

## Navigating the modern workplace: improving your team's performance

Alistair Shepherd

**I**nnovation today often requires specialist skills in very technical disciplines such as applied machine learning, mobile application development or programming. Technology is developing at such a pace that it is outstripping our education system's ability to teach it. This means the number of people entering the talent pool with the skills required for the modern workplace is decreasing. We've now become so focused on attracting this rare talent that we've forgotten the importance of retention.

The factors that influence retention are numerous, and many are quick to point to salary, geography or employee perks. However, according to a new study by Bupa UK[1], 53 per cent of UK employees identify trust as a primary reason for handing in their notice.

Indeed, company culture and team dynamics are playing an increasingly vital role in both employee engagement and overall productivity. In fact, according to Hay Group[2], happier workplaces achieve 4.5 times the revenue growth of less happy organisations. Yet still, HR leaders and managers rarely focus on the correlation between a team's dynamics and its output, largely because they are unaware of which steps are needed to take in order to steer in the right direction.

### Create meaningful teamwork

To effectively improve team-performance we must shift our focus away from the individual contributors that comprise a team to the network itself; this may seem like an obvious point, but it is one that is so often missed. Improvement of employee engagement may require a re-orientation of your management approach to improve retention and hold on to the valuable skills you already have within the business.

Companies tend to place far too much focus on their product or service as compared to other areas of the business such as HR, and it's easy to see why: the product, be it a digital banking wallet or a new phone, is often the very foundation on which organisations are built. If someone mentions Apple, you think of the iPhone, when you encounter a Marvel logo you think of Spider-Man; rarely do you consider the people and processes behind the scenes.

When certain short-term goals aren't met, (revenues drop or customer retention decreases), founders and management teams can quickly jump to the wrong conclusion.

Unfortunately, this mistake is made by companies who are still early in their life cycle as well as established players. They will often wonder whether their product is user-friendly enough or whether its interface is engaging enough. However, only rarely do they look for internal

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complications that might indicate that a team behind a product is not functioning well.

When Douglas Conant took over as CEO of Campbell's Soup in 2001<sup>[3]</sup>, the company's stock was falling at an astonishing rate. Rather than rejig the recipe of their products or reposition their brand, Conant focused primarily on one aspect of the company: employee engagement. After spending a considerable amount of time and capital tackling what was – in his own words – a “toxic culture”, Campbell's Soup eventually returned to solid profitability and today remains a mainstay in the American produce market. Conant did something that many had failed to do – make company culture a priority.

Just as leaders need to remember to develop an effective product or go to market strategy, they also need to make teamwork a priority on their agenda list. After all, team dynamics are a leading factor in determining the success or failure of a company.

Steering away from measurement practices such as annual performance reviews or internal employee rankings, and instead making a habit of team reflection is an excellent way of improving overall team dynamics and building trust. Not only can internal problems be addressed right away, employees also feel heard and understood when they are encouraged to share their thoughts at the workplace.

Just as a good teacher focuses on the overall performance of a student rather than the final grade, leaders need to apply the same approach. Luckily there are now numerous tools available to facilitate this shift; AI-powered chatbots, for example, offer digitised coaching which can be scaled across an entire organisation.

### **A clearly defined purpose and shared values create inclusion**

The modern workplace is increasingly becoming a diverse one. While

businesses are benefiting from the many perspectives of employees with different backgrounds, of different ages and with different views, a team needs to be connected by a mutually agreed upon foundation. Otherwise it's all too easy to for team members to be pulling in different directions, making it difficult to make progress. According to CEB (now Gartner), almost half of an employee's success in the first 18 months on the job can be attributed to how well they fit in with others; the rest of their success depends on whether they can actually do the job or not.

This of course presents a huge challenge for founders and management teams, but not an insurmountable one.

Discussing a team's purpose is an excellent first step to take in providing a foundation that fosters inclusion. Regardless of whether this is conducted anonymously through a questionnaire or openly addressed in a group, it ensures that every employee has their voice heard. It also allows the group to determine a framework that every member needs to abide by, giving a direction to steer towards. After all, employees that feel included and supported by their peers will be more productive and engaged at work, which will ultimately translate into how successful a company will be in the future.

### **Build connections and establish norms**

Whilst you may be tempted to install that ping pong table or offer your staff free monthly massages, take a moment to consider what your employees *actually* need, rather than what you *perceive* they want. People are increasingly demanding meaningful work in their careers, and it's plain to see why – the difficult question however is how do we achieve this?

When leaders create direct connections between the tasks of individuals and the team's and company's goals, employees are automatically encouraged to perform better. They're given autonomy over their actions and find increases in overall efficiency.

And don't stop there – take time to establish a set of agreed upon norms for your team. The social norms that govern the behaviour of individuals differ from one team to the next. Whereas one team might have a high acceptance threshold, a different group might have a complete opposite understanding of how to act in social situations.

Founders, management teams and HR practitioners need to give teams the autonomy to create their own norms. This set of informal rules builds a foundation of behaviours that team members want to adhere to. Norms cannot be forced upon individuals by a managing team, they need to be a direct result of internal discussions with every member involved.

Remember though: trust in the workplace won't come overnight – it is a process that requires dedication and ongoing commitment from each member involved but if it can improve retention by over 50 per cent it's worth the effort!

### **Notes**

1. [www.bupa.co.uk/newsroom/ourviews/value-of-trust](http://www.bupa.co.uk/newsroom/ourviews/value-of-trust)
2. [www.haygroup.com/downloads/uk/misc/viewpoint\\_issue\\_3\\_performing\\_in\\_uncertain\\_times.pdf](http://www.haygroup.com/downloads/uk/misc/viewpoint_issue_3_performing_in_uncertain_times.pdf)
3. [www.fastcompany.com/3035830/how-campbells-soups-former-ceo-turned-the-company-around](http://www.fastcompany.com/3035830/how-campbells-soups-former-ceo-turned-the-company-around)

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