

Leadership, conversational practice and engagement: working with paradoxical tensions

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Introduction

Indications are that employee engagement is a critical priority for leaders and people professionals, concerned with boosting organisational effectiveness and championing better working lives (Bailey et. al. 2017). In this paper, Helen Francis reflects upon leadership issues arising from People strategies aimed at building employee engagement in an age of austerity. Using a set of reflective questions, Helen explains that engagement is more tension-filled and therefore less stable than psychologists tend to suggest and goes on to explain what this means in practice. The need is stressed for better communication practices that help workers and managers deal with tensions productively.

Catherine Thomson then presents a case example of a dialogic leadership intervention within a Housing Association, at a time when the organisation was experiencing poor operational performance, low morale and low engagement.

Why use the term ‘People’ professional – how does this differ from HR professional?

There are a range of titles for Human Resources Management (HRM) Departments and roles, such as ‘HR’, ‘human capital’, ‘personnel’ or ‘people’. The question of what title to use is underpinned by long standing controversy amongst academics and practitioners about whether the name ‘HR’ or ‘Personnel’ matters. We believe this matters a great deal, given that language has an important shaping influence on individual and organisational behaviours and HR practice, especially the human ‘resource’ metaphor which we tend not to question and take for granted (Francis, 2002; Janssens and Steyaert, 2009).

The term HRM was coined in US Business Schools during the 1980s to model a more ‘strategic’, business focused approach to people management practice. Since then, the notion of HRM has become the preferred way of speaking about modern-day people management- replacing talk of personnel management (Francis, 2016). Alongside an upsurge of academic research in ‘strategic’ HRM, HR professionals have positioned themselves as ‘partners’ working closely with line management. This helps to bolster a legitimacy to adopt board-level roles, and to promote greater line manager involvement in HR duties, such as recruitment and performance management.

As time has moved on, we’ve seen significant structural changes in HR functions and roles, supported by advancements in technology. This has led to more streamlined HR processes such as on-line recruitment, and training, and to a closer alignment of business and HR strategies geared to improve engagement and performance at the workplace.

Critics have argued that these developments have enabled the emergence of an increasingly dispassionate resource-based view of people management – employees are framed as a costly ‘asset’, targeted by ‘hard’

HR practices - such as those concerned with improvements in the monitoring and control of performance and sickness absence, and the use of call center technology in communicating with staff, described as 'dehumanising' by one of the following research respondents:

It's done over the phone, it's done on a computer, it's done like a question and answer session, and it doesn't begin to put the human element into consideration (Senior HR Manager).
(Keegan and Francis, 2010).

Arguments have been made from critical-theoretical perspectives, for a more balanced HR agenda that treats people as creative, resourceful human beings who will flourish in a supportive organisational environment. Yet with the eyes of the HR profession set on strategic partnership, the traditional employee-facing HR role is less in evidence, leading in some cases to a loss of employee trust and confidence in HR, and costs to employee well-being (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Purcell, 2014; Thompson, 2011).

We know that Personnel functions have always operated at the interface of conflicting forces within organisations, leading to a mix of "hard" and "soft" people practices (Marchington, 2015). Locked in relationship to each other, they emerge as *paradoxical*, expressed in the form of mixed (and sometimes confusing) messages. For instance, on the one hand we hear a great deal in the popular media about the payoffs in creating more empowered work cultures, supported by a 'softer' edge to HR work concerned with employee engagement and well-being, and the switching in title from 'HR' to 'People' Departments (Francis et. al. 2013; Francis and Baum, 2018; Keenoy, 2013). On the other hand, the 'hard' language of strategic HRM is increasingly dominant as organisations seek to maintain a competitive edge in harsh market and financial conditions - creating a 'dark' side to engagement where people may be expected to work harder with less job security and poorer terms and conditions (Bolino et. al. 2013; George, 2011; Francis and Keegan, 2018; Turnbull, and Wass, 2015). These arguments underpin an emerging area of academic research into the practice of engagement, used to challenge prevailing theoretical frameworks.

What challenges are taking place to prevailing models of engagement?

To address this question, we need to be mindful that there are wide differences between academics and practitioner perspectives on engagement. In the practitioner world, engagement is treated as a workforce strategy designed to build and measure people's commitment to organisational goals and values, and measuring outcomes arising from this such as discretionary effort and improved productivity (Truss, 2014). In contrast, most academic research has been undertaken by psychologists, focused on defining and measuring 'work' engagement - a positive work-related state of mind associated with an investment of energy, dedication and involvement in work tasks (Bakker, 2017; Schaufeli, 2013).

More recently, academics from a critical perspective offer insights into people's actual *experiences* of being engaged (or disengaged) with their job and their organization (Bailey et. al. 2017). Challenging the dominant 'resource' metaphor of HRM, focus is being placed on paradoxical engagement tensions rooted in external socio-political /economic contexts, and associated pressures for individuals and organisations to 'do more with less' resources (Francis et. al. 2013; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013).

One example involves a case study of a health charity that relied quite heavily on local government contracts amidst cuts in public sector spending. The charity was faced with a growing amount of contractual paperwork, amidst pressure to do more with less resources in order to maintain and win, new contracts (Francis and Keegan, 2018). These pressures had a strong impact on how people felt about their job, their organisation, and their ability to cope with competing demands. For instance, an engagement survey revealed a strong commitment amongst charity workers to supporting vulnerable clients, but that some

were becoming overwhelmed with competing priorities. They were expected to maintain a high level of care on the one hand, and on the other, complete more and more paperwork, while their contacted hours for service users was being reduced in the face of new contracting processes. These demands are paradoxical in that they are contradictory and interrelated – choosing to do either care work or paperwork was not an option - they had to do both - yet there appeared to be little or discussion with line managers about how to balance competing demands, other than working extra hours, which was unpaid (Francis and Keegan, 2018).

Left unchecked, there is potential here, for levels of workplace stress to increase, and for individuals to become disengaged (or withdraw) from their job roles, suggested by sentiments expressed by one care worker:

Time is taken up by cooking, cleaning, medicating, providing personal care and health & safety. Albeit this is important and has to be done. But is this all that matters in your life? There is more to any person than this!!! unfortunately after the allocated support hours have been utilised delivering this support, then completing the ridiculous paperwork that goes with it, the service user is almost every time sitting in a room/flat doing NOTHING ELSE. This makes me really sad and frustrated and if you could put yourself in that position I'm sure you would find your self-esteem and mental health would not be in a great place (cited in Francis and Keegan, 2018).

In contrast, charity workers who appeared to be in a better position to balance work demands, were actively encouraged by their line managers to engage in open conversations about issues and concerns, illustrated in the following account:

I have worked with my line manager to initiate a transformational change programme, we worked well together to initiate a business case and resources by taking lots of time to discuss options, tactics, potential risks or barriers, how others may feel about the change and I welcomed the opportunity to raise issues, concerns, challenges and opportunities (Health Care worker, cited in Francis and Keegan, 2018).

These findings support Kahn's seminal work (1990) about the importance of *relationships* to engagement, including the pivotal role of line managers in building a supportive conversational climate (Francis et.al 2013); and with more recent notions of 'conversational', 'relational', 'distributive' and 'paradoxical' leadership (Alfes and Langer, 2017; Putnam et al 2016; Reitz 2015). These terms place emphasis upon dialogue and working constructively with opposing leadership demands, recognising that these cannot be reduced to a simple either/or choice (Smith and Lewis, 2012).

What are the implications for future leadership and management practice?

There is growing evidence of more practice-led 'conversational' techniques aimed at generating dialogue and 'bottom-up' conversations for change. These include broader organisational development interventions, such as 'world café' and 'open space' techniques (Oswick, 2013; Bushe and Marshak 2009), used to generate shared understandings about competing perspectives and priorities – and how to work with these productively.

Also, there are a growing number of dialogue frameworks used to build individual leaders' communicative competencies (Ridings, 2011). David Kantor's (2012) 'four-player model' is an example of work in this field, evolving from a synthesis between his theory of face-to-face communications and the original works of well-

known scholars of organisational learning ie. Chris Argyris, Peter Senge, Don Schön, Ed Schein (Kantor, Wallace, Hill, and Melville, 2014).

Participants learn about their common behavioural tendencies: positions that they tend to hold when in conversation (move-oppose-follow-bystand), and associated talents and traps of their profile. They learn to expand their communicative repertoire, recognising the role of broader 'Operating systems' and 'Communicative domains' which powerfully shape their conversational practice (eg. the rules they implicitly follow and expect others to follow); the focus of their attention, including topics /issues to which they gravitate). A case example is presented below by Catherine Thomson, of a leadership intervention within a Housing Association which draws upon Kantor's seminal model to bring about a shift in managerial mindsets and behaviours.

Case Study: Housing Association

This assignment, led by Catherine Thomson, highlighted the need to develop leaders' focus on the power of developing conversational intelligence at a time when the organisation was experiencing poor operational performance, poor morale and engagement.

What we Did

We set up a 360-degree survey measuring Team Climate and Leadership Styles (based on research by the Korn Ferry Institute) for the CEO, Executive Team and the remaining leaders/managers in the organisation (30 in total). We wanted to better understand *team climate* by measuring the following dimensions:

Clarity – the degree to which employees know and understand what is expected of them. (job challenge, importance and variety);

Standards - the degree to which challenging but achievable standards and encouragement to improve performance exist;

Flexibility - the degree to which there are unnecessary rules/procedures and how easy it is to have new ideas accepted;

Responsibility – the degree to which authority is given to accomplish tasks without checking for approval;

Rewards – leadership facilitation and support - the degree to which staff are rewarded for good performance and that praise outweighs criticism and threats;

Team Commitment– workgroup cooperation, friendliness, warmth and management of conflict. Data analysis included an assessment of the degree to which team climate was influenced by the *prevailing leadership styles* used by this group of leaders.

What we Found

Employee feedback pointed to difficulty in being able to suggest new ideas and solutions to problems facing them at work, with concerns expressed about having to 'fight against' unreasonable constraints. This revealed evidence of 'micro managing' on the one hand, and unclear performance expectations on the other. Survey results also suggested that:

- Staff did not feel valued or their efforts recognised.
- Conversational patterns consisted of the monologue variety; manager making all the decisions; absence of debate around critical issues; covert opposition; courteous compliance.
- Prevailing Leadership Styles across the organisation were primarily, Coercive (do as I tell you) and Pacesetter (if you can't do it right, I'll do it myself) both of which contributed significantly to the creation of low climate for Clarity, Responsibility, Flexibility, Reward and Team Commitment.

What Happened Next

Working with the entire leadership community we explored the type of organisational culture they

wished to create, and how this could be achieved, by focusing on the quality of the following categories of conversations: Coaching; Setting Direction; Giving feedback; Problem Solving; Innovating; and Decision Making. Leadership development was focused on enabling the leadership community to discuss and explore data findings in a way that engendered trust, openness and honesty.

Approach

Using Kantor's model of *Structural Dynamics*, leaders became aware of the (action) stances they take in a conversation, the words chosen when speaking and the implicit rules that are followed when interacting with someone. Our findings pointed to evidence of ongoing interpersonal relationships, that have existed over a period of time, which include patterns of 'stuck' behaviours that repeat over and over again.

Survey feedback sessions with the team of 30 managers were used to help them build an understanding of their own behavioural repertoire and learn how to expand it, contributing to their communicative success. This included learning about how to change 'stuck' patterns of conversational behaviours by expanding their repertoire.

Participants also learned to work with key *Conversational Practices* underpinning the positions that they hold in conversation (Authentic Voice, Listen, Respect and Judgement). Working consciously with these conversational practices allows managers to enhance the quality of their leadership conversations by speaking with their authentic voice and encouraging others to do the same; listening as a participant, seeking more to understand; respecting the views of others and suspending their own certainties.

Over a period of nine months our participants worked at developing their behavioural repertoire by practice, reflection and follow-through, with an observable improvement in their communicative competence, including their awareness and ability to:

- Expand their conversational repertoire, bringing balance and new understandings when the conversation gets 'stuck'.
- Build healthy relationships with team members leading to higher engagement.
- Build trust and create opportunities to talk about shared anxieties, ideas and solutions.
- Facilitate meaningful conversations where everyone's voice holds equal value

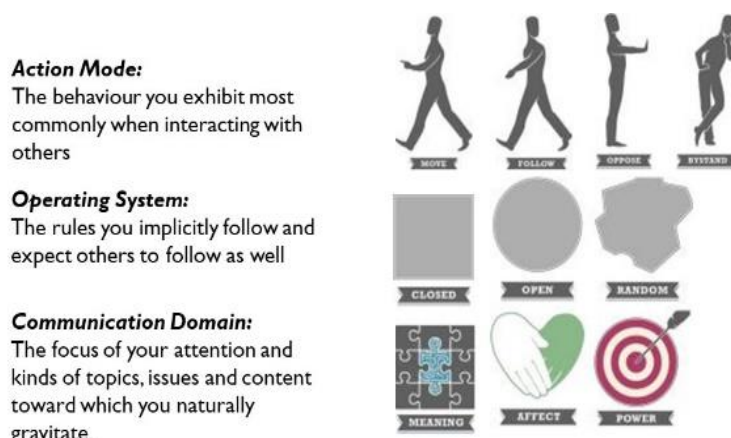
Outcomes

A second Organisational Climate and Leadership Styles Assessment was undertaken one year later. Results indicated that across the organisation:

- Employees were experiencing a healthy reduction in the Pacesetter and Coercive styles of leadership and an increase in the Democratic and Coaching Styles.
- These results were positively linked to evidence of a more balanced organisational (and related team) climate.
- There was significant improvement in the climate dimensions of Clarity, Responsibility, Flexibility and Team Commitment.

By the end of our Leadership Intervention, participants had created climate improvement plans used for ongoing monitoring and tracking of progress. They now having regular, more meaningful conversations with peers and team members.

Kantor Structural Dynamics (Kantor, 2012)



Source: 2014 The Kantor Institute

Conclusion

Amidst increasing complexity and scarcity of resources, people in organisations are increasingly being expected to work with contradictory information and paradoxical demands. In this paper, we place the spotlight on engagement tensions arising from demands to raise service quality and cut costs and how these were linked to the wider economy. We highlight the pivotal role of 'conversational leadership' in generating the time and space to embrace an openness to change and opportunities to work with tensions creatively.

We recognise that embedding leadership practice of this kind is challenging in the face of structural constraints, such as declining time/space for supervisors to initiative conversations and collective inquiry with subordinates, or mindsets that are entrenched in either/or thinking about tensions between opposites. Nevertheless, there is growing evidence to suggest that organisations, leaders and managers who can successfully embrace paradoxical demands are more adaptive and effective (Von Bergen et.al. 2017; Derksen et. al. 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2012; Zang et. al. 2015). These findings offer an important contribution to current debates about the impact of attempts by HRM professionals to perform both people-centred and business-oriented roles – a key theme underpinning the CIPD New Professional Map aimed at championing 'better work and better working lives' (CIPD website 2019).

Reflective Learning Activity

1. Identify three key learning points from reading this thought piece?
2. How might you apply this learning to future academic work or practice?

Bibliographies

Helen Francis

Helen Francis is Professor of People and Organisation at Edinburgh Napier Business School (part-time) and has held honorary professorships at St Andrews University and at the University of Strathclyde. She started her career in personnel management and industrial relations, and when she moved into academic practice, she completed a PhD in the role of language and strategic change. She has played key roles in research, teaching and commercial developments in public, private and not-for profit sectors. Helen has published in a wide range of academic and practitioner journals / textbooks, calling for the pursuit of more 'balanced' HR agendas. As a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, she developed strong links with the Institute and with business communities, building a reputation in executive education and research-based consultancy, and achieved the lifetime award of 'Outstanding Contribution to the Scottish HR Profession' in 2013 (HR Network Awards Scotland).

Catherine Thomson

Catherine is founder of the Houston Exchange with over 20 years' experience in helping senior leaders align their workforce to deliver company strategy. Working internationally with leading brands across multiple sectors, Catherine's experience spans the full range of people and organisational challenges including performance transformation, behavioural change, top team and board development. Her focus now is working with leaders to help boost individual and team performance by focusing on workplace conversations, and the actions and behaviours that flow from them. She has worked in all sectors with UK-wide and international experience. She is accredited by the Kantor Institute to work with the Behavioural Propensities Profile, an instrument for measuring distinctive behaviours that are typically expressed in everyday conversations. Catherine is a co-recipient of the Gold Medal Award for Best Leadership Development Programme awarded by the Training Journal UK.

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