

# Employee engagement: the use of storytelling

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*“Stories are communications in which author and author-ity coincide in the organisation. The story suggests power is diffused, available to anyone who can speak the ideology of the organisation” (Browning, 1992:283)*

## **Introduction**

Employee engagement is of significant interest to management practitioners (Macey et al. 2009) and policy makers (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). There has been particular focus on the relationship between employee engagement and the achievement of performance indicators including satisfaction, commitment and retention, as well as improved productivity. However, little is currently known about the two facets of employee engagement and their relationship: 1) employee engagement as an organisational activity and 2) employee engagement as a state of being. The former is concerned with what managers do to help their employees connect with colleagues, managers and the wider organisation (Truss, quoted in MacLeod and Clarke 2009). The latter is about employees’ willingness to contribute intellectual effort in a meaningful way. Indicators of employee engagement include the creation of meaningful work, the creation of opportunities to participate in decision-making, and effective managerial communication (Alfes et al. 2010).

In this paper, we explore the role of communication in the reciprocal relationship between the two facets of employee engagement. Specifically, we examine the way in which storytelling as a means of managerial communication (Brown et al. 2005) has been used instrumentally in a strategic partnership to create employee engagement. Stories have a place in business settings to facilitate communication (Birchard, 2002), and storytelling in organisations takes two main forms: 1) corporate storytelling to communicate the organisation’s vision, mission and identity, and 2) managerial storytelling to translate the corporate story into systems, processes, procedures, behaviours and norms (Reissner and Pagan 2011).

The research<sup>i</sup> from which this paper derives took place in PPP<sup>ii</sup>, a strategic partnership founded in 2008 with staff from an existing private-sector organisation and staff from an existing public-sector organisation transferred under TUPE<sup>iii</sup> arrangements. The research demonstrates how storytelling is contained within communication methods whose purpose is to engage employees, i.e. how managers use storytelling to engage employees. It also illustrates how storytelling is received by employees in terms of their state of being, i.e. how storytelling affects employees’ experience of engagement.

This research is still in progress; the indicative findings presented here have been drawn from an initial analysis of 25 unstructured, face-to-face interviews with senior, middle and line managers as well as their staff from PPP, and observations of three group discussions. It has been compiled to provoke thought and enable practitioners to consider the implications for their own practice. The intended audience for this paper is, therefore, practising business managers and management consultants.

### **Employee engagement as an organisational activity**

PPP managers are explicit about using storytelling for the purpose of communication throughout the organisation. In the first instance, the use of storytelling has been adopted to address a lack of shared meanings among organisational actors. Storytelling is expected to translate otherwise abstract notions of business, organisation and management into a language that the majority of employees understand.

Corporate storytelling is the communication of the organisation's vision, mission and identity in story form. Its aim is to construct a coherent story to engage staff in what the organisation is doing, thereby providing direction and communicating what constitutes acceptable behaviour directly for their role. Such a story is commonly used to demonstrate an agreed and shared purpose in collaborative ventures and for internal transformational change. It typically paints a positive picture of the organisation and its future.

*"Storytelling to me is that you are telling people where you are on a journey. If you haven't got the view of where the journey's going, then you can't really tell a story of how we're getting there. You're setting the scene about what you want to achieve and telling the story of how we're getting there." (Middle Manager)*

By communicating in this way, it is intended that employees will understand and connect with the purpose and direction of the organisation. They have the opportunity to seek meaning in their work in relation to the 'bigger picture' of the organisation and its goals.

Managerial storytelling enables managers to engage their team members with the organisation's systems and procedures that allow the corporate story to become true. It also helps employees to engage with how the corporate story affects their role in the organisation. PPP employs a layered, trickle-down approach to communication to promote engagement, as illustrated by the following interviewee.

*"We have a set of meetings. They start at the top with our [engagement model], and then discussions are disseminated downwards through [middle and line managers]. ... An expectation that we have is that the discussions that take place in these meetings actually get communicated back down to the staff. The other day, a manager said 'can you get a set of slides to communicate [the operating model] to my team?' ..." (Senior Manager)*

PPP has a number of structured and formal methods through which stories are told to engage its employees in their roles and place within the organisation. These include whole organisation events, department and team meetings, round-table discussions with senior managers, a monthly newsletter, and a communications forum. The purpose of this multitude of formal communication methods is to ensure that all organisational actors get to know what they need to know. Moreover, managers recognise that different employees are more open to different types of communication. The portfolio of communication methods has been designed in such a way as to appeal to as many organisational actors as possible whilst acknowledging that managers cannot control take-up; this is a facet of the reciprocal relationship between the two aspects of employee engagement.

*"The way I look at it is if they've got the information, it's up to them whether they choose to read it or not. Great if they read it, or if they skim it, at least they know they've got it. If they had nothing they'd be complaining that there's nothing. And so what we give them it's amusing, it's anecdotal, it's interesting, it's informative and if they go, 'oh a newsletter', they can't go, 'oh well nobody tells me anything', because they know they've got a newsletter that they didn't bother to read. So it puts us in the right, we've ticked the box. Yes, we've communicated with staff, we do round tables, we do newsletters, we do events. Nobody can come back and say we didn't try, they*

*can only say, 'I didn't engage', and people can only convince themselves so much that it's the big, bad managers." (Senior Manager)*

Informal contacts are also valuable; for example, an open door policy and 'management by walking around'. Stories are therefore not just written or spoken, they are manifested in behaviours and actions by managers. The telling of the corporate story itself is not enough, it has to be lived and experienced, and there is significant potential for damage to the organisation if actions do not match words.

*"So in some ways, while it's not a verbal story or a written-down story, [the CEO] is telling a story by her behaviours and the way she's engaging people. I applaud it because if you don't have that, you are not going to run a successful business. ... I think there's something in a story that's not manifesting itself verbally or on paper, but actually by the actions taken, and I think more of that would be good." (Senior Manager)*

Managers are also aware that the story itself is not enough. There is a need for action for it to become something meaningful for employees.

*"The story's probably the entry point to get people engaged and bought in, but if you aren't following it through with substance then it becomes quite empty and pointless, doesn't it." (Senior Manager)*

The sharing of personal experiences – from within or outside of a work context – can be a powerful means of communicating one's sense of humour, values and beliefs, as well as an opportunity to explore how senior members of staff have approached situations that employees have to address.

*"I would want people to understand and to be engaged, but not necessarily to be entertained, and therefore elements of the story would contain facts that you wanted them to know. If I'm trying to just make somebody feel more at ease, you come in and you don't launch straight into the meeting, you go, 'oh you'll never believe when I got here and I couldn't get in the car park', and that's not even a very interesting story, but it's an ice breaker and by the time then, you've got on to whatever you might be talking about, the person's quite relaxed". (Senior Manager)*

Despite this, however, PPP managers acknowledge that information is processed by people in different ways, potentially affecting their understanding and their level of engagement.

*"Some people just hear [the story], and the words are what they focus on, and some people translate it into a picture in their head. But that's how people receive a story, isn't it. ... So it's not so much what you say, it's how you say it as well, in an engaging way to get people interested in what you're saying, because some people would think that they're doing the right thing in telling a story, but people think, 'well what are they on about, what relevance is this to me', because they haven't actually put the connectors in." (Senior manager)*

In this respect, a package of communication methods offering repetition and reinforcement of messages is utilised to facilitate engagement and to check understanding. In general, managers consider that there has been observable improvement in engagement with their employees.

*"I think it's been for the better, there's a lot more engagement, it's more interactive. Not with all staff members, because you never will. There's definitely more engagement with the management, enough for people to say to other people 'you*

*know, they are making a difference', or 'they're a sounding board and they're not too distant, they're actually engaged'." (Senior manager)*

### **Employee engagement as a state of being**

The majority of the 10 members of frontline staff interviewed for the research acknowledged that there had been an increase in communication since they were transferred to PPP compared with their previous employer.

*"The newsletter I think works really, really well and there's nothing about it that feels contrived. I love reading the 'Day in my Life' [feature] and all the bits about your three favourite books and who you would have at your dinner party. All of these bits and pieces let you know [about the person in question]. They have got nothing to do with work, really, but it just makes people feel real. And I think there is something warm and engaging about it, and I think that really works and a lot of that is story-telling." (Employee)*

These members of staff also agreed that the increase in communication had been positive in terms of greater knowledge and, by extension, understanding of changes in practice and expectations. A sense of involvement provokes willing contribution towards the organisation.

*"...you're always informed, you're always told, either by a meeting or by email, what's going on. Whereas for all the years I've worked with the [council], there wasn't that much. There weren't team meetings or other meetings to say 'this is happening'. You were just told it was going to happen. ... Now there's a new [computer] system that's been brought in, and there're meetings about it. You know it's about 'can you offer any input to it?' And you're very involved in anything that's going on. So I suppose that's a very good thing compared to where I've come from." (Employee)*

There is evidence that employees crave understanding of their place within a broader organisational context, the corporate story, but that this is incorporated in their own personal framework of priorities, values. In this respect, there is a reciprocal relationship between employees and the organisation; the organisation offers opportunities for employees to engage, and employees may or may not accept these opportunities as processed through a 'filter' of existing beliefs and their search for meaning.

*"It's about what the end goal is, what we're all here for basically. For some people ... it's about money. For some people it's about feeling that we've done a good job. It's about [PPP] engaging at that different level, what different people want from work, the reason why they come to work, so whether it's a happiness thing or work or whatever it is. If the end of the story can say 'this is what it will do for you, be part of it at whatever different level', that would probably be an effective story, like a way of getting the message over of what we're about." (Employee)*

Personal relevance and significance of the story to employees can affect the extent to which they engage, and this is translated by managers from corporate level to their employees' roles and responsibilities at an operational level. There is a resulting emotional connection with the role and the beneficiaries of the employees' work.

*"It's how you actually engage somebody with [their work]. So if you can tell a story that people can identify with, it might be the story of [local area], which is what we tell people when they come to work for us. This is the story of where you work, so they'll engage with that: 'oh yes, I work in [local area]' and they probably live in [local area], too. The story is the mechanism for delivering the message, so if I can use the example of the induction [event for new employees], the story is the history of [the local area]: thought we were doing well, started getting inspected, actually weren't*

*doing very well, all this deprivation, poverty, dah di dah di dah... So it's just using the story, just using the methodology if you like or the vehicle of the story to actually say, 'this is where we've come from, this is what happened, and this is where we're going, and this is your role within it.'* (Employee)

Particularly acute in the PPP context has been the difference between job meaning previously experienced by employees who have moved from the public sector (with a perceived goal as being a greater social good) into an organisation perceived as having a private sector ethos (financial gain). As the following employee suggests, there is an extent to which there is initially acquiescence to change as opposed to true engagement in terms of meaningful connection and positive emotion, which can take time to develop.

*"I do think you serve the people of the [local area], that's the way it was then. Now it's not that anymore, it's to make a profit. This is a business, and we're concerned with how can we bring in new business. It's a complete culture change to everything that we've ever known, which is why I think people have a hard time trying to accept it. And there're constantly involvement workshops, there're meetings all the time and you have to learn this, you have to learn that. ... I don't want to put a negative spin on it but it's a lot of change to take on board for people, and you really have no choice but to get on board and do all those changes."* (Employee)

However, where managers have combined the personal relevance of the content of the stories with personal communication regarding the value of individual contributions, employees have retained this as part of the development of their engagement.

*"[As part of the organisation-wide communications event] all participants got little name plates that they've still got in front of their screens now, where the manager had to go away prior to the [event] and write a brief on how you, myself, or whoever would contribute to the team. So they got basically a little plaque with blah, blah, blah does this and this, and this is why they're a valued member of the team. The fact that they've still got them on their monitors now, I think says it all ... sometimes you just need to hear from your manager what they may or may not think of you, so I think it went down quite well."* (Employee)

The importance of managerial storytelling is most acute from the perspective of employees; this team-level relationship appears to be a pivot for employee engagement, particularly in terms of employees having a voice that can be heard in the decision-making.

*"It feels like a lot of decisions are being made that the people who are doing the work haven't been consulted on – and there is a lot of change happening that is happening very, very fast ... I think having team meetings at our end helps control that a little bit better because there's a greater sense of a decision being made that's best for us, rather than just 'well, it's only the bottom line that matters and you need to do this and this has come from above'. ... So yes, I think it works better that way, to have an outlet where you can discuss things properly."* (Employee)

Stories need to go beyond painting a pretty picture of the organisation; more importantly, they need to address negativity and any challenges that the organisation is facing. This links to the previous point made with regard to the relationship between hearing/reading stories and experiencing them in work practice. If a story does not relate to the organisational reality of employees, it can create disengagement among groups of organisational actors.

*"I think that at the same time, you've got to make sure that people understand what's going on around them, because that's part of trust as well. You don't want to sugar coat everything, you want to make them trust the fact that you are going to let them*

*know exactly how things are going, what's succeeding and what needs work, and how they can engage their energies to make everything better.” (Employee)*

Employees also recognise the value of storytelling at an operational level; that it facilitates greater understanding of practice that can be directly applied in their work and role. As such, storytelling permeates the organisation and it plays a part in the depth of engagement experienced by employees.

*“...I will pitch in examples and stories [when I interact with my colleagues] because that's how I think, and I think it helps to engage people. I know when I've done training, you ask people what's good customer service. You don't just say it. It's a case of giving you a specific example – what did that feel like, what did that smell like, look like, what made it good, what did you do next. Because that's what makes it real as opposed to generic bland words that we churn out into a document.” (Employee)*

### **Implications for managers**

Our research provides further evidence of the importance of communication in facilitating good practice in the way in which organisational actors deliver quality outputs and outcomes. In terms of employee engagement, however, the research is indicating that not only communication from senior managers matters for the facilitation of employee engagement (the telling of the corporate story), but also that communication through managerial storytelling at team level has a particular impact on the experiences of engagement from an employee perspective. It is at this operational level that there is most evidence of a reciprocal dynamic, with managers translating stories into practice of personal relevance to employees and employees feeling meaningful connection with their role and organisation through the opportunity to have an input in discussion and decision-making. This, in turn, is likely to increase employees' satisfaction and willing commitment to the organisation, its strategies and goals.

In the context of a strategic partnership between two organisations, resulting in the creation of a new work environment, our research has illustrated that a portfolio of communication methods can be effective in offering multiple opportunities through which employees can engage. Multiple methods respond to the variation in ways that people hear and process messages. Crucially, the use of stories can particularly humanise and make real what can otherwise be abstract and clinical organisational processes, expectations and targets. Employers can empower employees by provoking interpretation of their examples i.e. 'in that situation, this is what I did, it might help you decide what to do' as opposed to 'in that situation, just do this'. Employees can also find greater meaning in their work if it is positioned both in terms of its value to recipients or beneficiaries and in terms of their own personal development.

For PPP, employee engagement is a progressive and fluctuating process of delivery and state of being. It is not the case that employee engagement gets done by employers and is completed. It is also not the case that employees experience engagement as a constant state of being. Our research offers indicates the ways in which the telling of stories within organisations can contribute towards the ongoing practice and experience of employee engagement.

## References and further reading

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<sup>i</sup> The authors would like to acknowledge financial support by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under grant No. RES-061-25-0144-A for this research.

<sup>ii</sup> A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the organisation.

<sup>iii</sup> TUPE = Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment).