



# Leader

**Nick Hastings**, a consultant for YSC, on why current stress, fear and negativity in the workplace mean survey results do little to help us create a genuine connection with our employees. It is all about creating a personal connection: simple conversations and small gestures can recreate focus and confidence

---

As technology continues to advance we are now more reliant than ever on the speed, cost and efficiency of the employee survey. In the current climate they are regularly deployed to monitor, measure and inform our employee engagement strategies.

This mechanistic approach will always be appealing. Quantitative data and headline figures that come out of survey responses give us something to focus on when we need to come up with ways to engage our people. This fairly standard, commoditised approach characterises the majority of work in this field – yet it misses out a crucial component which is that engagement is personal.

Asking 1,000 marching peace demonstrators what it is that motivates them cannot properly capture the strength of emotion displayed by an individual when they march through the rain to protest. That they're 'against the war' is a fairly safe assumption to make. We need to remember that the individual is on their own unique journey that we must seek to understand authentically, rather than resorting to yes and no answers that form a pithy headline or sound bite.

Engagement is not a commodity, it cannot be aggregated or depersonalised and to do so is counter-intuitive. The very act of engaging with someone, or something, is to create a personal connection. This personal connection – itself the vehicle to drive change – is lost when we resort to questionnaires and mass data capture. These methods are even less meaningful in a climate that is characterised by stress, fear and constant negativity in the media.

The traditional levers for generating and maintaining employee engagement include remuneration (specifically, bonuses), staff away-days, lunches and evenings out, among other things. But in the current climate, for many organisations, these are no longer viable options. Now is the time to come back to a basic understanding of psychology. The connection between the individual and their workplace is critical. All our efforts should be focused on creating meaning in this context, creating a genuine and empathic connection with our people.

At YSC, in our experience as business psychologists, it is the small, simple and seemingly obvious initiatives that create and engender genuine engagement. These are traditionally both underplayed, under valued and often bypassed altogether. The point worth making is that these small connection points cannot be captured by technology alone. However, simple conversations, a little detective work and a relatively modest outlay of effort can generate a deeper knowledge of an individual's perceptions, motivations and insights. This approach of 'hearing from the horse's mouth' is an invaluable engagement strategy as it gives people a local voice to contribute to the company's bigger picture.

Channel4's recent programme, *I'm Running Sainsbury's* is a powerful illustration of encouraging employees to share their knowledge by being invited to come up with new ideas to increase Sainsbury's sales in a kind of grocery-themed *Dragons' Den* at their own head office. This acts both as an engagement tool and as a means of uniting company strategy with the workforce on the front-line. We worked with Sainsbury's several years ago, when Justin King came to the helm, helping the company to re-establish their vision and values and suggesting processes to help empower staff to do just this.

Trust and candour, genuine respect, deep understanding and empathy and positive intent are all key mechanisms through which leaders can engage with their people. Gestures as small as remembering a birthday or a modest, even token, reward for a key achievement may make the difference between connecting with someone and isolating them. Engagement should be targeted at the individual level and in such a way that it cascades down through the leadership chain.

If leaders can create meaning for their people – positioning them to move towards success rather than away from failure – they will maximise the chance of keeping them focused, confident and engaged. The initial effort and investment that this requires is a small price to pay for the benefits available over the longer-term. ■