Going that extra mile

The science of discretionary effort is about finding out what makes people do their very best for an organisation. **Steve Coomber** explains

In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, the key to performance is through engaging employees in ways that produce discretionary effort and creating an environment which encourages greater employee empowerment and voice to facilitate the exchange of ideas and know-how." So says Peter Cheese, CEO of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, following the publication of its recent report on leadership.

Discretionary effort is a hot topic at the moment, whether it is volunteering - as with the Olympic and Paralympic games this summer - or employees going the extra mile to do their best for an organisation. And while discretionary effort can be seen as part of the more general employee engagement picture, it is a very distinct and important part. It is that component where employee goodwill translates into benefits for the organisation.

"It's absolutely essential," says Doug Sawers, managing director at Ceridian UK. "Without discretionary effort, most organisations would have major problems. It's also a differentiator. It's often that special, extra effort that makes a difference for our customer, and either remedies a situation or wins a piece of revenue. It happens every day. You can't do without it."

So what are the drivers of discretionary effort? How do you create an environment in which people are more likely to want to go the extra mile? It is a question Marc Woods, a founding director of SladenWoods management consultants and gold-medal-winning Paralympian, addresses in his forthcoming book *Beyond the Call: Why Some of Your Team Go the Extra Mile and Others Don't Show*. Woods first became interested in the subject when a bank teller sorted out a problem he was having with a few minutes extra work - a problem that had until then dragged on for weeks.

"People matter," says Woods. "Call it human capital if you like, but what we're talking about is all the actions that contribute to the success of an organisation. Yet evidence suggests there's a gap between what people are potentially prepared to do and what they actually do. What stops people from doing that little bit extra? Often it is the environment they're working in, the organisation's culture or their relationship with their manager or co-workers. I wanted to close that discretionary effort gap."

Woods commissioned a team at New York University, led by Dr Christopher Rotolo, an adjunct associate professor in NYU's psychology department specialising in organisational psychology, to investigate the drivers of discretionary effort. Six drivers, in particular, emerged as targets for organisations wanting to create an environment conducive to discretionary effort. They also found that aggregate discretionary effort scores, derived from the presence or absence of these drivers, correlated with positive performance across a range of metrics such as group cohesiveness, net promoter score, sick days, quality of performance and job satisfaction.

The six drivers? Autonomy and empowerment; consideration of the individual; self-sacrificial leadership; fairness and equity; identifying with your team; and trust. If organisations focus on improving these areas, the research suggests, it should lead to greater discretionary effort and improved performance.

If only it was so simple. While each driver offers opportunity for improvement, it also poses some significant challenges. Take autonomy and empowerment. It seems sensible to allow people the freedom and authority to take actions of their own volition that benefit the organisation. But how do you ensure they act in a way the organisation would want?

PRINCIPLES NOT PROCESSES

"You need to provide a clear governance framework based on principles, not processes – and to communicate this widely and to keep communicating," says Tracey Camilleri, associate fellow at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, and director of the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme. "In an increasingly technologically sophisticated world, leaders can no longer expect to be more expert than those they lead. They need to set rhythm and direction, but more importantly, provide the support and encouragement to allow those they lead to do what they do best and give them the freedom to innovate, learn and evolve within a framework of principles."

Tendencies to micro-manage must also be avoided. The kind of leadership that encourages autonomy, and discourages micromanagement, is rooted in the coaching and teaching tradition, rather than the showing and doing. "Empowering someone means giving them the freedom to do it their way, not over-supervising them, but at the same time being there. It is a coaching style," says Baroness Sue Campbell CBE, chief executive at the Youth Sport Trust. "The challenge is developing a management team and management style that embraces the coaching style consistently. It means moving away from a situation where things are over-processed, and there are checks made of checks on checks, and then it is checked again by the CEO, for example. That's not necessary."

Employees that believe their managers care about them as individuals are also more likely to go the extra mile. "It is crucial

that people feel the leader knows them, it's the perception in the followers that's most important," says David Cleeton-Watkins, a senior consultant at Roffey Park leadership institute. "It doesn't have to be about understanding deeper motivations or work ambitions. It can be social chat, engaging with people at a meaningful level. We describe it as showing real interest in others."

As well as getting to know employees as individuals, managers need to understand the reality of work from the employee's perspective. Some of the old ways are still the best. Managing by wandering around (MBWA), for example, or variations on the theme. "McDonald's has every manager in the organisation spend at least a day a year in a restaurant," says Konstantin Korotov, associate professor and director of the Center for Leadership Development Research at ESMT business school in Germany. "Another example is Deutsche Telekom, which has a service academy where every employee spends three days a year working in mixed teams with frontline employees."

But, in the days of fragmented value chains, multiple stakeholders, and geographically dispersed employees, understanding work from the employee's perspective may require a more modern take on MBWA. That may be via town hall meetings, discussion groups, and focus groups, or harnessing the interactive capabilities of modern technology, using social media to take the pulse of the workforce.

IT'S JUST NOT FAIR

Fairness and equity is a concept that has attracted some attention in recent years, but is not that well discussed. It is, however, a critical factor in discretionary effort.

"Look at employee engagement scales and the factors that engage you the most in your organisation," says Cary Cooper, distinguished professor of organisational psychology and health at Lancaster University Management School. "What you earn comes pretty far down the system, but what you earn in comparison to others is an important factor." Cooper is right. If people can harbour resentment over the little things, not getting the best sandwiches in a meeting, or colleagues spending time smoking outside the office, for example, pay and rewards can send the resentment thermometer soaring sky-high.

Thierry Nadisic, a professor of management, law and human resources at EM Lyon business school, has made fairness in the workplace his specialist research subject. He is the co-author of a book on the subject, *Social Justice and the Experience of Emotion*, and many academic papers. "Discretionary behaviours depend on the fairness of the firm or the manager," says Nadisic. "Traditionally managers didn't care about discretionary behaviours, they just wanted people to follow orders. Today, that's not enough for a firm to be efficient."

Fairness comes in three distinct types, explains Nadisic. Managers should attend to all three. Distributive justice, for example, is when individuals make comparisons with others in terms of what they get and what they give, as with pay and rewards. It is one of the main reasons why people work less, take long breaks, and pretend to be working when they're not, says Nadisic.

Procedural justice is about the ability of individuals to contribute to decisions that affect their work. Employees want to be heard. They want a voice.

Interactional justice is a third type of fairness, related to interpersonal interaction and issues such as integrity and respect. If a manager is impolite to a subordinate, for example, that employee will evaluate their boss as unfair. The manager may think nothing of it; they were in a bad mood, it will soon be forgotten. But it would be wrong to treat this kind of interaction as unimportant, suggests Nadisic, as it is a potential source of unfairness.

Of course this can only be a brief dip into a few of the discretionary effort drivers. As research shows, it is possible for organisations, by assessing and acting upon a limited number of drivers, to create an environment where employees want to go beyond the call of duty. At the same time, there are likely to be difficult challenges along the way. Ultimately though, given the value of discretionary effort in organisations, it seems a worthwhile exercise.

"The employees who work in an organisation have far more potential to contribute than their managers imagine," says Woods. "No matter what someone's position or role is they can help their organisation focus on these key drivers and unlock that potential. Why wouldn't anyone want to create an environment in which discretionary effort can flourish? Isn't that the kind of organisation we all want to be a part of?" ■

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- self-sacrificial leadership;
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