

Reclaiming Engagement in the SAF: Building Strong Relationships and Honest Communication

by MAJ Lawrence Leong

Abstract:

The concept of “Engagement” in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) came to the fore in 2007 when then-Chief of Defence Force, LG Desmond Kuek, espoused it as one of his visions for the SAF. Since then, “engagement” has become a cornerstone of the respective SAF services’ human resource constructs. It is imperative that the SAF re-focuses on what engagement means, enumerates what it hopes to achieve via this construct and explain how it can be correctly implemented by “commanders at every level.” “Engagement” should include concepts such as commitment to defence, unit cohesion, morale levels, superior-subordinate interaction and inspiring leadership.

Keywords: Engagement; Superior-Subordinate Relations; Human Resource; Leadership

INTRODUCTION

The concept of “Engagement” in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) came to the fore in 2007 when then-Chief of Defence Force, LG Desmond Kuek, espoused it as one of his visions for the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). He wanted “commanders at every level ... to engage their servicemen intellectually, emotionally and professionally, so that ultimately our people understand the purpose, feel that they belong, and know what and how to achieve mission success.”¹ Since then, “engagement” has become a cornerstone of the respective SAF services’ human resource (HR) constructs.² Over time, “engagement” was used to describe either HR outcomes such as increased productivity, HR processes such as creating a positive workspace or specific HR initiatives such as commanders’ dialogues. Like the term “command and control” in military parlance,³ the term “engagement” has been interchangeably used to mean seemingly similar but in reality quite different concepts. Such concepts include commitment to defence, unit cohesion, morale levels, superior-subordinate interaction and inspiring leadership. It is imperative that the SAF refocuses on what engagement means, enumerates what it hopes to achieve via this construct and explain how it can be correctly implemented by “commanders at every level.”



Commander Engaging His Subordinates During Exercise Panzer Strike 2013

In this article, a definition of engagement will be put forth that will help the SAF achieve its objectives. Two ideas of engagement—working relationships and communication—will subsequently be explored. It will then be argued that amongst the methods used to deepen engagement, the employee’s working relationship with his or her direct superior plays the most critical role. Following the positive establishment of such a working relationship, honest communication is next needed to cement this relationship. Lastly, the essay will explore some measures that can be undertaken by both the individual and the organization to advance engagement in the SAF.

DEFINING ENGAGEMENT

In attempting to create a working definition of engagement, two factors were considered. Firstly, engagement is, at its root, a psychological concept. Thus, any definition will need to encompass cognitive and emotive processes, and behavioral outcomes.⁴ This psychological dimension also underscores the fact that engagement starts with an individual but ultimately requires the meeting of two minds. Secondly, the well-known adage of “winning hearts and minds” is used as a guideline. The familiarity of this phrase would facilitate recollection of the essence behind the definition of engagement. “Heart” refers to the intangible emotional and inter-personal dimension of engagement. “Mind” refers to structured processes and procedures that further engagement and also points to the measurable behavioral outcomes that engagement can create. With these two factors in mind, a resultant definition of engagement can be “a cognitive and emotive connection an employee has with workplace elements that results in measurable and voluntary increase in work productivity.”

WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE’S MANAGER: THE CRITICAL DRIVER OF ENGAGEMENT

An employee’s personal working relationship with his or her direct manager is the most important factor in furthering engagement. This is an important assertion given that no less than 26 separate factors, identified by major research studies, are responsible for driving engagement.⁵ However, there are several reasons why one’s relationship with one’s direct boss plays the critical role. The significance of human relationships in general will first be explored. The significance of human relationships is deeply embedded in human evolution.⁶ Teamwork and mutual understanding were essential survival tools for early humans. This called for humans to understand one another’s motivations and interests. John Medina called this the “Theory of Mind.”⁷ This need to

understand others in turn stimulated the human learning process. Over time, our ability to learn became inextricably linked to our relationships with other people.⁸ Learning not only increases productivity but also increases perception of self-worth. Hence, the ability to learn is fundamentally linked to engagement drivers such as job performance, personal development and working well with colleagues. In essence, relationships at work affect the ability to learn, which in turn has ramifications for one’s level of engagement.

Secondly, of all the relationships at work, the relationship with one’s immediate superior is the most significant. Various HR think-tanks and academics have concluded that “the relationship that an individual has with his or her manager is the strongest influencer of his or her engagement.”⁹ This is because direct superiors make decisions that have the most direct impact on their subordinates. They are also the most direct source of performance feedback. In

addition, Medina argues that the greatest source of work stress comes from having no control over one’s performance.¹⁰ Thus, immediate superiors have an immediate impact on whether their subordinates can exert control over their performance. Furthermore, direct bosses are usually the first in line to bridge the gap between the employee and the organization. Therefore, one’s direct superior is the single most important factor in facilitating one’s cognitive and emotive connection with the workplace.

CEMENTING THE RELATIONSHIP: HONEST COMMUNICATION

Once a good working relationship has been established between direct superior and subordinate, honest communication helps to strengthen it and allows further engagement to take place. An analogy would be to equate a good working relationship to a well-built expressway, while communication is the truck that transports goods from point to point. It is a widely-held belief that effective communication, getting the message across efficiently, is the key to

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building good relationships. However, it is *honest* communication—getting the right message across—that is more important. It is akin to having a good quality truck that hardly breaks down. Honest communication usually begins with the superior in the form of frank performance appraisal, quality feedback, forthright analysis of organizational problems and admission of mistakes. This is usually reciprocated by the subordinate by sharing openly on obstacles faced at work and at home, level of motivation, direction of superiors and clarity of organizational vision. Honesty is characterized by such openness.

Honest communication is a more sophisticated form of effective communication where more emphasis is placed on the content of the message rather than how it is transmitted. The preliminary result of honest communication is the establishment of “psychological safety.” This means being able to express one’s true self without negative consequences to self-image, status or career.¹¹ With psychological safety, the desired end-product, trust, is built. Trust facilitates the establishment of further engagement drivers. Such a driver can be seen in Christine Doyle’s theory of work motivation.¹² Doyle argues that one’s self-concept shapes one’s work identity, which in turn determines the level of motivation. For example, if one’s self-conception is that of a sociable person, one’s work identity will most likely be that of a good team player. With trust in the direct superior-subordinate relationship, the superior will not only be able to quickly discover this work identity of the subordinate, but also understand its origins and utilize it for the good of the individual and the organization.

Trust created by honest communication will also strengthen the direct superior-subordinate working relationship. It is important to note that trust then begets trust. Similarly, mistrust breeds mistrust. This can be seen in the Pygmalion Effect, postulated by Shawn Achor. A superior who believes his or her subordinates are lazy and untrustworthy usually ends

up creating employees with such characteristics even though such characteristics were not originally present.¹³ In other words, employees end up like how their employers envisage them to be. Therefore, trust also serves to cement the most important relationship one can have at work—with one’s direct boss.

GOOD RELATIONSHIPS BUILT ON TRUST: START TODAY

For engagement practitioners in the SAF, deepening engagement in the workplace starts, first and foremost, with the individual soldier. Creating a good immediate superior-subordinate relationship requires more than having the occasional cigarette or coffee together. It also goes beyond conducting the routine interview session with virtually no guidelines to properly advance engagement. One way forward is to have a framework that can facilitate the building of a good superior-subordinate relationship. One proposal is the “4S” framework (Table 1).

Apart from a set of guidelines specifically for the immediate superior-subordinate relationship, it would also be useful to adopt a broader perspective in terms of a collection of such relationships in the workplace. For newly posted superiors especially, there is a need to adopt a strategy that can create a conducive environment for such relationships to grow and deepen; to “shape the battlefield” in military parlance. Often, trust is built when two persons interact with a high degree of openness, maturity and empathy. Thus, superiors tend to build relationships first with subordinates who are able to interact with them in this manner. However, it might be useful to first target good working relationships with the “connectors” and the “salesmen” in the workplace.¹⁴ Connectors are people who know lots of people and have a knack for making friends and acquaintances. Salesmen are people who can pass messages along convincingly and persuade other people. By first properly engaging these people, the superior is able to effectively send out the message to the rest of his or her direct subordinates that “I am interested in building a genuine working

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No.	Category	Description
01	Service Rendered	<p>What are the contributions of this serviceman to the unit/organization, both primary and secondary?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superiors should help their servicemen, including NSFs, see how their work connects to the larger picture. • By understanding the subordinate's work in its entirety, the superior will be able to provide accurate work appraisal, and guidance in how performance in the various work-areas can be improved.
02	Social Support	<p>What are the key sources of emotional and personal support the serviceman receives both at home and at work?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These sources can range from the subordinate's family members, a clique of friends, a colleague or a type of activity that the serviceman derives joy from. • It is important to know these sources of support well as it will give better insight into the psyche of the serviceman. It will also allow the superior to understand what drives the serviceman's motivation at work.
03	Strengths and Weaknesses	<p>What are the strengths and weaknesses of the serviceman both at work and at home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oftentimes, when one speaks of strengths and weaknesses, it is framed in the context of the target person's work performance. However, it is also important to look at other areas of a serviceman's life. Most significantly, the superior should seek to understand the serviceman's definition of "strength" and "weakness" on his or her own terms and not pre-judge. This will facilitate the building of trust and understanding. • For example, serviceman who spends most of his time at home may seem to be a good husband. But he may deem it a weakness as he sees himself being controlled too much by his wife.
04	Success in the Future?	<p>What are the plans to position this serviceman for success?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a direct superior, there must always be plans to develop one's subordinates that are aligned to personal aspirations and organizational needs. • More importantly, these plans must be communicated honestly with the serviceman with his or her feedback sought. • These plans must be constantly reviewed and updated.

Table 1: The "4S" Framework

relationship with you; I am concerned about your performance and problems, both here and at home; and I want to help you succeed.” Once enough connectors and salesmen are brought onboard, a tipping point can be reached such that there is widespread belief in the good intent of the superior. This will set the stage for good immediate superior-subordinate relationships to be built.

Lastly, from the larger SAF perspective, there is a need to ensure that people put in positions of authority and leadership can be good “engagers.” Good engagement practitioners first need to have a high level of emotional intelligence and emotional competence.¹⁵ This is the ability to identify, assess and regulate the emotions of oneself and others. It is also about being adept at handling inter-personal relationships. For example, without empathy, a superior would not be able to sense other people’s feelings and perspectives. The superior would find it difficult to take an active interest in the subordinate’s concerns.¹⁶ It is recommended that potential candidates for officer and warrant officer ranks possess a basic level of emotional competence. In addition, they should be equipped with the full-range of soft skills that will lead to high emotional competence early in their careers.

By first properly engaging these people, the superior is able to effectively send out the message to the rest of his or her direct subordinates that “I am interested in building a genuine working relationship with you; I am concerned about your performance and problems, both here and at home; and I want to help you succeed.”

The SAF also needs to explore ways to reward superiors who are good “engagers.” This is because establishing good personal relationships at work and

honest communication is a time-consuming process; some servicemen may need frequent attention over a period of time. In other words, engagement efforts may not produce immediate results. These results are also not as directly measurable as other conventional work pursuits. Furthermore, efforts expended may sometimes not be recognized at all. For example, a direct superior may devote much time and energy to help a soldier with problems perform at the average level of the soldier’s peers. However, the fact that this soldier performs only averagely draws very little attention to the engagement efforts of his direct boss.¹⁷ One way to reward good “engagers” is to tie organizational climate surveys more closely to the work performance of these leaders. These surveys can also be tailored such that the results will reveal the extent of engagement at every level down to the last soldier, and not just at the unit level. Another measure can be to create more detailed interview templates which are based on the “4S” model above, that a leader needs to use for pre-identified subordinates. These interview records would then have to be regularly reviewed by a higher authority.

CONCLUSION

To ensure that engagement is properly executed, the focus must first be on the relationship between direct superior and subordinate. Subsequently, honest communication, carried out in a structured manner, can serve to cement this relationship through the establishment of trust. It is then important for the organization to support and incentivize the engagement process.

Setting the engagement agenda in the SAF right has never been so important. A 2009 report by the Defence Psychology Department revealed that Gen Y (those born between 1977 and 1994) are articulate and idealistic. They want a good work-life balance and look forward to interesting work and development opportunities. Most importantly, they expect inspiring leadership. A robust engagement framework for such Gen Y servicemen is no longer a good-to-have but a necessity. In addition, engagement is a virtuous

process that also grooms and develops the engagement practitioner. This will contribute to the future success of SAF leaders within and outside the organization. It is hoped that this article will become a springboard for the issue of engagement to be given greater thought and discussion—it is imperative that engagement be strengthened in the SAF. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. "In Conversation With LG Desmond Kuek," *Cyberpioneer*, 31 Jul 2007.
2. These include the RSAF's CARDINAL framework, the Army's LIVE framework, the RSN's Knowledge Journey (KJ) Vision and Joint's Human Capital Development Framework.
3. The term "command and control" has been used for years by militaries to describe various forms of structures, processes and types of authority with no consistent definition. See Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, "Re-conceptualizing Command and Control", *Canadian Military Journal*, 2002, 53-64.
4. John Gibbons, "Employee Engagement: A Review Of Current Research And Its Implications," *Conference Board Research Report*, No. E-0010-06-RR, 2006, 5.
5. Ibid., Annex A.
6. John Medina, *Brain Rules: 12 Principles For Surviving And Thriving At Work, Home, and School* (Seattle, WA: Pear Press, 2008), 43-46.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Gibbons, "Employee Engagement," 9.
10. Ibid., 188-189.
11. Valerie Yeo and Christian Chao, "Making 'Teamwork' Work," *Odyssey E-newsletter* 9, (Civil Service College: Centre for Organization Development, 2012).
12. Christine E. Doyle, *Work And Organizational Psychology: An Introduction With Attitude* (England, Hove: Psychology Press, 2003), 106.
13. Geraldine Ling, "Engaging Employees: How Supervisors Can Show Better Support," *Odyssey E-newsletter* 16, (Civil Service College: Centre for Organization Development, 2012).
14. Ibid.
15. Daniel Goleman, *Working With Emotional Intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 24-27.
16. Ibid., 27.
17. Unfortunately, if the soldier continues to perform poorly, it will certainly reflect badly on his or her direct superior.



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