

HR insights podcast

Series 9 | Episode 1

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The truth about employee engagement

[Stuart:] Hi everyone, my name's Stuart Elliott and welcome back to HR Insights. Today we're going to talk about engagement. It's a topic that I see and hear about in my daily work when I talk to HR leaders. Experts on this topic today are, Paul Knight and Rebecca Saunders Jones. Paul has been in HR for a number of years now and brings his own Practical judgement to that. Rebecca is the CEO of Loopin, an engagement specialist organisation. If you don't follow us on social media, please do. We are on Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. I hope you enjoy the show.

[Stuart:] Hi both. Welcome to the show.

[Both:] Hello.

[Stuart:] Hello. For the audience. Would you like to do a little intro into the two of you? Rebecca, do you want to start first?

[Rebecca:] Yeah. Brilliant. I'm Rebecca Saunders Jones, Managing director of Loopin. Loopin runs kind of innovative employee engagement platform and digital coaching. And my background is 15 years in the Ministry of Defence. Really passionate about driving people first cultures, leadership, creating the environments where people can thrive. And now I run a company that kind of helps bring that to businesses.

[Stuart:] That's very good. How did the link happen between the Ministry?

[Rebecca:] That's a really good question. So I got into kind of management roles and then senior leadership roles in the Ministry of Defence and then was doing kind of big, transformational change programmes and then I was doing more business strategy and operations and then I left civil service and went into the tech startup world and brought that expertise into tech companies. The first one having a defence business. Okay, so that was the link. Yeah. So I took my kind of knowledge of MOD and defence. They wanted that and they wanted that, but my, my role was head of operations. So I, yeah, help scale the business and then I've moved across into different, tech companies. So one in health and social care and now Lupin. Yeah. So how long have you been with Loopin? A year and a half. Okay. And how's it going? Yeah, it's great. It's brilliant. Yeah, it's a brilliant ride.

[Stuart:] Yeah, yeah. Very, very cool. Paul.

[Paul:] I don't think my journey is as exciting as yours, but, Yeah, so I'm Paul Knight, so currently, Chief People Officer for a company called PA Media, on a contract there, I guess a lot of experience in senior HR roles. Probably don't like to count the years of experience now because it makes me slightly sad, but yeah, all sorts of organisations I suppose. Primarily in the last 15 maybe years in the sort of tech major business streaming businesses, startups, all sorts of things. So yeah, lots of experience. This is really brilliant subject. There's lots of experience of trying to increase engagement using different tools, you know, all that kind of good stuff. So really good, good subject to be talking about.

[Stuart:] Very cool. Well, it's great to have you both and obviously new setting for us in terms of studio, so thank, you for coming in. Yeah, it's weird not having desks in front of me that I'm sort of almost trying to get used to your comfort.

[Rebecca:] Yeah, you're out of your comfort zone.

[Stuart:] I know I'm out of my comfort zone. Fair enough. But look, we're here to talk about engagement. Today we found that, we run a recent survey, we found that engagement has been mentioned a number of times. So it's something that we wanted to touch on today, more from an expertise perspective and also an internal perspective and understand, I suppose, what HR are going through from, from that side.

[Stuart:] I'm looking at my phone because before we got here I was thinking, okay, what do we do? How do we define engagement? What does ChatGPT tell us? Because we all do that nowadays. But in a company setting, engagement apparently is the level of emotional commitment, discretionary effort and connection an employee has toward their work, their team and the organisation. It's not just satisfaction, it's not just happiness, it's not just retention, it's whether someone cares enough to give more than the minimum. Does that sound right? What do you think of that as a definition?

[Rebecca:] Yeah, well, I think it's a pretty good definition. I would also add, so things that I think when I think about engagement, what I really think about is, is, a sense of purpose, having that sense of how are you adding value, what's your purpose and your role in your organisation. I'd also add things like, mastery and growth. So feeling like you're improving. So I think that touched on that definition. Touched on it. And also that sense of belonging is really important as well. So I think that I'd sort of include those three things.

[Stuart:] Well you've done pretty well. Because it then goes on to say a clearer definition. Number one is feel connected to the company's purpose and values. Oh, there we go. Very good. Yeah. So a tick there for you. With that said, I believe their work matters. Trust leadership and their manager. Feel heard and supported. Choose to apply discretionary. Discretionary effort beyond basic job requirements and sounds like we all agree on that.

[Paul:] I couldn't add any more than it's already been added. I think that's completely.

[Stuart:] ChatGPT is on the money today

[Paul:] Who figure it.

[Stuart:] But, in terms then, I suppose of engagement, do we think that engagement right now is. Do you think people within organisations are fully engaged or they're flatlining or is even decreasing? What are your thoughts on that, Rebecca?

[Rebecca:] Well, I think it does depend on the organisation and for me the biggest thing is culture. Yeah. I think for me, for people to really feel engaged and to do all of those things that ChatGPT have said and give more, is all about having, having leadership that values, giving people a voice. It values transparency, values psychological safety and therefore people are going to be engaged, and they'll feel like they want to give more, they'll want to go above and beyond for the organisation. I think, probably the case is many organisations, perhaps large organisations, that beautiful, perfect culture perhaps isn't there? And so therefore I think it is very different. In some organisations, yes, you will have people who are really deeply engaged and want to give more. But. But I think often people just don't believe in leadership and don't trust leadership and don't feel that actually actions taken on whether, even if they fill out a survey, for example, is action gonna be taken? So for me, I'd say probably, on balance, it's probably flatlining. But obviously there's differences in the culture that you

create and obviously from my perspective, I'm passionate about creating cultures that drives engagement.

[Stuart:] From your perspective, Paul, and looking, I suppose, through your career, do you see any differences between now and maybe years ago? I think you're right. It's sort of multifaceted, isn't it, really?

[Paul:] So, yeah, to some extent. And I think some of it is about kind of the type of organisation you're in, to be honest. And I think in large organisations it's incredibly difficult. Some people maybe succeed in this, but to have a consistent culture. Right. Because you can have subcultures depending on could be location, could be, you know, driven by manager, obviously. I'm sure we talk about that as well going forward. Is it. Has it flatlined? Probably a little bit, but it's a bit of a generalisation and obviously I think we could play in the employment market a little bit into this. My last company I worked for, we had, always on type of, product in terms of engagement and it was really interesting because the engagement was apps. You could see it, it was quite depressing, but you could see it plummeting every Morning if you went into the app. But we weren't having any, attrition problems. That's one of the things I think Chat, let's call him Chat, shall we? Yeah, Chat told us, because there wasn't any jobs. Yeah. Because the job market was, was suppressed in that particular area. And I think that's an interesting one because. And almost more dangerous is that you have a bunch of people going to sit and I'd never heard this before you said it to me the other day, Stuart, but what's the hugging thing?

[Stuart:] Oh, job hugging.

[Paul:] Yeah, Job hugging people that, thinking, climbing. Don't really love it here. But I don't really want to go somewhere else either. So, I don't know, I think it's probably too easy to say it's flatlining everywhere. I think it probably does depend on the organisation and hopefully we get onto sort of the leadership and how that affects, people's engagement.

[Stuart:] Yeah. So going a bit to that. I just want to touch on the generational thing a little bit there because I've personally found, I like the multifaceted comment because I do think that work and engagement is definitely multifaceted, but. But it feels like historically things were a little bit more black and white, a little bit simpler and there's now, I suppose the work environment is much more complex. You've got different generations that we almost put definitions on the different generations. Whereas previously did we used to do that?

[Paul:] And I just, I feel you've, again, you've got to be careful not to generalise, obviously. You know, our comments will be a bit like that because it's easy, isn't it? But I think, yeah, it is a bit different. I think younger people have probably. And I would say good on them, maybe are a little bit more demanding on what they expect from the workplace. People like you and me were probably suckers. We kind of go, well, okay, then we're coming. Do 12 hours a day, you know, just tell us what to do. Yeah, okay, five days a week, you know, whatever it was. Because I don't know why, because maybe we've been through a few, difficult economic times and all that kind of stuff. So, I think, yes, but I just think you just got to be careful because obviously, as I'm sure we have done, you meet younger people that have a certain sort of entrenched attitude towards work. And you meet older people that have got a very big, you know, flexible approach to work and a different thing. But yeah, I think it is a thing. I think young people definitely are demanding more perhaps look to their parents. Thought you know, why are you doing that? You know, and been honest and think, well, I don't want to do that and sorry, I will shut up in a minute. But also I think it depends on what you're doing for a living. Right. I always think if you work in the Costa, all these conversations are irrelevant. You know, if you're working in a factory or an Amazon warehouse, all these conversations are irrelevant because, not irrelevant in terms of trying to drive engagement, but some of the choices that people have.

[Stuart:] Yeah, fair. Okay. We'll come to some of that stuff as well a little later. But I want to touch on Loopin? Let's, let's talk about Loopin in terms of the, I suppose most organisations do that sort of biannual or annual survey. Tell us about the approach that Loopin take to surveys and engagement.

[Rebecca:] Yeah, thanks. So, the traditional annual survey or biannual survey, it's not wrong, it's not bad. But if you think of it as, you know, how would you look after your health? You might do an annual kind of health check, but that just gives you a snapshot in that moment. And actually workplaces, your body if we're using that analogy, changes, it's quite fluid and changes weekly, monthly, quarterly. And so the concept of Loopin is that idea of regular, regular poll surveys, regular check-ins with your teams. So you get the in the moment information, you get real time sentiment data to the line managers about how the teams and the individuals are feeling. And the most important thing is then, tips on what to do next. It's that action that you can take in the moment to support your teams and support your individuals. And so that way it's not just a. At this point in time, engagement is X. Maybe three months later you'll have a presentation from leadership to say, you've told us this, we're doing this. That's a very common concept in organisations. But actually what Loopin is now doing, and I think a lot of organisations are wanting to move this way, is that in the moment data, and importantly, what are you going to do about it and how can you help? Because they can sit alongside annual surveys, but actually it's much more relevant in the moment. Yeah.

[Stuart:] And so when we're talking like in the moment that live data, do you see reactions from organisations when they see it that are different to maybe an annual survey?

[Rebecca:] The whole idea is the annual survey is kind of like a peak of activity. You know, here's the. You do a run up, you know, we're having the annual survey, don't forget to fill in the annual survey. And then people do the survey and then there's a bit of a lull, but there's lots of activity about the analysis and then you have this big hurrah and presentation. And a lot of focus is kind of drawn on it. With the concept of regular pulse surveys, daily, weekly, fortnightly, it just becomes the norm. So actually the question, are people being surprised what they're seeing? Well, the whole concept is it becomes your daily ritual for a manager to go, okay, well, let me look at the dashboard. How my team feeling and what do I need to prioritise today so it doesn't become a kind of, oh my goodness, how's engagement? It just becomes the norm and people feel listened to, heard, valued, and actions taken in the moment. So it, it just sort of becomes part of the ritual in the organisation rather than this big thing that warrants a massive response.

[Stuart:] Yeah, yeah, I like the analogy with your health and the annual check-in. I find wearables are really good for that. Like my whoop in terms of being able to measure, I suppose what I'm doing, how I'm doing it on a regular basis means that when I get back for that annual check-in I'm hoping to see good results. So it's almost like I want the annual still, but I like the fact that I'm being told things along the way so I can see things changing as they go and you can make the small adjustments in the moment rather than if you have a, you know, if you wait six months, then you have to make some big changes to adjust for perhaps a dip in engagement or a dip in sense of belonging or whatever it is. And you have to make those big adjustments, whereas if you're tracking it weekly, you just have to make those small changes and adjustments and, and you kind of everything's on track.

[Paul:] Yeah, we don't do this as a company at the moment, but we come from a company that did do that and to less or greater success, to be honest. I totally agree, by the way. It's kind of. And obviously what you've implying there is. It's a management, you know, a leader owned kind of process, isn't it? It's a piece of information that they need to use and act on. It was interesting, actually. When you're talking about when we did do our big annual survey, one of our leaders said, well, do you know what? All they wanted was new chairs and a couple of things. I could just. I know, I know, it's boring, right? He said there's two or three things he talked about and he just did it really quickly. And he said that's all they wanted. And I know that's a low level example, but yeah, so we don't do it here. I've done it before. The only thing I would say, and I'm sure you get this with customers, is you have to have the

managers engaged in it. It's a very different way of doing it. So I proactively this time didn't go for that because we're not there in terms of where our leaders are. I knew if we did something like that, they wouldn't be ready. They're not. We need to shift them on a little bit first to yes, we did this annual survey and yes, we try to make you or drive action plans. We're going to have this other platform that you're going to have a bit more control over the data. You'll be able to access it more easily, hopefully. And we can do some more kind of very targeted pieces of information out, throughout the year. But sorry, as a concept, I entirely love and agree that it shouldn't just be some big, type of thing. It should just be weaved in as another piece of information that managers have.

[Stuart:] That's very fair. Is it a fair criticism then of engagement surveys that they do them and then nothing happens? Is that, is that a fair little bit?

[Paul:] Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's entirely fair. I think sometimes companies do it because they think they should do it. I think some senior managers go, okay, then get on with it. People team or HR team. And then as ever, and we should get into this is like it depends on the leaders. If you've got good leaders, I think, oh, this is great piece of data, great piece of information. How can I use that? And how can I kind of help engage my employees? Other leaders will think, oh God, is it another task I've got to do? I've got to do all these other things that you keep asking, asking me to do. Right? And this is another one you ask me to do. So yes is the simple answer in some organisations I think it is, do it, forget and then go back about two months before the next one go. I can't swear on a podcast, but

[Stuart:] you can, you can swear on the podcast

[Paul:] You know, I didn't do those things and then think sh*t I have to put together something that proves that we did do some stuff and then, you know, all that kind of stuff and we did. You, know, you said we did kind of stuff falls away after a period. So I could have just said yes. Sorry.

[Stuart:] That's all right. That's all right. Is engagement something that HR owns?

[Paul:] No, no. Right. So we facilitate it. I think it's okay. It doesn't have to be, to be honest. But, you know, traditionally HR teams facilitate the kind of tools that help people to, help manage and leaders to engage. But we know we've failed if they think we're owning it. I mean, just listening to you, I wonder if there's a better way of doing it. But kind of like we may report it up, may talk about it, but it's not really owned by the HR team. No way.

[Stuart:] But on the flip side, you sell to hr, though it does depend on the organisation.

[Rebecca:] So, yes, technically the buyers would be the Chief People Officers, heads of L and D, perhaps, but in small organisations it might be Chief Operating Officer, for example. I was at, I was at an HR forum the other day and it was really apparent this them and us culture between HR and managers. And it was really interesting sitting there listening. So it was a group of HR professionals and I was, there was in my, role as manager director of Loopin, and I was listening to the way that HR spoke about managers and how managers spoke about HR and I thought, well, this is a problem. It was a real problem because it was almost. I was thinking, well, HR, you're part of the organisation too, and so I think this, them and us culture between managers and HR is actually quite a big challenge in bigger organisations. And whereas I'm thinking, well, obviously managers are obviously going to be caring about engagement and HR. They're facilitating it, but HR can lead it. But if there isn't that kind of team effort, it's going to be really difficult.

[Paul:] Entirely agreed. I mean, my general principle, maybe it's served me well or not in a career, is I'm not going to do something unless the business think it's got some kind of value. Obviously, you have to comply and stuff, keep people out of court and all the rest of it. Yeah, but entirely agree. And I think you're right. I think you can get trapped. Or some HR teams, maybe in the big organisations can be trapped in the us and them. And why aren't they doing this and why they haven't. Instead of

understanding their customers, which the managers are one of the understand where they're coming from and maybe it's because what we're doing isn't adding that value to them, they don't see the point of it. Maybe there's a conversation about that or maybe their leaders don't really see the point of it or can't see the value in it. So really helpful, interesting feedback, but not surprising feedback unfortunately.

[Stuart:] Do you find then we talked about managers and HR and where it sort of sat and who owns it but do you potentially find then that boards roll their eyes when they hear about engagement surveys? Is that something where someone goes to them and says new engagement survey this year and they go here we go again. Is that, is that a common theme or thread?

[Rebecca:] So I think this is where coming back to culture, this is where if action isn't taken, that's where it's that downward spiral of you know, oh, well no one's going to engage next year and that's when you get the eye rolls. But you can flip it to have that, you know, that kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of the more if action is taken in the moment, if people are bought the chairs or whatever they want, then people go oh, something's happening and then it's that self-fulfilling prophecy of you don't get the eye rolls, you get the oh brilliant. And actually the conversations I'm having with chief people, Officers, heads of HR, L and D, heads of L and D about Pulse surveys and the concept of does feel like that's getting a lot of traction and interest and that's people aren't rolling their eyes and actually are going well I can see how that could benefit our organisation. Obviously as to your point, the organisation has to be ready and you have to do a big kind of change piece to bring it in. But I think the eye rolling I'm not experiencing okay at the moment. Are you?

[Paul:] Well look where I'm at moment I'm lucky we've just got a great CEO who kind of believes in it all. So there's no eye rolling there at all. I suspect there's probably some eye rolling down in some parts of the organisation. I have no doubt about that at all. That I don't see. I think it does play into your argument, your kind of profit, your what your positioning is. If you make a big deal of it every year then maybe you get more likely to get the eye rolling because that's you know, work and I think maybe we talk about this as well but it's kind of how do you make the connection really clear about why we're doing it and what the benefit is. So I'm a massive, actually someone did talk about, I was reading something at the weekend. It was a guy who runs all the big. Not the WeWork one, but is it IWG? I think it is.

[Stuart:] Oh yes, it was in 'The Times', wasn't it?

[Paul:] Yeah. So, he talked about and I agree with him that we got productivity puzzle problem, haven't we in this country? And everybody always talks about oh we're not investing in training or technology. But I think leadership is one of the biggest drivers for productivity. And coming back to this conversation, I think if you can somehow link the kind of engagement to productivity, really hard I know but kind of how do you kind of. I think there's, there's an investment case there, there's kind of. Well, we're not doing this because we think it's a nice thing to do or because wasn't it interesting to hear what people say? Okay, yes, that's useful but it's going to drive a business outcome and if we don't do it the business outcome will be worse.

[Rebecca:] 100%. And I think that that link between engagement, so when I was at mod, it very much, you know, the people culture, the leadership, it was seen as, you know, the fluffy stuff. But actually I think it's, it's more and more important that there is that link between engagement and productivity because if you can engage your teams, give your managers the information they need, help your teams drive high performance, it saves time. It means that people do give more to your point earlier about what engagement is and actually then if you can reduce churn, you save a huge amount of time and money on recruitment, lost knowledge, manager time and actually these, these traditional engagement surveys, they do take effort. You know, you have the big, as I said, the big run up, the big

work or the analysis and that in itself saves huge amount of time if you do it in the moment. So you can make that link relatively, simply or logically, can't you? Between engagement and productivity?

[Paul:] Yeah, look, I would say that I think so, and especially in the more sort of worked in quite hard commercial companies where you have to make that. And that's fair enough, you have to make that, that link and I do. Yeah, I think we're just agreeing aren't we? But I think that is a strong argument. I think it's a strong argument to have something that's kind of more ongoing rather than the one off. I just think people sometimes. Yeah, as you said, we said it a few times now, but the effort of getting it all out again. Have a look at last year, getting data sorted.

[Stuart:] Yeah. On that in terms of, I suppose that real time engagement, that real time sort of measurement. What kind of data are we capturing on that kind of, when we're doing that?

[Rebecca:] Yeah. So, Loopin the way that we can build it can be, we can ask the questions whatever organisations want to be capturing. So, for example, if an organisation is going through a change or a merger acquisition, we can ask specific questions about that and how staff are coping with that change. We do offer a kind of out of the box standard question set, which is based on kind of eight themes around engagement, and we've actually touched on some of them. So, things around psychological safety, a sense of belonging, purpose, mastery, clarity on the vision. And those, those kinds of questions are based on science that says if you get these things right and if you're tracking these things, you're more likely to drive up engagement and drive-up performance of your people. So we have that kind of out of the box question set and we get that data, and we can pull it into the team, overarching team sentiment and individual as well. But it's all customizable. So, depending on what people want to check, it could be around, well-being, mental health, it could be around delivery, productivity, performance, you know, are you progressing against your goals? Or it could be around, you know, change and transformation. Yeah.

[Stuart:] So, yeah, which, which makes sense. You mentioned it a couple of times as well. Psychological safety. So how do you balance transparency with psychological safety? And again, I'll sort of throw this open a little bit, firstly to you, Rebecca. I think it follows on quite nicely from the previous question.

[Rebecca:] Yeah. So I think it really comes down to leadership, and actually the leadership showing that transparency to the organisation. And what I mean by that is, you know, openness around decision making, what's happening in the organisation, why. And what I don't mean is bearing all, obviously. But actually if leadership is showing that transparency, you're more likely to get the organisation to be, to feel safe and to be able to be transparent themselves. If we're talking about kind of anonymity, I don't know if that's you sort of touching anonymity in engagement surveys. So that's a really interesting debate. You know, do you do, you have it anonymous. So people, when they're doing the surveys, they feel that they can really share

[Stuart:] What do most companies go for?

[Rebecca:] So it does depend on where you're at. So if you have a culture of transparency and openness and kind of action is taken and psychological safety, then people are, more likely to be able to put their name to it. Because the whole aim is if people put their name to it, that drives better conversations and it drives clarity and people can follow up and go, oh, okay, tell me more about that. And it sparks that conversation. Obviously if it's anonymous, you can't have that, but people might feel they can open up a bit more. So it does depend on where the, where the company is at. But I find. And what we do at Loopin is we offer a kind of both. Right. We can offer hybrid. So people can choose to say, actually, I want to do my survey anonymously today, because actually I'm going to say something quite, that I maybe about leadership.

[Stuart:] Because that is the balance, isn't it? The balance is that if it's anonymous, you feel like you can truly say what you think.

[Rebecca:] But people are less thoughtful in how they say it.

[Stuart:] That's very true. Yeah. They'll be much, well, be very blunt around what they say. Yeah, that's, that's it. What have you done Paul in the past?

[Paul:] So, yeah, so mainly an anonymous, comment as I said, we used a product where you had a live chat type of thing going on. Right. But again, it was interesting. I was gonna ask you a question in a minute. I'll try and remember what it is. But like it was kind of trying to then gauge them. There was a bit of paranoia that goes, oh, you can tell who I am, by the language I've used. And some of the managers, not many, but the old one would go, oh, who said this? How can we find them? Not to be fair, not the senior leaders, but how can we find out who it was that said this thing? Because we used to have an MD of that was pretty good. He would kind of answer it and you could send the comments to other people and all the rest of it. So mainly it's been anonymous because I think it's you. You have to have a really strong culture. Maybe again, it's to do with the size of the organisation, the. That kind of good stuff. But you're right, obviously the other thing about surveys is, they're really helpful. But then how do you get underneath the kind of some of the sentiment? But if you're going again back to your product. If the sentiment is something you do all the time, maybe that becomes a bit more natural. But I think also psychological safety, I know it's a buzzword we've used for quite a few years now but is incredibly important. But that is driven by whoever you work for. The leadership team or an organisation can set the parameters, I guess, and give it like, well, we're doing it, we're being open, we're being transparent. But as we all know, our day to day interactions are with the person you work for.

[Stuart:] Yeah, I find it probably the biggest challenge with these things is. Yeah, the anonymity and the, and the honesty versus then having a name to it and being able to say what you think without it coming back to bite you, I suppose so.

[Rebecca:] So I was reading around this before the podcast and, and there's no, there's no right answer. It's. It does depend on the level of trust that there is in the organisation and. But the most, the highest risk to engagement is action not being taken because otherwise don't ask, don't bother. And so actually it's kind of, yes, it could be anonymous, that might work in some. Yes, not anonymous, might work in others. But the most important thing is whatever you're doing is take action, do something with it.

[Paul:] I think it's more damaging doing one and don't. If people don't want to do it, fine. Okay, fair enough. Don't do it. Don't do it because you think it's the right thing to do. Because if you don't take any actions, you'll just look like a fool basically. And that will erode the trust.

[Stuart:] Yeah, and erodes it. It's a negative, not a positive. Right, that's fair. So if I suppose we talk about, I suppose from a practical lens on this and company wants to improve engagement Paul, what do you think the first step that they should do is? Like, let's say the company's not done it before.

[Paul:] Okay, Yeah. I mean, look, if engagements, as we said before, multifaceted, isn't it? It's not just about surveys and things like that. I think there is a good. If you've never ever done anything like this before, I think it's probably worth starting off with a more traditional kind of set of questions that gives you a bit of a benchmark, gives you a view on where things are at, where the hotspots and all the rest of it. And then I think it's very much as you do in your product, but it's kind of like sharing that information with managers, making it clear, you know, what's the purpose, why we're doing it, what's important about it, the ownership they have in terms of the information. So that's what I would do in terms of like, well how do you start understanding where the issues are, where we're at? I think from then onwards it's kind of. That should give you some data points. You have some other data points,

don't you? Like attrition and things like that. And often, sometimes this sort of comes up, doesn't it, where a manager or someone's going oh my gosh, your electricians, Matt, why is that? And then you go well okay, well let's find out why that is. So there might be a burning platform but as I said before, the actual practical stuff around what drives engagement is the person that you work for. So how can you help that person? One with some information but secondly with the tools and ability to kind of drive that engagement. And again it's an overused. I've been around for few years doing this job now but it's kind of like those, you know, I'm not you know at the moment obviously I kind of, I suppose in theory sit at the top of this organisation but no one knows I'm not person really affects their lives. I have some influence over things that we do and how we communicate and how I show up. But there'll be a person that's the editor or whoever it is that really has the impact. So how do we get into those individuals and make them understand that their actions and how they operate and, and all that kind of stuff has a big impact. I've not been successful in that so far I don't think I think it's kind of been like you've got, you do the surveys, you roll them through, you kind of almost go, here you go. Then here's some stuff. You have a people partner will help them hopefully build a plan around it that works to some extent but I think if you really want to go for it. That was that thing, wasn't that the Google, what's that overly used quote around the Google kind of research they did about what makes most the most successful teams and they thought it was going to be about technical abilities. Hydrogen I think it was called. Right no, Oxygen. Sorry, it's gas. But they, they talked about that is about leaders who can create somehow this, this psychological safety or this ability for people to say what they think. Now I would say the other thing is that gives as a leader my ability to say what I think. Right. And I don't mean that in the kind of. Maybe that sounded aggressive. I don't mean like that. But if I'm happy to take your feedback, but you need to be happy to take my feedback and I'll do that in a polite and a good way, I hope I'm going to tell you how I think that's operating. So it's not a soft thing. It's not you giving up anything because obviously there's still a lot of command and control out there, isn't there? But it's kind of like, okay, fair enough. I accept what you've said about that, but and I, will act on it. But also you need to understand where I'm coming from and you need to accept that. And getting that, I think is really hard. I think you've got to be pretty skilled. I'll shut up in a minute. But I think because we don't invest in management as a skill. Back to the productivity thing. We all know we're bored of hearing it, but it is a truism that manager tends to accidentally fall into it. You might have the rare person that really wants to do it or ends up being good at it, but a lot of them are going, well, I need some more money. You know, how do I get promoted? I'm really good at the thing I do. I'm going to be promoting. And then you lose twice because you lose a brilliant practitioner who's a sh*t manager, maybe. And you got a person who's now got intimately more kind of effect on the team than they had before.

[Stuart:] Am I hearing it right though? If you're doing an engagement survey for the first time, part of the. Part of doing it is understanding why you're doing it or knowing why you're doing it correct?

[Paul:] Yeah, yeah, what the drivers are and what you're trying to get out of it. Don't just. Again, obviously we have three people that will hopefully be understanding why this is a good thing. Right? But not everybody will. So it's kind of, where's the driver? It's listening. If you're an HR or people person, it's listening to your leader thinking, right, okay, there's a problem here. One of the solutions to that problem, or trying to find out what the solution is, is wouldn't it be a good idea to see what our people think? And that's you're listening and you think about that and then that's a starting point.

[Stuart:] Have you ever done a survey and gone, oh my God, I never saw that coming in terms of the results.

[Paul:] I try not to be arrogant, as you know, Stuart. But not. No, no, you get a feeling there's sometimes there's a few nice. I mean, I like it when I get not blindsided, but I like it when you see something a bit different. The most interesting one was, as I said a few years ago, where we saw the kind of complete diminishing of engagement without any actual effect. Because for me it was kind of fascinating, isn't it? Because we all believe, I believe that engagement is that thing that our mate Chat

just talked about. Yeah. But the business goes, well, I don't care because no one's leaving. It's not cost me any money. Still doing stuff. Well, you know, why should I put effort into that?

[Stuart:] What did that highlight, though, was that just a ticking time bomb then?

[Paul:] Was that the fact I like the business wasn't doing very well. Well, which it wasn't right. In an area that definitely was in struggling. But yeah, it didn't. Yeah, that's all it highlighted. It highlighted that people peed off because probably the business wasn't doing well. Probably they didn't really understand where we're going with the business, if I'm honest with you. And then that was trickling down. But because they need to pay the mortgage, rent and everything else, they're not going to just bug off and, well, you'll lose the good ones.

[Stuart:] Is it ever possible to over measure?

[Rebecca:] Well, yes, probably, yes. I mean, clearly you don't want this to become a burden. You don't want measuring to become a burden. And something that I really like this quote, 'measure what matters', and I think we've spoken about this before, is 'what you measure gets done'. Gets done. Literally used that phrase this morning. So I think those two things. Things are really true. So, yes, you absolutely can over measure and you can particularly measure the wrong stuff because if you're measuring the wrong stuff, the wrong stuff gets done and prioritised. So yes, you absolutely can.

[Paul:] What do your customers, do you ever get feedback from your customers about that, though? If your kind of survey is on quite regularly, do they go, well, you know the question, because the thing we had was, why are you asking me the same thing every two weeks? You know, or do you have that feedback or not really?

[Rebecca:] We haven't had that feedback. I suppose what we do is really understand what they want to find out from their people and what they want to be measuring and working with that, is that the right stuff? So, for example, if they really want to track, deliver against goals, making sure, obviously the questions are giving that data, or if they're wanting to look at well-being and burnout or pre-empting burnout, then obviously we want to be measuring the right stuff. The whole aim is that it's super quick. So 10 seconds, 20 seconds.

[Paul:] How many question?

[Rebecca:] It depends. Okay, probably minimum five. Yeah. Sort of eight to 10 questions. Really, really quick sliders. You know, short answer, multiple choice, really, really quick. Because then it doesn't become a burden and then we're not having that feedback of, oh, why are we getting this again? And if people are saying why we're getting this again, it's about reaffirming the why. You know, really understanding why it's important.

[Paul:] Interesting.

[Stuart:] Yeah, it's really interesting. Have, have you ever seen, Paul, a relatively small leadership change, have a disproportionate impact on engagement?

[Paul:] Yeah, I read that question. Yeah, it was a good question. I thought, how am I going to answer that? Well, obviously,

[Stuart:] I'm glad you've prepped for. I love this.

[Paul:] I wouldn't say that I was thinking about it while we're walking over here. No, I would say what I've seen here in this current organisation is a new CEO making an extraordinary positive impact on engagement. Now, that's not a small change. Right. You know, she's a natural communicator. She's incredibly engaging. She's been down to earth. I'm only saying this just in case she hears.

[Stuart:] I was going to say if she's listening. Yeah, yeah. How long has she been there?

[Paul:] She's done. She's been in the business a long time, but she's doing this role for the last two years, almost two years. And it was just dramatic. Right. So that's not a small thing. It's a big thing.

[Stuart:] And it's gone beyond that sort of, I suppose, new manager bounce, using a football analogy. It's gone beyond that.

[Paul:] Yeah, because I think she's consistent and she's like, continue to drive a different style of leadership in the organisation by the people that she's employed in her team, and how we operate and what we do. So I have not seen a small thing make a difference. I think the example I gave right at the beginning, which is great, one of our MDs just picking out, I thought was a genius of him. You know, he just picked out two or three really small, things that he said, you know, would make a massive difference. I think in his area it has. But, yeah, that's my best example. It's the freshest example that really.

[Stuart:] And it makes sense. So a couple of questions before we sort of wrap things up a little bit. We were actually talking on the way over about, I suppose, hybrid environments. I suppose. Is that. Is that. Does that still come up on engagement? Are you still seeing. You feel it internally at work?

[Paul:] Yeah, yeah, I do. Yeah. But I think, Yeah, I do. I think it's. It's. Yeah, I do. I think we're kind of like where I'm at the moment. We're trying to drive, you know, a change and hate using the change of culture, but change the way we do things could change culture. And I think that is a little bit more difficult if we're not seeing people in a physical space on a regular basis. Yeah, it just is. I think the hybrid requires a lot more effort from the managers, to kind of. It's not impossible. And I'm an advocate of sort of hybrid working, by the way. But I think as a leader and a manager, you have to make much more of an effort to engage your people. And maybe we did that, for slightly guilty because I wasn't as out of working code of COVID times. And, I know my colleagues were, you know, running ragged, but, you know, maybe that was. There was effort put in at that point, and then that's probably drifted away, I would imagine so. Has an effect. It doesn't mean you can't be. Doesn't mean you. You know, I think engagement is just something that needs to be a bit more of an effort, I would say. Yeah. It's my opinion. Yeah.

[Stuart:] Have you seen anything on that, Rebecca, in terms of engagement, hybrid working?

[Rebecca:] Well, we. We actually really like working with customers who have dispersed teams. Right. So that might be hybrid workers. It might be in one country, or it might be global teams. Because actually, you're right, it absolutely does put more onus on the. To connect, to engage, to reach out. And that's where technology can support. Obviously, I'm not suggesting that it replaces in any way. But technology can support if you've got those dispersed teams, those remote workers, those hybrid teams. And your sort of product probably helps in that.

[Paul:] You know, I've worked in global companies as well, and your product probably helps with that because it's kind of, as you say, you get more of a pulse. It's another piece of information, isn't it? They can have.

[Rebecca:] Yeah, the most important thing, technology can help and we really want to drive. Use that technology, use those insights to drive better conversations. So it, technology can help to a point, but it still requires that manager to then either pick up the phone or you know, connect or reach out based on the information. So that's the most important thing.

[Stuart:] Embedding that technology.

[Rebecca:] Exactly.

[Stuart:] Do you see that with AI as well? I suppose the introduction of AI too?

[Rebecca:] Yeah, yeah. We use AI in terms of doing the. This is how you can help, you know, based on all the sentiment, based on the data that's coming in. The AI interprets that and pushes those action points to the manager to say this is what you should do. Obviously then the manager has to do those things. So yeah, technology, AI obviously that's the latest technology can help to a point but it still requires the human to then take action and follow up.

[Stuart:] Which, which makes perfect sense. And then lastly for you both, how do you prevent engagement from just becoming I suppose just another metric rather than something embedded into the culture?

[Paul:] It's a difficult one, isn't it? Again, if it comes back to the premise of the whole conversation, right, is you need to connect the reason why you're doing it. Right. And the business needs to understand that and leaders need to understand that. So if you think having if you believe in our mate chats kind of description and you think discretionary efforts worth having and you think that will drive you productivity, then of course having a kind of emphasis on engagement. It's really important. But back to your point is that's just a tool that is not to be, you know, we need the information that's not going to drive engagement. Survey does not drive engagement. Doesn't. Just doesn't. The thing that drives engagement is how that data is then used and then how the manager kind of interacts with the individuals and how they build those relationships. That is what will drive engagement up or drive it down.

[Rebecca:] Yeah, and I think that the word that you said in the question is really important is that embedding. And I think with engagement I completely agree. It cannot be seen as a single thing that we do an engagement survey or we do engagement. It has to be viewed holistically. So it's, it's how you onboard your teams, it's how you train your managers, it's how you communicate, it's how leadership transparent is building that whole culture. And this is where I'm absolutely passionate about those people first cultures. Because then you create and it's easy to talk about. Right. It's very difficult to do it in reality. I'm aware. But that's. If you take a holistic view to it, then you will get this increase in psychological safety and trust and engagement and then that's how you build high performing teams.

[Paul:] Agreed. And some of it is really small. Right. So the team that part of now are quite, you know, they're good human beings and they will talk to people in the kitchen and that will drive a level of engagement. Everybody's kind of, you know, approachable. So some of the things are really small. It's like, oh, wow. I spoke to Emily Today. We had a chat about the kids or something that was going on in her life and you think she's kind of really normal kind of thing or, you know, I spoke to Paul, he was weird. No, not that obviously, you know, but that there's small bits that kind of can have a big impact and I, again, maybe people don't always understand that, but yeah.

[Stuart:] That makes perfect sense. I just want to say thank you so much to have to you both coming on the show. It's really good to have you. Thank you for coming to the new studio as well, which is, which is very good. And listeners, if you want to get in touch and talk more about this, please do. My email is se@elliottscotthr.com but thank you very much.

[Paul:] Thank you for inviting me.

[Rebecca:] Thanks for having me.

[Stuart:] Cheers.