Title:
Employee engagement during organisational change and external turbulence: internal communication inferences

1.0 Introduction

The 2008-2009 financial crisis affected global economies and uncertainty remains. Following the credit crunch, very few UK businesses were immune to reduced credit and heightened competition, with resultant streamlining, including redundancies, to try to minimise risk. Wage increases have not stayed abreast with inflation and generally, employee morale is low. The public sector continues to be heavily affected.

Johnson et al, (2009 p. 465) suggest that strategic leaders should envisage long-term future goals and clearly communicate them to their internal stakeholders, amidst inherent difficulties with internal resistance to strategic change. They warn that ineffective strategic leadership results in a demotivated and confused workforce. In times of change, and bureaucratic leadership, departments and individuals’ tendency is to work in silos; their only power being their accumulated knowledge, which Wooldridge (2011) recognised is a tendency in Higher Education (HE). At the very time when companies need motivated, committed employees, to withstand external turbulence, in reality this does not appear to be the case.

Political funding cuts and increased fees resulted in a need for HE providers (Bailey and Freedman 2011), to introduce leaner, more effective austerity strategies in todays’ turbulent competitive environment. Pasquier and Villeneuve (2012) suggest that consideration must be given to internal communications in the public sector – warning that the sector tendency is to overlook that staff are a company’s main resource, and potentially their unique competitive advantage.

MacLeod and Clarke’s (2009) Government white paper; Engaging for Success highlighted the interrelationship between two key factors; UK’s employee engagement deficit and its productivity deficit. They stressed the need to “encourage more organisations to adopt engagement approaches” to compete in the global economy and contribute to the UK’s prosperity. While agreeing with this need, subsequent research by Rayton et al (2012) highlighted that in practice in 2012 “Britain lagged behind other large economies with only 27% of employees engaged with their companies”. Internal marketing (IM) strategies are believed to contribute to engagement approaches. Amine et al (2012) believe IM aims to create a “healthy environment promoting motivation, creativity, effectiveness and co-operation of all employees.”

Welch (2011) offers a model (appendix one) which conceptualises relationships between internal corporate communication and dimensions of employee engagement. She surmised if senior management shared meaning, including the culture and changing internal environment and changing goals to employees, then trust could be built through continual communications. This leads to greater understanding and employees would feel committed and engaged, eventually physically contributing to achieve the new goals with “improved business performance”. She advises further research from various communications disciplines to discover potential engagement effects of communication strategies and tactics.
2.0 Problem Definition

Welch’s conceptual model clearly links internal communication with employee engagement and calls for more research because little has thus far investigated the effects of differencing communications strategies with engagement. Yet there are problems with both concepts. Welch does not mention the concept of internal marketing however, marketing practitioners and academics would advocate that internal communications is a responsibility of the internal marketing role.

2.1 Internal Marketing

Unfortunately, internal marketing is still viewed by many as a concept, rather than a proven policy. Osbourne and Ballantyne (2012) suggest that “in spite of many attempts it remains largely untried” despite describing it as a customer-centric strategy aiming to improve inter-functional coordination and the embodied know-how of employees and can guide the attitudes and behaviour of employees. But conflict exists around who controls, produces and delivers internal marketing and internal communication. Smith (2005) suggested both must be led by the CEO, but recognised that responsibility is devolved. Mankin (2009) argued that IM is important to Human Resource Management (HRM) “as it focuses on customer service strategy and philosophy, protocols and standards which the workforce should be trained to adhere to”. Ahmed and Rafiq (2002) and Sanchez-Hernandez and Miranda (2011) argue that both marketing and HR departments have fundamental roles to play in successful internal communication, while Welch and Jackson (2007) suggested as public relations (PR) is now a part of integrated marketing communications; the PR department should take a fundamental role in IM.

Dasgupta et al (2012) contend that managerial communication frames employee behaviour. Therefore internal communication is an organisational level intervention which can positively impact employee engagement (Welch 2011). There is a substantial relation between communication and organizational commitment although the links between the two depend on the type of communication (Postmes et al 2001). They suggest that horizontal communications, (which Egan, 2007: p. 359 described as sideways communications between employees), are less useful for commitment than vertical communications, whereas Herrero (2013) advocates peer to peer viral communication has greatest influence and generates real organisational change, not hierarchical top-down communication. The literature continues to debate who should generate the communication effort. There is also debate about what kinds of communication tools and appeals should be used and through which channels they should be delivered to differentiate various groups (Fill 2009), for these including very diverse job roles, education levels, cultural and generational differences and employees with varying technological competence. Since information overload will not decrease given the digital revolution (Smith 2005) then how and when groups of employees consume information requires more research (Finney 2011). Recently, Chapleo’s (2012) research signified that “buy-in” or “engagement” with HE brands from the internal audience was a critical issue and Amine et al (2012) advised that effective internal communication reinforces trust, respect and loyalty of employees, maintaining harmonious relationships.
2.2 Employee Engagement

Concerns surround this concept too. Differing organisations agree the difficulties in identifying what employee engagement embodies (Gibbons, 2007; Holley et al, 2008; and Hogg, 2013) while academic researchers cannot find a definitive meaning either (Saks, 2008; Balain and Sparrow, 2009; Schneider et al, 2009; Wefald and Downey, 2009; Bakker and Leiter, 2010; Welch, 2011 and Soieb et al, 2013). Researchers found a lack of clarity in understanding how leadership behaviour affects employee engagement (Soieb et al., 2013) and gaps exist around the drivers that affect employee engagement including: quality of management; (Church, 2013); trust and belief in them (Walker, 2012); fairness and excellence in recruitment, (Schneider et al, 2009); and organisational values and reputation (Balain and Sparrow, 2009; Albrecht, 2010 and Sanborn and Oehler, 2013) together with organisational efficacy (Kataria et al, 2013).

Further problems exist around what employee-engagement means to employees and whether their understanding of it mirrors that of their senior management who seek organisational engagement from staff. Employee engagement now also embraces collective-engagement and an initial pilot study revealed that it is possible for an employee to reach high levels of both self and collective engagement (using Kahn’s 1990 seminal engagement concepts) in the majority of tasks, without evidence of much organisational engagement. Perhaps employees who are passionate and absorbed in their work are completely engaged, are contributing heavily to their organisation’s fortunes, but because of the gaps in understanding, the one-size-fits-all consultancy led engagement surveys meted out to the public sector, are redundant? Niu (2013) warns; the annual employee engagement survey is not adequate for the real world of work today.

3.0 Overall Aim & Objectives

It is anticipated that the aims and objectives are as follows:

3.1 Aim

The aim of this research is to discover potential engagement effects of internal communication strategies and tactics, as suggested by Welch, (2011)

3.2 Objectives

The objectives of the research are:
To explore what work engagement means to employees and decision-makers of a London-based university.
To review current internal communications strategies and tactics, levels of efficacy and current levels of employee engagement.
To compare levels of engagement and current communications activities with any changes that arise through new leadership and evolving strategies internally in the university together with due consideration of potential external influences.

3.3 Research Questions

- What does engagement mean to employees and managers in a London University?
• What are employees views (support and academics) of current strategies and do they feel they are working, if not why not?
• How do policy makers and implementers try to encourage and maintain employee engagement and why have they chosen particular strategies?
• What are policy makers’ views of current strategy efficacy? How it is measured? If it has not worked, what is wrong with it, why has it not worked?
• How are internal communications planned and distributed, how are they measured and are they working? If not, why not?
• How do employees/managers perceive and receive these communications and what would they change? Why?

3.4 Research Outcomes

• To contribute to and extend Welch’s (2011) three wave evolution of employee engagement framework.
• To add to current understanding and knowledge of internal marketing and internal communications and their relationship with employee engagement.
• To develop and transform the personal and professional expertise of the researcher in this particular field.

4.0 Methodology (tentative)

The proposed research will focus on the case of one particular London University currently mirroring low levels of employee engagement seen in UK companies. It will use qualitative and exploratory approaches. Thus it will follow a phenomenological inductive approach using constructivist single-case study methodology. The research may evolve into a pragmatic (mixed methods) approach dependant on the data received using the methods described below. Should a mixed-methods approach be selected (Yin, 2009:101) this would be through a survey, with larger representative samples. Having identified constructs to correlate with previous data findings (Piekkari et al 2009) the survey may offer further evidence of engagement meaning, and measurement of engagement levels derived from employee perceptions. It will identify preferable message appeals and media types in internal communications using a broader and larger sample.

The sample will be based on a triangulation of strategies, attitudes, perceptions and experiences from the current literature, university academics, administrators, professional services teams, senior managers and decision makers and representatives of the board of Governors. A non-probability quota sample will be used to ensure that the diversity of the sample population is represented. The sample will comprise of the following:

1) Academics and administrators will be contacted via email for their consent to participate in interviews. They will be selected to include representatives from all faculties. Interviews will continue until saturation where no new information is achieved.

2) Senior representation from professions service departments to include: HRM, marketing, organisational development, PR, recruitment and the registry.

3) Two members of the executive board including the new Vice Chancellor (two interviews) and two members of the board of Governors.
Two main methods will be used:

1) **Individual depth interviews** have been selected because issues for these emotive discussions are sensitive in nature. These depth interviews will be administered face to face using open ended questioning and projective techniques to elicit wide ranging qualitative responses. A semi-structured interview format will enable in-depth probing and exploration of specific areas. All interviews will be recorded.

2) This will allow the interviewer to **observe** the interviewee to note silent behaviour and expression.

5.0 **Analysis**

Analysis of the research will take place continuously while the research is in progress. This will allow for revision of methods, inclusion of new questions and issues for discussion. Final analysis following completion of the field work will attempt to look for similar patterns and differences in responses from all respondents.
6.0 References:


Appendix One

The employee engagement concept and internal corporate communication: a conceptual model (Welch 2011).