

Real Time Employee Engagement: Concept and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The paper highlights the concept of real time engagement as a human resource utilization strategy which assumed importance in the context of the imperatives of global competition. First the issues underlying the nature of individual employees in relation to work/job; the group processes and dynamics; and organization conditions are highlighted. It is attempted to briefly highlight the three pronged strategies focusing on individual employee, the groups and the organization. However, the paper takes the assumption that it is ultimately the organization's responsibility to use the potential of individuals and dovetail the energy of groups towards achievement of organizational objectives. The HR practices, team building processes, organizational culture, knowledge management and communication systems and other strategies are discussed as possible action plans for real time employee engagement.

Keywords

Employee, Organization, Real Time Engagement Strategies

CONCEPT

Employee Engagement is a real time exercise by the organization to effectively use the services of its human resource in relation to its objectives, resources, and competitive environment. Earlier it was conceived as a contractual relationship between employee and employer explaining the terms and conditions of employment. With the onset of globalization, many organizations, in their endeavor to cope with the challenges of change and competition, found redundancy in human resource structure and systems. They first went for HR rightsizing. It was followed by strengthening the practices of HR utilization. It is in this second phase of HR utilization that the real time employee engagement assumed strategic importance.

The seminal principles of real time employee engagement are as follows:

- Real time employee engagement rests on a tripod of individual, group and organization centric activities with ultimate responsibility being laid on the organization.
- The organization is responsible for finding work for the individual employee, for unleashing the potential of the groups and for making the organizational expectations known to the human resource.
- Individual's work need to be dovetailed into group efforts contributing to achievement of organizational objectives. This is the responsibility of the organization. Any failure located at individual and group levels are to be conceived as caused by the organization.
- Work shall be 'meaningful' to the individual, 'involving' for the group and 'profitable' for the organization. In this process it shall be an ideal 'win-win' situation for all.
- As the reality is farther from the ideal, organization has to continuously develop strategies for real time employee engagement.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WORK

- Work is a remunerative activity which is performed at the behest of the organization. So any self-serving activity is not 'work'.
- Individuals consider work as burden even though remunerative and hence try to do the minimum and if possible, avoid it. Work alienation resulting out of work avoidance is a serious malady, which need to be addressed by the organization.
- Work entrusted to and performed by groups run the risk of suffering from the possibility of "Everybody's responsibility is no body's responsibility". Therefore, work assignments, measurements and rewards are largely done at individual level.

- Any 'average' organization doesn't know what "a fair day's work" is. This is a truth as on today, though it was F.W.Taylor whose propagation of scientific management started a century back with this assumption.
- Work is shrouded in the cloak of 'job', whose roles; responsibilities; risks; and offers are defined and described by the organization formally. Even then, job contours are often blurred because of lack of perceptual clarity; the need for job overlapping, and organization's failure at real time job designing.
- For successful completion of work/job; material, human, capital, and technology resources get more prominence than two equally important resources namely 'time' and 'place (space)'.
- Work and work tools and processes tend to expand into 'time' and 'space' there by leading to wastage of all the resources.
- Work engagement in a work period takes off slowly, reaches a peak or crescendo and then falls down until an end spurt at the end of the work period. Therefore, it is not expected that one can work with same level of efficiency over a period of time.
- The organization hence has to go for real time employee engagement. This imperative is now realized as never before.

CHARACTERISTICS OF 'INDIVIDUAL' AS AN EMPLOYEE

- Individual, as an employee, relates one's work to the organizational functioning through the job. Job sets the identity of an employee in the organization and Job description sets the boundaries of a job.
- Individual, as an employee, is caught in a quagmire of 'triple allegiance'- to oneself (including family); to the formal and informal groups; and to the organization.
- It is situational dynamics, which determines the potency of these three influencing forces. However, the ultimate decision to develop a 'zone of indifference' or to be fully swayed away by any one of these forces is taken by the individual basing

on one's own perception of the laws of the situation.

- Individual, as an employee, tends to limit work performance and stifle potential either on one's own or at the behest of the group or because of experience in the organization.
- Individual, as an employee, expects work/job to be rewarding and satisfying, which in turn may shape one's commitment level to the organization.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GROUP PROCESSES IN ORGANIZATIONS

- Groups in organizations manifest in two ways namely formal and informal.
- Formal workgroups are designed as work in organizations requires efforts of many people in a work area leading to job overlapping. Work groups interweave into departments. Inter-department relations along with hierarchy culminate into total organization.
- Informal groups spontaneously emerge out of formal systems to satisfy inter-personal interests and social needs of belongingness of its members. These groups are highly normative and are valued by the members.
- The formal systems cannot escape from the informal group processes even though the later could be inimical to the former. So, organizations attempt to integrate these two through teams, small group activities, quality circles, kaizen groups. In this way, team is the most positive expression of group process.
- Unions, as employee associations, have got recognition as a force to be reckoned with. These bodies shape the destiny of organizations by raising disputes and by collective bargaining process.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATION AS EMPLOYEE ENGAGER

- Organization pursues socially approved objectives for which resources are allocated to it. It also sets job designs at micro level to make employees engage in real time work that ultimately contributes to achieving the organizational goals.

- HR as a resource pulsates with life. Its engagement at the optimal level is impossible as it can resist, and stifle optimization of other resources. Organization finds a challenge here.
- Organization tends to feel that employees restrict their productivity and hence expenses on employees as a bargainable cost can be reduced. Employees and their unions, on the other hand nourish a notion that, profit maximization and competitive advantages as organizational goals are pursued at the cost of the employees' interests. This mutual mistrust is a challenge for organization in real time employee engagement.
- Organization seldom gives credence to the informal group process. Even in organizing the formal workgroups and teams, it loses sight of real time problems. This failure to integrate the individual employee through a healthy group process is a challenge in employee engagement.

STRATEGIES FOR REAL TIME EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The concepts underlying real time employee engagement shape the strategies. The real time employee engagement strategies are individual, group and organization focused. Though these strategies are discussed separately. Yet, they should not be construed as independent of one another. All are authored by the organization, only the target differs.

Individual focused-

Placement is an extended function of selection, where the right person is placed in the right job. In selection itself the best fit between the job and the prospective employee is attempted to be determined. In the placement phase, the job-person matching is taken at the real time level taking into account the human engineering, ergonomics and attitudinal aspects of employee behavior. It generates inputs for training and job design decisions. In India the system of 'probation' and 'confirmation' addresses to the issue of placement. But, currently this is almost a half-hearted HR strategy not having discernible impact on employee engagement even though it is the first step.

Induction (employee on-boarding & orientation) is the first step in micro HRD. Organizational policies, systems and practices are explained to the new employees who after learning those formally try to

shape their skill and mindset to the requirements of the job and organization. It is a kind of acculturation process which integrates the new employee with the organization. Informal induction is imperative in any human organization. But, it could be highly negative if the new employee is fed with negative peer opinions. Therefore, formal induction shall be strong enough to influence the impressions of the new employee. Further, induction shall be at both organizational as well as social levels; because, work life and social life are equally new to the new employee. Induction can have an important and long lasting impact on the positive attitude of employee which would help in real time employee engagement.

The performance management systems (PMS) cut across a myriad of strategies like performance appraisal, competency mapping, and performance feedback with forward linkages to career planning and training. The PMS identifies both the strengths (competencies) and weaknesses (may be attitudes) of the job holder, in a non-threatening way and recognizes the potential of the employee to overcome the weaknesses. It gives appropriate feedback through a formal system of communication followed by counseling and mentoring to stimulate the employee towards better performance. It resorts to a developmental approach through training thereby substituting the traditional punitive approach of performance appraisal. Under PMS, real time employee engagement is much better.

Employee Compensation and Reward Systems motivate employees to engage themselves with committed zeal. The compensation systems take into account the time, effort and degree of difficulty involved in a job/work to structure wage and salaries in consultation with Unions. The incentives and other rewards take into account real time performance measures and score cards. As monetary rewards are not conceived as sole motivators of behavior, non-monetary rewards are also extended. Currently, systems are developed for group and team rewards.

Grievance handling and Disciplinary actions are mutually complimentary twin strategies for employee engagement. Richard P. Calhoun, integrating these strategies observes that, "Grievance is as much a control of the employee on the employer as discipline is the control of the employer on the employee".

Despite best efforts of an organization, and intentions of its human resource, the grievances and acts of

indiscipline become obvious in organizations. Both are addressed at individual level.

Grievance is a complaint nourished by an employee against the decision of the employer. It may be justified or unjustified; expressed or latent; and is a potential industrial dispute. Grievance heard is half redressed. Therefore formal channels of grievance redressal do have an advantage. Open door policy of grievance redressal works in small organizations having small number of people and decisions centers. Model grievance procedure adopting a time bound step ladder system was suggested by the Indian Labour Conference in 1958 as a part of the Code of Discipline, which is vogue in organizations. The Industrial Disputes Amendment Act of 2010 has prescribed for the formation of Grievance Redressal machinery in every industry employing more than 20 workers. But this Act is yet to come into effect as the rules are yet to be framed. Grievance handling shall be timely as the employee nourishes it for a specific period of time and any redressal beyond the time may not have the desired effect. A grievance need not always be redressed in favor of the employee. But the organization gets an opportunity to explain its stand on the grievance. This in itself gives a relief to the aggrieved employee.

Acts of indiscipline occur when the behavior of the employee is not in consonance with the organization's prescriptions. 'Hot stove rule' meaning; instant, constant, consistent, non-discriminatory responses to the acts of indiscipline is a governing principle. 'Principle of natural justice' meaning no one shall be condemned without being heard is another cardinal principle. Establishing the onus, intensity and outcome of acts of indiscipline lie with the accuser i.e., the organization. The Industrial Employment (standing orders) Act 1946 and various judicial pronouncements have set out a well laid disciplinary procedure. The disciplinary procedure starts with the listing out of minor and major misconducts, which as per the law shall be clearly, widely circulated to one and all in an organization. The procedure also lays down the minor and major punishments. The process of enquiring into an event of indiscipline, establishing the truth by following the principles of natural justice, determining the adequacy of punishment are all laid down procedures.

Group focused-

Team building exercises are meant for harnessing and channelizing group energy into a reckonable force

contributing to the effectiveness of the organization. If not harnessed, it can lead to disastrous consequences through informal group processes or unions. After the Hawthorne Studies identified the group processes in organizations and group dynamics theorists like Kurt Lewin, Bales further refined the understanding of groups; the group integration assumed strategic importance. Team building, small group activities in the form of Quality circles became popular methods of dovetailing group energy for organizational success. Embedded groups provided the much cherished comfort zone to the individuals as much as the propelling force to the organizational performance.

Team is an organized and purposeful association of likeminded people, who using their individual skills, aptitudes and efficiencies, contribute to the total effectiveness of the formal work group with which they are associated by virtue of being members of the organization, so that put together all can contribute to the ultimate success of the organization. Teams exist to achieve a shared goal. Members are interdependent regarding a common goal and they are bounded and remain relatively stable over time. Members have and assume the authority to manage their own work and internal processes.

Teams do not stand contrary to the division of labour and functional specialization principles of organization structuring process. Rather they work with these principles in conjunction with the imperatives of willing collaboration, cooperation, and coordination. Teams are group activities but not merely groups and collectivity of individuals. They are purposeful formal organization of small groups which endeavor for achieving commonly set out objectives in a distinct spirit of '*esprit de corps*'. It doesn't entail coercion of any type; rather it rests on the foundation of cohesion.

Significance of Teams

- Incubator of new IDEAS (Intelligently Developed Effective Action Plan)
- Performer of multi-disciplinary tasks
- Builder of Relationships.
- Relieving individual weakness with collective strengths.
- Promoter of learning better practices and excellent performance.

- Strengtheners of formal communication by beating the grapevine.
- Producer of better quality (output) at cost effective (input) levels.
- Reducer of change resistance by way of group adoption.
- Derivers of strength from competition driven challenge

B.W.Tuckman's 4 stages of team formation namely, Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing; Theodore Newcomb's proximity and propinquity principles; C.J.G. Gersick's inertia and activation phases of team formation ; Orsburn, Moran, White and Zenger's five stages model of team building namely; start-up, State of Confusion, Leader-Centered Teamwork, Tightly formed teams, and skill directed teams; M.Shaw's determinants of Team Cohesiveness comprising team homogeneity, team maturity, team size, team communication, team goals, perception of threat and competition, and team leadership; L.Hoffman's team roles such as Task-Oriented Roles; Relations-Oriented Roles and Self-Oriented Roles are some of the important theoretical constructs which give the inputs for developing team strategies.

Team building in fact, is the best group strategy for real time employee engagement as the control comes from the group and not from the organization. As employees cherish their image in the group, the acceptance of group norms becomes more willful.

Quality Circles (QC) - The spoils of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombardment moved two quality experts of U.S.A namely Edward Deming and Joseph Juran who came to Japan to rebuild it on the quality philosophy. It is a known fact that Japan emerged as the quality leader in the World. Quality Circle is a typical Japanese Experiment which started in 1962 and its success made it a worth emulating **strategy** by organizations all over the world. India imported the idea of QC through Mr. S.R.Udpa of Bharat Heavy Electricals in 1982 and since then industrial organizations have adopted them as strong strategies of problem solving through employee empowerment

QC is a group of 10-12 members drawn from the same work area who voluntarily come forward to discuss, deliberate, and **suggest** measures for the day to day problems faced by them. There will be a leader and a

deputy leader in every QC nominated by the QC members. A management representative, not a participant in the QC, will act as a facilitator. The non members of QC though do not take active part, yet they are important because in the ultimate implementation of the QC suggestions their role is of paramount importance.

QC Techniques are Brain Storming exercises, Pareto Analysis, Fish-bone Analysis (Ishikawa Diagram), Financial Analysis, Statistical Presentations, and Management presentation. By applying these techniques, QC has addressed to many basic work related problems with creative and cost-effective solutions.

QC functions well due to the novelty of the concept, its participatory nature and practicality. But, once the initial euphoria dies down, QC participation becomes lukewarm. QC needs management support for its success as its recommendations need to be accepted by the management. This distances the Unions from QC, who play foul games for dissipation of QC.

QC provides scope for real time workplace problems to come to surface through the voluntary group process. It not only designs scientific methods of understanding causes and effects of those problems but also gives the opportunity to think of solutions of those problems. This could be one of the best examples of grass root level participation leading to real time employee engagement.

Organization focused-

Organizational Climate and Culture - Every organization possesses a typical climate and exudes a culture of its own. Climate prevails and culture pervades and permeates. Both appear synonymous as the indicators are almost same. But, in reality climate is itself indicative of culture of an organization. Both develop a pattern over years there by providing an image and identity to the organization. People learn and shape their behavior and response patterns keeping in view the organizational climate and culture. Work culture, is a people centered but organizationally relevant culture that determines the work values and performance efficiency of people.

Organizations are mechanistic in structure and organic in spirit. Organizational Climate largely emerges from the mechanistic product/service processes, technological, structural and contextual variables and

reflects the perceptions of the people. Climate becomes visible and felt in terms of the nature of work activities, working conditions, employee lingua franca, and in segments of sub-climate. The synergy of these sub-climates ultimately indicates the organizational climate which endures test of time. Some events like industrial strife, accidents, absenteeism, and attrition may vitiate the climate, but an organization with strong climate can overcome them. Promoters of durable climate are corporate vision, mission and policies; managerial actions; public image, employee characteristics; union and industrial relations scenario.

Like air, culture is everywhere, but invisibly felt. The organic spirit of organization makes every organization culture specific. Culture is a set of shared values, beliefs, morals, customs, assumptions, traditions, ideologies, language, norms, legends, stories, anecdotes, arts & artifacts held by any entity namely society, organization, group and individual, which influence their activities and behavior.

Culture is built around heroes, symbols and values. It is transmitted from one generation to the other and leaves an indelible mark of uniqueness for an organization. Organizations on the strength of their culture get institutionalized as perpetual and immortal entities. People of all hues namely the corporate leaders, professional managers, shop floor level supervisors, skilled workers and others, are culture builders, transmitters and followers. Shareholders, Customers, collaborators, competitors and other stake holders also shape their responses by observing the culture of an organization.

Organizational culture is reflected in the perception of people about managerial intentions and actions in terms of addressing to issues like equity, promoting team work, resolving conflict, encouraging risk taking abilities, unit integration, and goal- directed orientation etc.

Organization exudes a dominant culture reflecting its core values. It also subsumes a set of subcultures typically department, shop floor, and even people specific. Corporate world is replete with instances of CEO influenced strong and weak organizational Cultures. The stages of cultural assimilation are pre-arrival stage, confrontation and encounter stage and metamorphosis stage.

Organizational culture can stimulate optimization of organizational resources by inculcating in people habits

of reducing waste, ensuring quality, achieving cost-effectiveness and customer delight as performance goals. All these are achieved by subjective handling of resources. Thus, culture can condition the usage of subjectivity for objective purposes.

High levels of morale and job satisfaction through innovative, effective decision-making and executing excellence can be promoted by organizational culture leading to organizational citizenship behavior which exudes high levels of real time employee engagement.

Work culture is a sub set of organizational culture. It is conditioned by the personal values of individual employees, impacting forces of group norms and the organizational approach towards the human resource. A real time employee engagement cultivates a positive work culture in the minds of the employees by a judicious combination of soft and synergic approaches. (Jai B.P.Sinha)

QWL & Workplace Democracy - QWL movement has transcended from mundane working conditions and welfare measures to workplace democracy. The strategies of employee empowerment, creating and using autonomous work teams, descending participation i.e. workers' participation in work, are some of the QWL thoughts reflecting workplace democracy. Set into a three-tier process of representative democracy (participative management); interest-group democracy (collective-bargaining); work- linked democracy (QWL); the edifice of industrial democracy is considered to be resting on the last one i.e. QWL, which has been hitherto neglected. (Eric Tryst, Fred Emery & EinarThorsrud). Employee empowerment strategies obviously help in real time employee engagement.

Equity & Organizational Justice - Equity and more precisely inequity is a pervasive concern of any organization and its people. It emanates not only from the imperative economic differentials found in organizations; but also from the psychological fairness one relatively derives vis-à-vis others. Largest Good of the largest number of people, if is the concise idea of Aristotelian Social Justice; getting one's due is the motto of equity. Sense of inequity arises in the psyche of a person, when one compares the outcome of one's own efforts with the perceived outcome of other's efforts.

In organizations, employers and employees indulge in an exchange and perceptually seek a balance between what they offer and get. The employee gives

knowledge, skill, time, physical services, experience, training etc in lieu of employment, pay and working conditions extended by the employer. HRM is an instrument for balancing this exchange through dispensation of organizational justice. Organizational justice is composed of Distributive and Corrective justice. Distributive justice mechanisms of HRM distributes results among the employees such as pay, incentives, perks and benefits, career progression etc as per ones due determined by praxis of performance appraisal, organizational positions, seniority, merit etc. With best of mechanisms also, it is not true that there could be no aberrations in distributive justice.

Corrective Justice intervenes here when feelings of inequity and cognitive dissonance appear loudly. The HRM processes devise intrinsically built warning systems & intervening systems to correct the aberrations. Grievance methods, suggestion schemes, dispute prevention and settlement mechanisms, amending the decisions on appeal are some of the corrective justice tools.

The third dimension of organizational justice, conceived in recent years, is the participative justice. HRM envisages for participation of the effected employees in the dispensation of justice. Transparency in decision making, employee involvement in decision implementation, and employee share in decision results are contemplated as methods of participative justice. All these facilitate the real time employee engagement.

Organizational justice has been an allusive goal. No organization has achieved it completely. The best effort is towards developing internal systems to ward off external interventions of judicature; and to keep the information open for the employees to know what and why of things happening in the organization. Knowledge itself empowers and helps in real time engagement. Knowledge management & Communication plays a significant role in this regard.

Knowledge Management and communication - Knowledge capital is currently conceived as the most powerful instrument for having any kind of competitive edge. Innovation and creativity are expected from human resource now as never before. The potential and capabilities of human resource as 'knowledge workers' have been long recognized by Peter F. Drucker. Knowledge as 'the revolutionary wealth' (Alvin & Heidi Toffler) has made it a singularly pursuable goal for corporates and countries. The information technology has opened up unprecedented opportunities

to generate, transmit, store, retrieve and utilize knowledge. But the main source as well as target of knowledge is the human resource. Knowledge can be theoretical and practical. Taking cue from the apt adage that, "theory is advanced by practice and practice is disciplined by theory", the intricate relationship between these two can be established. The real time employee engagement generates the practical knowledge, which if could be compiled and stored would be a rich warehouse of knowledge capital.

Organizational Communication systems are crucial to knowledge management. Information flow is central to any communication, be it at rudimentary inter-personal level or at organizational and currently global levels. Information technology has no doubt revolutionized the communication systems, but it has not substituted the human element. Communication is of, by, and for the people.

Organizational communication endeavors to in-reach the bottom of pyramid levels with its vision, mission, policy and goal statements while out-reaching markets, competitors and collaborators across the board. Thus, it acts as a nervous system working for sensitizing, activating the whole human and non-human aspects of the organization towards achievement of the organization's competitiveness, growth and development. Real time employee engagement is nearly impossible without the communication systems integrating the micro with the macro.

CONCLUSION

These strategies are only illustrative. Each organization can conceive distinct strategies for real time employee engagement, provided it realizes the potency of the employees as the repositories of path-breaking ideas. One thing is but sure that the whole gamut of real time employee engagement is a kind of self discovery for the organization.

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