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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Generating employee engagement in a public-private partnership: management communication activities and employee experiences

Much of existing research on employee engagement is deficient in examining organizational actors' lived experiences of organizational engagement activities. This article, deriving from qualitative research in a public-private partnership organization, contributes to the current understanding of how employee engagement is generated through management communication activities seeking to promote engagement and employees' responses thereto. Drawing also on the literatures on organizational change, communication and culture, our research demonstrates that (1) managers use both directive and discursive means of communication to create an environment in which employees may wish to engage and (2) employees respond positively to such communication as it makes them feel valued and involved, which enhances their propensity to engage with the organization. However, contrary to widespread assumptions in the literature, the generation of employee engagement is far from straightforward; employees have an active role to participate in the engagement activities offered by managers.

Keywords: employee engagement, lived experience, management communication, organizational change, organizational culture

Generating employee engagement in a public-private partnership:

Management communication activities and employee experiences

Introduction

The literature on employee engagement over recent years has focused on three main areas of interest. Firstly, previous research has sought to define employee engagement in relation to work engagement (e.g. Bakker et al. 2006; Salanova and Schaufeli 2008; Schaufeli and Bakker 2010) or job engagement (e.g. Rich et al. 2010; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004); yet a lack of clarity of what employees actually engage with remains (e.g. Dalal et al. 2008; Shuck 2011). Secondly, previous research has sought to identify the outcomes of employee engagement (e.g. Harter et al. 2002; Bakker and Schaufeli 2008; Alfes et al. 2012) and to measure its presence or absence (e.g. Schaufeli et al. 2006). Yet, there persists a lack of understanding of how employee engagement is generated through organizational engagement activities. Thirdly, previous research has sought to establish the antecedents and consequences of engagement activities (e.g. Saks 2006; Rich et al. 2010; Halbesleben 2011) and to identify the attitudes and behaviours that engaged employees display (e.g. Bakker and Schaufeli 2008; Macey et al. 2009; Albrecht 2010). Yet, few studies have examined organizational actors' lived experiences of engagement activities delivered through management communication.

Indeed, these gaps in the current understanding of employee engagement may be due to relative homogeneity in the methods employed in extant research with quantitative studies constituting an overwhelming majority (e.g. Albrecht 2010; Shuck 2011). For more comprehensive appreciation of employee engagement from both organizational and employee perspective, however, researchers need a more

detailed understanding of the processes through which organizations seek to generate engagement and how these are experienced by employees. Hence, our article responds to calls for more qualitative research into employee engagement (e.g. Kular et al. 2008; Shuck et al. 2011). It examines the ways in which managers in a public-private partnership organization seek to generate employee engagement through both directive and discursive management communication activities and the ways in which employees experience them. We provide evidence of the influence of organizational communication, culture and change on the generation of employee engagement in the organization. The contribution of this article is an in-depth examination of organizational engagement activities and employees' lived experiences to gain a fuller understanding of this important phenomenon.

Our research took place in NorthService Ltdⁱ, a public-private partnership located in England for which the engagement of employees with the organization has particular significance. NorthService Ltd. was manufactured from two organizations already in existence with approximately 400 employees being transferred from NorthCouncil, a local authority, and approximately 50 managers being transferred from ServiceCom plc, a private-sector services organization, on a short-term basis. Both ownership transition and transfer of staff were legal matters and did not involve physical relocation. The significance of engaging employees with the organization (see Christian et al. 2011; Schaufeli and Salanova 2011) stems from the majority of employees being transferred into the new partnership organization without choice and largely without change in work or role. It was such ownership transition that has required them to generate engagement with the new organization.

This article consists of six sections. Following this introduction, section 2 discusses the extant literatures on employee engagement, culture, communication

and change. Section 3 describes the methodology and methods employed in our research. Sections 4 and 5 respectively analyze managers' communication activities aimed at generating employee engagement and employees' lived experiences thereof as they journey towards engagement with the new organization. Section 6 provides a discussion of our findings in relation to previous research. Our conclusion is that employees have to respond actively to the engagement activities offered by managers for employee engagement to be generated. Our paper thereby provides detailed insights into the somewhat problematic process of generating of employee engagement with a new partnership organization.

Theoretical background

Conceptualizing employee engagement

Since Kahn's (1990) seminal article, employee engagement has commanded significant interest among management practitioners and scholars alike (e.g. Shuck 2011). Such interest has in turn fuelled a debate about how employee engagement differs from related concepts like organizational commitment (e.g. Swales 2002) or organizational identification (e.g. Van Dick 2001; Edwards 2005). It seems that employee engagement is a broader proposition, 'a dynamic, changeable psychological state which links employees to their organisations' (Welch 2011, p. 337; see also Macey and Schneider 2008). Such a conceptualization of employee engagement resonates with established debates in the organizational culture literature, particularly questions of organizational actors' belonging to an organization (e.g. Hofstede 1990) and ways in which they relate to organizational realities and events (e.g. Alvesson 2002). Arguments for the pervasiveness of organizational

culture and the difficulties associated with changing it (as summarized by Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008) imply that organizational actors' ways of thinking, their values and ideas as well as their perceptions of the organization may impact on their propensity to engage (see also Eisenberger et al. 1986).

A further debate centres on what organizational actors actually engage with (e.g. Dalal et al. 2008; Saks 2008). True to its roots in positive organizational psychology (e.g. Bakker and Schaufeli 2008), research into employee engagement has traditionally focused on employees' investment of self in their role (job engagement) or more generally at the workplace (work engagement) (e.g. Salanova and Schaufeli 2008; Rich et al. 2010). However, recent studies, most notably Saks (2006), have questioned such a narrow focus and taken into account organizational actors' relationship with the organization (see Shuck 2011 for a discussion). Indeed, a stronger focus on employee engagement with an organization (e.g. Schaufeli and Salanova 2011) as the locus (Gourlay et al. 2011) or environment (Shuck et al. 2011) of engagement would provide important insights into the ways by which individuals engage at a place of work. Transitions in organizational ownership have become frequent, and in the longer term organizational arrangements may have more significant impact on employees' propensity to engage than changes to work or role. Hence, in organizational settings characterized by increasingly permeable boundaries and transient work relationships, a conceptualization of employee engagement with the organization (e.g. Saks 2006; Salanova and Schaufeli 2011; Shuck 2011) rather than work or job may be more meaningful for both scholarly understanding and practical application.

Generating employee engagement

Extant research has also investigated employee engagement in relation to its outcomes for employees, for example, the attitudes and behaviours displayed by engaged employees (e.g. Bakker and Schaufeli 2008; Macey et al. 2009; Albrecht 2010), and as the antithesis of burnout (e.g. Demerouti et al. 2001; Maslach et al. 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Schaufeli et al. 2009). A related strand of research is concerned with identifying organizational outcomes of employee engagement (e.g. Harter et al. 2002; Bakker and Schaufeli 2008; Alfes et al. 2012) and their measurement (e.g. Maslach et al. 2001; Schaufeli et al. 2006; Albrecht 2010). Measurement scales such as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES, Schaufeli et al. 2006) have been developed to identify the presence or absence of employee engagement and turnover intentions (e.g. Alfes et al. 2012). Increases in productivity and organizational performance (Wefald and Downey 2009; Rich et al. 2010; Christian et al. 2011; Halbesleben 2011) have also been of interest to scholars.

There have been long-standing suggestions that employee engagement is a reciprocal construct that organizations should foster (e.g. Harter et al. 2002), and recent research has drawn on social exchange theory and a perspective of perceived organizational support to provide further insights. Specifically, research using social exchange theory (e.g. Alfes et al. 2012; see also Eisenberger et al. 2001) indicates that social relationships at the workplace are reciprocal, and Saks (2006) in particular has established that employee engagement develops through a model of social exchange. There is also evidence that organizational support can foster organizational engagement, and, studies adopting a perspective of perceived organizational support in particular reveal that employees who feel valued by the

organization are more likely to engage (e.g. Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010). There may be an implicit and somewhat optimistic expectation, however, that organizational engagement activities develop and strengthen employee engagement.

Indeed, it has been established that from an employee perspective, engagement is 'influenced by various aspects of an employee's treatment by the organization and would, in turn, influence the employee's interpretation of organizational motives underlying that treatment' (Eisenberger et al. 1986, p. 501). As outlined in the previous section of this literature review, a variety of factors relating to the organizational culture are likely to impact on an employee's propensity to engage (see Hofstede 1990; Alvesson 2002), but the underlying dynamics remain under-researched. Hence, there is less depth in understanding of how employee engagement is generated (see Shuck and Wollard 2010) between managers as representatives of the organization and employees.

The literature on organizational change can provide two main insights into such a generative process. Firstly, communication across hierarchical layers is a medium through which the reciprocity of social relationships and associated attitudes of engagement can be fostered and maintained (e.g. Welch 2011). Through two-way communication and management behaviours, organizations seek to create an environment, a culture, in which employees engage (Leiter and Maslach 2010; Bakker et al. 2011; Christian et al. 2011). In particular, (1) managers communicating strategic and operational matters to employees and (2) employees being able to communicate upwards with their managers has been shown to facilitate the generation of employee engagement (e.g. Kular et al. 2008; Alfes et al. 2010a; see also Delbridge and Whitfield 2001). Studies of change communication reveal the

importance of personal and face-to-face communication (e.g. Goodman and Truss 2004) to allow for discussion and debate rather than more impersonal and directive means of communication. The effects are that if employees are being kept informed of organizational developments, they are more likely to participate or engage (Klein 1996; see also Welch 2011).

Secondly, like organizational change, employee engagement appears to be a process that is facilitated not only by opportunities for sensemaking (e.g. Stuart 1995; Sonenshein and Dholakia 2012) but also by time. In particular, stage models of change developed on the basis of Kübler-Ross's (1969) seminal work provide a series of steps leading from initial shock at the announcement of change to finally acceptance of changes such as new ownership, culture and working practices. The main elements here are both time and opportunities for organizational actors to discuss what change means for them (e.g. Author 1). Similar dynamics may apply to the generation of employee engagement, particularly in the context of ownership transition.

The implication is that both organization and employee have an active role in generating employee engagement and associated benefits like improved performance (see Sanders and Frenkel 2011) with communication being the main vehicle for organizational engagement activities (see Bakker et al. 2011). Extant research has shown that managers can actively develop employees' capacity, motivation and freedom to engage (e.g. Harter et al. 2002; Macey et al. 2009) through the instrumental delivery of organizational engagement activities that 'creat[e] opportunities for employees to connect with their colleagues, managers, and wider organisation' (Truss, quoted in MacLeod and Clarke 2009, p. 8; see also Delbridge and Whitfield 2001). Despite an assumed reciprocity (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro

and Conway 2005), however, engagement is not an automatic employee response to organizational engagement activities. Employee engagement as delivered by an organization and employee engagement as experienced by employees may not necessarily match, but there is limited insight into how individual organizational actors experience and respond to organizational engagement activities.

In summary, there appears to be a lack of in-depth understanding of how employee engagement is generated in the interplay between organizational engagement activities and employee's experiences thereof. Hence, our article aims to answer two questions: (1) what are the processes and activities that managers employ in an attempt to generate employee engagement with their organization? and (2) how are these experienced by employees? Our article therefore makes a two-fold contribution to the literatures discussed above. Firstly, it examines organizational engagement activities delivered by managers through both directive and discursive means of communication, and secondly, it analyzes employees' experiences of and responses to managers' engagement efforts to further develop the current understanding of how engagement with an organization might be generated.

Research background

In the United Kingdom in recent decades there has been a trend towards the transfer of service delivery from the public to the private sector (Spackman 2002; Ferlie et al. 2003; Broadbent and Laughlin 2004). Such public-private projects have used a range of 'co-operative institutional arrangements' (Hodge and Greve 2009, p. 33), including private finance initiatives, joint ventures and strategic partnerships.

NorthService Ltd. is of the latter type and represents an arrangement established in 2008 through which certain NorthCouncil services (including procurement, ICT and

human resources) are managed and delivered through the newly formed partnership organization. Individuals who had been employed in such departmental roles in NorthCouncil were transferred into NorthService Ltd. under TUPE arrangements to maintain operational expertise, whilst management expertise was brought in from ServiceCom plc, the private-sector parent which has been involved in other such ventures. NorthService Ltd. continues to operate out of NorthCouncil premises and to deliver services to the local community on the council's behalf.

NorthService Ltd. is a single case study that sought to examine first hand and in detail the complex dynamics of generating employee engagement in and with a public-private partnership organization (see Stake 1995; Flyvbjerg 2006). The case was chosen through theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007), which allows for the selection of extreme cases to gain new insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Yin 1994); in our research that is employee engagement with the organization and the ways in which it is generated. While case study research has been widely criticized (see, for instance, Flyvbjerg 2006 for details), it has shown to provide conceptual insights to inspire new ideas and research agendas (e.g. Eisenhardt 1989; Siggelkow 2007). The strength of our research is the examination of the generation of employee engagement with an organization in real time (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) and through multiple voices as discussed below.

Our research was exploratory, seeking to examine NorthService Ltd.'s journey towards employee engagement about two years into the organization's existence (data collection took place between September and November 2010). We were particularly interested in what engagement activities were delivered by managers on behalf of the organization and how employees responded to them, seeking to explore the manifestations and interpretations of employee engagement from both

management and employee perspectives, thereby going beyond a traditional focus on managers' perspectives. Our research employed a qualitative methodology, which is regarded as inductive, interpretivist, constructionist (Bryman and Bell 2011) and contextual (e.g. Holstein and Gubrium 2007).

We have used a number of data sources to build the picture of NorthService Ltd.'s journey towards engagement as portrayed in this article. The organization provided us with internal documents, including emails, management presentations to staff, copies of the newsletter, and the results of two consecutive staff satisfaction surveys. We also accessed press releases by both NorthCouncil and ServiceCom plc and other materials from their respective websites (NorthService Ltd. did not have a dedicated website at the time of data collection).

Our main method of data collection was qualitative interviewing (Mishler 1991), with interviews being largely unstructured and seeking to establish a dialogue between researcher and participants (Kvale 2007). A total of 25 individual and three group interviews were conducted with organizational actors from all hierarchical layers and departments within NorthService Ltd., resulting in a total of 2,000 minutes of audio recording. Five senior managers, five middle managers, five line managers and ten frontline employees were interviewed individually. One group interview was held with senior and middle managers (nine participants), one with middle managers (five participants) and one with frontline employees (four participants), and our sample included about 10% of the organization's total workforce.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and fed back to the interviewees to check and amend if necessary – an offer that only few interviewees took up. We complemented the formal interview with short memos containing reflections on the interview process and content as well as further questions arising

from the interview. Data analysis was inductive (e.g. Eisenhardt 1989) and involved the identification of patterns of relationships within the data (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). Through multiple detailed readings of the data, frequent themes and categories emerged, creating the coding framework (King and Horrocks 2010). The data was then constantly compared with the relevant literature to test small-scale hypotheses as advocated by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; see also Eisenhardt 1989).

For the purpose of this article, our analysis has categorized the data in two sets: (1) interviews with managers, and (2) interviews with frontline employees. The reason for doing so was to examine the engagement relationship between managers developing and delivering engagement activities on behalf of the organization in a directive and facilitative manner as well as to examine the reactions of employees to whom the engagement activities are directed. Whilst we acknowledge that managers are also employees (and therefore in a position to experience engagement), we have chosen to explore the relational and reciprocal dynamics of engagement between these two layers of responsibility (see our discussion on generating employee engagement in the literature review above).

We have also simplified the complex organizational situation at NorthService Ltd. for analytical purposes. Senior and middle managers have come almost exclusively from the private-sector parent (ServiceCom plc), while line managers have come mainly from the public-sector parent (NorthCouncil); our analysis regards their interviews as a single data set representing the organization's management structure. Our analysis of the employee data has focused on those interviewees who were transferred from NorthCouncil; we have ignored the data from the interview with the only one new recruit as there was insufficient evidence to draw any

inferences regarding his/her engagement with NorthService Ltd. Such simplification allows us to focus on NorthService Ltd.'s collective journey towards engagement.

Generating engagement: Managers' delivery and actions

In the analysis that follows, we show how management communication activities in NorthService Ltd. sought to generate employee engagement with the organization (Welch 2011). Through their engagement activities, NorthService managers wanted to challenge employees' previous assumptions of what an organization does and how it should be run to encourage them to come onto an engagement journey with them. We have summarized the cultural differences between NorthCouncil (from where the majority of employees were transferred) and NorthService Ltd. (which is influenced by ServiceCom plc's private sector ethos) in Table 1 below.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Strategic partnerships like NorthService Ltd. therefore require (re-)negotiation about what the organization stands for, believes in, promotes and endorses (e.g. Alvesson 2002; Rich et al. 2010). NorthService managers refer to this phenomenon as 'culture change' since they seek to alter organizational actors' cognition and behaviour in favour of a pre-defined culture and working practices ('hyper-culture', see Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008) which is expected to help the organization meet its goals. Senior manager Shaun reflected on the culture that he and his colleagues wish to build through their engagement activities as follows:

The sort of culture that we are looking to develop is about people taking a bit more initiative, a bit more ownership of their particular situation whatever that might be and not always defaulting, going straight and knocking on the manager's door when they've got a problem, [but] try and take ownership of that and try to work out the solution for themselves. And it's a good management responsibility to recognize that people are doing that and actually praise and reward that sort of behaviour if you like, rather than perhaps condemning people for making mistakes.

According to Shaun, NorthService managers seek to align organizational actors' cognition and behaviour (being proactive) to their new organization's culture, thereby fostering an environment with which employees choose to engage on the basis of their lived experiences in the organization (Leiter and Maslach 2010; Shuck et al. 2011). They take into account practical issues (such as systems and processes), cultural aspects (such as roles, responsibilities, expectations and power relationships, see Johnson and Scholes 1992) and the circumstances in which employees became part of NorthService Ltd. (involuntary transfer).

NorthService managers seek to enhance employees' propensity to engage with the organization (e.g. Welch 2011) through a wide range of organizational communication activities (summarized in Table 2 below). In particular, they want all employees to understand the bigger picture in which the organization operates, to recognize implications on their role and to experience meaning in work (Alfes et al. 2010a). NorthService managers utilize a mixture of primarily directive and discursive means of communication to create opportunities for their employees to participate in (e.g. Truss et al. 2010; see also Sanders and Frenkel 2011) and engage with the organization (Harter et al. 2002). They have invested considerable time and effort into communication across the organization, with senior and functional managers acting as important channels of communication (see also Goodman and Truss

2004). The mix of primarily directive and discursive methods allows for both communication from managers and a place for the voice of employees in terms of discussion, questioning and debate, echoing the reciprocal nature of employee engagement described in the literature review above (e.g. Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010; Alfes et al. 2012).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

An example of a primarily directive means of communication is a whole-organization event, which has been used to both inform organizational actors of recent developments and create an agreed and shared purpose for the organization. It has provided direction for organizational actors (see Klein 1996; Goodman and Truss 2004) while allowing employees to participate in discussion and debate (see Delbridge and Whitfield 2001). The core theme of the event is 'you are the difference' and it has constructed a coherent account of the organization ('strategic message') to enhance employees' propensity to engage with it (see Bakker et al. 2011). Senior manager Adam explained:

[It] is the opportunities, the vision of where we see ourselves in five or ten years' time. It just gives people something to hang on to. You'll get your cynics who think it's all a load of rubbish, but I think if you constantly deliver the messages, ... you should have a defined culture, a defined way of working, a set of behaviours. I think it should be interactive; I don't think you can do it by just sending people emails out saying that this is our vision.

Strategic communication activities like the whole-organization event aim to introduce a new and shared understanding of the organization and the culture managers wish to create (see Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008), and Adam stresses the importance of opportunities for discussion and debate (two-way communication, e.g. Truss et al. 2010). His account implies an assumption that once organizational actors have understood the new vision, they will want to participate in making it reality (see Klein 1996). This could be, however, somewhat optimistic as our discussion in the following section of this article suggests.

In order to promote such understanding further, NorthService managers seek to engage in discussion with organizational actors to interpret otherwise abstract notions of organizational culture jointly with employees to allow them to respond differently and, as they hope, in an engaged manner. Adam's understanding of effective engagement communication implies participation by all organizational actors (e.g. Welch 2011), which is reflected in the fact that four of the six main communication elements of their engagement activities are primarily discursive (see Table 2 above). Senior manager Marie expanded on this point as follows:

We do have the direct engagement ... quarterly on a department by department basis, where the staff can come and ask any questions to [name of other senior manager] and myself, and we do a staff survey which is communication the other way, for staff to give us information. ... On an ad hoc basis we try and have what we call an open door policy, if people want to come and talk to us, want to email us, want to have a meeting, they do.

Marie's account indicates that NorthService managers wish to provide employees with multiple opportunities to have a say and be heard. Our analysis suggests an expectation that reciprocity built in this way will translate into greater propensity to engage with the organization (e.g. Harter et al. 2002; Saks 2006). There is evident

appreciation within NorthService Ltd. that line managers have a crucial part to play (Truss et al. 2010; Welch 2011) in engagement communication as they provide and reinforce strategic messages at a team level. Line manager James explained:

Part of my role is to try to make my team see what opportunities are out there, what could potentially happen, and we're seeing the fruits of that now. Some of them are suddenly being given opportunities that they weren't even aware of, and they have grabbed them with open arms. ... I try to explain ... that if we do this, that is opportunity that will arise, and it can only benefit everybody.

James's account implies that NorthService managers seek to engage their team members with the organization through opportunities for career development arising from NorthService Ltd.'s new vision and culture (see Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008). They hope that this will make employees feel more valued (e.g. Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010) and encourage them to leave behind their previous organizational experiences, i.e. to 'un-engage' from NorthCouncil through a process that accompanies their journey towards engagement with NorthService Ltd. As senior manager Shaun reflected:

For people who were in NorthCouncil for a long period of time, it's very hard to believe that things are different. And there is an element of 'it was never any good when I was in NorthCouncil, how is it going to be any better in this organization?' So there is still a job to do to actually show people that there are more opportunities, and that can be communicated. ... For example, ... you can see people have really developed and grasped the opportunities and got on. We probably need to do more to ... share those stories ... and use them as examples of 'if you want to go for the opportunities, they are there and look at what so and so has done and where they are now'.

Shaun's testimony indicates managers' attempts to show through organizational communication activities the opportunities offered to employees by NorthService Ltd.

that were unavailable to them at NorthCouncil to reinforce the new culture and way of working (see Harter et al. 2002). This is happening discursively in team meetings, as James's account above suggests. The newsletter, another more directive means of communication, also features stories of individual employees' success in reshaping and promoting their career. The meanings are symbolic: employees are told implicitly that they are valued by the organization as witnessed by new opportunities, and such feelings of being valued are expected to enhance their engagement with the organization (e.g. Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010).

NorthService managers are keen to communicate by both speech and action, and as senior manager Marie explained in the interview, verbal communication in itself is not necessarily enough to influence employees' 'interpretation of organizational motives' (Eisenberger et al. 1986, p. 501).

I think if there was nothing behind [the words] and all you did was be very pleasant with the staff, engage with them, tell them stories ... and they see no evidence of it, you would very quickly lose them, it would very quickly dissolve into deep cynicism. So there do have to be certain key milestones. What we do with the newsletter and other activities is try and be very clear about what we've done and what success we've had, so it's tangible to people that we are moving forward, because ... most people'll say, 'OK well let's just see. That sounds fine if it happens. I'll believe it when it happens'. Then if it does happen, they'll go, 'oh OK that's good, so I'll now listen to the next thing'.

Marie suggests that employees are unlikely to engage with the organization if the strategic message is not backed up by noticeable business outcomes (key milestones) that affect their direct sphere of work (see Author 1). Her account also implies that NorthService managers attempt to use more and different means of communication and interaction to generate engagement more widely among

employees. The importance of the strategic message being reflected in managers' behaviour has been picked up by senior manager Scott:

So in some ways, ...[Marie] is telling a story by her behaviours and the way she's engaging people, and I applaud it because if you don't have that and they're all like me, you are not going to run a successful business, you know [another senior manager] loves his spreadsheets rather than people. ...I think there's something there in a story that's not manifesting itself verbally or on paper, but actually by the actions taken, and I think more of that would be good.

By communicating with employees both directly and discursively, both verbally and through their actions, NorthService managers have changed the terms of relating to their employees, thereby offering them different lived experiences in the organization. Through a variety of both directive and discursive engagement activities (see Table 2) they demonstrate how they seek to achieve the organization's goals and that they want employees to have an active role, too. In such a way, NorthService managers encourage employees to respond to being managed differently by engaging with the organization (e.g. Saks 2006; Schaufeli and Salanova 2011), wanting to be a part of it (see Klein 1996). Indeed, the expectation is that through the norm of reciprocity, positive behaviours as exhibited by managers through organizational engagement activities (such as more openness to discussion through discursive means of communication) would make employees feel obliged to engage with the organization (see Eisenberger et al. 2001; Alfes et al. 2012). However, NorthService managers appreciate that such reciprocity is but a possibility and mediated by the organization's culture and situation (e.g. Alvesson 2002); they appreciate that they may never be able to engage all employees with the organization, as senior manager Sam reflected:

I think it's been for the better, a lot more engagement, more interactive, with not all staff members, because you never will. ... Enough for staff to say to other people, 'actually you know they are making a difference' or 'they are a sounding board and they're not too distant', they are actually engaged. So I'm hoping when we come to the next [whole organization] event, some of the staff that said we're celebrating success too much may just have a slightly different stance on it.

In the following section of this article, we complement these managerial accounts by exploring employees' lived experience in response to the organizational engagement activities outlined here.

Generating engagement: Employees' reactions and lived experiences

In the analysis that follows, we show how the management communication activities discussed above were experienced by NorthService employees, influencing their propensity to engage with the organization (Saks 2006; Shuck 2011). The data suggests that managers' best efforts to generate engagement may not always result in a positive reaction, that organizational actors have an active part to play in generating engagement with NorthService Ltd.

There is an appreciation among some employees that engagement with the organization is inextricably linked to its culture (see also Alvesson 2002) and wider context. Consequently, they also appreciate that communication mechanisms need to vary in order to precipitate understanding and experiences of the organization's culture, as employee Dan explained:

It's about ... what we're all here for. For some people it's about money, for some people it's about feeling we've done a good job and it's about engaging at that different level of what different people want from work, the reason why they

come to work. If the end of the story can say, 'and this is what it will do for you, be part of it at whatever different level', that would probably be an effective story, a way of getting the message over of what we're about.

Dan links the reasons why employees engage with an organization ('what we're all here for'), potential benefits to individual employees ('this is what it will do for you') and NorthService Ltd.'s culture ('what we're about'); intrinsically their lived experiences of the organization. It implies that employee engagement has to be generated taking into account the organization's context (ownership transition and subsequent involuntary transfer of employees) and its members' needs (see also Eisenberger et al. 1986). Employee David develops this point further:

I think that you've got to make sure that people understand what's going on around them, because that's part of trust as well. You don't want to sugar coat everything, you want to make them trust the fact that you are going to let them know exactly how it's going, what's succeeding and what needs work, and how they can engage their energies to make everything better.

David emphasizes the relationship between the organization and its employees (see Saks 2006), particularly the role of honesty. He suggests that trust in managers' openness to inform employees about 'exactly how it's going' and their guidance as to where employees ought to focus their energies are important ingredients to 'make everything better'. Honesty appears to be very important for David (perhaps an indication that this was lacking in management-employee relations at NorthCouncil), and he reflected on the whole organization event described above as follows:

I think it was that level of honesty and the fact that you had all the bosses there, and they all talked about their sections. But I think it was the fact that they weren't afraid to say 'we've had some mistakes here and there and we are trying to work on it'. Some of them weren't afraid to laugh at themselves and none of

them were very stand-offish. But I think it was their involvement that made it more than just a PR stunt.

David responded positively to the visibility and honesty of NorthService senior management during the whole organization event. His account implies that this is something which he did not experience (at least to the same extent) at NorthCouncil and that he has begun to consider whether there is more than propaganda ('PR stunt') behind NorthService managers' engagement activities; managers' terms of interaction with employees have been changed. It seems that David has begun to tentatively enter into a journey towards engagement with NorthService Ltd, which may be supported by his recent promotion to a NorthService role. David is one of those employees that have been given new opportunities, as outlined by managers James and Shaun above, which has enhanced his propensity to engage with the organization (see Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010).

However, employees generally have experienced positively the increased direct, consistent and frequent communication that is offered by the organization to facilitate employee engagement (see also Goodman and Truss 2004). It seems that employees generally have benefitted from greater knowledge of the organization's strategic message and new culture (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008) and, by extension, understanding of what changes mean in practice (Macey et al. 2009; Sonenshein and Dholakia 2012), as employee Hetty explained during the interview:

You're always informed, you're always told, either by a meeting or by email, what's going on. Whereas for all the years I've worked with NorthCouncil, there wasn't that much. There weren't team meetings or other meetings to say 'this is happening'. You were just told it was going to happen. ... Now there's a new [computer] system that's being brought in, and there're meetings about it. You know it's about 'can you offer any input to it?' And you're very involved in

anything that's going on. So I suppose that's a very good thing compared to where I've come from.

Hetty's account indicates that she feels involved in what is happening in NorthService Ltd. through participation in meetings. She seems to be flattered to be asked whether she could offer any input into new working practices, feels valued (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010). Hetty's reflections emphasize that effective communication goes beyond information sharing (directive communication) and that employees benefit from being given an opportunity to participate in discussion and debate through discursive means of communication (see also Delbridge and Whitfield 2001; Sanders and Frenkel 2011). Employee Jim agreed:

It feels like a lot of decisions are being made that the people who are doing the work haven't been consulted on – and there is a lot of change happening ... very, very fast. ... I think having team meetings at our end helps control that a little bit better because there's a greater sense of decisions being made that're best for us, rather than just 'well, it's only the bottom line that matters and you need to do this, and this has come from above'. ... So yes, I think it works better that way, to have something where you can discuss things properly.

Both Hetty and Jim express feelings of involvement with what is happening within the organization, feelings of having a voice (see Delbridge and Whitfield 2001). While Jim acknowledges that many decisions in NorthService Ltd. are made at the highest organizational level, he appreciates the opportunity to discuss them with his colleagues in team meetings as this gives him a feeling of being in control (see Bakker et al. 2011). Their lived experiences of being part of the organization in such a way are likely to enhance their propensity to engage with it (see Klein 1996).

HR officer Dan has offered insights into a further approach to generating employee engagement: making NorthService Ltd. relevant to employees' personal everyday experiences. The focus of NorthService Ltd. on service provision to the local community offers an overlap between personal life and work, which might create an emotional connection with their role (e.g. Kahn 1990). Referring to the induction event for new employees, Dan explained:

It's how you actually engage somebody with [the organization]. So if you can tell a story that people can identify with, it might be the story of [local area], which is what we tell people when they come to work for us. 'This is the story of where you work', so they'll engage with that: 'oh yes, I work in [local area]' and they probably live in [local area], too.

Dan reflects upon the importance of establishing the connection between the organization's strategic message (story of the organization) and individual employees' roles (see Shuck et al. 2011). It seems that relevance of content of organizational communication activities alluded to by Dan as well as more symbolic aspects of culture like visibility, perceived honesty and involvement (as described by David, Hetty and Jim above) enhance organizational actors' propensity to engage with the organization (see also Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010). Indeed, our analysis suggests that a tentative expectation of improvement in employees' immediate work environment (e.g. development opportunities, new working practices) and increased opportunities to communicate with managers (e.g. Truss et al. 2010) contribute to the generation of engagement with NorthService Ltd. Employee Jim reflected on his experiences further:

Hopefully things are improving in the organization. I think that every assurance has been given that it's going to be different this time, although I haven't had personal experience of [improvement] yet, hopefully that'll change in the future.

It's easy to be cynical about [change], but I like to be fair, there are a lot of opportunities now to communicate with higher level management.

Jim hears and listens to the messages that are being communicated to him through the different communication activities outlined in the previous section. He does have some reservations about the promises being made ('hopefully'), but acknowledges the increased opportunities to interact with senior managers (Welch 2011). Jim is not an untypical example of a NorthService employee who cautiously expects that the promised results will be achieved through the organizational engagement activities.

Hence, there is tentative evidence that the generation of engagement with NorthService Ltd. involves a gradual consignment of employees' experiences with NorthCouncil to memory, positioned in the past as opposed to the present, and a gradual belief in the messages being communicated to them via communication activities and management behaviours. Employees who have started to engage with NorthService Ltd. are willing to judge the organization increasingly favourably. They no longer compare how things were done in the past to the present, but consider the present on its own merits and look ahead to the future. However, there is no guarantee that all employees are either on a journey of engagement at all or travelling at the same speed (e.g. Christian et al. 2011).

Discussion and conclusion: Generating employee engagement in a public-private partnership

Our analysis offered in the previous two sections of this paper indicates that the organizational engagement activities instigated by NorthService managers represent an attempt to create new terms of interaction between organization and employees (see Harter et al. 2002). They have delivered a number of organizational

communication activities with both directive and discursive purposes in order to provide the foundations for the generation of employee engagement with the newly formed organization (see Welch 2011; Delbridge and Whitfield 2001). Through primarily directive means of communication such as the whole organization event and the newsletter NorthService managers sought to provide direction, promote a coherent strategic message and enhance employees' knowledge of the organization and its new, pre-defined culture (see Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008). Through primarily discursive means of communication such as team meetings they have sought discussion and debate and have also provided employees with opportunities for having a say (see also Goodman and Truss 2004). A particular type of interactive and inter-communicative culture is being promoted by NorthService managers through the engagement activities that are based on assumed reciprocity of interaction between organization and employees (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro and Conway 2005).

Our analysis also indicates that NorthService employees' lived experiences in response to the organizational engagement activities offered by managers have generally been positive. The employees cited above have experienced enhanced opportunities to connect with their managers and wider organization through the whole-organization event, meetings and other opportunities to interact (see Delbridge and Whitfield 2001; Welch 2011). They have begun to reconsider their relationship with their previous employer NorthCouncil and their current organization NorthService Ltd. by comparing past and present (e.g. Sonenshein and Dholakia 2012). Through managers' communication activities, the employees quoted above feel better informed, more involved and more in control than in the past (e.g. Bakker et al. 2011). We regard such statements as indicators for their tentative engagement

with NorthService Ltd. and acknowledge that not all employees may have similarly positive experiences of the organization.

Three main factors appear to influence organizational actors' propensity to engage with the new organization. Firstly, they may continue to experience a connection to their previous organization (see Eisenberger et al. 1986), which they need to sever before being able to connect with NorthService Ltd. Secondly, membership of NorthService Ltd. has been imposed on employees through involuntary transfer into the new organization. Thirdly, NorthService Ltd. is not the type of organization that many employees would have chosen to work for; many had decided early on in their career to work for NorthCouncil because of its community-focused values and perceived caring and nurturing ethos. After ten or more years of working in NorthCouncil they find it difficult to accept NorthService Ltd.'s private-sector ethos, culture and working practices (see Hofstede 1990; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008). It would therefore be overly optimistic to expect that the generation of employee engagement with the organization is a straightforward process.

Indeed, NorthService managers appreciate that their engagement activities are contextual and that associated communication needs to be factual in terms of content and symbolic in terms of their actions reinforcing or contradicting their words (see Welch 2011). They are keen to define and deliver milestones to enhance the credibility of their words (e.g. Author 1) and to establish a meaningful relationship with their employees. NorthService managers seek to involve employees in decisions, make them feel valued and provide them with development opportunities (see Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010), regarding such issues as crucial to the new culture that they wish to create for the organization (see Alvesson

and Sveningsson 2008). In return, however, NorthService managers expect reciprocity from their employees (see Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010), a willingness to judge their efforts favourably and join the journey towards employee engagement that they have started. While our research has shown that the communication activities that offer opportunities for interaction, discussion and debate (see also Goodman and Truss 2004; Delbridge and Whitfield 2001) can foster employee engagement (e.g. Harter et al. 2002), it has also demonstrated that employees need to listen to and accept them for employee engagement to be generated. The ‘give’ and ‘take’ in the generation of employee engagement identified by our research is summarized in Table 3 below:

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Managers give their time by organizing and participating in meetings, and they also give information through presentations and documentation. But through interaction with their employees in meetings for instance, managers can take information, feedback and observations from their employees, which they can take into account when further developing strategies and working practices. Such ‘take’ seems to give employees feelings of having a say and getting involved (e.g. Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010), which they regard as a positive experience. In turn, employees take information, understanding and meaning from their interaction with managers through discursive means of communication and give participation, information and feedback, leading to tentative feelings of belonging (see Hofstede 1990).

The generation of employee engagement relies on expectations that organizational engagement activities are experienced positively by employees. However, our research indicates that this is far from straightforward to achieve, particularly in organizations like NorthService Ltd. where many employees were transferred without choice. While the current engagement activities have generally been experienced positively, the engagement position among interviewees remains tentative and somewhat precarious. Hence, generating employee engagement is a gradual process with further consistent management communication activities likely to facilitate and potential contradictions likely to hamper further progress (see Goodman and Truss 2004; Harter et al. 2002; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008).

In conclusion, our research has made two important contributions to the current understanding of the process by which employee engagement with an organization is generated (see Saks 2006; Schaufeli and Salanove 2011; Shuck 2011). Firstly, it has offered real-time insights into the generation of employee engagement in a partnership organization, emphasizing the importance of organizational communication activities (e.g. Goodman and Truss 2004; Welch 2011). Opportunities for interaction between management and employees (Delbridge and Whitfield 2001) through discursive means of communication seem to allow for better understanding of the organization among employees as well as opportunities to feel involved and valued (e.g. Rhoades and Eisenberger 2007; Rich et al. 2010; see also Klein 1996) – experiences that enhance employees' propensity to engage with the organization.

Secondly, our research illustrates that generating employee engagement is by no means a straightforward process. Organizations can but offer opportunities for employees to experience engagement activities positively, but they cannot force

them to engage (see Leiter and Maslach 2010). Particularly in organizations like NorthService Ltd., contextual factors also influence whether or not employees choose to engage with the organization. However, further research is required to understand more fully the mechanisms by which employee engagement with changing organizations is generated. In particular, more research is required into employee engagement in collaborative ventures such as NorthService Ltd. with a focus on any prior engagement of employees with their previous organization and the dynamic process of generating engagement with their new organization.

7,972 words

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Table 1. Perceptions of NorthCouncil and NorthService Ltd. as organizations

	NorthCouncil	NorthService Ltd.
Focus of organizational activity	Delivering services for the local community.	Delivering services for the local community at a competitive price and drawing in new business from elsewhere.
Ethos	Common good	Financial gain
Culture	'Blame culture' in which individuals and groups were given the blame when something went wrong. Individuals and groups tended to 'keep a low profile', 'cover their backs' and hide behind a set of rules and stacks of paperwork.	'Inquiry culture' in which problems are investigated to see how they can be avoided in future. Interviewees agreed that NorthService managers have no interest in assigning blame.
Organizational communication	Poor management communication, grapevine as key source of information.	Extensive management communication from company-wide events to small team briefings, monthly newsletter, round-table meetings with senior managers.
Relationship with management	Interviewees felt deceived or let down, and many have a generally negative perception of management.	NorthService managers attempt to create perceptions of support by being more visible throughout the organization and by delivering on their promises.