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# ACT 1

## BRAND ENGAGEMENT, EVERYMAN AND THE DEATH OF THE HERO LEADER

### NOVEMBER 1983

Everyman is on his way to work on the 7.30 a.m. commuter train. He's rereading George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, in between elbows, coughs, sneezes, and newspapers. The banality of its antihero Gordon Comstock, who resigned from his job with a lucrative advertising agency in favor of the life of a penniless poet, to romantically rage against Mammon, seems so childishly idealistic. How society has advanced since Orwell's pessimism between the wars. Looking around the smart suits in his carriage and out of the windows at the houses flashing by, he reflects on how he and his partner, like so many of his traveling peers, have made it onto the property ladder on the back of a free university degree, state welfare, and a job in the City with a generous pension package. They live at 8 New Road, a much-envied corner plot with solid middle-class neighbors; a teacher and his executive assistant wife. Nice couple. This is what his grandparents had suffered depression, conflict, and austerity for, the chance to create a landed generation of "baby boomers," who would, in due course, hand down the baton of middle-class affluence to their own lucky children.

Arriving at his office building, with its Palladian columns, exactly half an hour before his contracted start time, he is still, after all this time, a little intimidated by the cathedral-like dimensions of the entrance and halls, with the single arched window leading to the executive floor. A shadowy figure is looking down from the window as he arrives. Quickly passing the managerial suite, he is soon greeted by the usual chorus of affectionate banter. "Afternoon," calls one comedian. "Good, none of the managers have made it into our section yet," he thinks to himself. "I'll have enough time to grab a coffee before starting the recon-

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ciliations and hopefully manage to get some real work done before the Monday meeting.”

The ritual of Monday meetings seems to have been around forever. It is the organization’s way of ensuring that key employees are aware of the changes to rules and regulations and standard procedures (copies available in the sequential instruction manuals controlled by the senior appointed officer), as well as any marketing initiatives that would inevitably mean additional work for frontline staff. The managers hate these sessions as much as the staff but go through the motions, managers at the front, officers arranged in rows in front of them. They always last for the first hour of the day, which means that many of Everyman’s colleagues started early to ensure that their normal, time-critical tasks are finished first. Some had been at their desks since 6.30 a.m.

At the appointed time, they’re summoned by the senior manager’s assistant and take their places for the Monday briefing, ties straightened, notepads in hand, mouths shut and brains parked. The monolithic Georgian door slowly swings open.

## WHAT DOES GREAT BRAND ENGAGEMENT FEEL LIKE?

**Brand** (noun or verb): torch, permanent mark deliberately made by hot iron, trade-mark goods, burn with hot iron (penally or to show ownership), impress on memory, stigmatize

**Engage:** bind by contract, bind by promise, hire, morally committed

**Engaged:** state of being engaged, moral commitment

**Engaging:** attractive, charming

SOURCE: *Concise Oxford Dictionary*

Branding is an overused and often poorly understood term. In a world where we should retain a healthy objectivity, it’s often an enlightening and salutary exercise to track these seemingly modern “power” words back to their roots. Taking this back-to-basics approach, branding is reduced to little more than “making a mark signifying ownership.” That’s a loaded image in a contemporary context.

In the modern world of commerce, where services and experiences are traded as vociferously as physical goods and products, brands have come to signify a set of associations that we, as consumers and employees, make, linked to a set of communicated promises. In short, commercial brands are synonymous with promises.

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Experiences are as distinct from services as services are from goods.  
(Pine and Gilmore, 1999)

**So what is brand engagement?**

Interestingly, the derivation of the word “engagement” evokes a form of emotional and moral commitment. To be engaged implies a condition or state of committed focus and that the state has been induced by an act of free will in response to seduction, attraction, or charm. Are we still talking about commerce here?

The most obvious use of the word “engagement” in society applies to the prenuptial promise made between two individuals committed to spend their lives together. It’s another of what I call “power” words, a term reserved for our most important interactions; certainly not something that is easily earned or taken lightly.

An important distinction must be made between the terms “engagement” and “committed.” The two are inextricably linked and yet true engagement, unlike contractual forms of commitment, is something that can’t be legislated for, it really can’t be driven, coerced, forced, or aligned; instead, it is reliant upon our higher order needs and depends upon the exercising of free will. Sure, we can be forced to focus on a presentation by peer pressure, obligation, seniority of the speaker, or responsibility. We can even be engrossed in an interesting television program or a compelling speech, but true engagement is of an altogether higher order and has a longevity all of its own.

Brand engagement describes the relationship between the promises made by an organization and the degree to which they connect with the needs-driven free will of individuals, be they employees or customers. It is the driving force behind decision making, relationships, and loyalty and is the single most important aspect of brand management. It’s a vital step beyond compliance leading to true commitment and lasting commitment because it’s self-determined.

When assisting the executive team behind the international Guinness brand to implement the next phase in its retail strategy, a number of my colleagues were asked to facilitate at a conference for the top 200 managers. As part of the briefing, we were told, in no uncertain terms, “not to make the same mistake the last lot did.” Apparently, an agency had called upon the services of a well-known comedian to comper the event. Despite a briefing about the strong emotional ties between the

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people in the business and the brand, the comedian, apparently a lager drinker, made the ill-judged decision to ridicule their iconic dark stout. He was booed from the stage and was lucky to escape in one piece.

Tales of product-related brand loyalty abound. Sticking with the alcohol theme (often a subject to arouse strong emotions), I know of perfectly normal folk who, following the takeover of a local brewery and despite having frequented the same establishment for decades, traveled for miles to track down the last few kegs of pretakeover beer. Or consider the fanatics I refer to as “Macolytes.” Simply utter the word “Apple” and it’s like lighting a verbal fuse. Without any encouragement they volunteer the virtues of the superior Mac and passionately denounce the pragmatic population of PC users. They’re more than champions; they love Macs and all things Apple and, as a result, they are probably Apple’s most effective sales force. Chances are you know plenty of these folk yourself. But perhaps the most high-profile case of brand fanaticism in modern times was Coca-Cola’s ill-fated decision to change the formula of its totemic fizzy drink on the back of positive blind tastings, only to quickly reverse the decision in the face of a massive public outcry, especially in the US, and plummeting sales.

In each of these extreme cases, the stakeholders are illustrating the link between the values of the brand and the culture in which they exist. The Macolytes invariably relate to the inferred, almost maverick creativity associated with the Mac and the fact that Apple is still portrayed as David versus Microsoft’s Goliath, despite healthy performance figures. In the case of the local beer drinkers, their actions were driven less by the risk that they may not like the new beer recipe and more by a reaction to change – especially when it involved a small, local brewery, with clear, intimate associations, being subsumed into a faceless corporate. Being the plucky underdog is positive brand medicine. The Irish national brand has traded on that fact for years as, most famously, did Churchill during the darkest hours of World War II. It’s also powerful brand medicine.

I’ve encountered similar reactions to change from customers and employees when working with brands that are closely linked to UK national brands, like British Airways, Allied Irish Bank, the Wales Tourist Board (now called Visit Wales), the Royal Navy and Royal Mail, or where the emotional ties between employees and brands are close to the surface, most obviously at charities like the children’s charity the NSPCC or the animal charity, the RSPCA. One of the toughest brand refresh communication programmes I’ve been associated with

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was trying to convince reactionary RSPCA employees about the business case for making much needed basic changes to a brand they care for with a passion.

But organizations don't need an iconic product range or extreme emotional connections to achieve internal or external brand engagement on this scale.

Brand engagement is primarily about three things:

- understanding the core values that the organization stands for
- understanding the needs of customers, employees, and stakeholders that these values fulfill
- communicating a series of promises effectively, appropriately, and explicitly to both the internal and external stakeholders (and involving them in the process of determining how to fulfil those promises rather than simply turning marketing techniques inward).

Of course, sustaining that engagement is reliant upon delivery against those promises and that's an altogether different part of the journey. But who is responsible for brand engagement in the first place?

**THE CEO IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE ceo**

The top-down days are over. (David Cameron, leader of the UK Conservative Party, June 2007)

The cult of the superhero leader is increasingly a 90s phenomenon. We've all picked up the cape these days. (line manager, ARM Holdings)

There's an old saying in England that the queen believes the world "smells of fresh paint." There's a cachet attached to the role of chief executive or CEO that exists in a similar "otherworldly" state where, superficially, there never appears to be a problem and everything is fresh, shiny, and new. It simply comes with the territory. But anyone who is familiar with the fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" can appreciate that this phenomenon forewarns against a communication tragedy.

In the theatre, it's a well-known conceit that status is conferred upon an individual character, not so much by the actions of the actor

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playing the high-status part but by the deferential actions of others. As the actor given the role of king or queen, it is your peers on stage who convey the sense of power – you can't simply project it on your own.

Businesses work in a similar way. Almost irrespective of the behavior of the person in the top job, CEO land is largely manned by a nodding, grinning, fresh-faced and wide-eyed populace and that's all down to status. As in *Hamlet*, however, methinks "something is rotten in the state."

I often relate a true story, which has sadly passed into comic legend, regarding a junior employee of a high-street retailer who, to his horror, had the misfortune of bumping into the CEO on one of his monthly "back to the floor" walkabouts. The CEO asked him, in his most empathetic tone, "so, tell me young man, who do you work for?" The star-struck employee, thinking this a trick question, could only reply "well, you, of course sir!" (much to the amusement of his colleagues, the embarrassment of the retail god, and the deep chagrin of his branch manager). It's an anecdote that gives some insight into the limitations of the hero leader's communication role.

When facilitating a top team development session geared toward breaking down the communication barriers between the board and their employees, I was greeted with the news, rather smugly relayed it must be said, of a new board initiative. In their wisdom, the board members had decided to take it in turns to compensate for their legendary lack of approachability by holding birthday lunches. In short, whenever a significant staff member's birthday fell due, they were invited to the boardroom for lunch – on the face of it, a generous and powerful gesture. I did a little checking with my consultation forum of staff and what do you think the impact had been? Soaring morale, an increase in general bonhomie? No, the absenteeism statistics for employees on and around their birthdays had increased dramatically! Who was it who first uttered the wise words, "never mistake motion for action"?

What these simple stories illustrate is that, while there isn't an explicit rule about communication between the barracks and boardroom, the specter of status never leaves the CEO's side and even when a uniquely open relationship can be maintained between the office of the CEO and more junior members of the organization, there will always be barriers to full and frank communication, based upon that powerful intangible. The rules apply in both directions but are largely created as an unspoken way of creating an "us" and an "other." Once

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you don the robes of senior leadership, you unwittingly become the “other,” however much you may try not to. A certain brand of isolation comes with the power and the territory. The unspoken rules differ across cultures, but rules there most certainly are.

Whatever the “back to the floor” policy, if everyone the CEO meets on his weekly walkabout talks admiringly, fearing to utter a truly critical word during the dance of status, then sooner or later, loneliness and paranoia do become inevitable characteristics of new entrants to the CEO role. It takes exceptional communication skills to overcome this barrier and focusing on the CEO alone really doesn’t get to the heart of the matter or address the engagement challenge.

Unfortunately, command, control, and a despotic style are often the behavioral fallback of many when faced with frustrating communication difficulties. These behavioural fallbacks certainly get people’s attention, but they aren’t sustainable. The great leader, however, recognizes that true engagement stems from attraction and charm, tries hard to cultivate these traits through a combination of skills development and process, but, importantly, accepts the inevitable limitations of the role – something that all the legislation in the kingdom simply can’t buy. The great CEO treats his or her communication responsibilities as seriously as the other core competencies in his or her kit bag, recognizes they can’t do it all on their own and instead ensures that communication is prioritized at all levels.

Accepting that very few CEOs have the capability, capacity, appetite, time, or even right to become the communication fulcrum for the business, how can anyone seriously be expected to fulfill the role of exclusive chief engagement officer, under the banner of their brand, if the internal audience never utters a critical word?

Yes, it’s lonely being a CEO strutting the boards even if it’s often the brand of loneliness suffered by superstars who never get no for an answer! It gives them sleepless nights. If you’re in any doubt, find one and ask them. But how many CEOs have you met who truly crave the relentless spotlight and revel in its constant glare?

I believe it’s time to throw away the reams written on the role of CEO as superhero communicator because:

- with a few notable exceptions, they generally aren’t the best at it
- they generally can’t get a straight answer by reaching down the organization
- the CEO alone really isn’t the brand

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- there's strong resistance to top-down communication from at least one working generation
- it's a lot more helpful to focus on the true critical mass, the line management community.

How many organizations have gambled all on the hope of a “big bang” CEO appointment, only to negotiate a severance check once the PR honeymoon is over, 18 months down the line? Whatever the hero-worshippers might say, CEOs do come and go.

Recent research by a number of consultancies and research houses has found that the average chief executive of a FTSE 100 company is in their early to mid fifties. The average age may be falling but how effective can any wealthy 50+ year old be at truly connecting with employees less than half their age and net worth? Most significantly perhaps, other research also reports that turnover of CEOs is also increasing with up to 15 percent of companies now having a change of chief executive every year. (See Lucier et al., 2002 and Egremont study, 2007).

Today's major companies are led by executives who are actually younger, show less loyalty to the company, take bigger remuneration packages, and are more dispensable than in the past. Even the legendary marathon men like BP's Lord Brown fall eventually, yet one of the marks of their greatness is that the brand lives on long after they are but a compromise agreement.

I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning. (William Blake, 1757–1827)

To quote an article I wrote with marketing supremo Professor Phillip Kitchen:

Stakeholders, both internally and externally, have seen too many streetwise alley cat leaders, caught in the spotlight with the corporate cream soaking their whiskers, to rest corporate communication on just one set of shoulders.

Irrespective of whether you're of the hero-worshipping bent or favor the more gestalt line, it's still clear that developing and sustaining corporate reputation through truly engaging communications – whether inside-out or outside-in – should be of utmost

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importance to CEOs in the drive toward achieving corporate objectives. In these accountability-driven, shareholder-focused days, as the expected life-span of the species falls, they really must keep the promises they make to their stakeholders – and then make sure everyone knows about it. However it's not something they need do, or indeed should do, alone ... Far too many of today's wannabe hero-leaders remain a little too "one eyed" as they feverishly scrutinize the share price popularity polls, failing to focus on the core constituents within. If the customer really is King, isn't it worth the time and investment to ensure that the "court" is a more productive place? (Buckingham and Kitchen, 2005)

In my experience across sectors as an internal and external adviser and coach, it's the individuals who have achieved their position through establishing and maintaining functional teams, by engaging with stakeholders as with their own people, who are most able to sustain their performance levels. So why is it that so many new appointees find that no sooner do they take to the leather throne than all nonpolitical, pragmatic points of view fade? Is it any wonder that what follows is a paranoid period of soul searching to try and reconcile the avuncular, gregarious team player and friend with the character designed by the chattels of office? As the average CEO tenure continues to fall, there's very little time for them to wade through the smoke and mirrors of statistical data provided by colleagues most likely to have a vested interest in their fall.

Preparing the materials for a pan-industry engagement skills development workshop at Henley Management College, I got together with a close-knit group of experienced consultants who have worked in the people-centered consultancy industry for many years. Comparing experiences, we compiled a list of the key characteristics of senior executives we had known and worked with and who excelled at communicating. The most common traits included:

- their ability to listen and absorb
- their skill at rationalizing regular information sources into key indicators
- their love of triptych communication.

Up there at the top of the list is the willingness and ability to listen, followed by the ability to analyze information and detect patterns and

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then, lastly, the ability to impart information in a simple yet potent way. The last point demonstrates an ability not only to see but to point out “the wood for the trees,” an innate understanding of the power of the simple yet impactful message. I once asked Patrick O’Sullivan, former CEO of Zurich in the UK, now in a senior group role, why he favored three prongs to every message when preparing his talks? He replied in typical style: “That’s how I take in information myself so I’m always working with the lowest common denominator in mind.”

It may be a tricky task, but many CEOs do attempt to reach down the organization for the eyes, ears, and, most importantly, the voices of the workaday custodians of the brand. Richard Branson is a famous advocate of the informal audience with the CEO and goes to great lengths to obtain employee feedback personally whenever he can, even writing to them every couple of months to encourage direct feedback, including his home contact details on the personalized letters.

But Branson is very much a one-off maverick and Virgin is exceptional for structuring its companies in small, personable units with informal but effective processes to facilitate two-way dialogue. It famously works hard on its culture, of which an informal communication style is a key component. Virgin doesn’t “do its washing” in public (as one of their senior managers eloquently put it at a recent engagement event), which helps to maintain an intimate culture, and Branson credits a close executive team with helping to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust and preserve Branson’s personal, avuncular brand. While Branson does lead by example in terms of his communication, it’s clear that he expects his leaders to follow, be they in charge of an airplane or a helpline. And, in the main, they do.

It certainly helps if the chief exec is a passionate communication visionary, but he simply can’t, and shouldn’t, do it all himself. But internal communication is not universally respected as a discipline yet. Too often I’ve seen that, unless the board acknowledges that there’s the same commercial rationale for focusing on communication with employees as for other strands of the corporate strategy, it’s the first budget out of the basket when the “hot air balloon” hits rough weather. It always comes back to haunt them later. In the recent past, British Airways, Virgin’s leading rival, despite being a market leading brand in so many areas, has found this out to its cost a number of times, as apparent internal consultation breakdowns regarding pay, security, and working conditions led to near-disastrous industrial action and have arguably adversely impacted the BA brand.

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Although the industry as a whole has been under siege from external sources for some time, many of BA's recent brand problems have undoubtedly come from within. BA invest a great deal of time and effort on their internal brand and have recognized the impact these issues can potentially have on their brand and are continuously addressing any potential engagement gap.

Consider another lauded hero leader, Sir Terry Leahy, CEO of the UK's leading supermarket chain. He has transformed Tesco in the last decade to the point where profits and sales are treble what they were; the group's stock market value is around £35 billion (\$70 billion) (almost nine times what it was when he took over); it has the ear of the UK government; and Tesco now competes as an international powerhouse (taking on Wal-Mart in Asia, Europe and the US); India is next. Quite a turnaround from the days when Tesco was content with capturing rival UK supermarket Sainsbury's "aspirational" customer base in the UK.

Leahy is arguably the most powerful man in his market, is certainly the most successful retailer of the last decade, and yet, far from being a heroic pin up at Tesco, he is most famous for the fact that he is still largely anonymous in his own stores. Why? Because he's much more concerned with gathering and simplifying information through listening to the people who really know, his customers and staff, than he is with self-promotion and pushing missives out to the shop floor or compliance with contrived protocol and status.

Interestingly, Leahy wrote the foreword to the visionary book *Brand Manners* (Pringle and Gordon, 2001), which carries a comprehensive case study of Tesco. In it he writes about his belief in the power of customer service and appropriate behaviors at all levels which exemplify and epitomize the ideal brand experience. He is clearly an advocate of on-brand behavior as a motivator for his customers, suppliers, stakeholders and employees alike and refers to the need for "good manners" as the cornerstone for effective relationships.

He talks about "the prospect of achieving business success by making work a better place to be." Pringle and Gordon indicate that, with 220,000 staff, Tesco's priorities back in 2001 were summed up by: mobilization and vision, "harnessing the mental energy of our people" and "having a clear, powerful and widely understood vision and values." They have come a long way.

They've certainly outperformed themselves in the last six years and it is clear that whilst processes are very important, employee engagement

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focused around the Tesco brand values, has been paramount. While the cynics among the analysts point to their allegedly intimidating purchasing and supplier management reputation, Leahy attributes the source of much of the success to the power of that vision of the Tesco brand, supporting behaviors and the communication surrounding it.

Leahy is famously selfless and yet his understanding of his staff and his target customer base is the stuff of business legend. He clearly owes a great deal to the controversial power of branded loyalty card data but perhaps more important is the fact that, even though he reputedly earns around £3 million (\$6 million) a year, he is still comfortable being described as “the personification of his product” (empathy in action). He makes an effort not to build up brand Terry and he’s as comfortable and as credible as someone in his role can be asking questions and engaging with ordinary people.

Leahy, rather like Sir Fred Goodwin at RBS, clearly prioritizes employee communication, over and above the lure of PR directed at competitors and peers. He positions himself very deliberately at the foot of the brand mountain yet is careful to role model the brand manners, values, and behaviors required of his employees. He may be famous for listening but, rather like Branson, he is role modeling a trait he expects from his employees and leaders and provides a program of development support to help deliver against this goal.

Of course, the challenges Leahy and Tesco now face are shifting in line with an awakening to the commercial realities of the environmental agenda, but, listening as ever, he is alert to the opportunities:

You can be green and grow. Looking to the future, you may have to be green to grow. (*How Green is Your High Street*, June 2007)

But despite the pressure of corporate social responsibility being an external communication challenge, it will be fascinating to watch how Leahy engages and mobilizes his growing staff base around this new and growing ethical “mountain.” Has Leahy misjudged the rapidly shifting sands of public opinion? Only time will tell, but what is clear is that however Tesco faces up to the environmental agenda, Leahy will be harnessing the power of brand-related internal communication to address the challenges they face. We watch with interest.

Whatever you may think of their organizations, their politics or personal style, there are very few executives with the ability of Leahy or Branson to reach down the organization effectively. There are few senior executives, in my experience, who haven’t, instead, developed

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a comparatively dark art, a subtle form of inner counsel, a network of scouts who seek out the safe passages and hot spots and inadvertently help to shape strategy and policy through relaying “street” data to their leader. I’m not referring to committees, employee consultation forums and working parties that are, more often than not, a political or legislative gesture rather than a trusted partner, but to forms of personal and private counsel. This is territory that internal communication professionals should tread with caution.

Consider this quote from the CEO of a major US automotive company:

I have my network of individuals I meet informally, individually at least once a month. This includes internal and external communications people and shop-floor cynics I can trust. The informal network includes my head of internal communication. They’re normally well-rounded yet ultimately loyal folk who care enough about the time they spend at work and their relationship with me, to be honest. They’re more interested in doing a worthwhile job than promotion and are themselves when they speak with me – so I trust what they say about our brand in action.

This “secret service” communication scenario is probably more common than you think. But this rather clandestine strategy also has clear limitations, not least the message it conveys about trust.

If we accept that an organization’s brand is the sum of the physical and, most importantly, behavioral manifestations of the service promise it makes to its consumers, I’m afraid the sad news is that CEOs seldom trust feedback from executive peers whose jobs depend on their reports. Even at a formal level, I’ve seen many a new CEO tear at their hair when the incumbent FD’s blanket barrage of analysis and reports are first delivered by the crate-load. Agencies and consultancies have unfortunately fallen foul of this trap, which is also why so many CEOs insist on retaining their own personal advisers and aren’t really open to change. I can still picture the bearded, modestly suited, unassuming individual who was a constant presence at the elbow of the head of a global financial services company, derided and strangely feared by the board in equal measure. Yet the CEO wouldn’t be without him, thought of him as his eyes and ears and, to be honest, you couldn’t meet a more genuine and affable person. Oh, the tales he could tell! But did the rest of the board trust him?

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Even considering the status of the figurehead, factoring in the cultural obsession with celebrity, and the extraordinary lengths some CEOs go to stay connected, the fact is that the most gifted senior communicators are, on balance, just not the most important communicators anymore.

Employees, however, are consistently and increasingly vital to reputation. They are the customer interface and, in an age of increasing systematization, all endangered touch points with fellow human beings are becoming more critical for developing and sustaining brand. When the customer has a need and/or succumbs to the advertising, responds to the brand's projected values, and comes face to face with an automated process, process engineers and frontline employees are absolutely vital. This means that the leaders who communicate with them the most frequently, either directly or through their teams, are the key communicators in any business. Increasingly, this is the line management community. But, arguably, frontline communication standards have slipped – a big brand issue.

When the smoke has cleared from the latest brand launch and the troupe of performing artistes has packed up its Queen CDs and moved on, when the last sound bite from the trend-setting webcast has lost its teeth, when the last “customer first” mug has finally cracked in the corporate dishwasher, employees alone will remain the keepers or breakers of the promises that organizations make to customers, whatever the CEO says. In an age of mission statements, high-profile, often high-tech guerilla communication and supposedly visionary leadership, the chief engagement officer role has expanded dramatically. Now, more than ever, all line managers are chief engagement officers in their interactions with staff and all employees become chief engagement officers in every customer interaction.

Internal communication specialist, Melcrum, who have a global network of around 20,000 internal communication stakeholders, undertook an Employee Engagement study in 2005 and asked respondents to choose the top three most important drivers of engagement. Interestingly, the top result was still senior leadership (what I'm calling hero leaders), but was closely followed by direct supervisors or line managers. This is the first time they have asked the question so they don't have comparative data, but it won't be long before their rankings are reversed

What this does illustrate is that face-to-face communication from

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credible sources is absolutely key, with formal internal communication (which is largely tactical) coming well down the list. A tricky conundrum for many communicators who still have their sights locked on the tactical level.

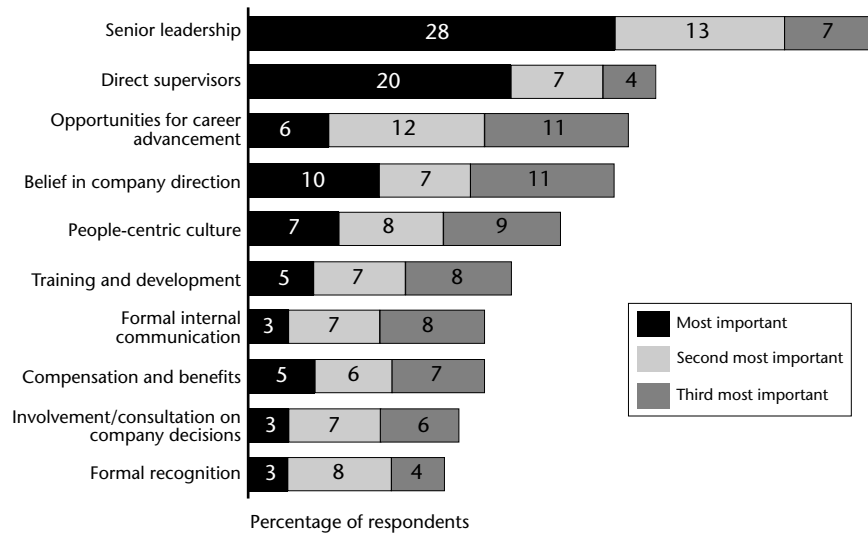


FIGURE 1.1 Top 10 drivers of employee engagement (all data from companies that conduct a key driver analysis)

Source: *Employee Engagement* © Melcrum Publishing, 2005

With the need for more adaptive behavior to meet changing customer demands, employees, rather than board members, have become the vital ingredient in how missions are accomplished.

Bennis (1997, taken from Buckingham and Kitchen, 2005) states:

What effective leaders are going to have to do is to create not just a vision, but a vision with meaning ... The vision has to be shared. And the only way that it can be shared is for it to have meaning for the people who are involved in it.

The key point is in the last sentence – for a vision to be shared, it needs “to have meaning for the people who are involved in it.” It’s relatively easy when you’ve written the battle plan to watch the action unfold on a distant plain and just as easy to criticize the decisions of the

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generals if you're not party to the factors behind the orders. It's often overlooked that the process of working together across hierarchies in the very act of involvement is probably the key driver of engagement and that it's frankly not something that you can cascade. Engagement simply has to be built from the ground up and it means getting very involved in the action.

**ARE WE AT THE TAIL END OF SPIN?**

We live in an era of political, military and socioeconomic spin (the act of providing an interpretation of a statement or event, in a way that subtly conveys bias so as to sway opinion). We may be approaching the tail end of that era as there's a great deal of evidence to show that this veneer is wearing extremely thin. Just as customers are becoming increasingly intolerant of spin, employees (who, of course, are consumers themselves) have little time for employer branding focused on aligning them with scripted messages, descending like favors from above.

This last point was graphically illustrated recently when I was asked to review and report back on the impact of a vision communication cascade. The request was from the central communications function of a global engineering company. When the expensive, slickly designed video of the chairman, CEO and board, filmed talking from a carefully designed script at a range of international locations (you know the sort of thing I'm referring to), was played to the subsidiaries in Eastern Europe, it was met with an angry silence. This was soon followed by cold hostility in the feedback forum. What had been perceived as a benevolent act of engagement by the central team was compared to politburo tactics by the Eastern line managers. They had failed, as a result, to pick up any of the many positive messages in the piece.

Furthermore, employees the world over are extremely intolerant of overdesigned initiatives that cost more than the severance packages of their colleagues. If employees are to engage with and support the vision and claims made by corporate and brand communications, they need to be treated with respect. Communication must be authentic and tailored to local markets, and recognition must be given to the fact that line managers are the workaday communication "superheroes." Line managers and supervisors, the noncommissioned officers of the corporate machine, have to make sense of the world for their people if they're

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to help the strategy work. They can't do that with spin and internal PR, largely because they have to look their team members in the eyes every day. Pity the poor divisional director of a professional services firm who recently had to run an expensively designed team briefing session about employment brand when her department, the operations function, was officially called "Burden" on the structure chart.

If brand engagement is to be truly achieved, local ceos, irrespective of level, need to know how they fit in. They need to understand their importance to the corporation, and willingly translate this into supportive attitudes, behavior, and positive word of mouth. Communication needs to be recognized, measured, and rewarded as a core competency. Clearly, clumsy attempts to align and control will eventually prove unsustainable and ultimately breed creeping brand death through cultural stagnation, corruption, failure to innovate, and even sabotage. If you doubt it, remember Barings, BCCI, the Shell reserves crisis, the Firestone tires debacle, Enron, the recent television telephone competition scandals – even dare to remember Abu Ghraib.

**WHAT CHARACTERIZES AN EFFECTIVE CHIEF ENGAGEMENT OFFICER?**

According to Fombrun (1996), the top traits of companies that employees would like to work for are:

- they promote trust
- they empower employees
- they inspire pride.

But what are employees saying now?

In 2005, my consultancy, the Bring Yourself 2 Work Fellowship (BY2W) surveyed 1,500 employees in CEO roles (defined as anyone with pivotal communications responsibility from board members through to line managers). When we asked respondents to reflect on corporate communication and relay best practices, we discovered that the traits they most admire in leaders who they consider to be effective at engaging with employees include (in ranking order):

- openness
- bravery

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- honesty
- charisma.

Conversely, the characteristics that they see as hindering effective engagement from both a personal and corporate perspective are prioritized as:

- one-way communication and lack of involvement
- insincerity and spin
- inaction
- failure to personalize messages to key audiences (blanket bombing).

In leadership terms, social development has long been determining a shift away from the era of authoritarian leadership – defined by obedience to authority at the expense of personal liberty. We are now in the age of authentic leadership, driven by a need to believe and to trust. The communication role of the chief executive, in communication terms, is more *primus inter pares* than presidential now. How fast the transition happens and how effective it will be will rest significantly on the degree to which leaders can engage their employees by connecting with their emotional as well as rational selves.

Authoritarian organizations arguably still have their place, but it's increasingly questionable whether they're getting the best out of their people, and when authoritarian cultures appear on the corporate radar, it's more often than not a signal that something's awry! Even the armed forces are having to adapt their leadership style to bring out the best in their recruits.

Bill George (2003), in *True North*, one of the seminal texts on this subject, defines the concept of authentic leadership as, in effect, being true to yourself. This means understanding and being true to your values, finding your own style, and ensuring that there is appropriate fit between your values and the organization you represent. He refers to five dimensions:

1. Understanding and pursuing your purpose with passion
2. Practicing solid values
3. Leading with your heart
4. Establishing connected relationships
5. Demonstrating self-discipline.

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Being your own person is absolutely key, it allows the leader to be objective and independent. Understanding what the real you is can be an altogether trickier undertaking. Clarifying the true culture and values of your organization is a great deal more complex than consulting the marketing literature; but ensuring that the real you fits with the brand of your organization is the trickiest proposition of all. Authentic leadership is the central challenge facing anyone in a leadership role, who is concerned with brand management and believes that employee engagement is the key to effective brand management. It is the challenge that now faces true ceos, or as Caroline Hempstead, AstraZeneca's VP, group corporate communication, and what I call a true Tier 1 communication professional puts it:

The best role models and most effective communicators I've known are all:

- astute business leaders who are positive about engagement, not just pushing information
- good at simplifying and staying on message, linking information to develop a consistent story, adapted for audiences
- comfortable in their own skin, so their communication is authentic and consistent with other aspects of their leadership style
- as good at listening as they are communicating
- being themselves and, therefore, they're inspirational but also predictable which adds to the credibility of the message.

The acid test always is "would I follow this person into battle?" That's a characteristic which owes a lot to integrity and authenticity rather than being a slick communicator.

**SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNINGS**

- Brands are more about people than process and their management has global implications
- Line managers are the new hero communicators
- Authentic communication that delivers at both the emotional and rational levels is the most powerful and most engaging communication

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## 5 Things to Try Today

---

1. Be clear about the organization's purpose and values.
2. Ask yourself how your own values square with 1.
3. Find a way to understand where your staff (and customers) are at.
4. Seek out and promote great brand engagement role models (don't be blinded by seniority).
5. Imagine yourself giving a rallying speech and then charging headlong into battle, flags and bullets flying. You take a look around you. Who's still there?

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