



**Head
Light**

Why Your Approach to Talent Management Destroys the ‘Meaningfulness’ of Your Employees’ Work

part of our White Paper series

The Talent Cloud Platform

Developing Skills. Encouraging Performance. Boosting Recognition.





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Meaningfulness and Talent Management

With our focus of Engagement being an integral part of Talent Management, we were excited to see a workshop planning by the CIPD on the concept of 'Meaningfulness' of work billed as 'Beyond Engagement'. The speaker, Katie Bailey, of the University of Sussex outlines a research project and its findings on Meaningfulness and refers to an MIT/Sloan Paper.

Without going into detail, two key items stood out for us and showed relevance to our work in the Talent Management domain:

- The first finding is that **'meaningfulness' at work is largely determined individually** – whilst there might be external influences of events, it is largely subjective and personal.
- The second is that the **'destroyer' of meaningfulness largely emanates from organisations and managers** – the processes and procedures introduced, information gathering requirements and so on.

As a provider of Talent Management technology and services to help organisations change and develop, Head Light is conscious of this relationship between employee, manager and organisation. We also heard in Bailey's presentation that attempts to create meaningfulness of work by organisations aren't particularly effective and are often viewed cynically by employees when they are obviously transparent efforts to make people work longer or harder. Whilst organisations might wish to create uniform and enhanced 'meaningfulness' for their employees in pursuit of greater discretionary effort, meaningfulness was demonstrated not to occur evenly throughout a day, but rather it 'spikes' possibly driven by events or outcomes. However, there are conditions that can be created to enable these moments of meaningfulness. The speaker also outlined anecdotal evidence that those organisations whose employees find greater meaningfulness in their work also enjoy higher levels of engagement, retention and so on.

To our mind, we see 'Meaningfulness' not as an outcome of engagement but more of a foundation for it. It is difficult to imagine highly engaged workers who find little meaning in their work. Conversely, one can imagine workers who are not engaged with their organisations, but highly engaged with their own work – we saw this phenomenon in an IES study that compared the concepts of engagement when in vocations (such as nursing, police and so on) rather than 'just jobs'.

It comes down to us in HR to be mindful of two things:

1. How can we structure work, teams and support managers to create moments that provide opportunities to create meaningfulness, although this might be difficult,

and
2. To ensure that our change interventions don't destroy meaningfulness, which hopefully should not be so challenging and are more universally applicable.

Introducing the seven deadly sins of meaninglessness

The authors suggest that the key factors, or 'Seven Deadly Sins' of Meaninglessness, are:

1. Disconnecting people from their values
2. Taking employees for granted
3. Setting pointless work tasks
4. Operating unfairly
5. Overriding employee judgement
6. Isolating employees
7. Making employees take unnecessary risks

On reflection this would be a reasonable 'avoid' list for any behaviours or practices, but when we hear from managers and employees for specific examples, they are surprisingly common.

So, to keep with within scope of Talent Management practices that organisations design and implement, how do we avoid these seven deadly sins, or as many that might apply?

Deadly sin #1 – Disconnecting people from their values

This disconnection seems to stem from a difference in underlying motivations and often not the '*what*' gets done, but '*how*' it is done. As such values and resultant behaviours might have different weightings – for example for some a 'quick and dirty' fix just isn't worth doing and may even create a sense of professional compromise. Clearly if a disconnect exists and persists then something is fundamentally wrong.

As HR professionals, we do have tools at our disposal to prompt a conversation (and hopefully a resolution) about conflicting values.

One approach is the use of 360 degree feedback to help individuals see how they are perceived by others – after all it may not be an issue of values, but perception that is misunderstood. Alternatively, and as part of performance management conversations, a discussion can be had between employee and manager of the '*how*' in the context of organisational values and the degree to which they are shared or observed. We should not ignore the opportunity to avoid a disconnection with values and leave it unresolved.

Another strategy is to ensure that values are reflected in other Talent Management practices. For instance, look to align competency frameworks, job descriptions, recruitment processes, assessment, development and other talent management practices with your organisation's values. By conducting these practices in a way which overtly demonstrates and role models those values can make it much clearer to employees from the outset what the organisation stands for.

Deadly sin #2 – Taking employees for granted

This strikes us as fairly obvious and straightforward. But then why is this such a common feeling for employees? Feedback and recognition takes so little time and also no money to deliver yet research shows it to be powerful in many ways. Whilst encouraging managers to provide recognition and feedback can often be a '*work in progress*' in many organisations, increasingly employees desire and provide peer-level feedback. This is of course especially true for the more recent additions to our workforces and from those outside our organisations such as customers.

Feedback and recognition, when genuine, is a real tonic for the feeling 'being taken for granted' and with the diverse demographics in our organisations we should adopt different approaches to suit – one is to enable a conduit for feedback where the will already exists and to harness it in our talent management practices. The other approach is to continue to develop a cultural affinity with feedback where the ground may be less fertile. Short of banging heads (managers specifically) together, helping managers overcome their 'fear' of feedback is part of their journey. We would suggest a carefully considered 360 degree feedback programme, tied to developing managers' softer skills and a 'manager as coach' programme. Where feedback is readily available, but not part of 'legitimate' talent management practices, we have the opportunity to help create meaningfulness by enabling peer level feedback in performance management approaches, often exemplified as part of a more agile performance management process where people can request feedback from peers and others, and where colleagues can provide impromptu feedback to others when they see something good happening.

Deadly sin #3 – Setting pointless work tasks

Our role in HR could be described as an enabling function to the key operations of the business. As such we don't create the volume of work-related tasks for employees and managers that are part of their normal day job. However, might we be guilty of creating tasks for them which might not seem relevant?

There are of course the unavoidable data collection tasks that are generally in the interest of employees to complete – bank details for example, and employees might balk at having to fill in yet another form to provide them, (or another self-service screen), but they generally understand that it is necessary. This of course might be where the relevance of our requests can end.

The elephant in the room here is of course the broken Performance Management process.

We won't spend any further words on how it's generally perceived other than to say that it could be a source of 'meaninglessness' in the working lives of many. It can be easily categorised as a 'pointless task' and when it's 'HR chasing form completion' we are firmly the ones believed to be responsible. We shudder when we hear of organisations that want to 'put their forms online' when those forms embody a process that either doesn't work or where there's no evidence it does work. So this represents a huge opportunity, not just to fix what's broken, improve performance, retention etc., but also not to undermine the 'meaningfulness' that people take from their work.

We are not suggesting throwing it away – some organisations have because they have had to, and the jury is out as to whether the situation is better for having done so, but the evidence from the CIPD report on Performance Management strongly suggests that executing Performance Management correctly brings organisational benefits over the cost of its implementation. So we should do it only if we're prepared to do it right. A performance management process that includes a discussion of values, of objectives aligned to the mission and purpose of the organisation, managing performance for the future such as career aspiration and potential, all mixed with contextual feedback from co-workers, coaches and managers creates opportunities for meaningfulness to be recognised and captured. Often referring back to meaningful moments from the past year creates positive reinforcement for meaningfulness in work when one is in a bit of a 'lean patch'.

Deadly sin #4 – Operating unfairly

We have covered the topic of Fairness and Talent Management quite extensively in previous webinars, [articles](#) and blogs and from that perspective we were pleased to see it feature here too. The authors discuss two types of fairness – Procedural (i.e. a fair process) and Distributive (which we would paraphrase as a fair outcome when compared with others). Interestingly, our analysis of the research suggests that perceptions around the outcome (i.e. Distributive) are considered to be fair (even if undesirable) if the process is considered fair. Procedural transparency plays a part here and when related to Talent Management, secrecy still often shrouds processes such as Talent Reviews, concepts of potential and the whole gamut of 'Bias' in decision-making.

So our takeaway from the perception of 'meaningfulness' and fairness is that fairness not only impacts the effectiveness of Talent Management processes, it also can compromise a sense of meaningfulness at work. In my mind, this is a double-whammy for engagement and whilst we all want fairness, we must be vigilant to not permit unfairness in the workplace, regardless of how unpopular that might make our interventions. To tolerate it, will be it to support it in the eyes of our employees. To what degree do you train your managers how to mitigate and manage the main biases associated with decision-making regarding people at work? Do you embed bias management training and values-based decision-making in your management training portfolio; especially with regards to recruitment, performance management and promotion?

So to reduce the impact of bias, we must solicit multiple views and perspectives, have clear definitions of potential, be evidence-based in our assessments, educate and identify where bias plays a role and use tools that support open (yet still confidential) approaches to identifying and progressing talent. Rarely will tools such as spreadsheets and Microsoft Word® forms encourage rigour and transparency – tools developed specifically for the purposes of Succession Planning, Career Conversations and Selection can create a legitimate basis for Talent Management that embodies both Procedural and Distributive fairness.

Deadly sin #5 – Overriding employee judgement

If we assume that we hire people to perform their jobs to the best of their ability, then we should trust them to use their experience and judgement. Clearly there are some boundaries especially for more junior or inexperienced staff. The feelings created when an employee's view is discarded, discounted or deliberately contradicted is cited as a source of meaninglessness. It can be clearly seen that when Managers take a very directive approach to management and therefore use positional power to ensure their will is met, that frustration and disengagement result.

We have seen this in our work in traditionally 'Command and Control' type environments where this single Leadership style permeates the organisation and is imposed on working relationships where no such positional hierarchy carries any weight. So why do people ride rough-shod over the views of their teams? Is this an issue of a life-saving intervention? If so, then so be it – and a wrap-up of why the intervention was necessary should be had as part of any performance management approach. But if not, then are managers resorting to this tactic for other reason? If true, then this presents a number of Talent Management challenges – the nature of the prevailing leadership style, the development of a coaching culture, how failure and blame is managed and how managers support employees in the achievement of objectives.

Again, we have to ask ourselves to what degree we are dealing with certain leadership styles – are we using techniques that raise self-awareness of our impact on others, are we getting feedback on our behaviours, and are we ensuring the 'how' is as important as the 'what'? Ultimately are we making progress on the organisation's Values to preserve meaningfulness in our employee's working days? Are we 'joining up' our Performance Management approaches to drive Values, Conversations and Feedback, or are we driving Appraisal Form completion and letting people get away with bad behaviour and ignoring critical feedback from a 360? Do we place undue reliance on bell curves to determine final performance ratings removing discretion and knowledge of the role and working environment?

Deadly sin #6 – Isolating employees

The authors cite this as being a number of factors – physical isolation (our increasingly mobile work force and the rise in working from home) can create a sense of disconnection from co-workers and teams impacting meaningfulness of work. In this technology-mediated world, more technology doesn't strike us as the solution to this – yes – forums, chat groups, collaboration tools and so on go some way to bridge the gaps between people but they are inclined to support the work, and not the personal relationship. This is broader than a focussed Talent Management domain, but we need to be mindful that our technology should not act as a substitute and lead us into a false sense that 'it'll be fine' because we have such technology. This is especially true with feedback – feedback based on a person's behaviour that we have seldom met or only met 'on-line' must carry some health warnings. Also where organisations do ask for feedback, such as via Employee Engagement surveys, the resultant action plans, subtle changes made, and internal communications actions may create a greater sense of isolation to those who are not physically present. So, if we are to concern ourselves with avoiding the reduction of the meaningfulness of someone's work, the way we engage with remote workers merits some very specific and deeper thought.

Deadly sin # 7 – Making employees take unnecessary risks

For many roles, there can be an element of risk – Health & Safety Regulations are largely designed to protect us from risk of physical harm and Employment Law for some elements of reputational and financial risk. So if we exclude those elements of risk in the workplace that are covered by the above, then other more subtle areas of risk in the workplace are more often manifested in the sense of some form of 'comeback'. Examples might be feedback provided about a manager in a 360 or responses to a survey about employee satisfaction. Employees accept that some risk exists in all walks of life, and it is the unnecessary risk that the authors refer to having a negative impact of meaningfulness and you can see it that employees must question why they are doing something that does have (in their eyes) some level of unnecessary risk.

So, from a Talent Management perspective what do we do – well we keep some things 'secret', such as an employee's 'flight risk' or their 'potential', and these two items would be standard practice. We might also make some 'noises' about anonymity of a survey in order to manage down perceptions of risk.

Actually what employees are concerned with is 'personal comeback' on what they say and, they believe the only way to guarantee that is to demand anonymity. This also absolves them of any responsibility too for what they say, and hampers the organisation's ability to make changes or improvements if it is 'blind' to the source of critical feedback. If the organisation offers Confidentiality and Trust in the place of Anonymity, then that is a basis for action. We know that even promises of anonymity are often just not believed with the resultant typically low response rates to surveys, even those managed by third parties. So, if anonymity doesn't work in the minds of employees to reduce any personal risk, then why do we rely on it? Is it because of fear of comebacks? Clearly as Trust is built slowly and destroyed instantly, many organisations could describe themselves as 'low-trust' through the changes and perhaps mishandled situations of the past, but we have to attempt to rebuild it if we are to reduce its impact.

The approach we could take to tackle these problems are:

- To encourage our leaders to demonstrate these qualities and act as role models and for that to cascade down the organisation over time with transparency.
- To ensure that the Talent Management tools we provide employees are robust, reliable and include intrinsic checks and balances to promote feedback that is thoughtful and considered.

Can we measure 'Meaningfulness'?

We see strong parallels between Meaningfulness and how our Talent En-Gauge product is able to assess 'self' motivation and drivers. Our skill in creating questions or indicators of meaningfulness means that our ability to tap into where meaningfulness might lie for a person is a foundation step. We add to this, the feature for an employee to declare how important a particular factor is to them. This combination of a meaningful meaningfulness indicator (!) together with an assessment of personal importance provides a sound insight into a concept of 'Engagement Enablers and Inhibitors' that is used within our Talent En-Gauge product.

However, positioning this is important. If we were to embark on a 'meaningfulness survey' then we are likely to get a 'rolling eyes' response from our employees even if our intentions are in their best interest. A better strategy is to keep the concept of meaningfulness within the concept of Employee Engagement and include this 'self' perspective as part of the questions we ask employees. Analytics will show us where 'self' responses are high, indicating a positive sense of meaningfulness

The majority of this piece has concerned itself with the difference in perception of self, manager behaviour and organisation policies. Essential analytics within Talent En-Gauge enable HR to identify where, who and how these differences come about, and crucially what to do about them.

If an organisation was to embark on an Engagement Survey, why would it choose to miss the opportunity to assess this important concept of meaningfulness? Why would an organisation choose to ignore how its Talent Management Strategies can impact its employees in such a fundamental way – their performance, retention and brand advocacy.

The authors continue in their study to outline what they term an 'Ecosystem For Meaningfulness' which we encourage you to read and digest as it provides a broader overview for strategies for Organisational Design.

We'd like to thank Katie Bailey and the CIPD for this thought provoking session that has led us to consider how we can best advise our clients to implement their Talent Management Strategies in a way to preserve why people come to work, why they work hard and why they stay.

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About Head Light

Head Light is an award-winning talent management and talent retention software and consulting firm that works with clients to define and implement impactful talent management strategies.

Talent Cloud® is our cloud-based portfolio of integrated talent management platform tools designed for those who expect the maximum return from talent management processes. Our training and consulting services uniquely complement our platform that engages employees, managers and senior leaders in the selection, development and progression of people in their businesses.

Companies in the FTSE 350, public sector, large and small, from retailers to high tech innovators have all benefitted from our tools, techniques and expertise. Founded in 2004, we are headquartered in the UK.

Head Light has attained the ISO27001 standard for Information Security.
Certificate No 217613.





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transition to Continuous Performance Management

How do I...

introduce robust Succession Planning

How do I...

spot High Potentials and Future Leaders

How do I...

boost Recognition

How do I...

drive Engagement through Career Conversations and Development

How do I...

embed new values and improve culture

How do I...

develop Skills of the Future