Building Trust and Increasing Employee Engagement in the Workplace

How HR Business Partners and Managers Can Work Together for Success

Sandi Cardillo
Queen's IRC Facilitator

Ben was concerned. Emma, a manager new to his group, had just received her employee engagement scores. They were not good. Emma had been a rock star in her previous individual contributor role. She was seen as talent for the future in the organization. As her HR Business Partner, Ben had watched her struggle as a first-time manager. Now, it appeared that her employee team was willing to put those struggles on paper in the form of not so good engagement scores. This had always been a good team. But their responses were a strong signal to Ben that something was not right.

"Emma, let's talk about what these employee engagement scores might mean," Ben said.

"I know, Ben," she replied. "I am trying so hard to get this managing thing right. I am not happy with the responses and how the group sees me right now. This is such a good team. The one that really bothers me is the feedback from the 'do you trust your manager?' question. I've always thought of myself as a pretty trust worthy person, so this one really bothers me. I can't seem to find a way to earn my team's confidence and trust."

"Emma," he replied. "I've been doing a lot of studying on how managers build trust on their teams since we started this whole employee engagement initiative. We are trying to understand how what we do in HR helps build trust in the organization. Would you consider studying with me? I really want to help you. We can learn together."

"Ben, that would be great," Emma replied. "Let's do it!"

Engagement and Trust: Same or Different?

Trust and engagement – are they the same or different? In 2012, the global CIPD organization conducted a survey[1] on workplace trust. In their research, they found a distinct difference between how employee groups saw trust versus engagement. Engagement, they found, is an "exchange relationship" that can be cognitive, emotional or physical.

With engagement, one "gives something" and receives something in exchange[2] (ex. pay, recognition, safety). Conversely, trust was "about accepting a certain amount of uncertainty"[3]. It is about a willingness to be vulnerable and accept vulnerability in others. For managers, this is a

---

[1] Where Has All the Trust Gone? (2012, March). CIPD Research Report.
[2] Kahn, W. (1990). Psychological conditions of engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal.* Vol. 33, No. 4. pp 692-724.
[3] Where Has All the Trust Gone? (2012, March). CIPD Research Report.

supreme challenge. Employees will show up, but not trust. They will "do the job" but not trust. Conversations about trust take on a whole different meaning.

"Emma," said Ben. "Let's talk about the things that engage you as a manager. What do you like about being a manager? What is challenging to you? Basically, why do you show up every day?"

Emma replied, "Ben, I enjoy leading a team to meet the goals we've been given. I really like the strategy that's been laid out by our senior team. I like where we are going as an organization. The system and process improvement project work we've done is amazing. That said, I know that I struggle with getting my new team to be as excited about implementing their part of the new process as I am. They come to work every day. They tell me they really like the culture. They are committed, but they just don't seem to get why this new reporting and tracking system is so important."

"What do you think is important to them?" Ben asked.

"Well…" Emma replied. "Some of the team have mentioned how much they like the variety in the work. They like being able to move about and do different things in their day. What they don't like is too much time with reports and all the detail stuff at the end of the day. It's a new thing. Several of them have told me they don't understand why they have to do it."

"Sounds like they are engaged at some level," Ben replied. "Let's try and figure out what's happening. I'm betting the detail reports are part of the problem. We need to connect the dots about why you are asking them to report their activities with meeting the goals of the department."

Accountability and Vulnerability: Building Trust

Building trust at work, state MacLeod and Clark, [4] is personal. The factors of engagement (pay, safe work environment) can be seen. Trust is based on things that are not completely known. There is insecurity and uncertainty present. Things that build trust are not always so easily seen.

Building trust in an organization requires attention to building relationships. For human resources professionals, assisting managers in building trustworthy relationships is a significant part of their role. HR holds the systems within which trust is built – staffing, hiring, job evaluation, appraisal and review, and talent management.

---

[4] MacLeod, D & Clarke, N. (2009). *Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement.* London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Retrieved August 17, 2018, from http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1810/1/file52215.pdf.

HR Business Partners, are in many ways keepers of the culture. Edgar Schein, in <u>Organizational and Culture Leadership</u>[5] describes creating a culture as creating a common language. He writes, "to function as a group, the individuals who come together must establish a system of communication and language that permits interpretation of what is going on."[6] HR Business Partners, working with managers, hold the framework for how a culture is built. Managers do the building, HR partners hand them the tools.

HR practices and managerial practices are woven together in much the same manner as a beautiful woven cloth. In weaving, one can see the warp yarns, strong and straight. They hold the cloth together, providing strength and balance. The weft, those threads woven across and through the warp, provide the colour. Master weavers know that many colours and many fibers can be held together across a strong warp. Together, they create a beautiful cloth. Building a culture of trust in an organization happens in the same way that a beautiful cloth is woven.

Human Resources provides the warp yarns. They build systems of accountability and fairness. They build systems where all employee talent is identified, tracked and given opportunities to flourish. Managers, working within the strength of those warp yarns, create the weft of an organization through how they apply those practices in their day to day role as a manager. An individual manager's approach is different, but trust in a culture is woven within the strength of solid HR practices. Organizational "colour and texture" is applied as appropriate for the work to be done, but it is all held together with the strength of HR systems and practices.

Walking in Partnership: What's to Do?

"Emma," said Ben. "One of things that is coming through loud and clear for me in my studying about building trust in an organization, is the importance of accountability. Everyone in an organization shares a system for building accountability. That seems to be at the heart of what organizations that really have the trust thing down do well. Employees need to see what we do as credible, reliable and fair. As the HR guy, I've been thinking a lot about how our appraisal process builds accountability and trust. What do you think?"

"Wow Ben," she replied. "It's really interesting that you bring up the appraisal process. One of the things that Jamal, the lead on the team, mentioned in passing the other day was about appraisals. He wasn't sure that the new reporting for our system implementation would be fair for employees. I guess I've been so eager to show my managers that we could get this thing up and rolling to meet the strategic goals that I had not stopped to think about how it might impact the team. We do quarterly reviews for each employee.

---

[5] Schein, E.H. (2004). *Organizational and Culture Leadership*. 3rd Edition. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco.
[6] Ibid. pg. 111.

You know, I was on the team that recommended the new system. The team might see me as totally eager to have my way without listening to their concerns. I think I need to back up a bit."

"I agree," said Ben. "Let's look at what you're trying to do with this system implementation and all these reports and how it might be changing your team's work. That could be at the heart of their trust concern. They don't understand why what you're asking is important."

Trust building is about removing vulnerability. It's about being clear. It's about being fair. And, it's about acting with integrity. What is committed to be done, will be done. For a manager, building trust hinges on four critical elements:[7]

1. **Clarity of Expectations**
   How does an employee know what is expected of them? How do managers in the organization link the daily, weekly, and monthly tasks with what is written on job/role description? Do managers write role descriptions and review them on a regular basis with employees?

   HR holds the system for preparing and maintaining job/role descriptions. Managers understand what is expected – they hold the accountability for describing the work. Clarity of expectation is managerial work. Who writes the job descriptions in your organization – managers or the HR practitioners? If employees do not see that their managers are accountable for understanding and describing the expectations of their role, trust will not be built.

2. **Alignment of the Practice for Setting Strategic Goals with HR Systems and Practices.**
   Employees know when what they are being asked to do does not make sense with customer expectations or strategic goals. They know when the job description does not match what is actually discussed during an appraisal conversation.

   Do role descriptions align with strategic plans? Can an employee see how what they do aligns with where the organization is going? Does what they are being asked to do every day make sense in the big picture? Trust building in organizations requires HR systems in alignment with strategic systems. Asking employees to respond to engagement surveys without reviewing for system and practice alignment does not make sense. If employees do not perceive that all strategic, managerial and HR systems are in alignment, trust cannot be built.

---

[7] Jaques, E. (2006). *Requisite Organization*. Cason Hall & Co. Baltimore, MD.

3. **Providing the Resources to do the Job**
   Resources come in many flavours – people, technology support, well-written procedures and job aids. Do managers have the resources they need to support what they are asking of their teams? How does the organization review its resource needs? What support do HR Business Partners give managers to ensure appropriate identification and use of required resources? If employees cannot trust that they will be given what they need to do the job, trust will not be built.

4. **An Open, Ongoing Mechanism for Giving and Receiving Feedback**
   Do managers have an ongoing method for meeting with employees – both individually and collectively? Is that method visible and encouraged in the organization? Does it allow for "unplugged" time - time for open and honest discussions between adults? Trust is built individual by individual. It's personal. Without time to build open, honest conversations around what is expected, what is needed and what is happening, trust will not be built.

Human Resource Business Partners have a significant role in building trust in an organization. They are the "keepers of the culture building keys". They work with the HR systems and teach them to new managers. They work with HR practices and coach managers in how to be effective in their use of those practices. They thread the warp yarns of the loom and watch for the weft yarns of colour and the texture to be a woven. Without strong HR systems and the ability to support managers in the use of those systems, trust cannot be built. HR Business Partners are the teachers of those systems and practices – everyday.

A month later….

"Ben, thank you so much!" said Emma. "You really helped me understand what was happening with my team. I was so busy trying to convince them of what to do in implementing the new system that I had not taken the time to look at their role descriptions or talk with them individually about the changes we needed to make in those descriptions to be fair."

"I learned a lot, too, Emma," replied Ben. "We don't review our job descriptions enough. The new system project should have been a trigger for me to look at all the roles that were impacted in the change."

"Ben, could you coach me through how to talk with Jamal and the team on the changes we are making?" said Emma. "I want to make sure that I can draw the links between what we did to meet the customer needs with what they do every day. It made so much sense to me, but I want to make sure that we all understand together what is important. It would be great if you could practice with me. I really want to build trust with my team."

"You bet! Let's get started," replied Ben. "This is exactly what we should do together to build trust throughout the organization. Surveys are one thing; rolling up our sleeves to make it happen is what counts."

About the Author

Sandi Cardillo is president of Conrad Associates based in Boulder, Colorado. Sandi consults with both profit and not-for-profit organizations applying accountable management principles in structuring, talent management and improved managerial practices. She has over twenty years of experience in management, human resources, organization development and internal consulting. Sandi brings practical management and human resources experience to her consulting work. She is known for her ability to integrate high-level conceptual frameworks for the executive level, assisting them in breakthrough thinking in the application of accountable management principles. She is well respected for her ability to simplify complex principles and practices for mid-level and front line managers through her teaching and consulting style. She has fifteen plus years of experience teaching these principles and practices to all levels of managers in multiple sectors, including banking and finance, real estate, energy, distribution and not-for-profit.

Sandi serves as a facilitator for Queen's IRC's [Advanced Human Resources](#) and [Building Trust in the Workplace](#) programs.

References

Jaques, E. (2006). *Requisite Organization*. Cason Hall & Co. Baltimore, MD.

Kahn, W. (1990). Psychological conditions of engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*. Vol. 33, No. 4. pp 692-724.

MacLeod, D & Clarke, N. (2009). *Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Retrieved August 17, 2018, from http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1810/1/file52215.pdf.

Schein, E.H. (2004). *Organizational and Culture Leadership*. 3rd Edition. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco.

Where Has All the Trust Gone? (2012, March). CIPD Research Report.

Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
irc.queensu.ca