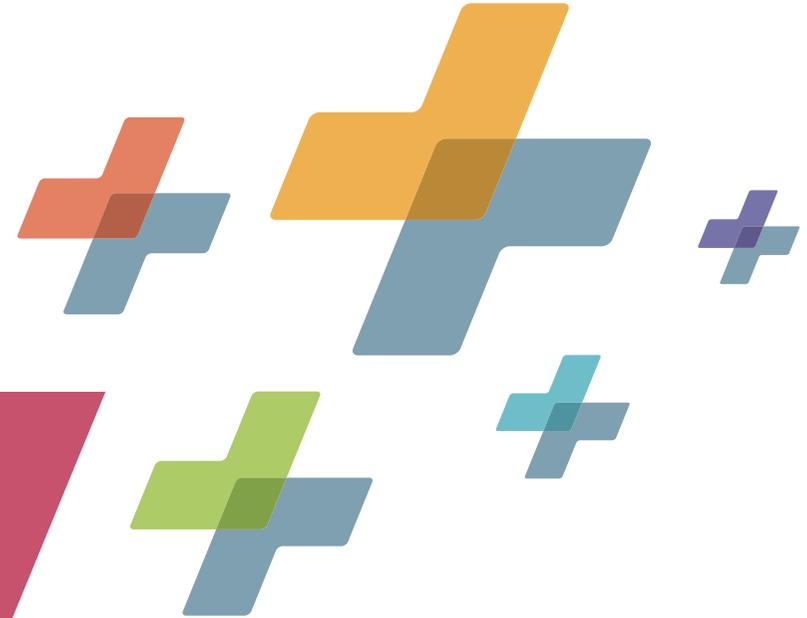


Managers are either the 'makers'
or 'breakers' of an organisation's
approach to employee engagement

Chris Clarke, Chief Executive at AdviserPlus



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78%*

of business leaders consider having an engaged workforce to be either urgent or important

Since the annual employee engagement survey started to gain popularity in the 1980s, organisations have become increasingly sophisticated in their efforts to make their people as passionate and committed as possible.

78%* of business leaders consider having an engaged workforce as either urgent or important, prompting HR teams to look at everything from creating the right benefits package and flexible working arrangements to offering the perfect working environment.

There is clearly no lack of interest or support for the principle of engagement. But something is going wrong - as highlighted by research across employers globally which has shown how levels of employee engagement in the UK continue to lag behind averages in comparable workforces elsewhere.

*Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends, 2014

The problem is that while engagement initiatives can and do influence someone's willingness to stay within the organisation, there's one key ingredient in the HR mix that's being consistently overlooked: how managers make employees feel. If you don't like your line manager, no amount of engagement activity, no smart rewards initiative is going to make you feel that much better about your employer. On a day-to-day basis, as far as employees are concerned, the manager is the ambassador, leader and embodiment of the organisation's brand.

The fact is, far too many organisations continue to promote people on the basis of their technical expertise, with little or no consideration for their ability to nurture, develop, engage with or bring out the best in others. The result is that when you ask managers how much of their role is HR-related, most will reply little or none, when middle managers in particular should be considering themselves the frontline of HR.

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Most managers miss daily opportunities to boost engagement levels, meaning that employees are all too willing to bypass talking to their manager in favour of raising formal grievances with HR against their manager when things go wrong, when they feel like they've been put under undue pressure to perform, if they feel excluded, bullied, discriminated against or simply misunderstood.

Here are some of the most common mistakes made by managers that destroy engagement:

➤ Relying on social events

There's a programme of parties for summer and Christmas, the bowling nights, pub lunches, so that's a tick in the box for engagement, all done.

➤ Leaving people management to HR

With their own stretching targets to meet, dealing with the sometimes messy and complex demands of different people and their personalities can easily drop down a list of priorities.

➤ Favouritism

We inevitably feel more of an affinity with some people than others, and that can show in terms of proportion of time spent with individuals, having private chats in corridors, how ideas are received, who's consulted on issues etc.

➤ Being too formal

Managers can quickly gain a reputation for not being approachable, for only keeping to the processes of communication in place.

➤ And being too informal

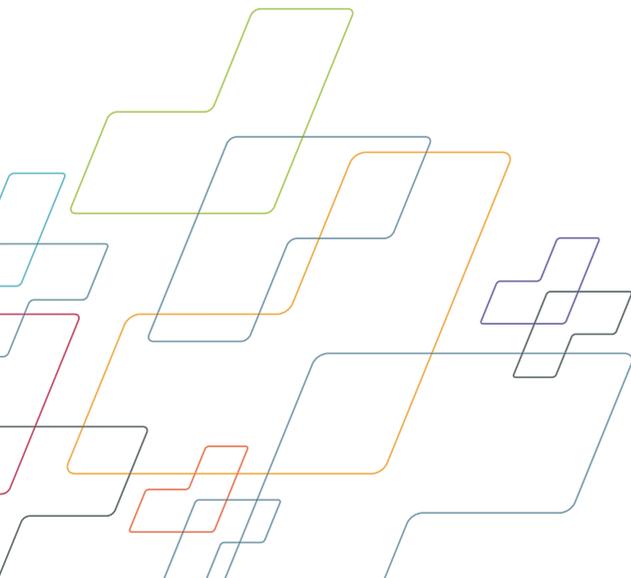
Informal relationships are important in order to encourage genuine engagement and open, everyday communication, but there also has to be a balance. A constantly jokey informality can end up meaning that the employee switches off to an important message, request or piece of advice.

Managers must be encouraged to embrace their role as the frontline of HR. That means clarity from the outset that people management is their responsibility, not something that filters down to the HR department whenever there's an issue. They need to be equipped to meet the first rule of people management: to deal with any issue informally and early, using tools and guidance which are easy to understand and always available for them.

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