CHAPTER 14

Employer Branding and Organisational Effectiveness

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

As HRM begins to assume a greater role in Organisational Effectiveness, there has been growing debate about the need for researchers to provide a more satisfactory means of accommodating workers' interests in the modelling of the employment relationship. This chapter builds upon these arguments, blending them with a critical review of the upsurge of interest in employer branding and employee engagement. In doing so, it draws upon our own research and consultancy practice to illustrate the application of a 'conversational approach' to EVP with explicit links drawn to the model of New OE that frames the book.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter the reader should be able to:

● appreciate the importance of discourse in the functioning of organisations and the employment relationship
● understand the concepts of and the emergent links between social exchange theory, employer branding and engagement
● critically appraise the role of paradox and ambiguity in HRM and Organisational Effectiveness
● examine a more dynamic model of employer branding and its links with New OE.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the drumbeat of business model change is growing recognition of the need for a shift in mindsets amongst HR professionals about how we treat 'context', and about the role of language in shaping this. For instance, the CIPD's recent report on *Next-Generation HR* emphasises the need for 'insight-led' HR leaders who are more alert to what is going on outside and inside the organisation, and able to harness these insights in ways that improve business performance and employee engagement (CIPD, 2011).

In what follows, we draw upon the critical realist lens outlined in Chapter 1 in order to explore the *active* or *performance* role of language in framing employment structures and activities. This is a matter often overlooked in management research and consultancy practice, which relies on a vocabulary of change framed by conventional mindsets and approaches (Butcher and Atkinson, 2001). These tend to adopt a highly mechanistic view of strategic management, treated as something confined to senior management teams. However, as Sparrow and colleagues point out, strategy is 'not rational and never has been' and inevitably involves people at *all* levels of the organisational hierarchy (Sparrow *et. al*, 2010).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a relatively new method of enquiry within management studies, which usefully draws attention to the emergent properties of strategy-making, how new vocabularies and 'storylines' crop up in organisational settings, and how they are appropriated and 'recontextualised' by participants (Thomas, 2003). There are many different interpretations of organisational discourse. For our purposes, we use the term to denote a distinctive vocabulary which constitutes a way of thinking, talking and behaving within the organisation, and which is intimately connected to broader social, economic and political contexts within which the organisation is operating.

From this perspective, discourse is not just about language but also about the actual practices and behaviours that go with it. The first learning objective within this chapter is to develop the reader's understanding about the links between language and action, recognising that language is not neutral – it actively frames how we think, and what we say and do. On this basis it can be argued that a change in social systems requires a change in the mix and *ordering* of prevailing discourses at play (Fairclough, 1995).

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

Recruitment consultant:

'Most HR professionals will now have "value added" stamped on their foreheads, because they are being asked always to think in terms of the business objectives and how what they do supports the business objectives and the business plan' (Francis and Keegan, 2006).

Business partner:

'It's a strange word but I don't think there's anybody got permission to be an employee champion in our sort of set-up, really … The unions see it as their role for the employees to come to them to tell them about their problems – not HR' (Keegan and Francis, 2010).

- To what extent do you agree with the assertion that HR practitioners are mostly concerned with business issues?

- Look back at Chapter 2 and consider the key contextual factors that shape HR discourses in modern-day organisations.

The quotations in the Reflective activity above draw our attention to the power of language in shaping our thinking and practice, reflected here in the narrow framing of HR work around business issues and the casting aside of talk about working *with* or *for* employees. They resonate with an unfortunate tendency to use phrases like 'tea and sympathy' to describe employee-facing roles in HR, linked with the suggestion that strategic business partnership is the 'future'– any attempt to reclaim a space for talking about employee well-being is tantamount to dragging the profession back into the dark ages of 'welfare work' (Beckett, 2005; Keegan and Francis, 2006).

From a critical standpoint, this is a storyline that misses the point, because *both* are essential to the future of HR work and sustainable performance, as argued in Chapter 1.

Nevertheless, much of the prescriptive HR and management literatures present a static view of language, failing to recognise its performative role, which is explained below.

LANGUAGE AND PERFORMANCE

We recognise that for new concepts and ideas about language and action to 'take', they must be perceived to be of value in terms of what 'works' within the context in which it is being introduced (Thomas, 2003). Much of the academic work on organisational discourse is couched in a vocabulary that is not easily translated into practical tools for managers and employees. However, we are seeing useful applications of discourse theory entering the world of practice, reflected in the uptake of new OD interventions noted in Chapter 3, which adopt a constructionist outlook to effect change and enhance performance (eg appreciative inquiry and storytelling techniques).

Ford and Ford usefully draw upon the metaphor of organisational change as 'conversations for change' to provide practical tools for managers about how to use language effectively in planned change efforts. They introduce the notion of *conversational responsibility* and *conversation management* to raise the pivotal role of line managers in shaping conversational patterns of language-use within the organisation (Ford and Ford, 1995, 2010). This is described in terms of engineering a 'shift' in conversations across and through four types – initiative conversations, conversations for understanding, conversations for performance, and conversations for closure.

- *Initiative conversations* signal the beginnings of change, by introducing new ideas, directions or possible courses of action. They include the use by change leaders of assertions, proposals, suggestions, and so on, to foster a 'readiness for change' by focusing attention on the 'what', 'when', 'why' and 'value' of change to the individual and the organisation, thereby creating an interest and legitimacy for change.
- *Conversations for understanding* allow more open discussion of opposing views and surfacing of tensions through conversations that increase in the number of 'voices' involved, and the generation of new ideas and possibilities. These take place alongside movement to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty and generate shared understandings about change in terms of value to the individual and organisation.
- *Conversations for performance* focus on generating action and intended results, recognising that this is a contested domain. They include the reaching of pragmatic 'workable arrangements' that are mutually satisfactory for all parties concerned, such as the setting of accountabilities, targets, plans, time-lines at the level of the organisation, team and individual.
- *Conversations for closure* focus on critical reflection of events. They are used to signal the completion of a current initiative and the facilitation of movement on to new projects, comprising an honest review of the successes and failures encountered on the way, and an acknowledgement of new futures and possibilities that did not exist prior to the start-up of the change initiative.

Ford and Ford explain that processes by which organisational members generate a common language for change are recognised as always being in a process of negotiation and/or conflict. One of the values and purposes of effective 'conversations for change' should be to reveal processes that lead to the dominance of particular ways of talking and action which result in systematic exclusion and disempowerment of others. Conversations for performance may therefore be suspended at any time to allow the dialogue to return to earlier conversations – to allow for further explanations, checking of 'political voice', and conversations for understanding.

CONVERSATION MANAGEMENT: SENSITIVITY TO CONTEXT

Ford and Ford (1995, 2010) make the point that successful change requires change managers to alter their conversational patterns, using the four different types of conversation at

different times. Little is said, however, about different *levels* of conversational 'arenas' in which these kinds of conversations take place. Francis and Sinclair (2003) present a framework for analysing this dynamic within organisations, articulated in terms of three levels of management activity, referred to in terms of strategic, managerial and operational conversations. As we draw upon Francis and Sinclair's framework in our modelling of EVP we prefer to use the term 'change leader' rather than 'change manager', to support the view that people at all levels of the organisational hierarchy can consciously shape conversations for change, taking a leadership role as and when required (consistent with the notion of distributive leadership noted in Chapter 1).

We argue that efforts to diffuse more collaborative and empowering management practices requires these change leaders to be more sensitive to the power effects of language within organisational settings and beyond. Writing from a critical HRM perspective, Delbridge and Keenoy (2010) outline what such sensitivity should entail amongst academics writing in this field:

- sensitivity to the wider socio-political context in which (discursively mediated) management practices are enacted
- challenging the unreflective adoption of managerial language/practice used in mainstream research – and the need for analysts to challenge the taken-for-granted beliefs and nostrums that frame this
- a concern to articulate a range of voices 'which are barely heard within the mainstream' (page 804).

Linked with these arguments, critical scholars point to dominance of the unitary HRM discourse within HRM–Performance (HRM-P) research, which has progressively obscured the inherent sources of tension and conflict in employment management noted in earlier chapters (see also Keegan and Boselie, 2006; Keenoy, 2009). Scholars writing from a critical HRM (CHRM) position have argued that although HRM-P practices may provide enhancements in involvement, discretion and engagement, these may come to employees at the expense of stress, work intensification and job strain (Delbridge, 2007; Legge, 2001; Maslach *et al*, 2001). They point to the controlling effects of the language of commitment, engagement, and so on, and the extent to which these pose a threat to employees materially and emotionally. In this case, HRM may represent more insidious forms of ideological control and identity appropriation, rather than offering any real substantive change in the employment relationship (Geary and Dobbins, 2001).

From this position, the 'manipulation of meaning' by employers can appear less as a concern for mutuality between employers and employees and 'more like straightforward corporate takeover of psychological space' (Overell, 2008: 14; Townley, 1998). Moreover, increasing attention to emotions at work and the management of these can arguably lead to a more, rather than less, instrumental orientation of employees (Fineman, 2000; Landen, 2002).

While we recognise the need to be mindful of the potentially manipulative/harmful effects of HRM noted above, we take the view of Keenoy and others, that employees are not simply passive receptacles for management ideas or corporate 'mono-cultures' (Keenoy, 2009; Francis, 2002, 2007; Grant and Shields, 2002). On reconceptualising employees as more active players in constructing their work and organisation, the lens of New OE emphasises the power of words and language for changing mindsets about the exercise of agency and ways in which people exercise choices, even within a 'constrained employment context' (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009: 6).

Understanding of agency within the field of HRM is relatively weak, and both CHRM and HRM-P research streams have been criticised for sharing a common view of the worker as essentially 'objects' that are being exploited to the benefit of the organisation, thereby slipping into some kind of structural determinism (Fleetwood and Hesketh, 2010).

THE EMPLOYMENT VALUE PROPOSITION: 'THE FULCRUM OF CONSTRUCTIVE TENSION'

Following from the arguments presented above, there are increasing calls for researchers to move beyond the either/or orientation and create a more 'balanced agenda' to HR research (Francis and Keegan, 2006). Writing within the mainstream literature, for instance, Paauwe (2009) calls for a 'more balanced approach' to performance-focused research, in ways that pay greater attention to the concerns and well-being of employees.

At the same time, critical scholars point to the increase in 'intellectual space' being given to CHRM within the mainstream as promising, and call for analysts to proactively re-frame the HRM agenda in ways that enable constructive engagement of competing approaches and perspectives. This requires the development of alternative interpretations and vocabularies that seek to connect different perspectives rather than synthesising or displacing one with another (Delbridge and Ezzamel, 2005; cited by Delbridge, 2011).

This chapter builds upon these sentiments by drawing upon the notion of constructive tension developed by Evans, Pucik and Barsoux (2002) and social exchange theory which places reciprocity and mutuality at the heart of the employee–organisation relationship. On raising questions about the highly unitarist underpinnings of current research in HRM and performance, we then draw connections between emergent theories of social exchange, employer branding and engagement.

Central to our arguments is the need for HR/OD professionals and change leaders to adopt a mindset which treats the active surfacing of paradoxical tensions as an opportunity to enhance social exchange, employee engagement and performance. Our third learning objective, therefore, looks at the role of paradox and ambiguity in HRM and organisational effectiveness, focusing on their implications in the social construction of employment value propositions (EVPs).

There is a dearth of research around these issues, and our fourth learning objective invites readers to examine a model of employer branding developed by ourselves, presented as a means of promoting fresh debate and further research in this field.

A key point we wish to make is that an over-reliance on statistical modelling of HRM-P has meant that there is a dearth of research and practical understanding about the social exchange processes involved in shaping EVPs (Francis and Reddington, 2010). Exchange relationships are more complex than the resources exchanged (Shore *et al*, 2009) and our process-oriented model of EVP moves beyond an examination of 'antecedents' and 'outcomes' in the exchange to one which also gives attention to the dynamic evolving nature of *relationships* and *employment structures* underpinning the employment deal. Depicted in Figure 14.1, this treats the construction of EVPs as a dynamic mix of social exchange processes, shaped by personal, job, and organisational characteristics.

Figure 14.1 EVP framework
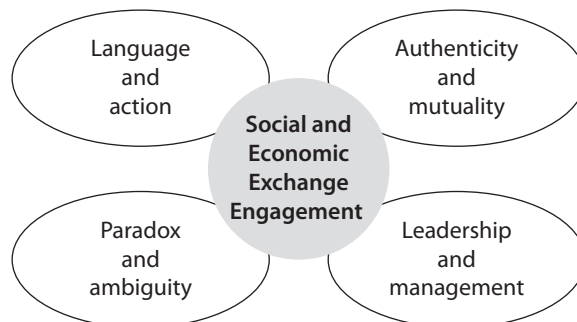
Underpinned by New OE mindset and behaviours, our framework of EVP characterises the employment deal in the form of social and economic exchange relationships (psychological contract, perceived organisational support), intimately linked to employee engagement as presented in Table 14.1. It will be used as an organising framework for the chapter.

Table 14.1 A model of EVP – key features and links to New OE

EVP lens	New OE lens
Language and action: priming conversations for change Recognises the active role of language in framing the processes by which value propositions are socially constructed and resulting actions. The notion of 'conversational responsibility' is used to promote a concern for context, dialogue and reflective use of language used to frame conversations for change.	**Language and action**
Authenticity and mutuality: enhancing social exchange A concern with building dynamic forms of social exchange that enhance employee/team agency in shaping the deal, and facilitate the creation of 'workable arrangements' of mutual benefit to the stakeholders involved. Perceived organisational support and psychosocial contract fulfilment are important factors that shape the quality of social exchange.	**Authenticity and mutuality**
Paradox and ambiguity: surfacing tensions and harnessing constructive tension Our EVP lens treats working with paradox and ambiguity and the active surfacing of tensions as an opportunity to enhance employee engagement and performance. We build the concept of constructive tension into the strategic planning and ongoing construction of EVPs.	**Paradox and ambiguity**
***Leadership and management: building judgemental competence and conversational responsibility** Emphasis is placed upon a person-centred language of 'authentic' and 'shared' leadership, and the building of 'judgemental competence' in ways that generate high levels of trust and feelings of mutual purpose and gains between the parties involved in the exchange.	**Leadership and management**

SOCIAL EXCHANGE WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

Social exchange theory has arguably become one of the most influential frameworks for understanding exchange behaviour within organisations, and been used to explain a number of different interactions, including psychological contract theory (PCT) and perceived organisational support (POS) (Shore *et al*, 2009), and more recently, employee engagement (Saks, 2006). Although there are different perspectives on social exchange, there is consensus that it involves a series of social and economic interactions that generate obligations to reciprocate, engendering 'feelings of personal obligations, gratitude and trust' (Blau, 1964: 20). Analysts mostly draw on a statistical lens in their examination of these interactions, and as a result they treat social and economic exchange as a duality (eg Song *et al*, 2009). Using the lens of New OE, our approach to EVP adopts a both/and perspective, recognising that all exchange processes have an element of social and economic features, albeit that the emphasis will vary, and in this chapter we mostly focus on the quality of the social exchange.

There is an extensive literature in this field; here, we provide a brief overview of current thinking, showing key connections between the literature on social exchange and the emergent conceptualisations of employer branding and employee engagement.

Social exchange has been differentiated from an economic exchange along the dimensions of resources exchanged, type and strength of obligations, reciprocity, and the quality of the relationship developed over time (Shore *et al*, 2009: 290; see also Conway and Briner, 2009). The section below illustrates these differentiating features, focusing on PCT and POS. According to PCT and POS theories, employees tend to personify the organisation by assigning characteristics to it that are human in nature enabling the organisation to develop perceived human-like feelings for an individual employee, such as appreciation, and to form various types of exchange relationships (Chiaburu *et al*, 2011; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). For personification to occur, people attribute organisational policies and practices to various organisational agents or representatives, and a key question arises – who is party to the relationship?

The employee's line manager or HR manager who sends out messages regarding expectations and obligations has been cited as an important 'agent' or proxy for the organisation (see Marks, 2001). HR practices also play an important role in signalling and creating particular employment offerings and images of employee–organisation relationships (Martin and Dyke, 2010; Martin, Gollan and Grigg, 2011).

People differ in their perceptions of the value of such offerings, but the central idea behind the modelling of HRM–Performance, social exchange and employer branding is that it is possible to 'summarise the totality of a common or shared employment experience' (Edwards, 2010: 7). This takes the form of a formally espoused mix of functional, social and economic benefits, used to frame performance expectations among workers, and to fostering psychological bonds to the organisation (Guest and Conway, 2002).

Most social exchange theories are based on *content models* concerned with what has been exchanged, how much, and the outcomes derived from it, such as employee commitment and performance, and perceptions of psychological 'breach' (Conway and Briner, 2005, 2009). Two major contemporary social exchange theories include organizational support theory (OST) and Psychological Contract Theory (PCT).

TWO MAJOR SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORIES

Psychological contract theory

The psychological contract has been defined by Guest and Conway (2002) as the perceptions of both parties to the employment relationship – organisational and individual – of the reciprocal promises and obligations implied in that relationship. They explain that psychological contracts are clearly expectations, although ones originating from the individual's *belief* in a promise, stated or implied, that he or she has been offered, in exchange for his or her contributions to the organisation.

Psychological contract theory (PCT) and most empirical research has focused on contract content in terms of 'inducements' from employers (eg pay, training and development, etc) in exchange for 'contributions' from employees – such as effort and ability (see Cullinane and Dundon, 2006).

Attention has been given to the perceived 'state' of the psychological contract – an individual's global impression of whether or not 'promises' are kept, how fair they are perceived to be, and trust in whether they are likely to be delivered in the future (Guest, 2004: 6). The failure of an organisation to meet its promises has been described in terms of perceived 'breach' and 'violation', when breach develops into feelings of injustice or betrayal (Morrison and Robinson, 1997).

Analysis typically draws upon Rousseau's transactional/relational classification which treats the exchange process as essentially economic or social (Rousseau, 1995), although

in practice any given employment relationship contains a mix of these elements in varying degrees (O'Donohue and Wickham, 2008).

A *transactional exchange* emphasises the economic and more tangible aspects of the exchange, such as working longer hours and accepting new job roles, in exchange for more pay and job-related training (Herriot and Pemberton, 1997).

A *relational exchange* emphasises less tangible socio-emotional aspects of the exchange, by which employees come to identify with their organisation and in doing so are expected to demonstrate 'organisational citizenship behaviours' (OCBs) in exchange for job security, financial rewards, and training and development. OCBs include going outside the requirements of the job, or 'going the extra mile', whether in customer service, in ensuring quality, in helping others (Dyer and Reeves, 1995) or in speaking well of the organisation (employee advocacy).

A relational psychological contract is consistent with the idealised employment relationship denoted by 'progressive' commitment-based HR practices linked to a more positive 'state' of psychological contract and improved employee/business performance (Guest and Conway, 2002).

Thompson and Bunderson (2003) introduce the notion of *ideologically infused psychological contracts*, reflecting the growing expectation that employers offer opportunities that enable individuals to contribute to a valued cause.

Organisational support theory (OCT)

Like the inducements-contribution model underpinning PCT, organisational support theory is based on the premise that when employees believe that the organisation values their contributions and well-being, they feel obliged to reciprocate. Perceived organizational support (POS) is closely associated with the meeting of socio-emotional needs and an organisation's readiness to reward increased efforts made on its behalf (Eisenberger *et al*, 1986; Eder and Eisenberger, 2008: 56). Research has mostly focused upon the content of the resources exchanged. Three key aspects of work experience shown to shape POS resonate with antecedents shaping the state of the psychological contract (Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003):

- organisational rewards and working conditions – eg developmental experiences, job autonomy, and visibility to and recognition from upper-level management
- perceived supervisor support – the extent to which supervisors care about the employees and value their contributions
- fairness of formal organisational policies and procedure, linked to notions of procedural justice.

While PCT and POS research are both rooted in social exchange theory, they have nevertheless developed in relative isolation from each other. Both constructs emphasise the quality of social exchange and procedural justice, although POS theory places more emphasis upon the *delivery* of support rather the types of '*promises*' exchanged & the extent to which they have been met (Tekleab et. al, 2005:148; see Chen *et al*, 2009 and Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003, for a fuller discussion).

Elements of both types of exchange relationships are evident in the ServCo case study presented below. It points to the pivotal role of HR professionals as organisational 'agents' in striking a 'deal' with managers during a period of organisational change, and processes of social exchange shaping various components of the employment deal.

The meaning attached to these components appears to be of more importance than the content or make-up of the deal *per se*, consistent with process models of social exchange (Shore *et al*, 2009). Training in emotional intelligence was interpreted by one respondent as an indication of increased self-worth by 'the organisation', thereby shaping her perceptions of the value of the deal. Consistent with organisational support theory, the case also illustrates how managers attributed to the organisation human-like qualities (eg as 'someone who cares'), and how actions by trainers and coaches are treated as actions by the organisation itself.

CASE STUDY

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT WITH SERVCO

In ServCo the employment deal operated largely in transactional terms and the case illustrates how the company instigated a culture change programme that promised a move away from a task-oriented management culture to one which encouraged 'leadership' and 'emotional loyalty'. This involved a range of management development activities including a four-day emotional intelligence programme for managers, aimed at enhancing 'leadership skills'. The programme focused on improving participants' self-management of emotions and an enhanced understanding of/ ability to manage the emotions of others. The perceived distinctiveness of the leadership programme appeared to act as a strong signalling device to participants about a move towards a more relational employment deal, illustrated in the accounts of two managers:

In the past people didn't do anything that focused on you as an individual – it was just you, and what they could do to enhance your management skills ... was very much on technical things or on behaviours that would just make you run your store better. Nothing ever focused on your personal need and what was important to you personally. And that I think made me feel 'M mmm, mmmm: they do recognise me and know I'm here and care about me a little bit as an individual.They care about me!

It is about you and your own personal feelings ... It was unlike any other ServCo

course I'd been on ... You were talking about feelings, and things like that ... (pause) ... It was structured in a way that it wasn't just about the business.

The enactment of a more relational leadership style was not without difficulty within a strong compliance culture that required managers to strictly follow HR procedures. Noticeably, significant resources were spent upon new structures for coaching managers in translating what they had learned into feasible strategies for 'building employee engagement and boosting store performance'. All participants received coaching from Group-level HR managers in setting up personal development plans in support of these, and this provided an important means for making sense of competing people-/ task-oriented management priorities. One coach talked about the 'idealistic nature' of the training programme and the need to reshape managers' expectations in a way that was 'more realistic'. This involved surfacing tensions between the need to follow standard procedures geared to achieve 'consistency in customer service' and also to display emotionally sensitive leadership behaviours promoted by the HRD programme. For this person, her role of coach was to help managers '*understand the parameters within which they [managers] were working*'.

Source: adapted from Francis and D'Annunzio-Green (2007), D'Annunzio-Green and Francis (2005)

Shore and colleagues (Shore *et al*, 2009) argue that more ought to be understood about how trust and balance in social exchange evolve, outside the 'norm of reciprocity' that is typically used to explain perceived organisational support, psychological contract breach/fulfillment, and employee contributions (Shore *et al*, 2009: 294). More nuanced models are required that take account of individual differences, plus other cultural norms, that are beyond the reciprocation motive (see Chapters 5 and 16 for discussion about the importance of culture and personality traits in shaping employee attitudes and behaviours).

This point is illustrated by recent case study research undertaken by the Work Foundation (Wong *et al*, 2010) concerned with exploring psychological contracting processes from

an employee perspective. For instance, a case example is given of how the employment deal amongst officers within a UK police force was shaped by strong social ties between co-workers who were treated as members of a second family, and this dynamic provided a better theoretical explanation than conventional assumptions of reciprocity and exchange underpinning theories of PCT. The authors conclude that the perceived value of working within an organisation may be more strongly linked with brand values and ideologies than with the more functional economic and social aspects of the deal typically expressed in psychological contract research (see also Cunningham and Kempling, 2010).

An implicit assumption underpinning social exchange theory is that the resources exchanged are valued by the recipient – ie that inducements offered by the employer are valued by employees and that employee contributions are valued by the employer. This is not necessarily the case, and more has yet to be understood about what resources are perceived as valuable, and about mutuality of purpose and gains (see Chapter 1). In our modelling of EVP we have drawn upon Lepak and colleagues' conceptualisation of value (Lepak *et al*, 2007) in a recent case study analysis in respect of how line managers within a services organisation perceived the value of the 'deal' between HR and line managers associated with the introduction of an e-HR implementation programme (Francis and Reddington, 2011).

Our research indicates that people differ in what they experience and in their perceptions of value when working within a particular organisation, which challenges the central idea behind the modelling of HRM–Performance, social exchange and employer branding; that it is possible to 'summarise the totality of a common or shared employment experience' (Edwards, 2010: 7).

Although personification of the organisation usefully allows analysts to assess how people relate to the organisation, Watson warns us of the risk of falling into a unitary language that oversimplifies the actual reality of organisational life, glossing over differing perceptions and values held by organisational members (Watson, 2002: 224). An understanding of the coalitional nature of organisations is therefore important, as noted in the discussion about subcultures and ethics in Chapters 5, and 12, and in Purcell's case example of an attempt to forge the organisation into a community (see Chapter 6).

Purcell notes that a community implies a sense of 'we' as well as 'me', and it is important therefore that HR/OD and line practitioners appreciate the necessity of managing employees as a collective, not just as individuals. At an analytical level, this also requires researchers to look for frameworks that allow for multiple levels of analysis regarding the employee–organisation relationship – at the level of the individual, team, and organisation (see Paauwe, 2009). This is a central issue emerging in discussion about the academic–practitioner divide in employee engagement research, for practitioners are shown to be more concerned about aggregating data to inform practice at macro-level, whereas academics focus more towards the micro-level, around defining the psychological concept of engagement (Wefald and Downie, 2009).

BRAND PERSONALITY AND THE VALUE OF WHAT IS EXCHANGED

We have noted that the conceptual language around 'value' within the context of social exchange remains underexplored by academics, reflecting a concern expressed by practitioners of the need for more practical management research that is 'evidence-based' (Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007: 987).

Employer branding has been described as an attempt by employers to better define the psychological contract in terms of the value employees derive from their employment in an organisation, linking this to organisational level of analysis, and a corporate personality or identity that both employees and customers will identify with (Barrow and Moseley, 2005; Martin and Hetrick, 2006; Rosethorn, 2009).

Brand personality has become an accepted means to identify associations made with the brand, and research in this area usefully draws links between organisational identity, organisational identification and organisational personality characteristics (Edwards, 2010).

Evidence indicates that expression of a brand image in terms of a 'brand personality' usefully provides a meaning structure by which people can relate to the organisation and make sense of the employment relationship (Lievans, 2007; Davies, 2008). The language associated with this metaphor builds upon what is called the 'Big Five' model as a reference structure for describing human personality: 1) *extroversion*, a preference for social interaction and for activity; 2) *agreeableness*, an orientation towards compassion and caring about others, and away from antagonism; 3) *conscientiousness*, the preference for goal-oriented activity (ie the degree of organisation); 4) *emotional stability*, the ability to cope effectively with negative emotions; and 5) *openness to experience*, a tolerance for new ideas and ways of doing things, particularly experientially (Caprara *et al*, 2001: 380).

Google traits

Below is how Google presents itself to potential recruits, drawing clear links between the employment experience and a corporate brand likened to 'being a good friend', translated into promises about fulfilling work and a supportive workplace (adapted from *Top 10 Reasons to Work at Google*, http://www.google.co.uk/jobs/reasons.html).

Lend a helping hand.
Google has become an essential part of everyday life – *like a good friend – connecting people* with the information they need to live great lives.

Life is beautiful.
Being a part of something that matters and working on products in which you can believe is remarkably fulfilling.

Good company everywhere you look.
… No matter what their backgrounds, Googlers make for interesting *cube mates*.

Work and play are not mutually exclusive.
Here at Google it is not just possible but 'mandatory' to *have fun and work* at the same time.

The paradoxical nature of employment practice illustrated here in the emphasis placed on 'fun *and* work' is poorly conceptualised within the employer branding literature, with practices being criticised for relying upon overly simplistic 'employer of choice' propositions (Martin and Dyke, 2010). This has led to growing concerns expressed by academics about the potential for so-called 'brandwashing' or culture controls that shape employees' sense of self (Cushen, 2009; Martin and Hetrick, 2006: 27).

Like models of PCT and POS, the language of employer branding relies heavily upon a unitarist stance that treats employees as essentially *consumers* buying into their employer's vision and corporate goals and brand or the cultural and symbolic cues which organisations attempt to signal, rather than *producers* of HR practices or corporate brand.

In the next section we explore recent trends within the HRM literature on engagement and employee involvement which have the potential to allow for greater employee agency in the exchange process, thereby conferring greater potential for the creation of 'workable arrangements' (Watson, 2002: 85) of mutual benefit to the stakeholders involved.

MUTUAL PURPOSE AND GAINS: PATHWAYS TO HIGH INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

We have suggested that idealised templates for HRM and performance ought to be re-framed to take better account of contextual factors and social exchange processes underpinning the employment relationship. Boxall and Macky (2009) in their examination of the literature on high-performance work systems (HPWS) explain that any 'HR system' encompasses two broad types of practices: *work* practices, to do with the way work is

organised – eg self-managing teams; and *employment* practices, to do with the recruitment and deployment of workers in tune with the job, and organisational requirements. The authors then draw on the companion terminology of high-involvement work systems (see below), stemming from Lawler's (1986) focus on high-involvement work practices, and Walton's (1985) focus on high-commitment employment practices. They argue that talking of involvement and commitment is a logical focus in today's competitive climate, where 'smarter working' is of vital importance to policy-makers.

However, they eschew the context-free lists of 'best practice' HRM noted in the PCT and HRM-P literatures (see the section above on *Content models of social exchange*), which assume a universalist bundle of practices that somehow result in mutual gains between employer and employee, and call for researchers to focus on identifying the *processes or pathways* that lead to sustainable individual, team and organisational performance.

Vandenberg and colleagues' (1999) model of high-involvement work processes is modified to examine both work involvement and work intensification as underpinning processes and it is acknowledged (page 17) that:

> There remain serious questions around the interaction between involvement and intensification. It would be extremely unwise for anyone to argue that any particular practice, such as teamwork, automatically enhances employee autonomy and leads on to positive levels of trust, satisfaction and commitment.

Boxall and Macky observe that a review of the evidence indicates that a move to higher involvement can result in increased work intensification for employees (eg Delbridge, 2007). It also indicates that there are possibilities for 'win/win' outcomes for employee and employer in certain contexts. These are 'not without careful management of inherent tensions for both parties' (Boxall and Macky, 2009: 17).

Components of best practice/high-commitment HRM

'Best practice' or 'high-commitment' HRM has a strong ideological component – the identification of the employee with the goals and values of the firm, so inducing commitment. Emphasis is typically placed upon developing an open and trusting employment relationship, with bundles of HR practices geared towards increasing worker autonomy and resourcefulness, grounded in the idea that employees can (and are willing to) become self-managing and self-reliant in ways that act in the firm's interests (Landen, 2002). These types of HR practices have been typified by Marchington and Wilkinson (2005), based on the work of Pfeffer (1998), as follows:

- extensive training, learning and development – a focus on skills development, training and longer-term employee development and organisational learning
- employment security and an internal labour market – an emphasis on effective manpower planning and the avoidance of job reductions, attention to career management
- employee involvement, information-sharing and worker voice – eg through briefing groups, quality circles or joint consultative committees – and the opportunity to express grievances openly and independently
- self-managed teams/teamworking – an emphasis on working 'beyond contract' and a search for continuous improvement
- high compensation contingent on performance – often linked to individual, team and organisational performance
- a reduction of status differentials/harmonisation, underpinned by the harmonisation of pay and conditions of employment between different employee groups.

THE ENGAGED, SELF-RELIANT WORKER

This notion of high involvement and the self-reliant worker is closely associated with increasing interest in positive psychology and engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003)

and the development of 'emotional capital', in which employees are required to effectively manage their feelings and displays of emotion at work (Fineman, 2000). Research into the evolutionary role of positive emotions has increased significantly in recent years, with an explosion of interest in psychological engagement with work and the organisation, heavily marketed by consultancy firms (see also Chapter 16).

There is a marked difference in focus between academic and practitioner research in this regard. The practitioner literature has focused on proprietary measures of engagement developed by consultancy firms such as Gallup, MORI and Best Companies. Engagement tends to be defined as a behavioural outcome aggregated at the level of the organisation and associated with an employee's attachment, loyalty and commitment to the organisation (Robertson-Smith and Marwick, 2009), and there is considerable confusion over whether it is an attitude, a behaviour or an outcome. This has led to scepticism amongst some analysts who are not convinced that engagement has met a sufficient standard as a distinct and useful construct, compounded by the fact that consultancy measurement tools tend not to be subject to external reviews (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009; Wefald and Downey, 2009).

Notwithstanding these concerns, there is a growing body of academic literature on engagement, but this focuses on very different definitions and measures. Although there is also an interest in outcomes such as advocacy and discretionary effort, attention has mostly centred on micro-level issues, carefully measuring the *psychological state* of engagement, labelled as 'job engagement' (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006).

Shuck (2011) provides an integrative literature review on engagement and identifies four emerging streams across the practitioner and academic realms noted above. He notes that Kahn (1990) is credited with the first application and use of engagement theory at the workplace. Kahn defines personal engagement in terms of a positive affective motivational state, in which an employee is physically, emotionally and cognitively involved in the work, thereby fully involving the sense of 'self'. From this perspective, organisations play an important role in meaning-making and emotional development, specifically in the enabling of 'meaningful work', heightened in an age when there is increasing orientation towards self-expression and self-realisation (Overell, 2009).

Kahn proposed that engaged individuals are prepared to invest significant personal resources to their work, given the right conditions, notably the extent to which they experience a sense of 'return' provided by their employer in the form of organisational support and other factors that meet their individual needs and expectations. Emphasis is placed on personal agency, and how well individual values and ideology align with personal values (Rich *et al*, 2010). Whereas the practitioner literature also draws links between various psychological bonds connecting the individual and the organisation, employees are viewed in a more passive role and employee engagement treated as a response that can somehow be 'driven' by the organisation, rather than as something that is largely under the control of employees (Wong *et al*, 2010).

Engagement as an act of reciprocity

The treatment of engagement as an element of the social exchange process is central to our modelling of EVP. This is consistent with recent conceptualisation of engagement by Saks (2006), who provides a multi-level analytical approach which treats engagement in work as an act of reciprocity rather than a state of being. He observes that although both Kahn's (1990) and Maslach *et al*'s (2001) models on engagement indicate some key psychological conditions necessary for engagement, they do not fully explain *why* individuals respond to these conditions with varying degrees of engagement (Saks, 2006: 633; emphasis added).

Based on survey evidence, he argues that employees will *choose* to engage themselves to varying degrees (ie cognitively, emotionally, and physically) and in response to the resources that they receive from their organisation. In other words the 'condition' of engagement forms part of the social exchange that takes place within the organisation.

Making this point, Balain and Sparrow (2009: 39) argue that sometimes engagement only 'works' when it creates a collective capability, such as in team behaviours and emotions, and that analysts need to understand more about what performance 'beliefs' or 'recipes' look like at a collective level – eg a shared trust in the team's ability.

Self-efficacy has been recognised as an important factor in explaining motivation, work-related effectiveness, burnout and engagement (Luthans and Peterson, 2002; Maslach *et al*, 2001; Saks, 2006). The construct refers to people's beliefs about their personal capabilities (and confidence) to perform a defined task, including perceptions about the ability to *mobilise* resources available to them, needed to do so (Bandura, 1994; Luthans and Peterson, 2002).

Our EVP lens draws upon both personal efficacy and the more recent notion of 'collective efficacy', rooted in social-cognitive theory defined by Bandura (2000: 75) as 'people's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results'. It is perceived not simply as the sum of the efficacy beliefs of individual members but as an emergent group-level property.

Language as a resource in social exchange

Although increasing attention is being given to social interaction and teamwork in the modelling of engagement, there is a noticeable dearth of research into the role of language as a resource in social exchange processes. (More recent modelling of job engagement by the Kingston School, however, points to the benefits of teamwork and social interaction with colleagues. The construct is defined as having three core facets: intellectual engagement, affective engagement and social engagement. The latter is described – Alfes *et al*, 2010: 5 – as 'actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work'.)

In Chapter 15, Carole Parkes observes the importance of language in creating values and norms in the workplace. Her study of MBA students indicates how language can be used as a resource in developing confidence and capability amongst managers in raising issues that they had previously thought about but did not know how to construct (see also Gentile, 2010).

More has yet to be understood about how planned change efforts can explicitly draw upon language use as a resource to motivate action and social exchange. Discourse theory has been used to shed some light on such dynamics (see Francis, 2007) and offers an important lens for more critical scrutiny of tensions inherent in social exchange, including unreflective use of embedded metaphors such as an over-reliance on the machine metaphor in describing organisation design and development (Chapter 1).

CONSTRUCTIVE TENSION, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The emphasis of New OE on authentic mutuality paints a picture of 'leadership' very different from classical models of OD, leadership and HRM – one in which different people take the lead depending upon organisational circumstances. As noted in Chapter 1, this approach requires a shift in the balance of power, creating challenges at many levels to the prevailing command-and-control cultures, reflected in Allan Ramdhony's case study of the rise and fall of critical action learning sets (Chapter 6). Examining the political dynamics involved, Ramdhony talks of the need for individuals (in this case HRD specialists) to 'stretch their reflective and problem-solving skills, and increase their political influence to effectively manage these tensions' (page **XX**).

Similarly, we argue that the notion of authentic mutuality places more responsibility upon the efficacy of individuals and teams to become actively involved in shaping the 'employment deal'. This involves reflecting upon what they need to learn and be able to do differently to reach workable arrangements that are of benefit to themselves, their team and the organisation. We noted in our introduction that an over-reliance on statistical modelling of perceptions of the deal and of employee engagement has meant that there is a dearth of research and practical understanding about the processes involved. This includes

the tensions between social and technological structures that enable individuals to use their judgement and initiative vis-à-vis more centralised controls and mechanistic decision-making technologies (Bhidé, 2010).

Judging when to 'break the rules' and being able to legitimise the reasons for doing so is a key feature of 'judgemental competency', a term drawn from the work of Evans (1999) that we have adapted to describe the leadership capabilities needed to manage competing challenges arising from the everyday tensions associated with organisational development and people management. Language use is a critical component in this process of legitimation, and it is important therefore that change leaders are 'conversationally responsible' (Ford, 1999); that they are willing to take ownership of the way they speak and listen, and the practical and ethical consequences of this. As Watson observes, although informal aspects of organisational life have been well documented, managers nevertheless generally talk about the organisation of work as largely a technical and rational exercise, but knowing that things do not in reality get done that way (Watson, 2002: 75).
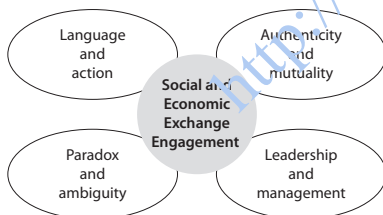
More also has yet to be understood about the socially-negotiated interactions amongst co-workers and line managers in shaping the deal, and the power relations shaping these. In the USA there is evidence of the growing development of 'i-deals' (idiosyncratic deals) at the workplace, by which managers have the freedom to negotiate customised work arrangements with individuals (Rousseau, 2005). These differ to some extent from those received by co-workers, such as customised duties and individual career opportunities, and are perceived to be beneficial to worker and employer (Rousseau and Kim, 2006; Rousseau *et al*, 2006, 2009).

Research within the UK suggests that employees are unlikely to proactively negotiate such customised arrangements but that they nevertheless see line managers as critical to the delivery of the deal, acting as employees' 'voice' in the organisation, and in negotiating the deal on their behalf (Wong *et al*, 2009). Our framework of EVP is explicitly geared to enhance personal and collective self-efficacy in shaping the deal, and our methodology is outlined in the next section.

EVP METHODOLOGY

Our methodology recognises the importance of providing practical tools of action for our readership, while remaining faithful to the richness and complexity of New OE as noted in our depiction of the EVP framework (below) and explained further in this section.

OE is being treated as open-ended and self-organising *and* as being made up of more structured, planned interventions. This is reflected in our use of dialogic (eg conversational-style) and traditional (eg survey feedback) OD techniques, primarily used as a means of facilitation/enablement rather than the providing of 'expert advice'. The approach is informed by Marshak and Busche's notion of 'dialogic OD', which places emphasis upon the surfacing of underlying contradictions and tensions, before agreeing on strategies for attaining that vision (Busche and Marshak, 2011: 352).

The *EVP architecture* is a term we use to describe the design and 'realisation' of EVP both in terms of content and process issues. Treated as a form of social exchange, the notion of 'architecture' draws upon a building metaphor to frame a technologically-enhanced approach to change used to imply collaboration with all stakeholders in the design and implementation of value propositions.

These value propositions are described as 'position statements' which, taken collectively, become the *espoused EVP*. They embody the unique and differentiating brand promise a business formally makes to its employees and potential candidates, and a broad set of reciprocal obligations and expectations placed on them.

Position statements are structured to capture economic, emotional and social aspects of the employment deal and include high-level overarching statements aligned to organisational ambitions and value statements, and a nested array of localised deals flowing from them. These rest on the proactive surfacing of tensions and the opening up of conversations for the understanding and putting into performance of competing priorities and values, what 'works' and what is feasible both in the short and the long term.

The construction of an *EVP portal* and associated use of social media technologies is an important feature, used for capturing qualitative and quantitative data in priming conversations for change. Simple visualisations of EVP depicted in the form of an 'inducements-contributions' model, and 'espoused' and 'experienced' value propositions are used during the initial engagement with clients. One example is depicted in Figure 14.2, which depicts a 'line of sight' between the adopted HR strategies of an organisation, the creation of an EVP architecture, and organisational outcomes, expressed in the form of *EVP equity*. This simplifies what in practice is a dynamic and complex process, but nevertheless provides a useful discursive device for raising the strategic importance of EVPs in the building of processual pathways for enhanced employee engagement and performance (see Reddington and Francis, 2011).

The notion of EVP equity is closely associated with the language of social exchange and New OE concept of authentic mutuality. It depicts the relative satisfaction and perceived 'value' of the EVP expressed at individual, team and organisational levels of analysis.

PRIMING CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE: MUTUAL PURPOSE AND GAINS

Enabling conditions

Our approach to EVP emphasises the need for creating 'enabling conditions' in raising consciousness and dialogue about alternative mindsets, values and structural tensions

Figure 14.2 The 'line-of-sight' EVP framework
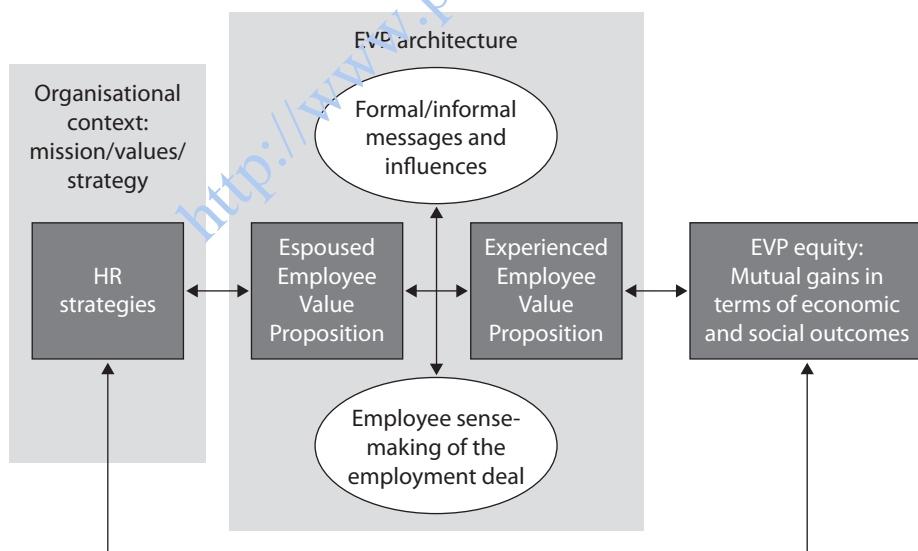
Anchored in Web 2.0 technologies that facilitate dynamic conversations for change

Source: adapted from Reddington and Francis (2011)

underpinning people's experience of the employment deal. This involves working with change leaders to set the foundations for people from diverse interests groups to work productively with paradox and ambiguity, and to foster collaboration and a common language for change in the co-constructing of EVP design – eg shared meaning about the realisation of position statements for 'innovation' and 'compliance'.

Priming conversations

Our next case study example, on ConsultCo, illustrates what we describe as our first phase in 'priming conversations' for change, beginning with an initial assessment of the employment relationship 'known' to participants via an EVP survey instrument that has an EVP personality dimension. This does not rely on detailed statistical analysis but is used to stimulate dialogue and co-construction of the 'deal', consistent with 'initiative conversations' (see the section *Language and performance* early in this chapter) aimed at challenging the status quo and fostering a perceived 'readiness for change'. It includes presentation of a basic 'radar plot' derived from aggregations of values representing personality traits, combined with a presentation of statistical correlations between various EVP elements, and our interpretations of free text responses (about what is most 'valued' about the deal, stories about 'workable arrangements', and 'key tensions' in carrying out job roles).

Creating draft value propositions

Survey feedback via an EVP portal, combined with facilitative discussion and practical workshops, assist in the creation of draft (espoused) 'position statements' based on the notion of inducements-contributions noted earlier, and 'personality profiles', which stimulate dialogue and agreement about which social exchange (EVP) elements are most likely to influence employee engagement and performance outcomes. An illustrative position statement drawn from our consultancy practice is provided below. This particular example is what we describe as a 'high-level position statement' around learning and innovation, and describes inducements and contributions associated with this.

Sample position statement on learning and innovation

We want to foster and support a culture of learning that will make our people more dynamic and able to capitalise upon opportunities for innovation.

Why is this important?
Our ability to learn and innovate is critical to the future success of our organisation, enabling us to respond quickly and flexibly to a fast-changing business environment.

How do we do it?
Through the creation of a high-trust learning climate that values diversity and learning opportunities for all, and fosters a willingness and capability for change and innovation.

This will be supported by innovative leadership and working practices that provide pathways for enhanced collaboration, learning, personal development, and knowledge-sharing at all levels of the business.

Everyone will be expected to respond to the opportunities provided, taking more responsibility for their own learning and development in ways that add tangible benefits to themselves and to the organisation.

How will we know we have succeeded?
We would expect to see evidence of enhanced engagement and performance at all levels within the organisation. This would be captured by measures of POS,

engagement and performance, and more qualitative data showing personal accounts of people's work experience, including stories of enhanced confidence and mastery in carrying out their roles, and in moving the organisation forward.

PARADOX, AMBIGUITY AND JUDGEMENTAL COMPETENCE

Our approach to EVP places emphasis upon distributed leadership and the building of judgemental competence amongst both managers *and* employees, through the kind of survey feedback, facilitative discussion and practical workshops noted above. A key responsibility placed on ourselves as researcher-based consultants is to be heedful of the political dynamics around the bringing together of multiple stakeholders and the maintenance of a safe and bounded space for interactions to take place (Busche and Marshak, 2011). This is illustrated in our ConsultCo case example, in which tensions around compliance-enterprise and business-driven/employee-driven activities were given a level of exposure that had not been possible to surface with the company's previous survey architecture.

A key tenet of our approach is the focus given to the ongoing renegotiation of position statements by people involved in these conversations for change, in order to achieve pragmatic 'workable arrangements' that are mutually satisfactory for all parties concerned, depicted in our model as 'Me and my job', 'My team' and 'My organisation'. Individuals and teams who can demonstrate efficacy in working with tensions as a means of improving performance outcomes of mutual benefit to the individual and the organisation can be seen as judgementally competent – a vital part of the leadership capability dimension of New OE.

CASE STUDY

CONSULTCO

ConsultCo is a leading global provider of professional services. This case study is based on an EVP 'audit' of a UK-located division that provides its clients with a range of HR and OD interventions. The case demonstrates the application of our conversational approach to EVP, working with the senior team and staff of the division, to examine perceptions of the current employment deal (the 'experienced EVP') with the aim of revealing insights (both strengths and tensions) that affect sustainable high performance and employee well-being.

The senior partner of the division was the principal sponsor of the EVP audit. The brief was to discover the aspects of the employment deal perceived to be most valued and aligned with high people performance and engagement. Linked with this was an aim to explicitly surface tensions that had most impact on an employee's work experience and perceptions of the deal.

ConsultCo had previously conducted regular internally-managed staff opinion surveys, which had provided useful

insights into some positive and some less attractive features of the working environment that might be linked to high performance. However, the exercise tended to be characterised as a normative one, detailed statistical comparisons being used to indicate the relative improvement or otherwise of things such as performance management, reward and recognition, knowledge management and diversity. Opportunities for respondents to provide descriptive feedback were limited to a small number of free text questions, and selected examples were used to reinforce the statistical analysis. Furthermore, there were no reliable, consistently-applied processes in place for members of the division to discuss the survey results with their line managers, nor to shape broader decision-making about organisational strategy, work and employment practices.

The internal sponsor recognised that their approach to employee voice via a standard opinion survey lacked authenticity – it was too one-dimensional and failed to provide sufficient depth of insight into the social

dynamics of the division. On this basis, the senior partner invited us to deploy our EVP audit methodology in order to bring the social dynamics into sharper relief.

ConsultCo regarded as highly important the need for employees to be able to demonstrate reliability, self-confidence and mastery in the delivery of services to their clients, while under consistently high pressure to manage complexity, quality and a high work volume. Accordingly, it was important to understand the factors impacting on this capability.

Taking full account of this, phase 1 of our EVP audit was a web-based survey comprising a range of items representative of the contextual elements of our EVP architecture and which explicitly encouraged the surfacing of tensions and personal accounts of working practices through free-text responses.

From a statistical standpoint, the survey results revealed that overall response patterns to the survey questions were very similar between members and non-members of the leadership team. The division displayed high levels of work engagement, and we were able to draw significant correlations between certain tensions and the wider perception of the ConsultCo employer brand. The division's EVP personality profile showed it to be perceived as highly 'competent' and 'prestigious', with an 'agreeable disposition'. 'Formality' was quite pronounced, indicating that it was nonetheless not always straightforward to get things done.

The free-text survey responses were very rich and revealed a wealth of insights expressed through personal accounts that we clustered into three themes: time pressures and quality of work; support, self-worth and personal development; and leadership and management capability.

The blending of these data in the form of a report was used to prime conversations, initially with the leadership team and subsequently the whole team – phase 2 of our methodology.

Both sessions were conducted in a workshop-style fashion. Groups or 'families'

were created, each assigned a ConsultCo partner, to proactively work through key themes and associated tensions, and to think through potential workable solutions.

We found that describing the division in terms of personality traits provided a useful platform for talking about tensions in a non-threatening way, and helped participants swap ideas and suggestions about new ways of talking about the deal. For example, one issue centred on people being more confident at speaking up about their needs around work–life balance issues, such as 'coming in late on a Monday to be able to go to a pilates class following a back injury'. Related to this there was some considerable discussion about how and when saying 'no' should be regarded as acceptable, and appeared to be linked to anxiety about 'hidden' impact on later performance reviews.

Our final report to the client included a critical discourse analysis of key themes emerging at the workshop, used to encourage reflection on the language framing conversations amongst participants. This included an illustrative mapping of the kind of words, expressions and practices cited as good examples of the deal in terms of mutual gains between employer and employee.

Based on the analysis, ConsultCo developed an action plan along three areas: personal development, culture and behaviours, and work–life balance. They defined a preferred future state in each of these areas and identified the actions required to achieve it involving the whole team. To date, good progress has been made on several of these actions, and EVP remains one of the core agenda items for all of their leadership team meetings and quarterly updates with the team.

Questions

1 How does this approach to capturing employee opinions differ from conventional approaches?

2 What are the implications for insight-led approaches to change management?

A well-designed EVP provides a 'meaning structure' that allows individuals and collectives from different disciplines, backgrounds and levels of decision-making to develop a mutuality of purpose and expectations around the employment deal. This meaning structure is not static and change leaders need to build capabilities in effectively working across the 'conversational landscape' of EVP.

The idea of explicitly surfacing tensions and placing emphasis on social exchange, mutual purpose and gains, represented a major departure from the adopted in-house convention at ConsultCo. Accordingly, we were able to provide a persuasive case to justify its fitness for purpose, based on the academic arguments set out in this chapter and evidence from other client assignments, and the whole process received acclaim.

We were also cognisant of the concern expressed by Wefald and Downie (2009) that industry 'instruments' used to provide a measure of engagement are not normally subject to external reviews. In our case, we address this through publication of our work, and we remain open to critical review.

CONCLUSION

In the last decade we have witnessed an upsurge of interest in work and employment strategies which can promote sustainable employee engagement and performance. In this context, employers are seeking more sophisticated means by which to link their people strategy and the company brand to achieve differentiation in the labour market. Developments in employer branding and employee engagement are largely practitioner-led, but increasingly being informed by academic theory that takes more account of the dynamic social and psychological processes underpinning the employment relationship. Linked with this is growing recognition of the need for more process-oriented research into underlying relationships in terms of balance, nature and reciprocity, and how they are associated with relationship quality (Shore *et al*, 2009: 293).

Future research into exchange processes could usefully draw upon a critical discourse lens to shed light on the role of language in shaping structures and processes underpinning the employment relationship, and mechanisms that enhance the scope for employee and collective agency, which remains under-researched. We have noted the dominance of the 'resource' metaphor framing the literature on HR and change management, by which people are essentially treated as a commodity to be used/developed/practised on (Grant and Shields, 2002; Inkson, 2008). As a result, the notion of mutuality or the *two-way* nature of engagement in terms of reciprocity and exchange between individual and employer is underplayed in mainstream HR research and in the world of practice. Our framework of EVP allows us to explore these dynamics which are not readily available through statistical analysis, allowing a more critical reflective stance on everyday language that we tend to take for granted and not scrutinise.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Fleetwood, S. and Hesketh, A. J. (2010) *Explaining the Performance of Human Resource Management*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This book introduces the reader to a critical realist perspective on HRM, and explores how such a stance adds value to our understanding of the work of HR executives and professionals.

Furnham, A., and Petrova, E. (2010) *Body Language In Business: Decoding the signals*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. This book provides practical tips and advice about how to become more astute at reading and displaying the right body language.

Grant, D., Hardy, C., Oswick, C. and Putnam, L. (eds) (2004) *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London: Sage. This handbook provides an important overview of the methodologies and perspectives used in research on organisational discourse.

Guest, D., Isaksson, K. and De Witte, H. (2010) 'Introduction', in Guest, D., Isaksson, K. and De Witte, H. (eds) *Employment Contracts: Psychological contracts and employee well-being, an international study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. This book focuses upon the relationship between temporary employment contracts and employee well-being, within the analytical framework of the psychological contract. It explores a range of potential influences on work-related well-being, including workload, job insecurity, employability and organisational support.

Rosethorn, H. (2009) *The Employer Brand: Keeping faith with the deal*. Aldershot: Gower. This text provides a practitioner perspective on employer branding which includes an array of practitioner insights and case examples.

Sparrow, P., Hird, M., Hesketh, A. and Cooper, C. (2010) *Leading HR*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. This book captures the challenges facing HR directors, rooted in twin imperatives to lead their teams towards successful performance and also to monitor and assess the most effective leadership techniques and practices.

The Work Foundation website, http://www.theworkfoundation.com/research/publications.aspx, provides a series of reports on the future of HR, and the employment deal.

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