

How to...

## ... better engage your employees

Mark Hunter looks at the methods that a business can use to motivate its workforce

### 1 Engage with engagement

Engagement has become a buzzword, resulting in a spate of initiatives to motivate employees. But Martin Clarke, senior lecturer in management development at Cranfield School of Management, argues that this "mechanical, bolt-on approach" is flawed. "Engagement is more about the mindset of the company than about conducting employee surveys. There needs to be two-way communication, a diversity of perspectives, and employees need to feel that top-line leadership is sincere about the process."



### 2 Be transparent

The companies whose workforces are most engaged tend to be those that are most honest with their employees. Julian Birkinshaw, director of MLab, a research centre at the London Business School, believes that transparency is particularly important when delivering bad news. "The more information you can give people about a decision, the more likely they are to accept it," he said.

### 3 Give employees space

Mr Birkinshaw believes that employees respond better to "less management rather than more management... When you give an employee a task, tell them what they should be doing, but don't give them every little detail about how they should do it. Give them the room to figure it out themselves, even if that means making mistakes."

### 4 Prepare for the journey

A sense of direction is a vital motivating factor, both for individual employees and for the organisation. According to Jonathan Austin, chief executive of Best Companies, a workplace engagement specialist, employees are more productive if they feel they are moving towards a goal. "Whether it is getting through a boring task or whether it's helping the company to emerge from the recession, it is easier if you can see it as a journey towards a destination."

### 5 Define a single goal

David MacLeod, co-author of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills' report *Engaging for Success*, urges companies not to overcomplicate matters when setting business goals. "Don't present a shopping list of proposed aims and

activities: this only confuses and disorientates employees," he said. "Craft a single goal or theme to help you build common understanding among your people."

### 6 Celebrate success

When you meet these goals, it's time to celebrate. "Too many organisations don't celebrate progress," Mr MacLeod said. "Use team meetings, notice and bulletin boards and more formal channels to show how employee actions have helped progress towards common goals."

### 7 Unleash the talent

Nita Clarke, director of the Involvement and Participation Association and Mr MacLeod's co-author, emphasises that business ideas are just as likely to come from the shop floor as from the boardroom. "Ensuring that everyone feels empowered to develop and contribute their own ideas is not only extremely motivating in its own right — but can also lead to the kind of challenging thinking that really drives organisations forward."

Andy Hooper, managing director of Westlakes Engineering, an expanding civil engineering company, said: "If I have one piece of advice for other employers of any size, it is that your people are always much smarter and better than you already think they are. It's up to employers to harness and unleash that talent."

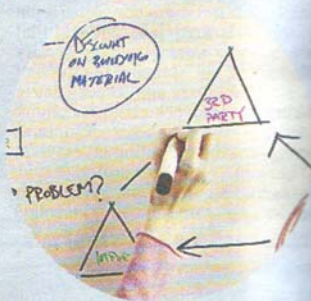
### 8 Encourage workplace champions

Culture change is more effective when it comes from within an organisation than when imposed from above. Eugene Farrell, business manager of AXA ICAS, the occupational wellbeing specialist, recommends the use of "workplace

champions" who help to engage their colleagues in healthy activities. "For instance walking clubs or running clubs can help improve the wellbeing of the workforce and improved wellbeing results in improved engagement."

### 9 Don't skimp on training

Cutting training budgets during hard economic times can be false economy, Sue Young, principal consultant at Berkshire Consultancy, believes. "Younger employees, particularly, put a lot of focus on developing skills and career progression," she said. "They are looking at life beyond their current organisation and will lose motivation if they don't feel they are getting something that improves their employability."



### 10 Be a smiling devil

When Dilys Robinson, principal research fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies, identified a number of successful "engaging managers", she asked members of their staff to draw a picture of how they saw their boss. Several drew pictures of smiling devils.

"The message we got was that good managers were receptive and open, good communicators and genuinely interested in their staff," she said. "But they could also be a little bit maverick and didn't always follow the company line."

