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Re-engaged, re-energised: coaching your team through testing times

Alison Griffiths explores the value of coaching, and how it can help motivate both managers and employees in the challenging economic climate

A fundamental aim of coaching is to raise our self-awareness, reconnect us with our choices at work and build self-confidence. The potential of coaching to address these issues comes to the fore when, as now, many companies are undergoing redundancies and restructuring.

If you are a manager and want to connect with your staff more effectively, or perhaps someone who is finding work difficult because you have lost enthusiasm and passion for your job, coaching can help you find the solution.

Personal control may be diminished due to the impact of the current economic climate and the ongoing re-structuring of the pharmaceutical industry. Coaching provides some practical ways for regaining that control. It invites you to

Key points

- Re-engage: Think about how your job is affecting your attitude and behaviour, and that of those around you
- Understand work emotions: People who are unhappy in their job can be as anxious as those who are unemployed
- Have one to one meetings: Time invested in staff can save time and money in the long run
- Value your team members: Focus on strengths, and don't ignore the individual input they have contributed
- Be honest: Asking the right questions can help employees open up as to what is really bothering them
- Share responsibility for success: Explore what you can do together to make life better at work

consider the questions posed to help towards a strategy for re-engaging both yourself and your team.

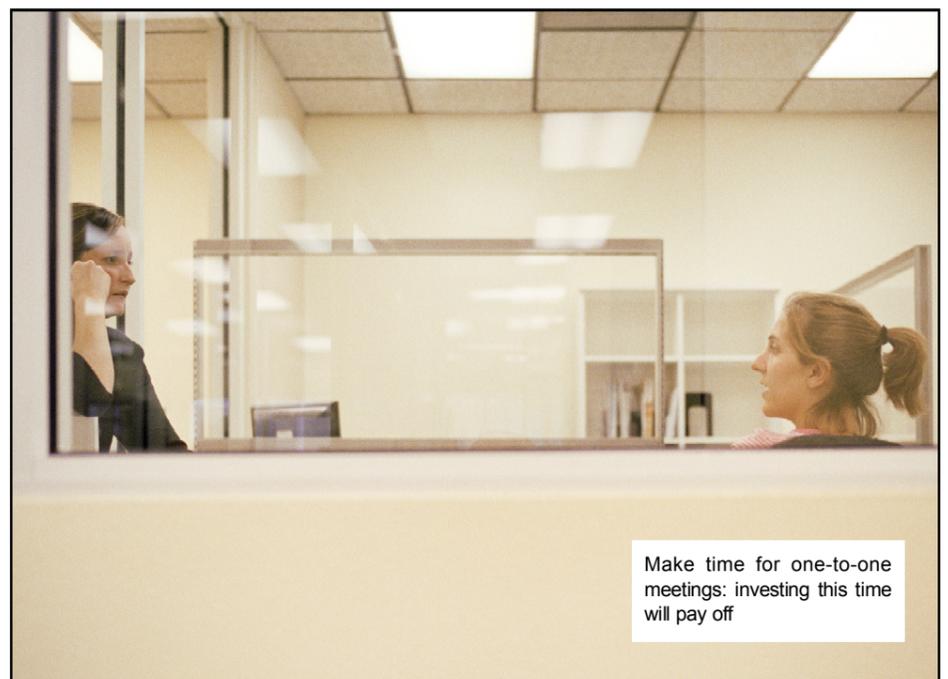
Re-engaging

What does being 'engaged' mean for you? Is it being clear why you are in your role? What its purpose is, and that of the team around you? Maybe it's feeling enthusiastic or passionate - having a vision of what you and the role are achieving along with a sense of loyalty and willingness to do the best you can.

Whatever it is, what are you thinking when you are truly engaged at work? Ask yourself how you feel. Or is it just that you are unconsciously engaged, absorbed in your work? Think for a moment and define how being fully engaged with your job, boss and the organisation affects your attitude and behaviour.

When times are good with only the usual ups and downs to contend with, we are better able to sustain a sense of 'engagement' with our job, boss, and organisation. We often do it unconsciously. However, this can become challenged when:

- a) Workload has increased due to redundancies or headcount freeze, and expenditure, reward and recognition are being cut
- b) The manager has left due to downsizing and we have no affiliation with our new manager (or worse still - don't have one)
- c) The manager is too busy to spend time with us
- d) Colleagues are unhappy and negativity prevails
- e) We or our people are not enjoying the role as much as we did, and too much uncertainty creates a sense of 'being stuck here'
- f) Re-structuring brings unwelcome promotions which can result in people feeling de-valued and unrecognised.



What happens to our attitude, behaviour and feelings towards the role? How can we tell when we are becoming disengaged? And if this is the case for ourselves or our employees, what can we do?

A recent event run by the Association for Coaching shared some statistics on the impact on individuals when left to fend for themselves after redundancies, or when they are no longer stimulated or motivated in their role or with the organisation. The one that resonated with me (it fits with my experience of coaching people in this situation) is the impact on the ability to recover and focus at work when this is going on.

Research by Brendan Burchell demonstrated that: 'People who feel insecure in their job display similar levels of anxiety and depression as those who are unemployed. Whereas a newly jobless person's mental health may bottom out (on the change curve) after six months, and then begin to improve, the mental state of people

who are perpetually worried about their job just continues to deteriorate, getting worse and worse.'

Notice the word 'feel' - it holds an important clue as to what is going on for people. Work is an emotional experience and it is therefore important that we stay or become more attuned to the emotional elements if we want to re-engage them. No longer can businesses give the message: "Either get on board with where we're going and what we're doing or leave!" In today's climate the person is less likely to leave and if they do, it will be more difficult to replace them. As highlighted in March's Pharmafocus by an established industry recruiter: "There is a cautiousness and unwillingness to move jobs unnecessarily."

The first step is to begin with ourselves. How engaged are we? How much attention are we paying to that? As managers, how can we expect our team members to be on board during

challenging times if we ourselves are sending out the wrong messages? Isn't it vital for us to be able to manage ourselves before we can expect to effectively manage others?

This is not a one hit wonder. Engaging ourselves and others takes time and some nurturing – both in terms of confidence and trust.

Regular one-to-one meetings with the right focus are essential and from experience of coaching managers through this, the idea can be uncomfortable. This is especially true when the focus of such meetings is to review progress, issues arising and what is happening next. The topics which are more personal and touch on 'values' and emotional aspects are often passed over until matters come to a head. Getting the balance right is essential in this situation – some people willingly receive this kind of interest, others are less willing to share their thoughts. However, in times of uncertainty and disengagement, you will probably find people are more open to this type of dialogue – if it is approached in the right way.

Here are four key elements which will help this to be a success. Of course, if the individual really does not want your help or is in fact content not to be engaged, you are less likely to succeed. Don't beat yourself up if this is the case! However, if the individual genuinely wants to be happier at work and what they need is some attention to what they are feeling and going through at the moment, these techniques should go some way to helping with re-engagement.

1. Have one-to-one meetings

If you don't have one to one meetings, now is the time to start making time for them. This may seem like a big time commitment, but managing and engaging your staff is a priority and will save you time in the long run.

2. Be honest about what you want to discuss

Be open about the situation and emphasise the importance of this individual to you, the team, the organisation. Be specific about the value they add and how important it is for you to do what you can (within the boundaries), to enable them to be as happy and motivated as possible in their role. Research from Gallop shows that managers who focus on employee's strengths reduce the chances of them being disengaged to 1%, compared with a 40% chance when employees are ignored.

A successful approach one client took was: "Greg, you're a really valued member of this team and someone I hold in very high regard. I know things have been tougher lately and that there's a lot of uncertainty which can affect how we feel. So I want us to put some time aside on a regular basis to keep in touch with how you're doing, what is impacting you the most and how we can make life a bit better here for you while we go through this challenging time."

This structure may not work for everyone – however, the underlying message can be adapted to suit the situation and ensure authenticity.

3. Find out what is bothering them

If the individual is not forthcoming with what's on their mind, begin by asking questions around what is important to them (their values). For example:

- Tell me how are you finding things at the moment?
- We've got some tough targets, what do you need most at the moment to help you?
- What would make for a really good day?
- Accepting that we can't change the headcount freeze, what one thing would help ease the pressure for you?
- What's missing at the moment?
- What would really help to re-energise you?

4. Share responsibility for success

Explore with them what you can do together to make life better at work. List and prioritise. Staying empathic, be honest about the aspects that neither of you can change and cross them off. Remember that as the manager, you may not be able to fix all those left on the list. You are representing the business and it is best not to put unrealistic expectations on yourself.

Referring to the list, identify with them which aspects you and/or they can do something about and which are in your or their control. Prioritise with

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Engaging your staff is a priority, especially in more difficult times and will save you time in the long run.

them and coach them through what and how things can be improved for them.

If the employee will not participate in such a discussion, or is resistant, do what you can to encourage them. It helps to establish whether they have faced this situation before. What coping strategies did they use then? If they say that they left the company, explore what they

could have done differently to make life better if they had chosen to stay? What could their manager have done? Build on the individual's power to make things better for themselves as well as your responsibility to do what you can.

If this is still not bringing the right results, it may require the help of a neutral third party or coach to explore with them what is going on. From experience, this intervention can enhance both the manager's relationship with the employee as well as the employee's awareness of what they can do for themselves. Coaching can also help if the manager lacks confidence.

Investment in supporting managers and employees through uncertain times may seem like an unwarranted cost. However, if we measure that against the loss of engagement of key people at the times when we need the most out of them, it may be a false economy to ignore it. Finally, most people in our industry don't necessarily need solutions at these times. They are intelligent and professional enough to know

that the current situation cannot be changed.

However, what they need is an empathetic ear, someone who acknowledges how things are and will give them the 'air space' to off-load, permission to take time to recover when it gets tough and reassurance that their predicament is understood even if it can't be fixed.

And of course, that their efforts are recognised and that they are appreciated and supported. I wonder how much of this we are actually giving to ourselves?

Alison Griffiths is an accredited coach and runs her own practice Success Coaching & Development Ltd.

Specialising in the pharma industry, she has coached leaders, managers and teams on a one-to-one and group basis for over six years.

Contact Alison at a.griffiths@successc-d.co.uk

www.inpharmjobs.com

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