

STAFF ENGAGEMENT? IT'S ALL ABOUT WINNING THE RACE...

Engaging staff, especially when times are tough, is about reminding them of why we're in business – to create the strongest brand, build market share, beat the competition and be No 1 – and involving them in winning the race.

It's 7.30am on a cold February Sunday morning. It's barely light. There's mist rising from the flat Thames water.

It's not a time when you would expect a group of people to be out of bed, let alone highly engaged in anything. The winter seems to be getting colder and longer. There's no sign of spring around the corner.

In spite of all this, engagement is high.

These people are rowers. A strange breed at the best of times. People who enjoy getting up early and pitting themselves against the elements. So the enthusiasm is infectious. The banter is quick. Eight experienced oarsmen ready for a productive training outing.

But this morning's outing is not going to go well. In fact, it's going to be an unqualified disaster. And I'm about to learn some valuable lessons about leadership, communication and engagement.

THE FIRST OUTING

We're all settling into our places in the boat, when it becomes clear that the "cox" has forgotten to charge up the "cox box". (The cox is the person who sits in the stern, steers and shouts the orders. The cox box is a loud speaker system that ensures the whole crew can hear what's being shouted.)

What this means is that at least half the crew won't be able to hear the instructions. I'm in the bows, so furthest from the cox. Even without the noise of moving oars and grunting oarsmen, I'm already struggling to hear.

Well, nothing for it but to go without. The cox (female and quite softly spoken) will just have to shout more loudly. And we'll do our best to pass on the messages.

In all the confusion about the cox box, there's no discussion about what we're going to do in the outing. No plan of action. We just row off into the semi-darkness.

At first, it's all quite good humoured and fun. People shouting "Can't hear...!" Messages being relayed inaccurately. The banter continuing.

But as we settle into what is meant to be a serious training session, the fun wears thin. At least four or five of us have little idea of what's going on or of what's going to happen next. Any communication we do receive is infrequent and unclear. We have no feedback on how we're doing. It's chaos. The standard of rowing is appalling.

Is this beginning to sound familiar?

What really interests me is my personal reaction to all this – my emotional journey - if that's not too sensitive a concept for a man in lycra on a cold winter's morning.

At first, I reason that I'm an experienced oarsman (we all are), so I'll be able to keep up just by being observant. Then I begin to think, "Well, at least if the others are out of time, I can follow "stroke" (the one who sets the rhythm) and go it alone".

Then, as the standard of rowing goes from bad to worse, I become angry and begin to resent the fact that I'm wasting my time and might as well have stayed in bed. Then I start to blame the others – the cox and anyone else who doesn't seem to be trying.

Then I become increasingly focused on watching the mess unfold in front of me. And finally, I give up trying and watch the scenery go by, effectively disengaged from the entire exercise.

Being naturally enthusiastic and self-motivated, I'm quite shocked by the degree to which this outing has affected my default state. I'm also shocked at the extent to which eight highly experienced oarsmen, who arguably should be an effective crew if left to their own devices, can fail to perform.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK

Cut to 7.30am the following Sunday.

Same boat. Same crew. Even worse conditions. Colder, darker, windier than last week.

But, new cox. And the cox box is charged and working.

The outing begins on the bank with a discussion of what we're going to do today. The cox reminds us that the crew is due to compete in three weeks' time and the goal is to beat our local rivals. He reminds us of all the experience in the boat. He's confident that experience will make a difference on the day, given the competition we are facing.

Today will be about concentration on boat speed. Not power, but how well we row together to move the boat smoothly through the water. Building on the experience that he knows is our difference and that can result in a smoother, more efficient row.

He gives a set of instructions about the exercises we will do at the start of the outing.

Already, the atmosphere is different. We're all clear on the purpose. We're all fired up with the idea of winning a race. And we're all out to prove how well we can row together.

The outing is a transformation.

Communication is regular, clear and to the point. The cox gives detailed feedback on our performance and lots of positive recognition whenever we are looking good enough to win the upcoming race.

We have a trial race against another crew, which we win. We know we're rowing well.

We stop to discuss how things are going. We come up with some new exercises to focus even more on boat speed.

And my emotional journey?

Well, I feel as if I'm rowing with a different crew, a winning team. I'm feeling committed, enthusiastic, focused, engaged. And I'm really pleased that I got out of bed.

EXTERNAL FOCUS

So what's different?

The answer is that so much is different, I hardly know where to start. But there is one fundamental change that had the biggest impact.

Rowing is a strange pursuit. Unlike many sports, it involves endless training and only the occasional competition. It's easy to forget why you're there. It's easy to become focused on the boat and the crew and the weather and to forget that you're doing this to win races.

Our cox reminded us that we were there to win a race.

In all the time I worked in marketing roles inside organisations, I could never understand how most people in the business could be so inwardly focused. In marketing, our lives are all about customers, external perceptions, market research, competition, market share, innovation, delivering value. The stuff of race winning.

By contrast, many of the functions within a business seem to lose sight of why they are doing what they are doing. Their contribution to winning the race.

If there's one point I would like to stress, it's this.

Especially when times are hard (as they still are for most organisations), the opportunity is to do what our cox did - remind people of why they are in business and engage them in winning the race.

The temptation, when people talk about staff engagement, is to think internally. The opportunity is to put the focus on the external – on the brand, the market, the customers, the competitors, the growth, the market share – the winning.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH EXTERNAL FOCUS

So how do you do that? Well, let's just take a few lessons from our cox's toolkit.

TEN STEPS TO ENGAGEMENT THROUGH EXTERNAL FOCUS	
1	Set an external goal
2	Devise a strategy to win
3	Clarify the brand
4	Build on your values
5	Develop leaders who reflect your brand
6	Constantly innovate
7	Create a winning team
8	Give positive recognition
9	Focus on external measurement
10	Communicate endlessly about what matters

- Set an external goal

Why are we in business? What are we trying to achieve? What does success mean? Whom are we trying to beat?

Is everyone in the business aware of the goal? Do they understand what their role is in achieving it? Can they relate what they're doing internally to an external result?

A team of people will only engage effectively if they know why they're engaging and what they will get out of success. Their engagement is most powerful when focused on an external aim or a common enemy.

- Devise a strategy to win

What are the priorities for the moment? Are we focused on power or on smooth rowing to increase boat speed? How is each part of the business going to align itself to our external goal?

Strategy doesn't have to be complex. In fact, it should be simple enough to communicate on one sheet of paper. And it should be communicated to everyone in the business.

- **Clarify the brand**

What's different and special about this organisation? What is its competitive advantage? How will we ensure that the experience of each of our customers is consistently better than and different from that of our competitors? Does everyone in the firm believe in the brand and understand what it means for them?

In the case of our crew, the difference was experience. What's special about your organisation?

- **Build on your values**

What are the values you share that will enable you to achieve your goal? Is your goal congruent with the organisational values? Are the organisational values congruent with the values of the people who work there?

We had rowed together for long enough to be confident of our shared values: commitment, enthusiasm, focus, winning. Our cox understood the crew's values and helped us build on them to achieve our goals.

Values in business are important to the internal cohesion of the firm. They are even more important to the firm's ability to deliver to its customers.

- **Develop leaders who reflect your brand**

It's one thing to have good leaders. It's another to have leaders who exhibit the kinds of behaviours your customers are seeking from your organisation. Leaders who, by their daily actions and the behaviour of the people who work for them, build your brand.

This is not just about the CEO. It's about leadership at all levels, whether people in authority or people who simply assume leadership roles.

Our cox was confident, competitive, decisive, inclusive – all the qualities we needed to perform as an effective crew on the day. His leadership gave us a role model for winning.

- **Constantly innovate**

Winning a race is sometimes about doing things better. It's often about doing things differently. It's about taking your competitors by surprise, in ways to which they find it hard to respond.

Involve everyone in the firm in coming up with new and better ways of doing things. Invite your customers into the fold and work with them to come up with better ways of meeting their needs.

Allowing people to express their creativity not only engages them, but also adds value to them, to their customers and to the firm.

- **Create a winning team**

From the start of the second outing, our cox was talking about winning the race. And from that point onwards, our confidence only increased. Each sign of improvement was noticed and communicated.

Start out with a clear focus on what you're aiming to win and keep the focus on that aim, however hard things become.

- **Give positive recognition**

Positive recognition is severely under-used in business. Even the most apparently confident people thrive on it.

The effective cox recognises the efforts of the crew but also of each individual. He or she knows that only by dealing with the individual motivations of each crew member will the full potential of the team be realised.

- **Focus on external measurement**

There's little point in knowing that your boat is moving quickly if it's still slower than the opposition. In so many organisations, people are measured by revenue growth, without any reference to how that relates to the market in which they are competing.

To keep the focus external, it's vital to keep people focused on external measures – market share, sales leads generated, competitive bids won, customer satisfaction, number of brand advocates. These measures remind people of why they're really in business and build the team pride that comes from winning.

- **Communicate endlessly about what matters**

I don't think I've ever heard anyone say that communication where they work is great. Which is probably a reflection of the fact that few organisations communicate anywhere near enough and what they do communicate is often not considered especially relevant.

Our cox communicated constantly. Sometimes to set out the plan, sometimes to give detailed instructions, sometimes to give feedback, sometimes to give recognition, sometimes to give encouragement. Always with a clear purpose. Always to help us do our job better. Always with a view to winning the race.

What matters in business is winning the race. Consistent communication on that alone will ensure that everyone stays focused on a common aim.

ENGAGING TO WIN THE RACE

Engagement is a strange word. An "engagement programme" implies that people are not engaged in the first place. As was the case with our crew of eight oarsmen, I tend to think that's not true.

In the first outing, they began fully engaged but lost the plot when no-one built on that by focusing their attention on why they were there – to prepare for winning a race.

In the second outing, their purpose and goal were clear from the start and the cox kept them focused throughout on the external aim and their progress towards it.

In business, especially in hard times, keeping everyone focused on the external goal ensures alignment of the best resources of the firm towards the one priority that counts – winning the race.

And of course business has one advantage over rowing – at least everyone is facing forwards.

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