

Resistance to engagement

Mike Clayton delves more deeply into why people don't want to engage

People want to be engaged. They want to be treated fairly, to be consulted about what is happening, and to feel valued and supported. Yet employee engagement initiatives often meet with scepticism, resistance and even hostility. Why is this? Can we understand the source of the resistance and build on this understanding to create positive ways to handle it?

First, let's look at what employee engagement is all about. Figure 1 below illustrates the overlap between what engaged employees can give their employer and what a good employer can offer its employees. True employee engagement sits in the overlap – it is a two-way relationship between people and the organisation for which they work.

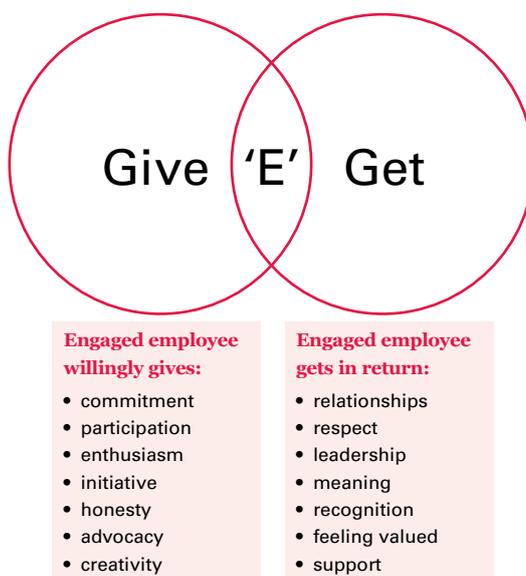


Figure 1: Employee Engagement

Engagement for volunteers

As an aside, let's also acknowledge the importance of this relationship of engagement between an organisation and its volunteers. It is every bit as valuable as engagement of paid staff. While volunteers are essentially defined by their willingness to 'give', engagement in this case represents a far more comprehensive 'give' than simply time. In exchange, an organisation committed to engagement can offer a 'get' that represents, for a volunteer, far more than the warm glow of knowing they are contributing to something of worth.

Un-engaged volunteers are often doing little more than going through the motions of their volunteering role, so the return on engagement is as valuable for the volunteering organisation as for an employer, whether it is a charity, a community organisation, a statutory body, an educational endeavour or a cultural institution.

The big question

Engagement seems like such an obviously 'good thing' that we have to ask why anybody would resist it. This turns out to be the essential question, because there are many answers and, to deal effectively with the resistance and be successful in delivering genuine engagement in the face of it, we must know which answer is relevant and adapt our response to the resistance we encounter.

The Onion Model

In the *Handling Resistance Pocketbook*¹, I introduced the Onion Model of ResistanceTM. This identifies six "layers of resistance" that we frequently encounter. Let's look at that model as it applies to resistance to engagement.

This will give us our different reasons for resistance and, hence, our ways of handling it. The

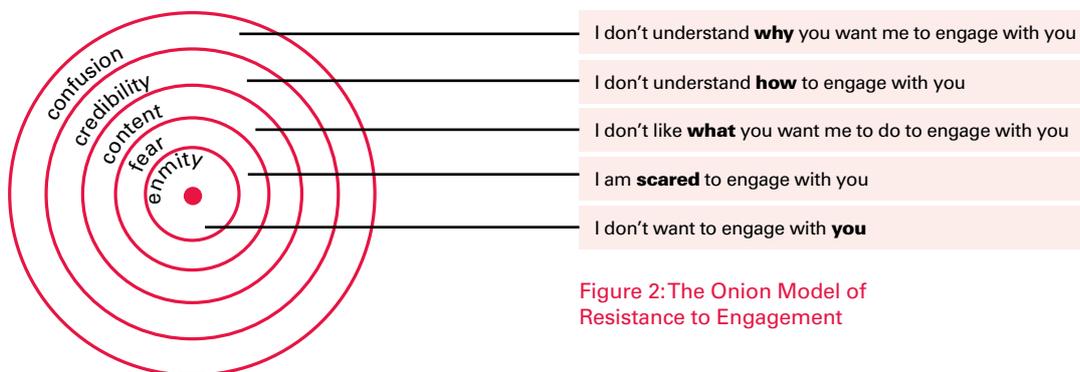


Figure 2: The Onion Model of Resistance to Engagement

Onion Model of Resistance to Engagement is illustrated in Figure 2 above.

Like a real onion, resistance to engagement has layers. As you peel one away, you will often reveal another beneath it and, if you do, that layer will be hotter than the one before.

The basics

Before we peel the onion, however, I want to cover the basics. When you introduce employee or volunteer engagement to your organisation for the first time, you are creating a change. Therefore, Mike's First Law of Change applies:

"Resistance is inevitable"

And once you encounter resistance, as you will, Mike's Golden Rule applies:

"Always respect your resisters"

This rule enjoins us to set aside our personal discomfort with the resister's behaviour, our sense that it feels like a personal attack (it rarely is) or our desire to reciprocate any animosity we feel. The truth is that, to the resister, his reasons for resisting are good ones. Often, objectively, we would be compelled to acknowledge that his reasons are sound. So it makes sense to be respectful not just because it is the decent way to behave, but because it will get you better results.

You might, however, deprecate the way the resistance is expressed. It is quite reasonable to make clear your objection to inappropriate behaviours or language – respectfully. But separate poor behaviour from the person, and respect them while you reject their approach. When we feel under pressure, we find it harder to express ourselves clearly and courteously, so this poor behaviour should signal to you that the other person is struggling with the perceived change.

With this noted, let's look at each layer, one at a time.

"I don't understand *why* you want me to engage with you" Engagement will take effort on my part and, if I can't see why I should do it, it is perfectly reasonable to resist. It isn't just children who say 'why?' when they can't see the point of something. You need to be able to show me the benefits of engagement: what's in it for me?

These may be positive benefits – a real advantage to me for embracing engagement – or they may be negative, in the sense that, by not engaging, I may be worse off. Let's start with this case.

A lot of engagement initiatives are a response to commercial or political pressures. It is a time-consuming and, therefore, costly endeavour, so your organisation must be doing it for a reason. Help me to understand that reason and show me how it will affect *me*. Listen to how I resist and give me the evidence I need, whether it is anecdotal, first-hand experience or facts and figures. Also, help me to feel the same sense of urgency that you feel.

If there are positive benefits, be sure to stress the ones that will appeal to me, rather than rattling off a list of abstract concepts like the examples in Figure 1. Instead of "relationships", tell me how the programme will give me a chance to get to know the people in marketing better, so I can collaborate to make more sales. Rather than talking about "meaning", show me how I will have a greater role in talking to schools, like the one my children attend, about what our company does.

"I don't understand *how* to engage with you"

The first component of this really means 'I don't understand what engagement means'. The word 'engagement' is totally abstract. While training, development and HR practitioners have come to a fairly uniform understanding of it, to many people it is just another piece of management jargon. You must be prepared to explain engagement in concrete terms.

My seven-year-old test applies. Try out your explanation on a seven-year-old. If he understands →

you, you have a good explanation; if not, try again. I am not for one moment asserting that you should treat colleagues like seven-year-olds; still less that they *are* like them. But if you can hone your own understanding to that level of clarity, it will really make sense.

I said above that we have come to a “fairly uniform understanding” of the term in our community, but it does vary in precise interpretation from practitioner to practitioner and, more importantly, from context to context.

But defining engagement is only the start. To make the meaning really concrete and to answer the ‘how’ question, you must also tell me what I need to do to engage with our organisation, and what I can expect it will do to engage with me.

“I don’t like *what you want me to do to engage with you*” Now the next layer is exposed: I don’t like what you want me to do... or maybe what *you* propose to do.

At its most fundamental level, this resistance reminds us of Douglas McGregor. He introduced two models of management that he called Theory X and Theory Y². In a nutshell, Theory X management assumes that people work only for money. They don’t want to do any more than they are told to do and won’t want to think for themselves. Theory Y, on the other hand, assumes people can enjoy their work and find it fulfilling; so Theory Y managers should give their people opportunities to take the initiative and do their best.

McGregor rejected Theory X in favour of Theory Y. Later, William Ouchi developed a third model, Theory Z. Developing Theory Y in the direction of modern Japanese management

practices, Ouchi created a model with many aspects of what we now call engagement: collective responsibility; implicit, informal control; and collective decision-making.

The problem is that some people *want* Theory X management; they don’t want to think innovatively, to stretch themselves or to engage. This is not to say that they couldn’t, or even that they wouldn’t, if given the right opportunities and motivation; but where their thinking is, here and now, some people would rather come to work, do as they are told, get paid and go home. And is there really anything wrong with this?

If you are reading this article, you will certainly find it hard to empathise, and you almost certainly reject any assertions that this is either the best for them or an inevitable and un-alterable state of affairs. But it is a source of ‘I don’t like *what you want me to do*’.

The solution, if I don’t like what you want me to do, depends on what you are asking of me. If you showed me the benefits of engagement at the first layer, I am almost certainly failing to link what you want me to do to those benefits. So there are two possibilities:

- 1 you need to link what you want me to give more explicitly to what you assert I will get. You also need to show me how much time it will take up and why it will be a good use of that time
- 2 there really is a mismatch and you need to understand my concerns and re-think your proposition.

“I am *scared to engage with you*” Changing the way I behave so that I can engage with you is risky. I need to do things differently and I may



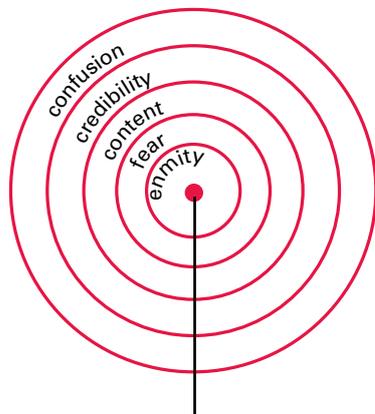


Figure 3: The Onion Model of Resistance to Engagement: the last layer

either not feel able to make that change or, worse, I may believe that I never will be able to.

In the first instance, you need to allay my fears of failure by supporting me with advice, guidance, training and any other interventions you can identify. Be clear, as with any learning support, that you understand precisely what my needs are and don't make assumptions based on what your, or my colleagues', needs are.

The second case is harder to deal with. Self-doubt and, worse, limiting beliefs that I am unable to make the change can go deep. You will need to undermine these limiting beliefs with counter-evidence and positive reinforcement of the smallest progress. This is difficult, but it gets tougher...

“I don't want to engage with you” This is not usually personal to *you* but rather reflects something that you represent to me: management, control, the organisation, society. Maybe I am feeling stressed and I just want to be difficult. This animosity is a reaction against something, but rarely against the engagement initiative itself.

You will know from the person concerned and his track record if there is any cynicism that you need to deal with – for example, if the organisation has broken trust with his or mistreated him in some way in the past. You need to show that you are different from previous people he has dealt with and demonstrate how things have changed, meaning that worthwhile engagement is possible. If necessary, put right any mistakes.

It is, of course, possible that this attitude reflects a desire to misbehave; to cause trouble and resist for the sake of it. If you suspect that this is the case, you should be on the lookout for other forms of inappropriate behaviours that are sabotaging the

workplace, and deal with them according to good practices and your internal procedures.

The centre of the onion

There is one more layer to examine. Right at the heart of the onion is a final layer, arising not from the situation but from how we are wired.

Some people don't want to engage at all. Their resistance comes fundamentally from a life perspective. Maybe they can't be bothered: they want something for nothing from their employer. Maybe they don't think your organisation is worthy of their engagement – they are too good for you. Or maybe the opposite is true, and they don't feel worthy enough and so feel that they don't deserve to get what is on offer, even if they were to give everything. So they shy away from an equal partnership with the organisation.

All of these responses need far deeper levels of insight to address. With these cases, you may need to accept defeat or call in specialist assistance, because the skills for addressing deep psychological states like these are beyond most workplace practitioners.

How to peel the onion

In dealing with resistance, two rules apply. The first is:

Always address the resistance at the level at which it is expressed.

There are two reasons for this: first, even if you suspect that there is something deeper going on, it is only respectful to take people at their word from the outset. Second, even if there is something deeper going on – like they are scared to engage with you – they may also genuinely not understand how to engage. Unless you deal with this, you will not make progress.

So:

Peel the onion one layer at a time

No guarantees

The Onion Model does not give all of the answers and the techniques here are only the start. But even with all of the tools in the world, people vary infinitely. There are no guarantees. But by understanding the source of the resistance you encounter, by treating your resisters with respect and by working systematically through the layers, you give yourself the best chance of handling the resistance effectively and implementing a successful engagement programme.

Good luck. **TJ**

References

- 1 Clayton M *The Handling Resistance Pocketbook* Management Pocketbooks (2010)
- 2 Clayton M “Super Models” *Training Journal* (April 2008)

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