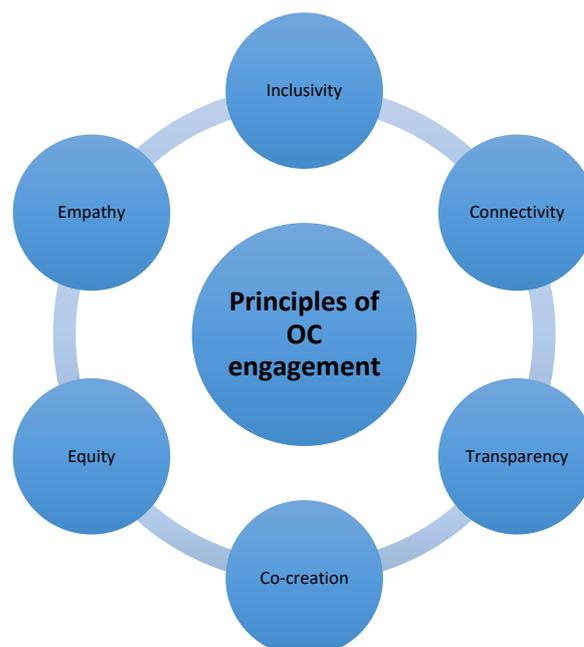


## Engaging Employees in Organizational Change

Engaging people in organizational change (OC engagement) is challenging and demands attention. Such engagement has to be fostered and maintained, which is a shared responsibility between leaders and managers, as well as employees and other stakeholders. The literature on how to engage employees with change is awash with generic checklists, which include good things to do, but which also tend to be couched at such a level of generality that they do not provide specific actions for generating OC engagement. Such checklists are also worrying since they view individuals, particularly employees, in a passive role, with engagement seen as something that is driven by the organization, rather than something that is also under the control of employees and other stakeholders. Instead of OC engagement being something that is done *to* stakeholders, in my book on *'Employee Engagement for Organizational Change'* I propose that it is done *with* them. To enable this to happen I suggest the following Principles of OC Engagement.

Principles of OC Engagement (from Hodges, 2019)\*



- **Inclusivity** needs to be established as a principle where the focus is upon capturing the ideas of stakeholders, securing their commitment and where employees are seen as central to OC. Inclusivity focuses on the role that employees play in the process of change and enables them to provide their own ideas rather than simply parroting the ideas that others present. In this way inclusivity enables employees to serve as frontline content providers of change themselves and to be proactive players in the process of OC.
- **Connectivity.** Every day people all over the world rush to embrace change, because they are seduced by an opportunity to connect with something big, exciting or virtuous. In order for people to engage with OC, they need to be given something worth connecting with. They need an enticing challenge that connects them and draws them to engage.
- **Transparency** provides clarity about why OC needs to happen; what it means for individuals and teams and the work they do, as well for the organization. It can also help to reduce uncertainty, which is a key blocker to OC engagement.
- **Co-creation** means constructing or negotiating OC *with*, rather than *for* stakeholders, thereby reflecting the plurality of stakeholders' interests. The co-creation of OC requires that power is more widely distributed across the organization and amongst stakeholders. This means that the organization becomes more of a collaborative community of individuals looking to co-create OC rather than a collection of people waiting to implement it. Co-creation means including people in the change process and its activities which

involves collaboration, developing a sense of ownership, creating a team based approach, and clarifying roles and responsibilities.

- **Equity** means that employees need to feel that they are fairly and justly treated, that they have, or will be given, the right resources for engaging with change, and that their effort will be fairly recognized and appropriately rewarded. When employees' equity is reduced or non-existent this results in loss of trust and, as a result, the employment relationship between employers and employees can be damaged, often beyond repair. If organizations want more from employees, in the form of OC engagement, arguably they will have to offer employees a more substantial commitment in return, in the form of adequate resources, recognition and rewards.
- **Empathy** is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the other person's frame of reference, that is the capacity to place oneself in another's position. It involves feeling the way someone else feels, and understanding how they feel. In other words, empathy comprises being able to put yourself in someone else's position both intellectually and emotionally. Consequently, leaders and managers need to be able to recognize and understand the emotional landscape, and this means tuning in to what people are, not just thinking, but also feeling.

These principles can help to build the antecedents of OC engagement such as trust and fairness which are closely related to the employees' perceptions that their opinions are sought that they are listened to and that their views treated with respect.

The challenge is for organizations to operationalize these principles in everyday practice, which requires:

- Co-producing change.

The co-creation of OC can be developed by setting up working groups with representatives from different levels of staff from across the organization. For instance, a change group with a specific role, such as pulling together communications. These need to be genuine attempts, not just a tick box, to make sure different views of the organization are represented.

- Being clear on negotiables and non-negotiables.

There is a need to be very clear with employees about what is within their power to shape with OC, what is not up for negotiation, and why. This will help with managing expectations and also help people understand and accept the decisions which need to be made without their input.

- Creating space for dialogue

Employees should be given the space and support they need to be able to speak up and share their views, ideas and concerns. This can be done through various forms of communication, such as staff meetings, drop-in sessions, and one-to-one sessions – not just emails. These will give people the space to share their views and ideas and the opportunity to ask questions and get answers.

- Demonstrating that you listen to employees' views.

Take time to listen and give feedback to employees about their opinions and your response to them. For example, 'You said.... We did...'. If it is not possible to take action based on views and ideas, then reasons and explanations need to be provided.

- Identifying relevant behaviours.

Managers need to identify behaviour that indicates a lack of engagement or even opposition to the change, discuss these behaviours with the relevant individual/s and address the issues which may be concerning them, such as job security, financial impact, work relationships, levels of responsibility and learning and development needs.

- Reviewing how you respond to personal concerns and reactions of people.

Employees at different levels of an organization have different experiences of the reality of the organization. Don't just assume that everyone will view the need for change in the same way that you do. Due to their knowledge and experience, frontline staff may have very different perspectives and ideas about what needs to change, and they need the opportunity to share these.

\*Hodges, J. (2019) Employee Engagement for Organizational Change: the theory and practice of stakeholder engagement. London: Routledge.