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Engage For Success. Repositioning Employee Engagement

Engage For Success Radio. Raising the profile of employee engagement and shining a light on good practice. For people who believe there's a better way to work.

JM - Well good afternoon everybody, and welcome to show 127 from Engage For Success. I'm Jo Moffatt. I'm host for this afternoon's show, and founder and Managing Director of Woodreed, and also part of the Engage For Success guru group. At Woodreed we believe in treating employees like customers. What that means is that we use the techniques, the creativity, and the brand thinking which marketeers use to engage external audiences, but we use them on the inside to engage employees and create effective internal cultures.

So this week's topic is of great interest to me, as we're going to be talking about repositioning employee engagement. First of all I'd like to welcome this week's guests - and we've got a full house today. I've got Andy Heath (Co-Founder of WeThrive), along with Piers Bishop (also Co-Founder of WeThrive), and we're joined as well by Janine Osmond, who is Head of Learning and Development at Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust. So, welcome to the show everybody.

Perhaps we can start off with Andy and you Piers, just to give the listeners a little bit of insight into your background. Andy, let's start with you. What path have you followed to get to the position you're in now with WeThrive?

AH - A very interesting one really. I founded a start-up in my sitting room with an old school friend, and grew that up to about fifty staff; and then sold that to a large corporation where I then worked for them for two years seeing how the mechanics of a big organisation works. Then following on from that, after I'd finished there, I worked as a sales business consultant in a wide variety of businesses. What I saw in all of those instances was the same problem - and the same thing that I'd experienced - of not having sufficient time and resources available to coach the people who were working for me, or seeing managers do that. I found predominantly that was because they were either too inexperienced, or just too busy delivering whatever it was that their particular area of the business was responsible for. I always found that the CEOs or share holders of the businesses who brought me in to help fix some of these problems were expecting that management layer to engage and motivate their teams to drive overall business improvement. That's where I saw a big opportunity. The employee engagement agenda, in my mind, is a good attempt to address this, but falls a bit short in some areas - which is what we are going to cover a bit later on - and what Piers and I put together.

JM - The repositioning...?

AH - The repositioning. Yes. It's a great idea and it's well intended, but what we feel we've achieved at WeThrive is something that actually bridges the gap between the employee engagement agenda and what managers and staff actually need - on the shop floor, if you like - to enable them to make real changes. Maybe I'll hand over to Piers now to explain his part.

JM - So, where did you come from Piers?

PB - My background's in psychology and psychotherapy, and I was actually consulting for a company that works with large organisations that have what they think of as being a communications problem. Now sometimes it is a communications problem, but actually when someone or when a group of people aren't doing what you expect or what you want, it can be because you haven't really communicated the requirements properly and they don't share the same picture in their heads that you have in yours. That does obviously happen, but it can also be for a number of other reasons. It may be because they don't have the capability to do it, or don't believe they have because they don't have confidence in themselves. Or there's a whole group of social and emotional reasons that crop up inside groups of people that can also get in the way of the staff achieving what the management hope they are going to do.

So we started grouping the possible reasons; the things that uncover themselves as we go along into groups - and they do fall into four quite neat groups. Out of that came a model for diagnosing what's actually getting in the way of people doing what they're supposed to be doing at work. We use that model in organisations to find out what it is that is getting in people's way, and in the end to help people to - as we would now say, although the engagement agenda hadn't cropped up at that point - to engage better with their work and to feel that what they are doing is interesting and useful and motivating to them.

So, that's what my side of it was. Then I bumped into Andy and we set out, between the two of us, to try to operationalise the model that we'd developed and make it available on a larger scale. It's all very well having a product you can work at as a consultant, but it is going to cost people a lot of money to get you in and have you actually working inside organisations. We thought if we could actually use the insight, the diagnostic element of that model inside a software service system then we could make it available at a more affordable cost to a larger number of people.

JM - So, Andy, once you'd sort of bumped into each other (which conjures up lovely pictures of you bumping into each other in a bar probably, which is somewhere where the best business partnerships begin [PB? - it's not exactly what did happen])...Once you'd bumped into each other Andy, how did you then set out to make that more scale-able and more affordable?

AH - That's a very good question. We spend a lot of time discussing what Piers had actually done when he was physically on location in the various organisations that he had worked with, and some of the things that I'd used when I'd been consulting. Basically we followed what's called a lead start up approach where we came up with a set of hypotheses that we wanted to test. We did all of the work initially manually using Excel; collecting the responses from people, doing the analysis manually, doing the feedback and the reports manually. Over a period of time we automated a lot of that by investing in some software we had built for us that automated that process and then allowed us to do it more quickly and with less manual intervention - to the point where we arrive today, where a customer can survey their team and get instant analysis on the sentiment of their staff, and instant action points and analysis on what they can do about it. So we've come an awfully long way in the two years that we've been doing this.

JM - I was going to say, what sort of time scale has that been? A couple of years then?

AH - Yeah, a couple of years. Feels like longer.

(laughter)

JM - I can imagine. So a lot done in a very short period of time, which is the joy of start ups isn't it - that you can look back on it and think: 'how the hell did we actually manage to do that given the time we had available?' Piers, we're talking today about repositioning employee engagement. That's quite a challenging phrase. What does that actually mean? What do you take that to mean? What do you want people to understand by that term?

PB - Well, Andy has already said that we think it should be available instantly. It can take a very long time for survey results to come back, and then they're all anonymous. You've gone to the effort of asking people a lot of questions about how their working life works; what works for them and what doesn't, and all the rest of it. To aggregate that data and turn it into a number and hang it on the wall, or show it to the shareholders, or hold it up as an example of how well your staff are engaged, is mildly useful - but it is an enormous waste to me because if you've got this personal data on what people are actually finding frustrating and what they're finding works well about their work, why not use that? Why not take that and feed it back into the learning and development process directly at a personal level for each individual? So the things that aren't working for that person can be addressed by their line managers; that's what their line manager's there for. And yet, you get people coming to the annual review and sitting down with their line manager and saying: 'what are we going to put in as objectives for this year?' And that's terrible, because there are things that are actually frustrating for everybody in their working life.

Another thing that we see as being problematic with a lot of engagement survey work is that it isn't compulsory, or people aren't actually incentivised to fill it in. And of course the people who do respond are often the ones who aren't disengaged; they're not the people who need to fill in the wretched survey because they are already doing okay at work. Now, obviously we don't want to make things compulsory as such, but on the other hand we do want to position the engagement exercise as something that people will want to take part in. That's absolutely fundamental to what we do. We insist that companies frame it, not as a test of you, not as a measure of your engagement or how much effort you're putting in, or how prepared you are to put in your discretionary effort to our company. If an engagement survey is anything, it is a test of the organisation; it's a test of the management. How far is the management providing a culture and environment, set of working circumstances, in which people are able to do what they want to do naturally? There's nothing we human beings want to do more than to get into groups and do things that are interesting and useful to our fellow people. That's how we've climbed all the way from the primordial soup up to the complex culture and society that we live in today. It's an achievement of companies, I think, to create circumstances in which people's natural drive to get into groups and do the things that work is somehow frustrated by the organisation. So that's how we want to reposition the idea of employee engagement; as something that measures the extent to which we are actually enabling people to do the work they want to do in order to get their needs met as individuals from the company.

JM - Piers, it's interesting actually this point about anonymity, because certainly in my working life I'm often talking to clients who will say things like: 'Well, you know, if it's not anonymous people won't do it'; 'If they perhaps put their name to it they're not going to do it'. But I guess from what you've been describing there, it is actually about how you sell that; how you tell that, so it's clear that this isn't a test of *them* as individuals. It's actually their opportunity to make things better for them and better test what their company's doing for them, rather than the other way round.

PB - It's clear from a very large number of people that if you say to them: This is not a test of you, it's not a psychometric, there are no trick questions here. This is an honest attempt on our part to find out what we can do to provide *you* with a culture and environment which allows you to do what you want to do - to do work that is interesting and useful in order to get the money that enables you to meet your needs as an individual at home. If you phrase it like that, if you frame it like that; then people will fill it in. Completion rates are almost always 100%.

JM - So that's what we mean by repositioning employee engagement. What I'd like to do now is bring in Janine at this point. I mentioned at the opening that Janine is Head of Learning and Development at Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust. This challenge of employee engagement, how you define it; the extent to which people do apply discretionary effort, is something you can talk very specifically about Janine - from your own experience within the Trust.

JO - Yes, I can Jo. Staff engagement for us in the NHS means better, safer care. However, the pressure is really on to produce more for less. We have an ageing population with more complex needs; we're in a very tough financial climate; and we've got growing concerns about staff stress levels. Of course, there's always higher expectations from our patients too. If you think about it, most days there's a story in the media criticising the NHS. I'm always aghast at just how often that happens and actually people still pitch up for work. I'm not sure where else that would happen; in what other industry that would happen. People keep on trucking despite what's going on in the press.

JM - They get beaten by sticks, but they still keep turning up. There was something in the press only last week about providing NHS staff with more counselling, help to deal with stress, help to deal with sickness absence, and so on - as a way of trying to keep the wheels turning I guess.

JO - Yes. Staff generally give everything to their patients, and then that means that they've got little left over for themselves. We see that in our own organisation. Our staff sickness levels are quite low; in fact very low by comparison to Trusts of other sizes. I think that's largely due to the priority that we give to staff engagement.

JM - I know (again from work that I've been involved in over the years), the NHS does do an annual engagement survey which is across all of the service. So, that's obviously going on. So what is it that you personally been looking to uncover using WeThrive? What have you been looking to uncover that's different to that, or perhaps in addition to that? What's been your thinking there?

JO - Well, the staff questionnaire - as you quite rightly point out - is an annual event. It's anonymous, and by the time we get the results people will say: 'Well, of course that was then and this is now' - because there's a gap of about four/five months before we actually get the results. So what we've found by using WeThrive, is that it's given us a cultural barometer. We can actually test the temperature of the team in real time, and the line manager has the ability to respond in a timely manner because there is an easy to read action plan complete with coaching style questions.

JM - So, is that the methodology behind the system then Piers? Can you perhaps talk a little bit more about that for listeners?

PB - Yes. Absolutely. The system is as lightweight as you can possibly make it. It's quite cunning because it asks people sixteen questions in the first place, and then depending on what they answer to those sixteen questions it serves up a number (potentially a very large bank) of subsidiary questions that then become coaching hints for the manager. So you end up finding out where the pinch points are in people's lives, and then doing some diagnostic work on those points; and then serving that back into the feedback loop so the manager can sit down with them and help them feel better about it. There are four quarters in the model. One is about what people know. You shouldn't take it for granted that employees have a clear un-ambiguous shared picture of what they are supposed to be doing, because data says they don't even though that is an absolute prerequisite. Of course they need all the necessary knowledge, resources, skills to actually do the work - the capability side; that's the second quarter of the model. But that leaves the questions of why they would bother, and why do people get out of bed and go to work apart from money? Now it's not all about money. If you ask, as we have, a large number of people why they've enjoyed the best work they ever did, money is almost never mentioned. Instead people talk about being in a group, about friendships, about being stretched and learning, about getting satisfaction out of their activities. This is the key really to uncovering the discretionary effort. It is finding out what human, emotional and social needs activities like work actually fulfil.

Now, there are countless ways of carving up what people need in order to be happy and work well. The simplest structure for understanding what is a self-motivating activity is self-determination theory which comes, in the end, down to three domains. They say that in a self-motivating activity people will find in it autonomy, competence and relatedness - but that is far too brief to be useful. You need much more granularity than that to arrive at useful outputs for managers to use in their coaching activities. So we have this sixteen domain model; two domains about the cognitive area - knowledge and being kept busy that I've already talked about - and the other two about the social and the emotional; the question of how people feel part of a working group, whether they actually feel secure, whether they actually have a status in the organisation, whether they are getting the feelings of competence that come from achieving things, and especially from learning and achieving things for the first time. Are they getting attention from others, including but not limited to their manager? Are they being stretched? What autonomy and control do they have over the way they work. Are they able to clear their heads from time to time so they don't become overwhelmed? Now if all those areas aren't working well, people do become wound up, they become stressed, they produce a whole series of different hormonal changes which change their thinking style, make them less intelligent, less collaborative, then they start making mistakes, becoming defensive, getting into silo, and so on. All the opposite of what you want in an engaged employee. So we ask a basic set of questions about where the pinch points are, then we delve into that in more detail; and turn that round and offer it to the line manager and say: 'look, this is what this person really needs some help from you with'.

JM - And Janine, what have you seen from that approach in your Trust?

JO - Well, what we noticed was that lots of teams actually share space. So we've got these lovely open plan offices, and actually that means that people can't clear their heads between one task and another. There isn't anywhere for them to go just for a bit of down time. So on the back of that we've identified some quiet areas right across the Trust, both inside and out, and we're advertising them as such. People can go there, they're protected from the general public - because, believe you me, if you've got a uniform on and you work in a hospital, you get asked all sorts of questions about patients.

JM - Oh, I can believe it. Even when you visit sometimes. I visit my mum in her care home and I get asked all sorts of questions - and I don't even work there!

JO - Yes, so you get my drift. So we've actually identified some quiet areas in the Trust that people can go and just have some down time.

JM - Okay. Interesting.

JO - Other things won't be at all surprising. People say they don't have the resources to do their job, because we're constantly being asked to do more with less money. So that's a big issue. The autonomy piece is also a stretch for us. We get dictate from the Department of Health raining down on us which actually erodes our autonomy to act. So that was an issue for us too. But the great thing is, that line managers have been given this action plan and they built it into the appraisals they do. So we're seeing an improvement in that appraisal conversation.

JM - Do managers complain though that it's just more work, it's onerous, it's yet more things I've got to talk to people about? How do you manage that potential challenge for them?

JO - Well, we're not rolling it out wholesale. What we're doing is working with managers, and we're badging it as a bit of organisational development. So we're revisiting it, probably with each individual manager that we're working with, and we're finding that it is a good thing. If we were just doing it and saying: 'you've got to role this out across the whole organisation' (4,200 staff), you and I would be drowned out by the groans.

(laughter)

JM - I can imagine. So Piers, those examples, the learnings that Janine's reported so far; do you see those as being applicable more widely than the NHS? How do you take those insights? What does that tell us about the wider world of work?

PB - I think Janine's comment about the problem we have with autonomy because of the amount of micro-management they get from on high from the Department of Health is extremely telling. I think there's another thing though - you've already touched on actually - that is really important about the NHS experience. Even though the overall scores look different from commerce as a whole (because we've got a big bank of data showing how people feel about all these different areas of their working lives across a wide range of different sectors - and the NHS data undoubtedly looks different from that), but even though there are dents in various places like, for example, resourcing (because they've got an endless demand side which they can never fulfil - no matter what happens, they are always going to be under-resourced), and there are other differences too; but the thing that shines out is that people in the NHS get a very healthy degree of meaning out of their job. They are right up there with the very best organisations in terms of the sense of meaning and purpose that people get out of working for the NHS. This is a key to the whole question of engagement. The paradox of the public services is that people really like working for them - they must do, otherwise there are other areas where they could be less stressed and potentially earn more money. They must like something about working there. If you can understand that as an employer, then you can understand the whole question of discretionary effort because if you can create a culture in which people are able to do what they want and get a real sense of meaning out of it, then they will want to come into work.

There isn't time to go into some of the wonderful stories about how this has been achieved in different organisations - usually in little isolated pockets, because it takes a really imaginative manager to be able to see that actually if we stop trying to drive people to do more and start asking them: 'what's in the way of you doing what you'd like to do in an enjoyable way, that you would get satisfaction out of? - it turns the whole working environment on its head and takes it away from the stick and towards the carrot, and into a much more humane environment in which people are actually able to get on and do what we as human beings are programmed to do; which is to find problems in our environment, to get together with other people, and solve them for the good of humanity. That's what I think every owner, every industrialist, every organisational manager would like. Obviously they want results as well, and owners and shareholders want results above all else; but the truth is the only way you're ever going to get better results is through the cooperation and the intelligence and the wit of your people. So anything you can do that uncovers areas of stress in those people, discovers why they are not getting their human needs actually met by being at work; anything you can do towards that will improve the results you get. That's the model we set out to create; something that will actually diagnose where the impediments are between people getting their needs met so that they can do what you need as the owner or employer to generate those results.

JM - So, if we take the NHS as an example of an employer that actually gives people an innate purpose simply by dint of being part of it, what that does is address some of those social and emotional needs that you're saying are so crucial to actually driving engagement. But even in an organisation like Janine's there's more that needs to be done. There's a lot of that innate engagement, but there's an awful lot of areas where it's being challenged or damaged and they can act accordingly to try and improve that.

PB - Yes, a sense of meaning and purpose will make up for some of the damage elsewhere.....for a while, but eventually people will get fed up, they will give up, and burn out, and so on. So if you want an organisation to work sustainably, you can't have an unbalanced model. You cannot have people getting their needs met in one area but not in others, because eventually the strains will show. I think it's a responsibility of management to identify where the stresses and strains are in their employees' lives, and that's one of the things we set out to uncover.

JM - So it's a bit like using Janine's phrase - quoting it back to you Janine - it's a bit like your: 'you can't run the tank on empty for too long before things start to go awry'.

JO - That's right.

JM - Janine - if you were to just put your finger on one key learning that you've taken from this experience so far, what would it be for you?

JO - The sort of things that staff flag don't cost the earth to improve. That's the biggest learning I would say. They're all minor tweaks that a manager can make to working practices. And the staff; they know what really irritates them.

JM - So it doesn't take mega-sized investment to make a significant difference and to move the dial a bit?

JO - No. You're going to have people - you see a kind of bell distribution curve when you look at the reports, and you're getting it right for most of the people, but actually your outliers tell you quite a lot about the culture in that team.

JM - Interesting. From your perspective Andy, what have you learnt from having been involved with this process over the last few years?

AH - Well, quite a lot. Through working with lots of different companies we've seen lots of different approaches to this; from buying beanbags and Pool tables, putting on Pilates courses at lunch time, and doing all these nice things - but they're short term bribes if you like. They keep people happy for a certain amount of time. Where we see real changes in businesses is where people have taken the time to get a real understanding of the needs of individuals, and most importantly empowering the managers to do something about it and supporting them with some good coaching skills like Janine does at Salisbury; giving them the sort of information that we can give that's instant, personal and actionable, and the combination of those things really starts to drive results. You can just see people standing a bit taller and putting in that discretionary effort. It works really well and, as Janine said, it doesn't need to cost loads of money. Making people happy shouldn't cost lots of money.

JM - So, what's next for what you're doing at Salisbury NHS Janine?

JO - We're intending to use the tool with more clinical teams. We've tended to use the tool with administrative staff, so we're now working with theatres in particular.

JM - Do you imagine that you're going to see a difference in what are the drivers of engagement between people who are in a clinical role (perhaps potentially more vocational clinical role) than people in an administrative role? Do you have an idea of what you might see, or are you going into this - well... let's just wait and see?

JO - I think we're taking the 'let's wait and see'.

JM - Well thank you all very much. We're just coming to the end of this week's show. So thank you very much Andy, Piers and Janine for joining us this afternoon. It's been really fascinating to understand what you're trying to do there.