

## **What is IC's role in driving staff engagement?**

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I was lucky enough to attend a networking evening recently. The theme was 'How to Lead, Motivate and Engage: Tools, Tips and Techniques to Maximise Emotional Commitment in your People'.

Who knew we would be so thoroughly informed as well as entertained!

These regular events, hosted by Comma Partners, attract a group of very experienced communication professionals with a variety of speakers on different topics. This time we were in the company of Mark Robb of Positive Reframe. Specialising in how leaders create a culture to drive staff engagement to increase customer delight, Mark designs and delivers whole business cultural evolution programmes around the globe.

We were treated to a high-octane hour's blend of cutting edge research, case study examples, practical models and demonstrations, and great, great story-telling leaving us with plenty of food for thought.

### **Stats make depressing reading**

Some of the detail from the latest Gallup State of the Global Workplace 2017 makes depressing reading. Only 11% of UK workers are fully engaged at work, 68% not engaged and 21% actively disengaged. That's an astonishing 1 in 5 employees working against your business: twice as many as your real evangelists. But the whole issue of employee engagement as a core driver for success has been high on the business agenda for nearly a decade since the Engage for Success report was published in 2009, yet the numbers are still going backwards.

Do we think that leaders are waking up finally to the fact that a change in fortune is down to them? That their level of care and behaviour with their people are key to levels of engagement in a business? [Karen Kimberley](#), who has over 20 years' experience in communication working with



major blue chip FTSE 100 international and UK companies and runs her own consultancy hopes so: “Progress has been far too slow. The latest drop in engagement scores in the UK that Mark highlighted must be a wake-up call that we need to get better, especially if we, as communicators, are going to help our leaders take us through the Brexit quagmire ahead.”

And it’s true: the issue of leadership communication and its impact on engagement and productivity has been discussed in IC circles as long as I can remember. One of the points that Mark made so clearly on the evening is that change requires a fundamental shift in mindset. It requires us to turn much of our traditional organisational thinking on its head. Quite literally.

### **A need to be agile**

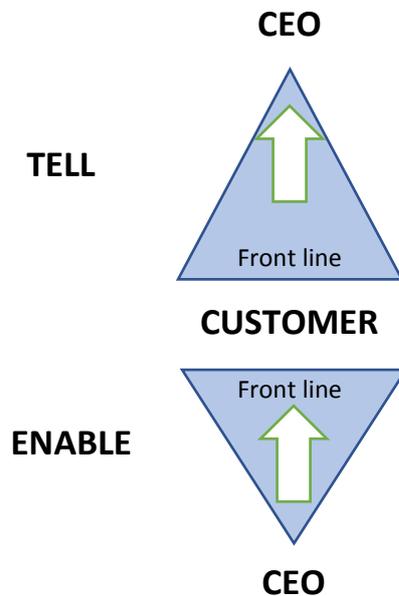
Relying on a hierarchical leadership model (the classic organisational pyramid) certainly seems outdated. Digital transformation has disrupted businesses with fundamental changes in how and where our work gets done. There’s pressure on organisations to adapt to thrive in the digital era. New collaboration technologies (which we write so much about here on simply-communicate) can help in this regard as they break down traditional silos of hierarchy, function and geography, yet many a platform has failed due to a lack of senior level sponsorship. It’s a stark reminder of the same problem, perhaps.

In his acclaimed study “The Iceberg of Ignorance”, consultant Sidney Yoshida concluded: “Only 4% of an organisation’s front-line problems are known by top management, 9% are known by middle management, 74% by supervisors and 100% by employees.” In a traditional top-down hierarchy therefore, we can pretty accurately assume that decisions are made on an inadequate amount of information because there is no easy and reliable way to gather and manage insights from employees across the wider organisation. This can lead to poor decisions that decrease confidence in leadership within the organisation, dent morale and negatively impact engagement.

The simple model below shows, at a glance, how a fundamental shift in leadership style and thinking changes the outlook of an organisation.



Is the energy and focus (denoted by arrows) flowing towards boss pleasing, or customer pleasing?  
Continuous business success requires a shift in leader thinking from 'Tell' to 'Enable'.



[Mark Robb](#) summarises: “We do not have enough time for just 10 brains at the top to work it all out. Organisations have to unlock the ideas and intelligence from the front line to be agile, responsive and successful. Internal communications has a key role to play in this.”

### **Internal communicators; Internal connectors**

Isobel Hoseason, who has spent the last 2.5 years as Interim Head of Internal Communications at Jaguar Land Rover, believes passionately in engaging employees as ambassadors and developing leaders as communicators: “What struck me about Mark's presentation was the role of leader needing to provide a clear vision of WHERE our organisations want to get to and being an **enabler** to allow the people who know best - frontline colleagues - to input into the HOW that's achieved. The role then of the IC lead is to connect leaders to colleagues who can provide those 'aha!' moments, when leaders realise the power of listening to their people. We have the benefit



of seeing not only across the organisation but also connecting at all levels, from shop floor to the board room. We are not just internal communicators, we are internal connectors!”

Mark certainly agrees: “Leadership is foundational to success. Instead of employees supporting leadership objectives, think of managers serving employees and leaders serving the broader organisation – all with the goal of giving a better service to customers. The leader’s role is to create the conditions to make it easier for the frontline teams to do their best work with the freedom to do what’s necessary to get customers to behave in the way that’s needed for business success.”

### **Get the mental mindset right.**

Abi Rowland, an interim consultant with particular focus on HR change and engagement communications, picks up this point: “As IC experts, we can support leaders, improving engagement across organisations and in teams, by helping them understand the impact they have on the experiences and feelings of people, and the powerful link to business outcomes. Through leaders’ words, decisions and actions, people will either believe their leaders are supporting them to be successful in their role (an Enabler mindset), or that they’re expected to support the leader, so he/she is successful in their role (a Tell mindset).”

Mark Robb encourages us to think about culture in another way too – as a balance of clarity and freedom. Having a clear understanding of what is expected is pretty much a given in terms of creating any level of engagement in a workforce. Good strategic comms and leadership comms, the bread and butter of an IC role, is essential here.

But what about the level of freedom? Clearly freedom without clarity leads to all sorts of problems – apathy at best, chaos at worst. But most of us have experience of working in organisations where the levels of clarity are high but our freedom relatively low. For decades this was the accepted norm. In the short term, this can be a successful strategy, but it breeds a generation of robots, programmed to carry out instructions from the top and follow due process. It tends to stifle innovation too and engagement suffers. As freedom increases (assuming clarity is still high), employees are focused more on the expected outcome, with significantly more freedom as to how



to achieve results. This, in turn, allows individuality and ideas to flourish, with engagement rising as a result. Capability rises also, and management styles need to adapt, gradually devolving control to allow for this.

### **Communication is the cornerstone of an engaged workforce**

A culture of high engagement requires a continuous and consistent flow of communication from top to bottom and bottom to top. This demands of course that all leaders, managers and supervisors are good at communicating. As effective communication can increase employee engagement, boost workplace productivity and drive business growth, it's an enormous opportunity for internal communications professionals to take more of a coaching role and upskill people.

As Mark points out: "All of this relies on really rich ongoing two-way communication between the line manager and their direct reports: not occasional suggestion through old fashioned 'good ideas schemes', but a day-in, day-out dialogue about the challenges and opportunities for the business and the best insights and ideas of the team. Front line teams are not in charge of business strategy, but they do have real time information on the customer that it's hard to get anywhere else. The best leaders know this and draw it out of their people."

Catherine Fallon, who has over 20 years' experience as a communications and employee engagement specialist, agrees: "We create the opportunities for dialogue - so the frontline feels that their voice is heard and that their opinions might be considered, irrespective of their role or level of seniority. The challenge is that most managers operate as per the 'tell' pyramid rather than the 'enablers' in the inverted pyramid (as per Mark's model). A lot of our role is to coach managers to take the inverted pyramid approach."

Donna Reeves, a communications and engagement specialist, has seen first-hand on many occasions how getting the culture right empowers people, drives high engagement and delivers success: "Often we use stats, like 80% of culture is shaped by the attitudes and behaviours of line managers. Whilst people can be impressed or shocked by such figures, what do they do with that



information? The real power is in the stories that demonstrate the culture in action – listening to your people, crediting them with the ability and empowering them to make changes that help customers, rather than it being dictated by someone sat in head office. This is a cultural shift and IC can help by highlighting these stories, by magnifying the employee voice and reinforcing that communication is a two-way activity not a one-way dissemination from the top.”

### **Line managers perform poorly**

In the recently published State of the Sector report from Gatehouse, 56% cite poor communication skills in their line managers as the single biggest barrier to their success. Providing communication training and coaching, along with collaboration and knowledge sharing, is lingering at the bottom of the core activities that IC are involved in. Also, improving line manager communication skills has dropped out of the top 5 IC priorities altogether. Does this suggest that our priorities need to change? Simon Wright, co-founder of Gatehouse, says: “It is certainly obvious that line managers need to be far better empowered to create motivated, engaged and high performing teams. Part of this is their ability to have meaningful conversations with their people, to show they care about employees, to really listen, to provide context for corporate decisions, to motivate and to inspire.”

If, as Mark Robb suggests, 70% of an employee’s engagement is affected by their immediate line manager, what key behaviours should those managers be focusing on? Mark tells us the answers have been codified by Gallup.

### **12 elements of great management**

The Gallup Q12 Index, Gallup's employee engagement work, is based on more than 30 years of in-depth behavioural economic research involving more than 24 million employees. Through rigorous research, Gallup has identified 12 core elements - the Q12 - that link powerfully to key business outcomes having an impact on profitability, productivity, customer engagement and turnover. These 12 statements emerged as those that best predict employee and workgroup performance.



The Twelve Questions are:

1. Do you know what is expected of you at work?
2. Do you have the materials and equipment to do your work right?
3. At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages your development?
7. At work, do your opinions seem to count?
8. Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?
9. Are your associates (fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?
10. Do you have a best friend at work?
11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
12. In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?

Abi Rowland again: “These 12 Gallup questions, which align to the critical levers of engagement, are an invaluable tool for us as IC/Change Interims. You don’t need to launch an employee survey to start applying the 12 Gallup questions. Mark demonstrated how to integrate critical engagement levers with change and communication models, adding a new dimension to the way Interims develop plans, deliver activities and measure results.”

Virginia Hicks of [Comma Partners](#) is inclined to agree: “The role of a senior internal communicator is much more about influencing and coaching leaders and managers at all levels in an organisation to be able to really connect with their colleagues. There can be many distractions in businesses, but communicators can lead and support the focus on getting those basics right, focussing on engagement around initiatives, strategy and change, and making sure senior and middle level team managers are truly plugged into creating the right culture for success.”

*Comma Partners provides internal and change communications specialists to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit [www.commapartners.com](http://www.commapartners.com)*