the effects of management communication activities on employees.

Key words: employee engagement, management communication

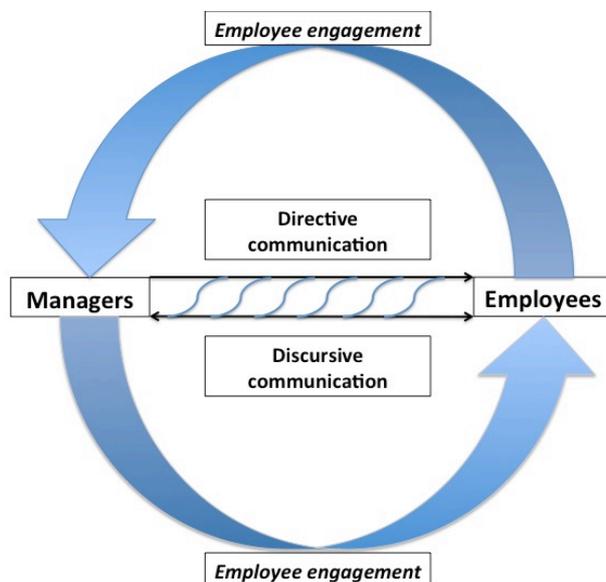
Generating employee engagement: the role of management communication activitiesⁱ

Introduction

Employees who are engaged with their organisation are more satisfied and committed and help increase overall productivityⁱⁱ. It is therefore not surprising that the concept of employee engagement continues to be of significant interest to managers and business leadersⁱⁱⁱ. Employee engagement is a reciprocal construct^{iv} whereby managers create opportunities for employees to engage, and employees can choose to respond positively^v. Two-way communication in particular can develop and maintain employee engagement^{vi}. Hence, both managers and employees have an active role in generating employee engagement in their organisation, a process that is facilitated by management communication.

Less clear, however, are the processes and activities that managers employ in an attempt to generate employee engagement and employees' experiences thereof. This is particularly pertinent in a business environment that is characterised by economic uncertainty, global competitive pressures, frequent ownership transitions and high management turnover. While there is clearly no simple solution, this research^{vii} demonstrates that a mix of directive and discursive communication activities can aid managers' efforts to engage employees with their colleagues and wider organisation, as depicted below.

Figure 1: Relationship diagram



The remainder of this article will:

- provide details about the research context and wider applicability of the research findings;
- introduce the management communication activities employed by the organisation in which this research took place; and
- present employees' experiences thereof.

Research context

This article reports on research^{viii} in a public-private partnership (called NorthService Ltd. here) which is located in England. NorthService Ltd. was formed in 2008 between a local authority (NorthCouncil) and a private-sector services firm (ServiceCom plc). The aim of this venture is to generate efficiency savings through the adoption of private-sector working practices and to grow NorthService Ltd. as a provider of business services like HR and ICT to a wider client base, thereby aiding the economic regeneration of the local area. About 400 NorthCouncil employees (mainly line managers and frontline staff) were transferred into NorthService Ltd. without change in contract, and a variable number of managers were seconded from ServiceCom plc to provide managerial expertise. Engaging such a variety of employees with an organisation that was essentially manufactured by its parent organisations has pertinent meaning for NorthService Ltd. if it is to achieve the ambitious targets stipulated in the partnership contract.

The analysis presented in this article derives from 28 qualitative interviews conducted in 2010 with managers and employees from different departments at NorthService Ltd., internal documents and publicly available information (such as company website, press releases and newspaper articles). While NorthService Ltd. represents a very specific case, the research allows insights into how they adopted management communication activities to generate employee engagement that could be relevant across a variety of organisational settings. Specifically, managers involved in ownership transition (merger and acquisition, spin-off, joint venture and other partnership contracts), managers dealing with large-scale change requiring a different culture / way of working, and managers with a more general interest in the effects of management communication on employees' experiences will find the analysis below of interest.

Management communication activities

From NorthService Ltd.'s founding, it was clear that employees' previous ways of working would not allow the organisation to achieve its targets in terms of efficiency savings, business growth and economic regeneration at a time of economic crisis. Former NorthCouncil employees described a culture of blame at the local authority, which led to proactive and fearful behaviour (such as seeking constant reassurance from managers to 'cover one's back') which they brought with them into NorthService Ltd. Such behaviour is contrary to the ethos that NorthService managers wanted to create, which is inspired by their private-sector background in ServiceCom plc. In particular, they sought to encourage employees to be more proactive in their daily work – a notion that resonates strongly with employee engagement since engaged employees are willing to go the extra mile for their colleagues, organisation or key stakeholders like customers^{ix}. In supporting the generation of employee engagement, NorthService managers employed two main types of communication activities: directive and discursive.

Directive communication activities

Directive management communication activities are characterised by the transmission of both strategic and operational information from managers to employees with limited opportunities for the latter to get involved. At NorthService Ltd., it was about communicating 'the bigger picture' in which the organisation operates (economic situation, stakeholders, change programmes) and the implications on employees' roles. The two main directive communication activities were a whole-organisation event and a newsletter.

- The whole-organisation event took place about 18 months after the organisation's founding. It was a half-day session with all employees in which senior managers provided an update of their respective fields of responsibility. They gave an overview of the organisation's progress to date as well as present and future challenges. The event also included interactive elements, in which employees would work in groups towards a guided task.
- The monthly newsletter contained regular updates on NorthService Ltd.'s relationship with its key stakeholders (i.e. the parent organisations and the local community) and updates on the main change programmes (both strategic and operational). It also contained human-interest stories about employees' achievements (e.g. professional development, promotion) or any activities in which others could get involved (e.g. fundraising for charity) to build a sense of community among employees.

Communication here is uni-directional with managers primarily seeking to transmit information from the top of the organisational hierarchy to the bottom to give employees deeper understanding of strategic and operational concerns. Such directive means of communication allow for a large degree of consistency of information that is transmitted to a large number of employees.

The role of directive management communication activities in generating employee engagement is two-fold. On the one hand, directive management communication gives employees sufficient information to decide whether they wish to engage with the organisation. On the other hand, directive management communication allows employees to gain insights into management philosophy and approach by judging, for instance, the frequency, consistency and transparency with which information is communicated to them.

Discursive communication activities

Discursive communication activities are characterised by opportunities for managers and employees to interact and jointly interpret and shape what is happening in their organisation at the strategic, operational and inter-personal level. At NorthService Ltd., it was about establishing a professional relationship between managers and employees coming from very different types of organisation (private-sector and public-sector). The three main activities were round-table meetings between senior managers and employees, a communications forum and floor-walking by senior managers.

- The round-table meetings, scheduled in monthly intervals, were an opportunity for employees to meet senior managers and discuss any matters of importance. They were a prime opportunity for managers to find out what the issues were for those working on the frontline and for employees to get an answer to pertinent questions.
- The communications forum was a monthly and more formal means for interaction between communications representatives (elected by and acting on behalf of employees working in a particular department) and the communications manager (acting on behalf of the organisation). The idea behind the communications forum is the exchange of information. Specifically, the communications representatives disseminated information up from the bottom of the organisational hierarchy (such as human interest stories for inclusion in the newsletter) and the communications manager cascaded down information (such as more informal updates about change) from the top.

- Senior managers' floor-walking was a further opportunity for informal interaction with employees, for instance to praise good practice and address any pressing questions or issues.

Communication here is bi-directional with managers seeking dialogue, discussion and at times also debate with employees about what is happening in the organisation. It is an opportunity for managers and employees to learn from one another – managers gaining insights into employees' hopes, fears and aspirations, and employees into managers' reasoning behind at times tough decision-making. The role of discursive management communication in generating employee engagement is to provide a place for employee voice to be heard^x.

Employee experiences

As outlined above, NorthService managers have created multiple opportunities for employees to engage through both directive and discursive management communication activities. While engagement is not an automatic response thereto, NorthService employees have generally responded positively to their managers' attempts to generate employee engagement. There are signs that employees feel valued by managers and that they are more willing to engage with the organisation.

In terms of directive communication, NorthService employees particularly valued:

- the opportunity to hear directly from senior managers at the whole-organisation event, thereby being able to put a face to a name; and
- honest information about the organisation's successes and challenges.

Employees' experiences of directive management communication activities are contrasted with those at their previous employer (NorthCouncil), where limited information was disseminated through official channels and the grapevine was the most readily available source of information. NorthService employees specifically appreciated the opportunity to experience their senior managers at the whole-organisation event and to learn more about them through a dedicated column in the newsletter. During the research interview, they also emphasised the honesty with which NorthService managers communicated, not only highlighting the organisation's successes to date but also the challenges lying ahead.

In terms of discursive communication, NorthService employees particularly valued:

- the opportunity to interact regularly with senior managers at the round-table meetings and during floor-walking;
- managers' discipline in following up any actions arising from the round-table meetings and other personal interaction; and
- opportunities to discuss information, share knowledge and get involved in what is happening in the organisation.

Employees' experiences of discursive management communication activities focus on the ability to interact with senior managers and to get their questions and issues addressed. The symbolic action of managers visiting staff in their offices for round-table meetings or floor-walking was powerful for NorthService employees, who were used to 'going up' to their managers in the past. Such interaction made NorthService employees feel more equal and it

also tended to make them feel valued, which enhances their willingness to engage with the organisation^{xi}.

Directive and discursive management communication activities must not be considered in isolation; they are intrinsically linked. Contrary to the presentation above, directive communication activities contained discursive elements and discursive communication activities contained directive elements. For instance, the whole-organisation event contained an interactive (and thereby discursive) part and the newsletter contained human-interest stories to discuss and debate more informally. Similarly, the round table meetings, communications forum and senior-manager floor-walking had a directive element in that managers sought to reinforce a central message about the organisation in interaction with employees.

More importantly for this article, directive and discursive communication complements each other. A variety of management communication activities allow employees to triangulate the information that is being disseminated verbally and non-verbally, management behaviour in different communication activities, and consistency of information and behaviour across activities. Different management communication activities represent an opportunity for employees to judge over time if their managers really ‘walk the talk’ and if they can be trusted. If, on the basis of management communication over time, employees find that their managers can be trusted, they are more likely to engage with the organisation. If, on the contrary, employees find that their managers cannot be trusted, then employee engagement is unlikely to happen.

Hence, management communication activities are not an end in themselves. They are a means by which the professional relationship between managers and employees, as an important antecedent for employee engagement, is created, developed and maintained. Both the dissemination of information and opportunities for interaction have a key role to play. Frequent and consistent management communication through a variety of means is therefore a long-term investment by an organisation for its future health and success. Its aim is to create a place where managers create opportunities for employee to engage and employees respond positively through satisfaction, involvement and commitment, which generate the potential benefits of employee engagement^{xii}.

Conclusion

Generating employee engagement is not straightforward, as the analysis above has shown. It relies on managers communicating through both directive and discursive means with their employees, thereby disseminating important information and creating opportunities for regular, face-to-face interaction. Such an approach to management communication is time-consuming for managers and resource-intensive for the organisation and, above all, is hampered by the following trends in the current business environment:

- High management turnover threatens the consistency of management communication activities over time;
- Remote and flexible working jeopardise regular and frequent interaction between managers and employees; and
- Short-term and agency staff have limited incentive to engage with an organisation in which they are unlikely to have a long-term future.

Yet, despite these challenges, employee engagement can be a valuable asset for organisations as those with an engaged workforce tend to outperform those without. Both managers and employees have a crucial role in generating employee engagement for their organisation's future health and success with management communication activities constituting a facilitative force. Managers seeking to generate employee engagement in their organisation need to take the initiative to create opportunities for their employees to engage, encouraging them to respond positively. With a commitment to frequent and consistent management communication (both directive and discursive) managers' efforts are likely to pay off.

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