

Why employee engagement starts with a culture of genuine support - hrleader.com.au

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Executive Summary

This article, authored by Cassandra Eastham, Head of People and Culture at Blue Connections IT, addresses the persistent misunderstanding organisations have about the nature of employee engagement. The central argument is that engagement cannot be manufactured through programs, platforms, or surveys alone — it emerges as an outcome of a genuinely supportive workplace culture. Eastham contends that psychological safety, authentic recognition, investment in development, work-life balance, and consistent leadership behaviour are the foundational conditions that enable engagement. Key evidence is drawn from practitioner observation rather than cited research, with emphasis on the gap between performative engagement initiatives and substantive cultural conditions. The article highlights that leadership accountability — including embedding engagement expectations into performance measures and remuneration — is critical to making support a whole-of-business responsibility rather than an HR function. It concludes that organisations which cultivate genuine cultures of support rarely need to actively pursue engagement, as it develops organically through everyday employee experience.

Key Insights

1. Employee engagement is framed as an emergent outcome of cultural conditions rather than a product of discrete initiatives or programs.
2. Psychological safety is identified as a foundational prerequisite for engagement, shaped primarily by everyday leadership behaviours rather than policy statements.
3. Embedding engagement and leadership support expectations into formal performance measures — including remuneration — is presented as a mechanism to elevate engagement from an HR priority to an organisational one.

Practical Takeaways

- Organisations that link leadership accountability for team support and engagement to formal performance and remuneration frameworks are more likely to sustain cultural conditions that enable engagement.
- Collecting employee feedback without visible subsequent action is identified as actively damaging to trust and engagement, suggesting that survey cadence and response cycles warrant scrutiny.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article presents a coherent and internally consistent argument that aligns with established organisational psychology literature on psychological safety and intrinsic motivation. The framing of engagement as an outcome rather than an initiative is a useful conceptual distinction for practitioners. The discussion of leadership accountability linked to remuneration is a concrete and actionable observation.

Limitations: The article contains no original data, no cited studies, and no empirical evidence. All claims are assertion-based, drawing on practitioner experience rather than research. The author's position as Head of People and Culture at a specific organisation introduces potential practitioner bias, as the perspective reflects a particular organisational context that may not generalise broadly. The treatment of psychological safety, while accurate in direction, is surface-level and does not engage with the complexity or measurement challenges documented in academic literature. The article also conflates correlation with causation in several places — for example, asserting that supportive leadership 'helps employees thrive and deliver results' without evidence. Overall, this is practitioner commentary of reasonable quality but limited evidential weight.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organisations embedding leadership engagement expectations into formal performance measures and remuneration structures, using engagement surveys and platforms, and deploying employee assistance programs and mental health officers as support mechanisms. It also references exit interview analysis and attrition data as tools for identifying cultural gaps.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader trend in PMS discourse toward holding leaders formally accountable for team culture and engagement outcomes, not solely performance metrics. This points to a potential convergence between engagement measurement and performance evaluation frameworks. The critique of survey-based engagement tools as capturing only point-in-time sentiment indicates growing recognition of their limitations, which may drive interest in more continuous or qualitative measurement approaches within PMS design.

Validation Status: passed
