



Many organisations talk up the importance of their people and the efforts made to help them achieve their potential. So why do so many people in our industry still feel left out in the cold? Steve Bernard looks at the reasons for this gap and why some employees feel undervalued.

Employers need to engage service ambassadors in every customer interface

# Power to people potential

**Organisational life** is so diverse, both in the nature of the businesses and in working practices. Unfortunately, one factor remains: many employers are still too traditional in their approach to service delivery which stifles creativity and innovative thinking throughout the organisation.

They persist with structures, hierarchies and roles that kill strong leadership and discourage discretionary effort by people who have more to offer. Managers' own insecurities and lack of confidence present

a barrier to progress, deterring innovation and inhibiting the potential in others.

Too often we see conformists and those in defined roles encouraged at the expense of others with new ideas to bring to the table. Is that the way forward for truly customer-focused organisations?

Automatically, this kind of 'tried and tested' mentality puts service organisations on the back foot. This is a key theme in Goffee and Jones' book *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?*

It doesn't have to be this way. Many organisations work on the 'upside down management' principle, a simple concept where the hierarchy is reversed and service ambassadors who are closest to customers are at the top of the organisation. Federal Express and Timpson, for example, are big proponents of this approach.

Even this enlightened approach is not the whole answer. Most great organisations have known for some time that a single focus strategy is at best risky and at worst a recipe for disaster. Many now take great care to balance their key drivers: operational efficiency, product innovation, brand engagement and customer intimacy.

The right formula depends on the organisation type, its market and other influencing factors.

The 'gap' arises when organisations enjoy a degree of success and then decide to 'lock down' their formula. They resist change and end up suppressing, often destroying the potential of their people whose unsupported ideas and insights go to waste.

One bright spot is British Airways and Terminal 5. Since the early gremlins BA has pulled off an amazing feat. T5 has brought together three of the key drivers.

The spacious self-service check-in environment is certainly efficient and its product innovation has delivered consistent, high-quality services faster. Customer intimacy is the icing on the cake. What you notice now is a distinct lack of technology.

Instead, customers are greeted with more welcoming, smiling faces – staff are providing proper service in a personal way. This is a great environment to release the potential of those customer service professionals.

So what's the answer? Ongoing dialogue is vital in any organisation. As markets change, customers ask about new products and services and it's important that service ambassadors – who know and understand their customers better than anyone else – are at the heart of all decisions that impact

on frontline interactions. Generally, leaders are more focused on specific 'problems' or 'opportunities'. It's not difficult to guess which lens those in the financial services sector are preoccupied with right now!

The value of more general organisational conversation is high. The problem is that its impact is often intangible or not immediate and therefore execution of the dialogue is crucial.

In a recent issue of *customerfirst*, under the heading *Stop telling us what to do*, ICS communications manager Gary Dawkes highlighted the problem with mission statements. He hit the nail on the head by referring to senior managers not walking the talk. This behaviour is very damaging.

Organisations do need a 'vision' or 'common purpose' otherwise how can people reach their potential without understanding the part they need to play. What's clearly missing in many organisations is the authenticity of the conversation around the vision and a lack of good role modelling.

Few would argue that, as service ambassadors, people are their organisation's biggest asset. Why, then, are many involved only at the tail end of the conversations with customers and the minutiae of service delivery?

### The new challenge

ICS chief executive David Parsons wrote recently about releasing the innovation potential of people, commenting on Institute-sponsored work by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE).

He talked about leadership qualities and behaviours that inspire and encourage others to use their initiative, to question the way things are done and to innovate.

The new challenge is to engage service ambassadors earlier into the whole conversation. Using their untapped potential starts by encouraging them to use their initiative to think beyond the tried and tested. It also means removing



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barriers and taking an axe to the 'we've always done it this way' mentality.

Creating that environment requires courage and bravery on the part of leaders and managers. Many companies find this difficult.

Managers operate in the way they know best and often need coaching themselves to create opportunities to involve their staff in a mutually rewarding and more effective way.

Imagine the power and potential available if every leader and manager in UK plc took a gamble, thought longer term and allowed service ambassadors and others to the table. With the financial system in disarray and the economy shrinking, will there ever be a better time to start trusting our people?

The great thing about investing in the potential within people is the 'human' pay-off. Yes, company profits, targets and service levels are absolutely critical. But when managers listen, lead and inspire their people, they will see more than they thought was there originally.

Once people's personal fears and inhibitions are expressed and attended to, they begin to appreciate their own power and potential.

Enabling people to play their full part is long overdue. The message is clear. Managers and leaders must drive the release of people potential throughout their organisations.

As one HR director put it, people are our single biggest cost. So when making a critical decision they collectively represent our company's brain. To be truly successful we must engage in 'whole-brain thinking'.