



# Making communications key to employee engagement

**If people are an organisation's biggest asset, creating a firm partnership that sees employees engaged and ambassadors for the business is vital for success.**

Research has identified the key drivers of employee engagement and the common theme throughout is effective communication.

Delegates at this month's aspic seminar heard the views and experiences of two speakers.

Nycomed's Director of Organisational Communications, Mark Watkins, told the story of the Danish pharmaceutical firm's recent purchase and integration of German company ALTANA Pharma.

The biggest issue faced was around the people with Nycomed's culture being entrepreneurial, opportunistic and Scandinavian in contrast to Altana's culture of strategy and policy driven, long-term thinking and German.

Five key challenges included setting up an integration project team drawn from both firms; working with senior management; engaging employees; addressing the very different needs around the business and resources.

To engage employees, three waves of survey were carried out to temperature test and act as a litmus test to feelings and perceptions. This allowed the communication team to target areas such as line management communications skills that were barriers to success and to use the preferred channels for dialogue.

Mark's key advice based on his experiences is to: be honest – if it is an acquisition then say so, don't hide behind softer words like 'merger'; build strong relationships with senior managers and manage their

expectations; employees want clues about the future and champions for their interests; the external media will influence the internal audience so align the two; and trust your intuition.

Meanwhile, Director and founder of Green Lion, Andy Parsley outlined his view that people are the next step in delivering competitive advantage for organisations.

Research shows that only 35 per cent of the UK workforce are actively engaged. Twenty per cent are actively disengaged in organisations and the remaining 55 per cent just don't care. The cost of disengagement to the UK economy is estimated at £38 billion a year.

Andy says that the three steps to successful engagement are leadership, respect and personal development.

Leadership must believe in the core values and the vision and compellingly communicate this with short term objectives. Our role as communications professionals is to help leaders to communicate effectively in their own style, tailoring tools and delivery style.

Respect is reflected in the fact that people do like change and want to be involved – if it is 'done' to you, you're not as engaged.

And, Andy advised organisations to think hard about why they promote people. Not everyone is a natural leader or communicator and inputs should be measured so that not only the fact that the task was completed is a measure of success.

He also shared his seven point employee engagement roadmap urging the audience to break down internal silos. Internal communications has the skills to break down the barriers between departments to achieve this.

Delegates also worked in small groups to share their own experiences on employee engagement.

**Key points raised here were:**

- the key driver of personal employee engagement range from earning a living, recognition, making a difference, diversity of the job, learning and development, having a structure to my day, have belief in the vision and understand what role you have to play in implementing it
- to engage an age diverse audience the top tips are to: know and segment your audience, have a full range of channels so that you engage with people via their preferences, make information easily accessible, wow them with the end benefit

**As communicators, the best practical steps we can take to create conditions that increase levels of employee engagement are:**

- coach team leaders in two-way communication
- have robust and effective feedback mechanisms and check regularly that they work
- bright, fun ideas! For example, an online game that's fun and gets across business messages at the same time, or events like barbecues that bring together people from different levels and functions
- have a regular flow of trusted and relevant information
- know what's happening at the water cooler
- have faith in your skills and knowledge
- get employees involved in crafting the messages
- line managers and middle managers are often responsible for communicating key messages to the workforce. Give them the skills to be able to do this effectively
- ensure that the right communication channels are securely in place and that staff have access to them. Ensure that channels enable employees to ask questions and receive answers, in order to engage them in what's happening, and to build trust and understanding
- evaluate and feed this back to the workforce. Provide convincing examples of ideas that have been acted upon as a result of previous surveys.