



DProf thesis

**Building engagement for post-pandemic survival and growth in an SME**

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# Building Engagement for Post-Pandemic Survival and Growth in an SME

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in partial fulfilment for the award of  
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in Organisational Practice

Middlesex University, London, UK

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# 1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Abstract

This Action Research (AR) project aimed to develop, implement, and demonstrate a system of two-way communication, linking to company aims and individual performance, that would increase employee engagement in a family-owned SME, leading to increased productivity and professionalism. From a research perspective the objective was to corroborate existing theories relating to engagement and related leadership approaches and integrate these into a combined theory for business growth, along with developing new hypotheses evolving from the Action Research. This objective became even more significant given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. An additional objective was to understand the extent to which top-down management versus bottom-up was appropriate, or required, to drive change during challenging times.

The triple impacts of Brexit, Covid-19 and Ukraine/Russia conflict during the period of this project strengthened the need for a robust, but time-efficient, process to engage with employees, as a counterpoint to the personal and business pressures that a smaller team, dealing with more challenging business situations, faced.

This research has shown that well-structured conversations can enhance engagement and productivity (in the sense of doing the right things). It has also demonstrated that a balanced approach between top-down (to establish the process and give some guidance) and bottom-up (to shape tasks and identify improvement), with the balance modified to suit each case, works well in this family SME environment.

Two new findings have emerged from this work:

1. Even positive employee relations and regular two-way communication can miss the factors needed to ensure that engagement is engendered. This leads to the concept of engagement-focused communication, a “third level” of communication beyond task-based or social interactions.
2. Employees can be engaged, or believe themselves to be engaged, but not in a way that translates to useful outcomes. This leads to the concept of well-directed engagement.

In practical terms, these concepts have led to the development through this AR project of two approaches to address them:

1. Engagement-focused communication – this entails a short list of 10 topics, broadly in line with Saks' (2006) antecedents of engagement, to which employees assign a score/ranking. This breaks down the “how are things?” question into bite-sized chunks, with associated discussion points, and then forms the basis of a conversation where the sole purpose is for the manager to understand, and where possible alleviate, any concerns.
2. Well-directed engagement – this involves employees developing, through further two-way discussion, what outcomes from their job are important, aligning them with the company aims, deciding what inputs they should be making to achieve these and identifying what gets in the way.

## 1.2 Executive Summary

This Action Research or AR project (utilising the *diagnose, plan, implement, evaluate* cycle explained more fully in section 5.4.3) began out of a desire to make change; change on several levels. I wanted to make my company simultaneously more successful, profitable, and productive, as well as a special place to work and to be a part of, and first to even understand what that might look and feel like. That change was likely to involve change in the attitudes and behaviour of many of the staff. It was also going to involve a change in me, since at the start of the project I had already been running the business for nearly 10 years. From day one I had had an ill-formed notion of creating a fully engaged culture but had become so engrossed in making other, perhaps more tangible, improvements as well as working “in” the business, that I had had little focus in working “on” the business, certainly in this aspect. Undertaking the DProf programme was an attempt to force my personal focus onto this mission and to develop my understanding and approach.

The development of the research project proposal occurred in parallel with actions that we had to take to reduce the business headcount because of Covid-19, across the period April 2020 (first lockdown began 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020) to September 2020 (redundancy program ran from June to September 2020). This had some interesting consequences because, as the AR project progressed after October 2020, it became apparent that, in some cases, some element of change, in terms of employee engagement, occurred as a result of the removal of around 40 employees (from 138 to below 100).

It is also the case that, perhaps in true Action Research style and as a result of continued external shocks, both the approach that I have taken, and to some extent the research question(s) that I now consider important, have shifted somewhat as the project has evolved, from those expressed in the original project proposal.

The project steps involved

- Pilot AR cycle with six staff, aborted early due to Covid restrictions, but nevertheless generating some learning points, through to a
- First full AR cycle with multiple individual meetings with a different group of thirteen staff, then a
- Second cycle with nine staff (including five from the first pilot), incorporating improvements from cycle 1 and a
- Third cycle with a further eleven staff,

- bringing the total involved to thirty-four people, and well over 100 direct structured and documented conversations.

A large part of the journey has been my evolving understanding and my changing approach to managing and coaching my direct team (with a progressive shift from the former to the latter). As I have seen more examples of how more involvement and engagement with staff is beneficial, the more I have focused my efforts on both formal and informal efforts to support my senior managers in adapting their management style to one that challenges people to do better and supports them to achieve that.

One of the challenges in this project was always going to be measurement of its impact. The first difficulty was going to be assessing the starting point of how engaged employees already were, and then how much that had improved. Also, establishing whether there were any noticeable productivity gains would be problematic. We have very few roles where individual performance can be numerically monitored. My initial intention was to use a value added per employee ratio at a division/department level. Whilst I was able to collect those figures, there have been many factors that render such an analysis indicative rather than absolute. There have been three major external factors that have impacted the sales and profitability of the business and its component parts so significantly, both positively and negatively, that it is not possible to separate financially the effects of these from any consequence of improved engagement. Covid, Brexit and the effect of sanctions imposed as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have all had a major influence on business trading conditions and led to, amongst other things,

- a reduction in total sales, and corresponding impact on profits
- a reduction and re-composition of the workforce
- rising prices, which has then conversely provided some opportunity for increased margins
- major material shortages and delays, with a “stop-start” effect for the entire supply chain
- increased absenteeism (only due to Covid)
- regrowth opportunities, now with a leaner team.

These factors have impacted the financial performance, on-time-delivery and every measure that we have in complex and varying ways.

Therefore, a more anecdotal approach, using Thick Description vignettes, coupled with commentary from ongoing personal and reflexive observation has been employed.

Some of my learning points have been:

1. Assessing engagement using questions such as those employed by Saks (2006) has proven problematic. Almost everyone ranked themselves, on the initial questionnaire, quite highly on nearly all aspects of the antecedents for both job and organisation engagement, and during qualitative discussion indicated that they felt engaged. However, those same conversations evidenced that few of them had clarity on how what they did connected with the company goals. So, what were they engaged *with*? I began thinking about *well-directed* engagement.
2. Many staff, whilst willing and keen to explore the idea, nevertheless found the concept of establishing what they were trying to achieve, and how they should go about it, very difficult. This was particularly true of those whose jobs were largely driven and time-dictated by external influences, such as customer service staff – they simply reacted. A good example was one customer service team member whose response to what his main focus was to simply state that he would process every order that he received during the day, no matter the volume. It was very difficult to get him to consider other features of his role that might be important. This led to two developments in the AR project, as I moved from cycle 2 to cycle 3; firstly, a decision to work, at least initially, with managers, supervisors or others where there is a reasonably high degree of self-determination in the role and, secondly, the development of a Job Focus Chart (JFC) to provide a structure to assist in this process of developing *well-directed* engagement.
3. As the project progressed, I further came to question whether measuring the antecedents of engagement was any useful proxy measure of true engagement itself. If, as is apparently the case, it is not, how can we measure engagement more directly? Measurements of increased performance would not be an appropriate proxy as the causal link is, itself, an element of the research. This led to the development, utilised in the 4<sup>th</sup> AR cycle, of a more in-depth discussion with staff, using a tool named the Engagement Support Chart (ESC), around how engaged they felt with the company and their job and why, and what more we and they could do to protect and enhance that. This method still broadly used antecedents, but more as a stepping off point, to help establish both a Thick Description assessment of, and an approach to strengthen, engagement with the individuals.
4. Somewhat a vindication of the Hawthorne effect (Wickström and Bendix, 2000), the very fact of having conversations, involving their CEO, that are about them, their work role, challenges, successes, and opportunities to understand or do more, had a very positive, and importantly not a transient, effect on the behaviour of certain individuals, evidenced by many examples of interactions and performance. For others, certainly those in the initial AR cycles, before

the JFC was introduced, any effect seems to have been less permanent, or at least it is difficult to assess, without further direct interaction.

5. My personal people awareness, and reflexivity, has been heightened as a result of all these discussions, so that I now understand the importance of having conversations with staff that are much deeper than transactional task-based intercourse, or passing the time of day. Few staff will volunteer their anxieties, even if comfortable in the working relationship, unless they are directly asked to discuss any areas of concern. During the period of the project there were three occasions where very good individuals tendered their resignations. In all cases we were, sometimes after a lot of effort, able to reverse their decision, confirming that we viewed them as important, and that they fundamentally liked being with the business once their concerns have been addressed. In all cases we made financial adjustments, which were warranted, but in all cases the reasons for resignation were not driven by monetary considerations. If we had been better engaged with them in the first place (including assessing their worth more carefully), they almost certainly would not have felt the need to resign. The importance of better engagement, including *of managers with their employees*, was particularly strengthened in the late-Covid, post-Brexit state where the demand for staff was at an all-time high.
6. Consequently, there was a need to develop a method which would reinforce both the engagement conversations (ESC), maintain the relevance/topicality of the role alignment (JFC), and shift the responsibility for maintaining the process long-term away solely from the CEO to the relevant line managers.
7. It is impossible to be certain that people are saying everything they want to say, but most of them certainly raised issues that we were then actively trying to solve, talking about a lot of topics that would not normally get aired, and ultimately speaking and acting as though this process had been beneficial and strengthened their (well-directed) engagement.
8. For most staff, including most managers, this process was difficult and needed top-down imposition to make it happen, and to help structure it. Inherently it required bottom-up and top-down input in the discussions and ongoing interactions themselves.

This AR project has resulted in a process which works well in our environment/culture for getting people to talk and “open up”, think critically about their job role, engagement, and raise ideas that would help them and would lead to increased engagement. It also became partly a coaching exercise with other managers to get them to realise the benefit of this approach, and to see how to go about it for themselves.



Emerging from the conversations it seems that trust is a key component of engagement. Because trust can be damaged or lost by a single action, so can engagement.

In the very simplest terms this project has demonstrated that engagement requires good dialogue as well as “treating people as you would like to be treated”. That seems obvious and easy to do but is often not well practised within the pressures of everyday workload. The structured approach developed here could potentially be adapted to work in similar environments to systematise the improvement of engagement.

## 1.3 Acknowledgements

I want to thank my wife for her support and allowing my “study time” to come first on far too many occasions.

There are many others who have contributed to this work, either directly or indirectly; firstly, my business co-owners who have supported me and created the space to allow me to undertake this research; secondly, all the staff who have been involved and worked so openly with me; thirdly, many good friends and business colleagues who have listened to my ramblings as I have tried to find my way into and through Action Research, and to make sense of what I have discovered; and fourthly, those who have given me great encouragement to push on to the end and, significantly, to consider how I might share my findings with a wider audience – you all know who you are!

Finally, but by no means least, I want to thank Professors Ifan Shepherd and Peter Newby, who have, respectively, introduced me to this fascinating world of research, especially Action Research, and helped to guide me through it.

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY (and concerns to be addressed)

The background behind this research project is deep and complicated. As is perhaps often the case with professional doctoral Action Research studies, especially those in the field of Organisational Development, while the findings may have wider applicability, the specific outcomes are the result of a confluence of the long history of a company, the author's personal business experiences, the personal stories of each of the participants, the prevailing business and economic background, and the influence of the project work itself. In this case, the particular challenges faced by small and medium enterprise (SME) businesses, especially in the manufacturing/engineering industry, are also pertinent to the research frame, since an aspect of my role as researcher is to isolate the learning from this project that is generalisable to other situations, particularly in this sector.

Although this section provides an overview of some of these topics, it is difficult to overstate the influence during the period of this project, of the impact of the global factors of Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the more UK-centric effects of Brexit and political instability. Each one of these was a severe external shock to James Lister and Sons Limited (Lister), the company studied for this project. Collectively they posed an existential threat to the company. Although, through various actions, including this project, the business survived, on a broader scale these issues all combined to heavily influence both the business and economic landscape and importantly, everyone's perceptions of their work, security and potential impacts on mental health. Each of these topics would be a study of their own so although I will cover many of them in passing in this thesis, apart from this Background section, the focus will remain primarily on the research questions and project results as discussed below.

## 2.1 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the UK

An SME is an organisation with less than 250 employees and a turnover below €50 million or a balance sheet less than €43 million (Gov.uk FCDO, 2023, p. 5). At the start of 2022, it was estimated that there were 5,501,260 SMEs in the UK, versus 7,675 large businesses (Gov.uk BEIS, 2023, p. 7). Although the latter make a large contribution to both employment and turnover, SMEs constitute 61% of employment (16.4 million people) and 51% (£2.1 trillion) of turnover. Despite the clear importance of SMEs to the economy, there are several underlying challenges in the sector. There are many industry bodies representing groups within SMEs (and large businesses), including the Federation of Small Businesses, Make UK, the Institute of Directors, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Confederation of British Industry. These five are known collectively as the B5 when they work together to lobby and influence government in an attempt to improve conditions for their members. I have been directly involved with Make UK for several years, including being the Chair of the Make UK West Midlands Regional Advisory Board for six years. Having been previously employed within large companies, I have experienced first-hand, and have discussed during numerous conversations with other SME owners and managers in the engineering/manufacturing SME sector, some of the challenges relevant to this group.

There are three main areas pertinent to this project;

1. Except within high value manufacturing businesses, engineering/manufacturing SMEs often struggle to maintain a cadre of professionally qualified people managers. Reasons include the poor perception of the sector meaning that high calibre students are attracted to other professions in the first place and those that do enter this sector are drawn to large companies for improved career prospects and typically higher salaries. Many SMEs are led by managers who are not professionally trained managers themselves and often do not see the value in training their staff in management skills or are not prepared to invest the time or money.
2. SMEs typically do not have sufficient cash reserves to operate without borrowing. This creates a short-termism approach, often resulting in a top-down management style.
3. The challenges of competing on a progressively global stage, often seen as not a level playing field, with a government that has been wedded to “pure” free market forces, has led to a constant drive to increase staff productivity.

The latter two points have become even more relevant following the recent market upheavals.

There are, of course, many advantages of privately owned SMEs, not least of which is the flexibility to be very responsive to opportunities, and typically very flat organisational structures which provides the potential for closeness to employees and good staff relations. Nevertheless, the industry is characterised by businesses that “just about survive”, perhaps yielding the owners a reasonable standard of living, but with limited capability to take significant steps towards growth. This, at least in part, is as a result of lower labour productivity, typically half that of German SMEs, due to not implementing suitable workplace cultures, employee benefits and rewarding good performance according to a NatWest/Cebr report (Natwest, 2018, pP. 1-2).

## 2.2 The Company background

Operating within this challenging sector, James Lister and Sons Limited had been in operation for almost 150 years.

The business was founded in 1874 by the eponymous schoolteacher owner, initially as an ironmonger's shop in Tipton, in the West Midlands. When his sons took over, the business began to expand with additional shops or branches, but it progressively moved away from a consumer customer focus towards supplying local industry with tools, lubrication, personal protective equipment and workwear, and janitorial/hygiene products. It was not until 1957 that the business was incorporated and became James Lister and Sons Limited.

In the 1980s the industrial supplies merchandising operation was expanded to include the distribution and assembly of hydraulic hoses and some pneumatic products, moving the business a little in the direction of more added value.

By the early 2000s the company had grown both organically and by acquisition and comprised of 18 locations in the West Midlands and South Wales, well over 100 employees, and four business divisions:

- Industrial Supplies (which now also included a cleaning machine sale/hire/service operation),
- Fluid Power (which had added a small motorsport activity in hoses and airjacks),
- Lister Gases (an industrial LPG distributor) and
- Accralite (which produced pistons for race cars).

The company had remained a private company, but ownership was distributed amongst thirteen shareholders, all descendants of James Lister.

In early 2010, three shareholder brothers took ownership of the business, funding the buyout of the remaining owners by the sale of the Gas and Accralite divisions. At the same time, as previously planned through my existing friendship with one of the brothers, I bought into the company as the fourth shareholder, officially joining as Chief Executive in November 2010.

I spent my first three months trying to gain a good understanding of the business, meeting with all employees, including working alongside some of them, and going out with the sales team to visit customers. There were several immediate challenges.

1. The business turnover had been significantly reduced by the sale of two divisions whilst the central overhead cost remained high. This required immediate restructuring to maintain profitability.
2. There was a very high degree of complexity, with at least thirteen separate business streams across the two divisions, and at thirteen, there remained too many physical sites.
3. Although there seemed to be a general liking of the family and family business concept amongst staff, in practice there was little cohesion and previous acquisitions had not been well integrated, so that there were many mini-fiefdoms, and little concept of teamwork between separate parts of the company. Many staff at branches talked about “Lister” when they were referring to the head office, as though they themselves were not part of Lister!
4. Almost all managers had been promoted from within, with no professional management training. This perpetuated a quite paternalistic and dictatorial management style, with limited space for the exercise of initiative. For example, all pricing decisions and recruitment interviews were centrally controlled, with almost no input from those “at the coalface”. The business had been run this way with quite tight control, and perceived limited reinvestment in the business by a few directors (and especially the previous Chief Executive who had been a major shareholder), who left the business as part of the 2010 changeover.
5. Only one small part of the company was accredited to ISO 9001 (Quality Management System), and there was a distinct absence of some of the most basic business operational measures. For example, there was no tracking of daily order rate, measurement of customer retention, or assessment of which portfolio of products each customer purchased versus their potential needs. Even on-time delivery (OTD) was not a familiar concept.
6. In part contributing to the above point, the main computer system was a legacy system over 20 years old, and no longer updated by the supplier. This created many operational inefficiencies.
7. There had been no general salary increase for several years!

On a positive note, there was a high degree of industry and product knowledge present, and the business had no borrowings.

The initial task was to address these challenges without risking the security of the business. My business partners saw themselves as custodians of the family business, a philosophy which I also subscribed to, and this created a long-term cautious and conservative approach. It was clear that there was a fear that undertaking radical change or “simplifying” the business, by exiting the non-core activities, would simply mean reducing needed financial contribution, and little confidence that we could quickly replace it in such mature and competitive markets. In addition, there was initially a high

degree of loyalty to long-term staff and a reluctance, even when their performance was not at the level that the business needed, to take steps to remove them.

Slowly, over the following seven or eight years, prior to this project, many of these challenges were addressed:

1. Central overhead was steadily reduced, and the number of sites consolidated from thirteen to seven (one more would be closed during the research period).
2. In the short-term adding to the complexity, we launched a new business of tube manipulation to complement the hydraulics activity. This is further along the added value manufacturing chain and has added much needed financial contribution. Although no business streams have been terminated, the focus in terms of marketing and development activity has been clearly allocated to those where we can be more successful.
3. I removed as many variations between the divisions and branches as possible, for example ensuring salary and bonus packages were consistent for similar roles, providing monthly communications to all staff on the total company performance as well as six-monthly newsletters, and for a period even combining the management and sales teams.
4. It took some time, but our constantly repeated and evidenced mantra that we wanted people to take responsibility and that there was a no-blame culture slowly became accepted and believed by most staff. There has been some external management training undertaken, and I have personally coached some of the senior managers, but due to small size but high complexity of the business we still rely on very hands-on, product/industry knowledgeable managers, rather than more generalist but professionally trained managers.
5. As early as 2012 we were able to achieve accreditation to ISO 9001, ISO 14001 (Environmental Management System) and ISO 18001, now ISO 45001 (Health and Safety Management System). This was a strong signal to the employees that we were on a journey to professionalise the company.
6. After much preparation, we implemented a new companywide computer system in stages, beginning just before the pandemic and continuing through it. This addressed some of the lack of useful business measures as well as providing considerable efficiencies which allowed some headcount reduction which was critical to bring the business back to profitability post-Covid.
7. We consistently provided companywide salary increases, typically above inflation, which had therefore been occurring for some years before the start of the research.



Within the research period and as discussed further in the section below, the existential threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic did change the attitude of my business partners towards the extent to which we could continue to employ people who were not contributing sufficiently to the business to justify their employment.

The planned implementation of the new computer system, K8, was also partly predicated on improving our capability to operate with fewer staff.

By mid to late-2020, at the beginning of this research, James Lister and Sons Limited consisted of three divisions; Industrial Supplies, Fluid Power, and a smaller Tube Manipulation activity. There had been a recent redundancy program, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (announced by the World Health Organisation in December 2019). Following that, the company had a turnover of approximately £14 million, around 100 staff and six locations, five in the West Midlands and one in South Wales. This was £3 million less sales and 50 less staff than in 2017. This meant that output per head was higher, representing a better use of resources and once the direct disruption due to Covid was excluded, resulted in higher profit per head. This was a further indication that the modernisation strategy was working.

Despite consolidation of the physical footprint, and the reduction in staff, the business continued to have high levels of complexity. The thirteen separate business streams remained:

Fluid Power Division – approximately £6.3 million turnover per annum

1. Hydraulics hose assembly and supply via phone/email/web ordering
2. Pneumatic component and kit supply
3. Ultra-high-pressure hose assembly, testing and supply
4. Hydraulic hose, component, and pneumatic supply via trade counters
5. 24/7 mobile hose replacement engineer service
6. Ultra-high-pressure valve build, test, and supply
7. Motorsport airjack build, test and supply
8. Motorsport hose line assembly and supply

Tube Manipulation Division – approx. £1.5 million pa

1. Tube stockholding and supply
2. Tube manipulation and end forming

Industrial Supplies Division – approx. £6.3 million pa

1. Supply of tools, lubricants, hygiene, work/safety-wear via phone/email/web ordering

2. Supply of tools, lubricants, hygiene, work/safety-wear via trade counters
3. Sale, hire, repair of industrial cleaning machines

This drove the necessity for a high degree of devolution of responsibility and authority. With the 100 staff spread across six locations (the main one including all central administration function) and the above business streams, each of which had unique technical and operational requirements, there were several situations where only two, three or four employees were responsible for managing a distinct section.

There are pros and cons to this level of complexity.

Although different, each business stream was, in some way, related to at least one other, and contributed to the one-stop-shop aspect of Lister. There was a strong belief that this had helped retain many of our long-term customers, both because they valued the benefit of a single supplier for many items, and because our presence in so many related engineering supplies and services fields strengthened their perception of our expert knowledge. In addition, although there were these links, the spread of our activities and end-user markets insulated us, to some extent, from market variation; while one business stream was down, another was up. Unless we saw a very significant and persistent up-turn in one or two of these business streams that allowed us to exclusively shift focus to them, we were reliant on maintaining our breadth of activities. I often explained internally that we were all reliant on each other's success, using the analogy of two drunk men walking down the street leaning on each other; if either one fell over, so would the other!

The other side of this coin was that by trying to focus on everything, we focused on nothing. The senior management team were spread so thinly that we struggled to make significant advances in any particular area. For example, even trying to market the business was problematic, since it was difficult to distil the business down to a few key messages. In the tube manipulation business, where there is the highest added value and arguably the most market development opportunity, I consciously devoted typically one day per week of my time and called upon strong support from many other colleagues. There we have seen the benefit of focus, with annual growth rates of around 20% (or 10-15% volume excluding price effects), although from a relatively low base.

The downsides included our dependence on many key individuals; one, two or more per business stream. Each time someone with this type of depth of knowledge and experience was going to retire we had to manage a careful reshuffle of the teams. On the - thankfully rare - occasions when one of them threatened to leave for another job, we took all steps possible, often including significant financial inducements.

Immediately prior to the commencement of this project, the average length of service remained high, at almost 15 years, with the distribution show in figure 1.

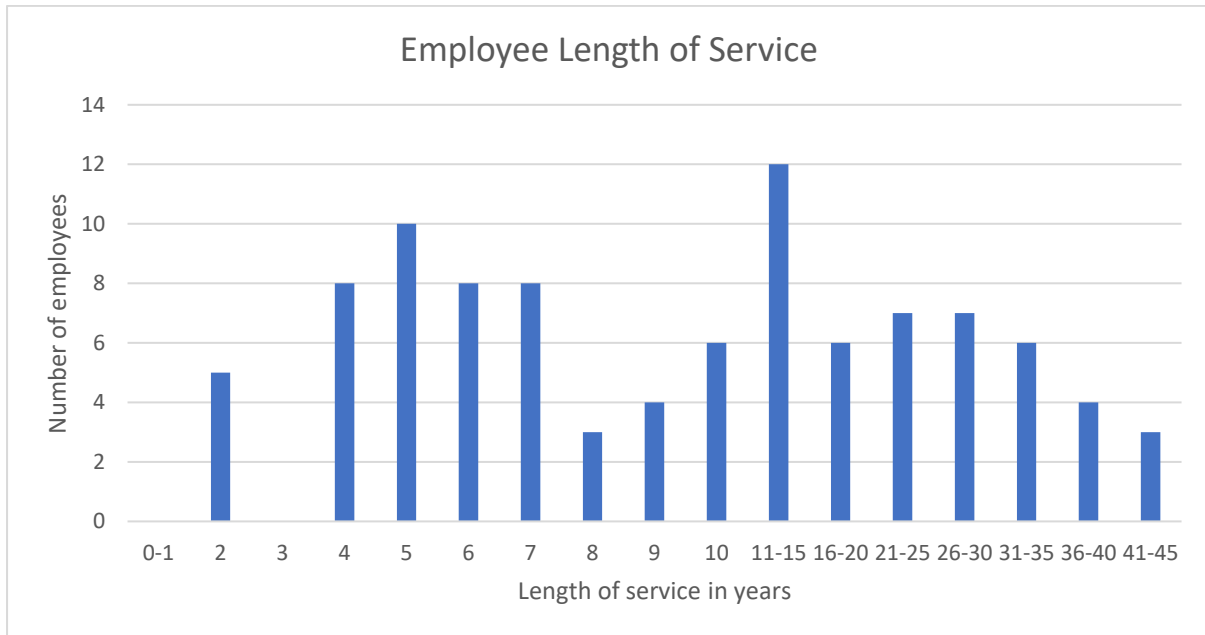


Figure 1: Employee length of service at the commencement of the project

One of the benefits of such a relatively stable workforce was that, within the constraints already mentioned, there was a strong organisational culture and learning that supported the operation of a complex multi-stream business. Contrariwise, as discussed in the following section, there was a concern that high length of service could also be caused by, and breed, complacency.

Finally, in this section, it is worth considering the company aims and objectives, and their communication since, as will be seen later, employees' alignment with them underpins the process of engagement developed in this project.

Every five years we developed a statement of the direction of the business, and the areas on which we would focus, which we called a "Project". The current Project 2025 summary, which was posted on all notice boards and in all offices and workplaces is shown in figure 2.

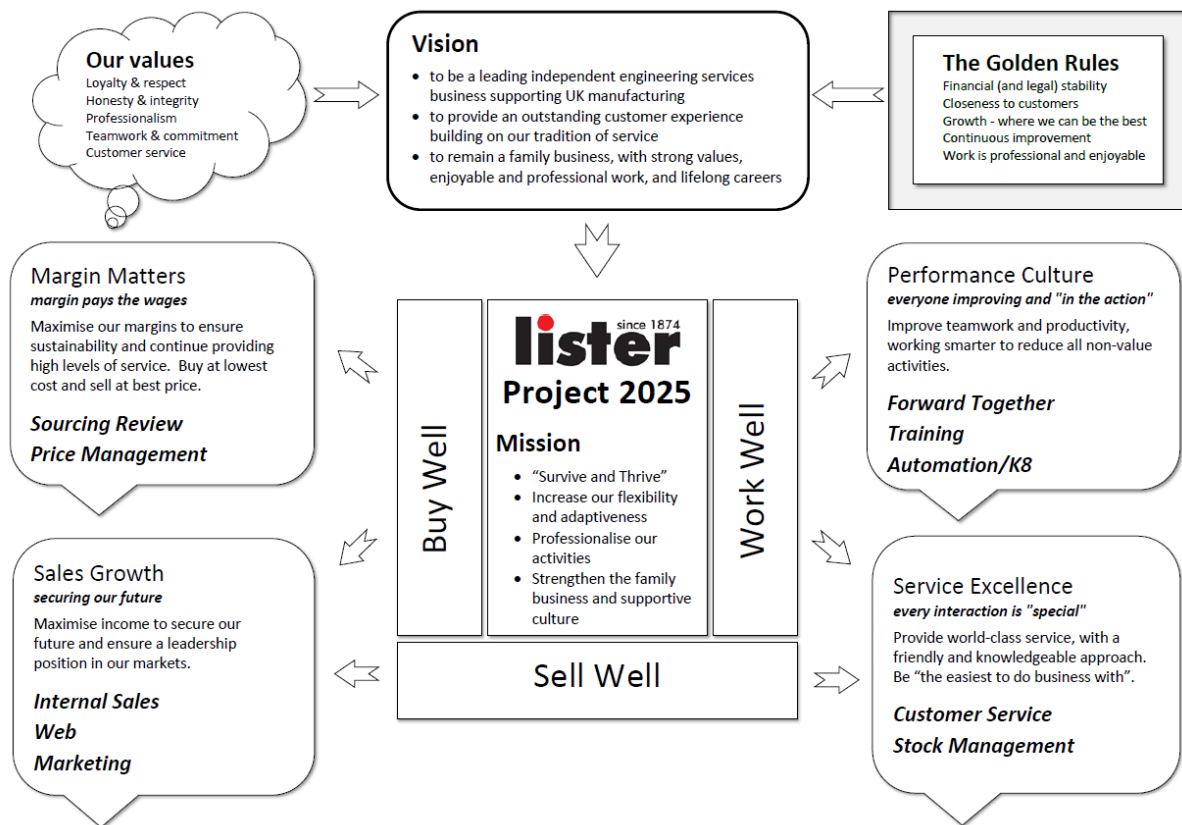


Figure 2: Project 2025 summary chart

This is supported by a more detailed booklet, issued to all staff at the time, and to any new starters.

A copy of the content of the booklet is included in Appendix 1.

In each six-monthly newsletter, the Company Update, I elaborated on various aspects of Project 2025, and our success (or not) in moving forward on these topics in different parts of the business.

There are three core objectives of buy well, work well, and sell well, which are underpinned by the four principles of performance culture, service excellence, sales growth, and margin matters. Each of the items in bold text, under these, is a sub-project in itself. Forward Together, for example, is the internal name given to this employee engagement project. Even though the supporting booklet goes into more detail about each aspect of Project 2025 there are no financial targets or budgets included. This is both because the market situation can change dramatically over a five-year period, as we have recently witnessed, and because we do not want people constrained by hard numbers. The aim is to achieve as much as we can.

## 2.3 My background

My personal background is also relevant to this research account as it provides an underpinning and context to my motivation for this research (discussed below), my positionality (discussed in Chapter 4) and my capability to undertake this project, especially as an insider researcher using an Action Research methodology (discussed in Chapter 5).

I come from a working/lower middle-class background. I was the first in the family to attend university which, in 1982, was a more significant change than it would be considered now. I have subsequently reflected that coming from this background, with no family managerial role models, significantly influenced my early and ongoing approaches to managing people, in the direction of being quite inclusive. I distinctly recall trying to decide how to react to “my” staff when I first became a factory manager at the relatively young age of 25. In the absence of any guidance, I made the conscious decision to speak to the employees with the same respect that I would show my parents. Even though that business, and many subsequent ones I worked in, was unionised and I regularly had what could have been very confrontational exchanges with the representatives, I managed to develop largely cordial relationships with them and the wider staff.

Although my father had no academic qualifications, he did successfully run his own business, selling carpets from market stalls, for many years. However, he was never prepared to employ anyone, and therefore ran the business as a one-man band, other than with some help from my mother, and my brother and me during holidays and weekends. This was largely down to a lack of confidence that anyone other than family could be trusted to put in the right level of effort and commitment, or even be trusted to handle money, in what was a fully cash business.

After around 18 years he decided to bring the business to an end, which coincided with the time when my brother and I were at university. There were many underlying reasons, but I always believed that a significant contributory factor was the lack of support inherent in a sole trader operation, and the consequent fact that he had never been able to expand the business. Even though he finally closed it, I was always very impressed that my father had run his own business, partly *because* of the challenge of operating without the safety net of a larger organisation behind him. This left me with a strong ambition to one day run my own company, to face that same challenge, and in some ways deal with that “unfinished business” for him, but also to handle the issue of growth and expansion. That fostered in me, from the very beginning of my career, the desire to understand, even though I may not have worded it this way at the time, how to engage people to be as committed to the success of a business as I would be.

My first degree was in Engineering Science, and I initially began working as a Production Engineer, which meant operating at the interface between Engineering Managers, Production Managers (who often had conflicting views) and the shopfloor workers. Effectively this was good grounding in seeing issues from all angles and trying to mediate.

As my first managerial role morphed from managing operations into that of managing all activities on that site, ranging from sales and finance to HR, I realised that an engineering degree had not sufficiently prepared me for the task, and I embarked on an MBA via distance learning. In addition to finance and strategy, this course of study included modules covering aspects of organisational behaviour and management and introduced me to topics such as employee motivation, leadership, and culture.

Subsequent roles, although always in the manufacturing/engineering field, expanded the scale and scope of my responsibilities, leading ultimately to VP and MD roles where I led teams of up to 400 people across international multi-site sales and operations activities. Although some of the companies I worked in had formal managerial systems, requiring structured financial, operational and appraisal reporting, I found that developing and maintaining a friendship relationship, certainly with my direct reports, but also cascading down through good information sharing and fair treatment, generated the best results. The last multinational company that I worked for, a company called Hager Group, already had a culture where most aspects of this approach were largely well established. Despite being a \$1 billion turnover business, the company remained family owned and had perpetuated many of the SME, or in this case Mittelstand, positive family-type behaviours. As the economic climate hardened post 2008, it was interesting, and somewhat disheartening, to witness the company begin a shift towards a more top-down and financial control model.

When the opportunity arose for me, in 2010, to join James Lister and Sons Limited as Chief Executive and as a co-owner, I saw the opportunity to achieve my dream of running my own business. I relished the chance to bring my experiences, and the best elements that I had seen work effectively in other companies, to this SME, and to “prove” that it is possible to create a “special” workplace, even within a very mature and competitive market, and without the safety net of a much larger parent company. My concept of “special” was ill-formed but included the desire to ensure that employees both enjoyed their work and felt proud to be part of the company.

I also took the opportunity, from 2013-2016, to become an Associate Lecturer in Engineering for the Open University, in my spare time. As part of this, I undertook a Practitioner Enquiry into my teaching work to gain certification as an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy which, along with

the two study modules in the first year of this doctorate, prepared me well to undertake the research project.

## 2.4 Concerns and Motivations for this research

The picture painted earlier is of a business that had successfully implemented modern systems and regained profitability. However, there remained several concerns.

From a financial perspective there were remaining risks. Although certainly not unique to Lister, we were heavily dependent on certain key customers and suppliers. Our success in winning new customers, certainly of significant size, to spread the risk had historically been poor. There were potentially many reasons for this, but what seemed to be absent for both the external sales representatives, and their internal support teams, which include most people in the company, was a real understanding of the need for growth and a driving ambition to succeed.

Even retaining existing long-standing customers, and ensuring a sufficient margin, was proving challenging. Both the industrial supplies and fluid power sectors are mature, low-margin and competitive. We compete with national players which have strong brands and greater economies of scale. We had to constantly find ways to improve just to stand still and most of the thinking was coming from a very few people at the top of the organisation.

I had long held the concern that one of the reasons for the high length of service of employment might be lethargy. Some staff had been with the company for so long that, despite poor wages and patriarchal management, they were exhibiting warm bath syndrome, i.e. things were just good enough that it was not worth getting out or changing anything. Because of the lack of meaningful performance measures, they had not been under any real pressure, so long as they did just enough; the "slacker" versus "enthusiastic staying" (Hom et al, 2012, pp. 842-845). It was encouraging to see that, after most of the obviously poorer performers had exited the company, because of Covid-related redundancies, those remaining had been flexible to cover other roles. However, it was uncertain whether this was in response to a short-term fear for their job security and whether, as the job market began to tighten again, we would be able to retain staff.

All of the above concerns pointed to insufficient ownership felt by employees to drive customer retention, growth, productivity and margin improvement themselves without constant guidance. I characterised this as a lack of professionalism and would add another element which was the - fortunately infrequent - sometimes uncaring attitude of some staff toward customer interactions. In addition, to drive growth in our type of markets (part manufacturing/assembly and part service provision) there has been a growing awareness of the need for servitisation; the move from selling products to selling solutions which integrate products and services. An important antecedent of



service innovation performance has been shown to be absorptive capacity (recognising and utilising external knowledge for commercial benefit), which in turn is strongly positively influenced by employee collaboration (Mennens et al, 2018, pp. 500-502). Servitisation ideas, and evidence of absorptive capacity, were limited to a few senior staff at Lister, thus pointing to the idea that some form of employee collaboration may be beneficial.

As described above, the company that I had worked at prior to joining Lister was a very successful and large European business, but still family owned and controlled. Hager was only around 50 years old, and despite rapid growth to around 10,000 people, or perhaps because of the speed of growth, had managed to retain, at least when I first joined, a very strong interconnectedness as well as a family feel and good work ethic. There was a strong HR function supporting this and a real focus on alignment with the company goals. At least at management level this was well embedded, although was somewhat less effective as it filtered down through the organisation. Nevertheless, there were many positive aspects that I hoped I could bring to Lister. There were some clear differences between Hager and Lister, such as the fact that Hager was a manufacturer of equipment, generating higher product margins associated with employing more qualified and skilled people. That meant any direct translation of tools and techniques may not be appropriate.

However, above all I had wanted to capture the spirit that I had felt when I joined and worked at Hager. When I refer to the notebook of the plans I wrote in the month before I officially began my role at Lister there is much around developing the right culture, building the flavour of a successful company and a key phrase “inspiring and creating a *special* company”. At the time I was not sure exactly what I meant by “special”, although I knew that I would recognise it if we could get there. I felt that it was akin to, using a phrase from Collins (2001, p41), getting “the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats”, or getting people feeling proud to be part of the company and knowing what they were there to do. Although the Company had the external trappings of success, international standards, modern IT, and reasonable profitability, all achieved during my first years managing the business, these were all “catch-up” activities. For many staff they just came to work and “did their job”. I felt that we had not moved very far towards being a *special* company.

In a broader context there is also the oft-cited poor productivity performance of UK manufacturing and SMEs in particular (Prowle et al, p10).

My motivation to undertake this research then, was to find a way to create that special company, by which I meant an organisation that engaged employees so that they felt ownership, pride and enthusiasm, and would achieve, or maintain, highly productive levels and be personally invested in driving innovation and improvement, contributing their insights and ideas to drive business success.

Although I had always had these ambitions, I had found that the daily pressures of running a complicated business crowded out developing a way forward. The structure of an Action Research project offered a discipline to ensure progress.

## 2.5 The social, economic and political background (Covid-19 pandemic etc and implications)

This project could not have occurred at a more interesting time. The social, economic and political implications of the upcoming Brexit and Covid-19, prior to the project start, and then the Russian invasion of Ukraine partway through, and more latterly the disastrous premiership of Liz Truss, have each had an influence on the performance of Lister and also affected the staff in many ways. All of these have had immediate and existential impacts, some which pre-dated the research itself, but which have also had continuing effects. It is likely that entire theses will be written on these topics, but the intention here is to reflect on those issues that are relevant to the engendering of engagement within the workforce.

### 2.5.1 The background prior to research project commencement (up to Sept 2020)

We knew that Brexit was going to occur ever since the referendum in 2016, although until the end of the transition period there always seemed the possibility of a change of heart. It is difficult now that the crises of Covid and the attack on Ukraine by Russia have occurred, to recollect just how concerning the possible impact of Brexit was to many businesspeople. By 2018/2019 we had grown the business to about £17 million turnover and around 150 staff. I knew that there was some spare capacity in the workforce, in some cases due to underperformance of certain individuals, but also because we were consciously recruiting ahead of demand to maintain high service levels and drive and support further growth. In particular, there was quite a large sales team for the Industrial Supplies division. However, as we began to move through 2019, it was apparent that Theresa May's government was incapable of achieving a Withdrawal Agreement (or "Brexit deal") with the very real possibility that we would exit the EU on world trade tariff rules, which would place a major financial burden on businesses. At this stage I began to allow numbers to decline through natural wastage (retirements, resignations, dismissals for misconduct etc) and the senior management team worked hard to reorganise activities to compensate. With the appointment of Boris Johnson, the mood music between the UK and the EU was, if anything, more fractious and even though by the end of the year there was an agreed Withdrawal Agreement, there were threats as late as 29<sup>th</sup> October that it would not achieve parliamentary assent, and it was unclear just how workable or advantageous it would be.

Against this backdrop, I continued the recruitment freeze, and numbers employed reduced from the peak of 150 in July 2019 down to 135 in March 2020. Apart from some pre-stocking by customers in December 2019, by the month before the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, we had seen a slight but steady decline in sales demand over this period, vindicating the decision to reduce labour costs.

I had communicated our concerns over the potential economic impact of Brexit to all the staff through newsletters and personally to many of them, so there was general acceptance of the need to minimise costs until the situation was clearer.

At the same time, of course, as we were entering the Transitional Period, which ran from 31 January 2020 to 31 December 2020, Covid-19 began to be recognised as an issue, with the first two cases in the UK in January, the first British death in February, the World Health Organisation declaring Covid-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020, and self-isolation guidance issued by the UK government the following day. Appendix 10 shows a chart which illustrates the key external factors on a timeline which also includes internal actions and the stages of this Action Research project.

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the then-Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, told everyone to “stay at home”, and announced that there would be a furlough scheme. There was much confusion at the time about the stay-at-home guidance with some companies closing completely. We took the decision to continue operating, in part because we supply janitorial products to a hospital trust. However, we quickly furloughed 46 staff, about a third of the workforce, although even that took over a week to organise as we struggled to understand the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme rules.

Customer demand began to fall, as many companies shut, and in early April we furloughed another 22 staff, including mothballing two branches (one of which, in Aston, Birmingham we would choose to never reopen). Of course, the people who were left at work were working incredibly hard to cope, because we were furloughing as many as possible to try to maintain some financial stability.

Although the initial stages of the Covid pandemic predated the development, across the period of July-September 2020, of my Action Research project proposal, these events deeply affected all of us in the business, inevitably influencing the employees’, and my, reactions to ways of working and engagement, as well as feeding into the nature of the project itself. I am very grateful to Professor Ifan Shepherd for the idea to document how the business adapted to the Covid-induced external forces. I maintained an almost daily log, from March 2020 until April 2021, with then infrequent notes until February 2022, when the government lifted all Covid restrictions. It has not only been invaluable in creating this record of the early stages to the project, but also in both reflecting on how significant

some of the organisational changes were during this period and in capturing some useful vignettes, discussed later, in the correct context of the traumatic experience of a pandemic.

More than two years on since the beginning of the pandemic, it is difficult to recapture just how concerning a time we lived through then, both in our personal lives but also from a business perspective. There were several evenings, after everyone else had gone home, when my co-Directors and I sat around the Board table and considered whether we could survive as a business, whether previous demand levels would ever return, and if there were any ways to restructure to keep at least a part of the company going.

On 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020 we heard the dreadful news that one of our sales representatives had died from Covid, without having even been hospitalised. One positive to come from this devastating situation was that all the staff took Covid very seriously and we never had any real issues with staff following any of the safety procedures that we implemented, such as one-way foot traffic, or relocation of desks or moving offices to observe social distancing.

By early May 2020 we had furloughed another six staff, bringing our active workforce down to around sixty-one, or 45% of the total, with only those staff needed to satisfy immediate demand, as we saw volumes drop to around 60% of pre-pandemic levels. At this stage we had moved from our normal customer-centric approach to survival-centric and were beginning to plan for significant redundancies.

Although this was a very traumatic time, with deep concerns that making redundancies would permanently damage the family spirit that we considered part of the Company's core ethos, the directors also found a clarity of purpose in finding a way to navigate the crisis. We spent much time in discussion about the future of the company, in many ways during this period laying the foundations of the work that would become my Action Research project. The key decisions at this point were as follows:

1. Make twenty-two staff redundant which, on top of three others who had left, and the loss of our colleague to Covid would reduce our headcount to 109.
2. Expecting more, on a long-term basis, from those remaining, and implementing processes to assist them in achieving that.
3. Going ahead with the planned implementation of a new company-wide computer system. This was for two reasons.
  - a. We wanted to have much greater capability for when we would emerge from Covid, and partly defensive to ensure we could even survive because our legacy system was unsupported.

- b. To create further efficiencies, even in the short term.

Regarding point 2 above, I have notes that I wrote after a Directors' meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020 that say "Also agreed that once through the above [redundancy] a first step in creating the new future is that I will meet 1-2-1 with all staff (do they know how/why their role matters, what can they improve, what info do they need, what is suitable measure of performance, other ideas to improve company) and start producing info relevant at each level and measures...". Thus, the Covid pandemic was a major influencer of the nature of this project.

In the first week of June 2020, we announced the redundancies. There were a lot of hung heads by those at risk, but I continued to walk around and talk to people, as I believed that it was wrong to hide away in these situations. A few staff did comment to me directly (and I had similar feedback from others) that this was totally expected, and they understood why we had to do it to protect the business for the rest of the staff.

By July 2020, even though demand was edging up, we were able to use flexi-furlough to bring some staff back into work, we could see that we needed to make further savings for the long run survival of the business. Our phase 2 redundancy program saw six people lose their jobs. Four of these were part-time cleaners, and staff now took on board cleaning their own areas, and two were non-redeployed staff from the Aston branch that we now confirmed we would not reopen.

Everyone was now required to wear masks in shops, although we never required that in our workplaces as we practised social distancing. We had the opportunity to buy some washable face masks and we gave 10 to every employee for their own use. This gesture was very well received.

As we began the training for the implementation of K8 (the new computer system) and worked on how to implement various aspects, it became clear that we could make significant efficiency savings in the finance area very quickly. That led to a third redundancy phase with a further reduction in numbers of five, bringing our total number of employees, including directors, to ninety-eight by the end of the year. We have stayed between ninety-eight and one hundred and one ever since.

By August, demand was beginning to increase again, and we were trying to balance the number of people we could retain on furlough for cost saving against what we needed to maintain customer service. As the demand could vary daily and was compounded by the first challenges of supply chain shortages, this was a very difficult time. We saw a couple of examples of people who were feeling the stress of the situation. One delivery driver was away from work due to being stressed by not being able to complete all the deliveries needed in the day, despite us explaining to him that this was not an

issue now. Indeed, customers were very understanding and grateful for any deliveries most of the time, even if late.

We also had some managers who, with more awareness perhaps of the need to get sales back to higher levels before furlough ended in September, were quite concerned by the situation. I spent some time reassuring them that we had cut costs to a level that would allow us to operate even if volumes returned to only 80% of pre-pandemic levels and our recovery trend was indicating that we would achieve that by the end of the year.

On a positive note, we saw a high level of support from most people. To give one example, one of the team working on a trade counter saw that the goods inward function in a different part of the business was not keeping up. Without being asked, he found a way to reorganise his own work so that he could take on the goods inward task on a long-term basis. Another individual readily agreed to a permanent change of branch location when we explained that we needed to rebalance staff. These were by no means isolated cases. I reflected that there could be two causes. Firstly, the redundancy selection process meant that we had retained broadly higher performing, more flexible people, which probably correlated with more positive attitudes, perhaps reinforced by positive treatment such as the masks we had provided everyone. Another way to express this, which I have heard from many other business leaders, is that the Covid crisis provided a “permission” (both in the leadership and amongst the wider workforce) to remove underperformers.

Secondly, perhaps people felt so concerned about the risk to the economy that they would put in more effort to keep their jobs. As I was planning my research project, I was considering how we could lock in this company “reset”. In this sense the “system shock” had its silver lining and helped with developing engagement.

As we moved into September, cases in the country were up from 1000 per day to 3000 per day triggering a second lockdown.

By now there was a certain level of “Covid fatigue” beginning to be evident. There was some feedback at our Smethwick branch about questioning of whether toilet cleaning would be an ongoing expectation of staff, or whether we would re-recruit cleaners as apparently other companies were starting to do. One of my managers told me some people felt we had them “over a barrel” so they have to clean toilets because everyone is afraid for their jobs! At the same time, I had feedback that one of the managers was concerned for his job because of “way things are going”.

I considered that this was a difficult balancing act. At this point we had just recovered to 80% of previous sales levels, which we believed was enough to stay above break-even. However, as we went

into a second lockdown, still uncertain of what impact Brexit would have (although country of origin requirements already appeared problematic and some customers had started pre-stocking), the future remained uncertain. In hindsight it appears obvious that one of the most powerful ways to address these concerns amongst staff was just to talk openly with them. I extended my discussions from managers to all staff, spending considerable time just walking around having open discussions to explain that whilst we were confident, we also had to be prudent. There was an overwhelmingly positive and appreciative response. This further fed into my project design, to base the whole process around direct conversation.

It was at this stage that my research “proper” began, having developed the outline over the period July to September 2020.

### 2.5.2 The significant external events during the research period (October 2020 to October 2022)

Although the following events were contemporaneous with the research project, I provide them here as a backdrop, since I was forced to continue dealing with these issues throughout the project, and to continue to assess the company and how we would survive. All of this contributed to shaping the research issue, explained in more detail in the following chapters.

The Covid pandemic continued with its ups and downs; another lockdown/3-tier rules in November 2020, but some relaxation so that three families could mix for December. We gave everyone a £200 end of year bonus which was very well received; I had many direct “thank you” comments from people all saying that they had not expected anything. Boris Johnson announced the “Christmas present” of a Brexit deal which did, at least, mean that there would not be tariffs for goods originating in the EU/UK, although it later became clear just how much documentation was required to be maintained to evidence country of origin.

Then the first vaccinations commenced in January 2021, with infection rates slowly falling. By this point we had nearly everyone back into work, with just a few either furloughed or flexi-furloughed or working from home all because of shielding.

By March 2021 shielding for clinically vulnerable people had ended and 20 million people in the UK, including me, had received their first vaccine. By now Covid had become something we were all just beginning to get used to, and second vaccinations and then booster jabs rolled out until, on 22<sup>nd</sup>



February 2022, the government announced that all Covid restrictions were lifted. In fact, at Lister we continued to ask people to remain at home if they tested positive, and paid full Company sick pay in all cases, both to protect our staff and to avoid the risk of an infection taking out entire teams (especially because in our business each function is often only covered by two or three people!). We only finally reverted to treating Covid like any other illness in October 2022, by which point with very high levels of vaccination in the population and perhaps a less virulent Covid variant, the general experience had become that Covid, whilst unpleasant for some, was broadly like a heavy cold or mild flu.

During the period from the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 until around April 2021 we had operated with lower staff levels than volumes would have previously dictated, due to furlough, then to quite deep redundancies, followed by our strict stay-at-home-if-positive policy. In fact, from August 2019 until the end of March 2021 we did not recruit anyone, instead constantly shuffling roles and responsibilities to keep everything going. There were sometimes questions from staff and managers about when we could add resource back, but I never heard a single complaint. There was a general perception, during this period, that outside world events, characterised, depending on which individual expressed them, as Covid, Brexit, or the government, were the *enemy* and that we were “all [at Lister] in this together”, “we were in the trenches”, “we were ‘still here’”. Supporting change by finding a *common enemy* is often mentioned in management training, and this externally-influenced camaraderie was one positive arising out of a challenging time. Independent of the engagement project, I discussed this openly with the general managers and we tried to strengthen and encourage the “we’re all in this together” and “we’re one family and look after each other” conversations wherever possible, being aware of doing it in a sensitive way, given that we had made redundancies. We hoped this would help with employees’ flexibility, and indeed we had negligible problems. This approach may also have had a positive influence on people’s own perceived organisational engagement.

As 2020 drew a close, and we had some confidence that the impacts of the Covid pandemic would lessen as the vaccination program was being announced, the next psychological impact for business leaders was beginning to build up. At Lister we had seen a slow but steady improvement in demand after the first lockdown, and this stepped up again in November 2020. Unfortunately, as expected, this turned out to be caused by many customers over-ordering to stock up ahead of the end of the Transition Period. January and February were much lower sales months partly as a consequence of that, but also due to significant supply chain disruption caused by Brexit issues such as confusion over customs rules, and difficulties with HGV drivers. Overlaying this, of course, was the global semiconductor shortage, causing many Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs), especially in the

automotive sector, to reduce output, impacting the entire engineering manufacturing sector, but also many other industries, in the UK and abroad, struggling to ramp back up after Covid. This was not helped by the high number of people who had apparently left the job market, compounded in the UK by the removal of the right for EU citizens to work in the UK.

2021 was marked by continuing challenges of material shortages, very extended supply lead-times and material/component cost increases, with many aspects of the global economy operating in a stop-go basis. After a small increase in sales after the lull of the first few months after Brexit, our turnover levelled off again, running consistently at about 85% of pre-pandemic levels. This was enough based on our smaller workforce for the business to be profitable, but everyone felt that the situation remained fragile. During this period, I undertook the first two-thirds of my research interviews and refined the process – refer to the timeline in Appendix 10.

As we entered 2022, although the medical implications of Covid were beginning to diminish, the global economic impact was still working through. A survey sent out in March 2022 by *Professional Engineering* (Flaig, 2022, pp. 22-25), the magazine of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, found that almost half of the 179 respondents in engineering-related roles, said that work had become more stressful as a result of Covid, with 80% commenting that workplace stress “had a negative effect on their mental health or wellbeing at least some of the time,” which could then affect their work, with strategic thinking particularly affected. On a positive note, the survey revealed that 56% of respondents felt that Covid had opened up conversations between colleagues and managers around the topic of mental health and emotional wellbeing, and that this “openness can lead to improvements elsewhere”. Even if more spontaneous, this is a positive vindication of the aims and practice of this research project.

Against this backdrop, we took the decision to award a pay increase to all employees, pulled forward from our usual review date of 1<sup>st</sup> April, of 4%. This was above inflation at the time, but we felt both that our staff deserved it for the increased productivity that we were getting despite very challenging conditions, but also because we knew that retention and recruitment were becoming an issue. As will be discussed later, we have been very successful in retaining staff, influenced by several factors including the effects of this Action Research project.

Just as we may have thought that the instability and uncertainty that everyone was feeling may have been diminishing, the political turmoil of the Partygate scandal began to engulf the Conservative Party which, of course, culminated in the resignation of Boris Johnson on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2022.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine which, in addition to being an awful situation for the Ukrainians, created huge global economic problems. The cost of many raw materials surged directly as a result. For example, Ukraine is a major source of Nickel which is a key component of stainless steel, which has seen massive price inflation as supplies have declined. The even more significant problem has been the increase in gas prices, and consequently electricity prices, which have factored through into almost every product and driven UK inflation towards two digits by late 2022, prompting the government to introduce a degree of fuel price support for both individuals and businesses. At Lister we chose to award a further pay increase, with effect from 1 September 2022, of 5% (bringing the total within the year to 9.2%).

Although occurring near the end of the research period of this project, it is relevant to add a comment about the period of Liz Truss's premiership, primarily because of the damage that she and her chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, managed to inflict on the UK economy. Liz Truss was one of the shortest serving Prime Ministers, resigning on 20 October 2022 after only 44 days in office. The "mini-budget" that Kwarteng presented on 23 September predicated economic growth on an array of tax cuts (or reversals of previously announced increases designed to help reduce government debt built up because of Covid support packages). The unfunded nature of these cuts caused turmoil in the financial markets, with sterling falling to an all-time low against the dollar and interest rates increasing strongly. Although, six days before resigning, Truss replaced Kwarteng with Jeremy Hunt as Chancellor, who reversed the majority of the mini-budget announcements, the damage was done, and the economy had been further weakened. As a consequence, some of our large customers lengthened payment terms which created some further challenges for us to manage.

## 2.6 Impact on research

In this chapter I have enumerated some of the challenges faced by SMEs in general, particularly in the engineering and manufacturing sector. I have discussed how we had already begun a process of modernising Lister, and how some of my personal background and experiences contributed towards that, but how the existential shocks that the business then faced necessitated rapid action to keep the business viable. This was the context for determining the research issue.

However, external conditions remained so changeable that I have provided quite an extensive review of the social, economic and political climate during the period leading up to (July 2019 – September 2020) and through the period of my research project (October 2020 – October 2022) for three reasons:

1. This background helps to set the context for the impact on the individuals. We have all faced a barrage of external issues that have impacted on our personal and business lives over this period. However, once one issue recedes it is easy, and to some extent human nature, to forget how worried we were at the time.
2. It also shows that we have been on “shifting sands”, both before and during the period of research, to an extent not fully anticipated during the project design. This has made developing direct performance measures, that can be isolated from external impacts, problematic.
3. Importantly, it also shows how the significance of the project outcomes - the ability of Lister to operate efficiently with full engagement from employees to survive and regrow - has further increased.

These factors build on the challenges that were already faced by Lister, and in the following chapter I explain why it was necessary to develop a new approach in order to survive these challenges, and to subsequently grow.

### 3 CHAPTER THREE: CONTEXT (what were the reasons for my concerns?)

In section 2.4, Concerns and Motivations for the Research, I detailed what were some of my concerns about the way the business, and the people (including me), were operating at Lister. In this chapter I will elaborate the key points, explaining *why* these were concerns, especially when set against the turbulent background outlined above, and what form the route forward could take.

#### 3.1 Company performance

The Lister financial year runs from October to September. As this project concept was being developed, I was considering the financial performance of the company. Figure 3 shows the sales and profit after tax (PAT) figures from the published accounts.

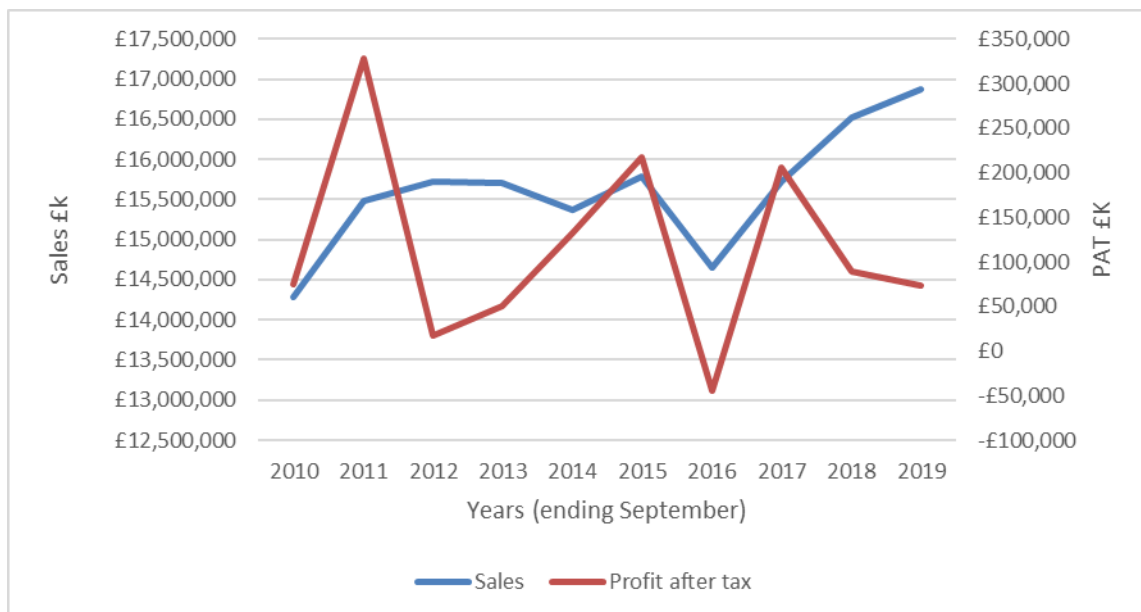


Figure 3: Historical Sales and Profit after tax performance of Lister

The level of profitability had remained consistently low. The return on sales (ROS) averaged 0.8%. This is concerning because it indicates that there is little “buffer” in the case of a downturn in sales and, as happened in 2016, a small decline in sales results in a loss. Of even greater concern, the

converse did not occur in 2018 and 2019, when sales growth did not drive profit improvement. There are complex reasons for this, but they include the fact that we had increased staff levels faster than sales in an attempt to both drive and support growth without, however, addressing some of the perceived underperformance of some longer serving staff.

With a fairly consistent funds employed value of around £4.9 million, the return on funds employed (ROFE) only averaged 2.5% over this period. This is extremely low for funds essentially at risk, when even 10-year UK gilt bond rates over this period were averaging over 1.5%.

Although 2018/19 had shown a sales increase, I was aware that this was more a result of existing customers increasing their demand - *a rising tide floats all boats* - than any extension of our customer base. Thus, there was a clear imperative to drive up company performance to ensure survival if sales dipped, to reach a more reasonable ROFE for shareholders, and to ensure a better growth focus.

As this Action Research project was being developed and commencing, in mid-2020, we had experienced exactly that type of dip in sales, as a consequence of the first lockdown, and were still deep inside the pandemic period. I was considering how the business could “survive and thrive” (see Project 2025 chart in section 2.2) through what was essentially a recessionary period. Although we had been forced to make redundancies, the forward plan needed to follow a pragmatic approach balancing defensive and offensive moves, as shown in the chart in figure 4 from Gulati et al (2010, p. 67), which illustrates the impact of various strategies on the growth in sales and earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA).

In addition to the growth rates, based on analysing 4700 companies across three recessions, Gulati et al (p. 67) found that “Morale is usually better at companies that stress operational efficiency. Employees at these companies appreciate management’s commitment to them, and they are more creative in reducing costs as a result”.

In addition, they discovered that “few progressive business leaders have a master plan when they enter a recession”. Instead, they empower and rely on their teams to find what works and combine that into a developmental approach. Clearly, this heightened employee involvement was exactly what we would need as we faced the rebuild and grow task.

## What's the Best Combination of Moves?

Companies that focus simultaneously on increasing operational efficiency, developing new markets, and enlarging their asset bases show the strongest performance, on average, in sales and EBITDA growth after a recession. (Percentages, which are adjusted for industry averages, refer to the three-year compound annual growth rate.)

		PROMOTION-FOCUSED MOVES		
		MARKET DEVELOPMENT	ASSET INVESTMENT	BOTH
PREVENTION-FOCUSED MOVES	EMPLOYEE REDUCTION	<b>GOOD</b> SALES 4.6% EBITDA 6.6%	<b>BAD</b> SALES 3.9% EBITDA 3.3%	<b>WORST</b> SALES 3.3% EBITDA -5.2%
	OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY	<b>GOOD</b> SALES 7.1% EBITDA 4.2%	<b>GOOD</b> SALES 8.4% EBITDA 8.4%	<b>BEST</b> SALES 13.0% EBITDA 12.2%
	BOTH	<b>BAD</b> SALES 5.2% EBITDA 2.1%	<b>BAD</b> SALES 5.2% EBITDA -0.5%	<b>GOOD</b> SALES 9.2% EBITDA 4.6%

Figure 4: The best combination of moves for growth (Gulati et al, 2010)

It was also important to me that we **do** something. Harries et al (2018) carried out a very interesting study entitled “Why it takes an ‘ontological shock’ to prompt increases in small firm resilience”. Although their investigation was based on flooding of business properties and the use of sensemaking to understand the attitude of company owners about whether or not to implement preventative solutions, the principle would apply to any “ontological shock”. Their interviews “revealed efforts to defend pre-flood representations of businesses” by “denial, attention deployment and the externalisation of responsibility” (ibid. p. 725) and in many cases not to take action to prepare for the next, similar, event. Fortunately, in our case, given the further shocks after Covid, of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, later, the disastrous Truss/Kwarteng mini-budget, we did take action on a number of fronts. These included reducing the physical (and overhead) footprint of the business by closing a branch, increasing our stock levels and extending our supplier base for strategic products, implementing improved systems to monitor and adjust selling prices to maintain margin, and reducing our workforce levels substantially. The latter point also led to the need to build resilience in the remaining team through engagement.

## 3.2 Family business ethos

Our long-term Vision and our Project 2025 Mission (see Appendix 1) both contain ambitions underpinned by our family ethos.

*Vision: to remain a family business, with strong values, enjoyable and professional work, and lifelong careers.*

*Mission: strengthen the family business and supportive culture.*

Another way that we would express this is that our desire is to have long-term employees and ensure that the experience of being an employee of Lister is a rewarding one. It is not just about years of service, but years of worthwhile service.

Despite improving some of the systems in the business, eg ISO 9001 for quality assurance, beyond that we had not made any significant changes or improvements to the way in which we managed or developed people, nor had we done anything to create the *special* environment that should engender a higher level of enthusiasm and professionalism.

The context in which the word professionalism is used here relates to a concern about the manner in which some customer-facing staff would interact with customers. We had seen several examples of responses which, although factual, were very blunt. This was concerning because it indicated an underlying attitude of either not caring, or understanding, the negative impact that this type of interaction could have on the friendly, family reputation on which the company prides itself, or on customer retention.

We also wanted to provide better financial rewards for our staff. To some extent this had been forced on us, by the annual increases in National Minimum Wage (NMW) and National Living Wage (NLW), which applied to some of the unskilled/semi-skilled staff, particularly in the Industrial Supplies division. Specifically, the NMW/NLW had cumulatively increased by around 15% more than the CPI inflation rate over the 2010 to 2019 period. This had also driven up the salaries of all staff although not by the same percentage. So, I had two concerns here.

1. There was an ongoing pressure on profitability from salary increases, with no corresponding productivity improvement, which could ultimately threaten everyone's jobs.
2. Salary differentials were being progressively eroded, because we felt incapable of matching large increases, but this created an unfairness where more highly skilled or responsible jobs were not rewarded accordingly.



In addition, for staff to want to have a lifelong career, and to find it interesting and enjoyable, it seemed that we needed a way both to know if they felt they were enjoying it, and to understand what support and development would be needed to enhance this.

In order to achieve the objectives of employees who:

1. Experience rewarding and enjoyable work
2. Have long careers within the Company
3. Are fairly and well rewarded for their endeavours
4. Value their membership within the family atmosphere and contribute to the friendly atmosphere,

whilst simultaneously achieving the objectives of the company performance (section 3.1),

5. Ensuring that we achieve high levels of productivity
6. Creating and maintaining a culture of innovation, customer service and professionalism
7. Minimising (unplanned) employee churn,

the idea of employee engagement offered a compelling solution.

Achieving engagement, and its espoused benefits, however, is not without its challenges, as discussed through an exploration of the relevant literature, in the last section of this chapter.

### 3.3 Employee engagement

The importance of engagement is generally viewed to be very significant. According to the “State of the Global Workplace: 2022 Report” (Gallup, 2022, p. 6) low engagement costs the global economy 7.8 trillion USD (11% of GDP) per annum and claims strong links between engagement and performance factors including employee retention, productivity, and profitability. Most concerning, only 21% of employee respondents said that they were actively engaged at work.

Employee engagement (EE), it transpires, is a very broad term, and even establishing a clear definition is somewhat problematic (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, pp. 8 and 35). This is explored further in the following literature review section. However, the popular but irreverent definition of a duck offers a useful analogy here; “if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck!”

Once equipped with some understanding of what EE means, the next obvious questions were,

1. How EE can be measured or assessed?
2. How can EE be engendered or increased?
3. Is that best implemented via a bottom-up or top-down process?
4. Does EE lead to (have a causal effect on) individual and/or business performance?

These then, formed the basis of my research questions, which are elaborated in Chapter 4, based on the following analysis of the current state of understanding of EE.

## 3.4 What do we mean by Employee Engagement (Including literature review)

For such a widely used term there “remains a paucity of critical academic literature” on employee engagement (Kular et al, 2008, p. 1). The situation may have improved somewhat since 2008, but the topic appears to remain underserved with a “surprising lack of research in the academic literature” (Lara & Sala-Vallina, 2017, p. 155). For example, from 2017 to 2022 inclusive, across all three of the *International Small Business Journal*, *Human Relations*, and the *Harvard Business Review*, only 9 articles, from a total of some 1808, could be considered even partially relevant to engagement.

The literature that is available shows many contradictions and there remains a lack of clarity around the topic. In the following sections I have explored the literature that is directly or peripherally relevant to engagement, specifically as it applies to the intention of this project to understand, measure, and improve engagement for the purpose of driving business success, especially in an SME environment. Within this “clear line of argument” I have attempted to make my own “‘voice’ clear” (Costley et al, 2010, p. 15) whilst still critically evaluating the various contributions.

### 3.4.1 The definition of engagement

There is clearly no single accepted definition of engagement. MacLeod and Clarke (2009, p. 8) found more than 50 definitions, and highlighted the confusion over whether engagement is an “attitude, a behaviour or an outcome or, indeed, all three”. They chose to use for their report a definition of “**a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation’s goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being**” (ibid. p. 9). This somewhat blurs the aforementioned confusion and, if anything, also introduces the idea of action (approach) to achieve engagement.

A definition from a more psychological perspective is “**personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s ‘preferred self’ in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances.**” (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). This definition adds the concept of linking an individual’s preference to how they approach their work and fits well with the family SME ethos where we want to balance the professionalism of our approach with the enjoyment of it (see Vision definition

in Chapter 1: Company Background). For the research project this would necessitate trying to elicit enough “personal” perspective from each employee for us (jointly) to explore how they could adapt their role to maximise their engagement and aligns with the concept of “feelings and perceptions around being valued and involved, which in turn generates the kinds of discretionary effort that leads to enhanced performance” (Kular et al, 2008, p. 19).

A related concept is the psychological contract. Kiazad et al (2019, p. 1336) show that employee embeddedness links the psychological contract fulfilment with employee extra-role behaviour. Based on the above definitions extra-role behaviour can be seen as a good indicator of the presence of employee engagement, and “sacrifice-embedded stayers” (who have too much at stake in terms of a wide variety of antecedents of links or fit, including pay, conditions and organisational support) are more likely to exhibit this extra-role behaviour (Hom et al, 2012, pp. 840-842).

Young and Gifford (2021, p. 4) undertook another literature review, under the auspices of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, and identified, similarly to MacLeod and Clarke, that there are multiple definitions, but they distinguish three types: psychological state, attitudinal/behavioural construct, or employment relations practice. Interestingly, they choose not to focus on the latter element, which they consider “doing engagement”, in favour of “being engaged”, whilst at the same time providing a quote that “most efforts to operationalise engagement.....have failed to demonstrate its validity as a construct or discriminant” (ibid., p. 5). It therefore seems to me to be an unwise separation. If we want employees to be engaged, we must “operationalise” engagement, and the definition needs to take account of both the “doing” and the “being”.

Shuck et al. (2017, p. 266) also distinguished between *state* engagement and *trait* engagement (similar to the attitudinal/behavioural idea) but argued that there was insufficient empirical evidence to justify that engagement was fully limited by any particular trait or disposition. The definition (ibid, p. 269) they proposed is “**positive, active, work-related psychological state operationalized by the maintenance, integrity, and direction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural energy**”.

It is encouraging that engagement is not seen as purely trait-based since that would imply that there would be limited value in attempting to increase engagement. However, common experience of us all as individuals suggests that some people will be more receptive to genuine efforts to increase engagement, and that any workplace activity will need to be flexible enough to cater for this aspect. There are also approaches that see engagement as only one element of a wider category of employee optimisation (Hultman, 2020, p. 37). The downside to this is that “employee satisfaction” and “positive work environment” are then separated out as unrelated elements versus engagement.

At the beginning of this research, based on the above and my “natural” understanding, my definition of engagement began as:

**“Engagement is both the outcome of, and the workplace approach designed to achieve, moving employees to a psychological state where they feel a strong sense of belonging and alignment with the company and are motivated to exert maximum effort for the achievement of their part in reaching the company goals.”**

As will be seen later this research has added another important element so that I now offer my definition as:

**“Engagement is (1) the outcome of, (2) the workplace approach designed to achieve, (3) the ongoing business and personal (manager/employee) *process* of sustaining, (4) the employees’ psychological states such that they feel a strong sense of belonging and alignment with the company and motivation to exert maximum effort for the achievement of their part in reaching the company goals.”**

My definition avoids the *sub-definitions* of “job engagement” and “organisational engagement” for example, used by Saks (2006, pp. 600-604) or the “expression of a person's ‘preferred self’” (Kahn, 1990, p. 700) because these, in my opinion, are more related to the methods of achieving engagement than defining what it is. In fact, my final definition is nearer to the discussion in the paper by Shuck et al. (although not included in their definition) where they discuss outcome, process, and state. However, I make an important distinction between a workplace approach (procedure) and engagement as a (psychological) process.

Nevertheless, I concede that my definition is, as Gifford and Young (2021, p. 9) express it, “a broad church”. In their review of the wide variety of definitions offered by authors, with foci on many aspects, they accept that using employee engagement as an umbrella term is a “valid option”, but caution that this precludes using it at one moment as a holistic term then at another stating “with apparent precision that, for example, only three in ten employees are actively engaged”.

### 3.4.2 Measuring engagement

If defining engagement is not straightforward, then measuring it is likely to be even more problematic. “Measurement of engagement is not an exact science” (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 10) but there are various tools that can be utilised. Questionnaires are commonly employed, either developed by

individual companies or using commercially available versions such as those from Gallup. The engagement elements assessed in this way depend on the type of questionnaire, of course, and a degree of interpretation is required, but they will allow for organisations to identify areas of concern, sometimes supplemented by small focus groups.

Some surveys (Buckingham, 2022, p. 68) measure engagement to be extremely low; 18% before the pandemic and 16% during it, in one USA based study. Other studies report considerably higher figures (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 57) for example motivation levels rising from 56% to 86% and pride in the organisation from 50% to 84% after an empowerment program was run in Birmingham City Council over 2006 to 2008.

MacLeod and Clarke (2009, p. 11) also make a strong point about the “importance of using instinct and judgement” and provide an amusing but pertinent quote from Andrew Templeman of the Cabinet Office Capability Building Programme *“No one ever got a pig fat by weighing it”*.

Gifford and Young (2021, p. 12) confirm the importance of using qualitative as well as quantitative measures, pointing out that “there is no replacement for in-depth, person-to-person discussions” to uncover a “richer understanding of the reasons why challenges persist, or solutions work.” In terms of quantitative measures, they suggest a variety of approaches including the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, but also measures that “build on Kahn’s model by differentiating engagement with the job and engagement with the organisation.”

Saks (2006, p. 608) undertook a detailed questionnaire study across 102 employees in a range of roles and companies, in an attempt to measure their engagement, what might be antecedents to their engagement, what were the effects of engagement, and most importantly the intercorrelations of the study variables. He designed two sets of six questions each to measure job engagement and organisation engagement, both measured on a five-point Likert scale. For the possible antecedents he selected sets of questions covering job characteristics, rewards and recognition, distributive justice, procedural justice, perceived organisational support and perceived supervisor support, some validated by use in previous research and some specific to this exercise, measured on four-, five-, seven- and ten-point scales as appropriate. Finally, there were sets of questions on job satisfaction, organisational commitment, intent to quit, organisational citizenship behaviour to individuals, and organisational citizenship behaviour to the organisation, used to assess the effects of engagement. He performed a statistical analysis, including multiple regression analyses, on the results which yielded important insights into which antecedents were most correlated with job and organisation engagement. These are discussed in the following section but, in terms of measurement, his approach did suggest that meaningful quantitative measures could be developed.

### 3.4.3 Creating engagement

Before the term was in common usage Joseph Scanlon (Krullee, 1955; Lesieur, 1958) was laying the groundwork for some of the elements of employee engagement. Although the “Scanlon Plan” was a financially driven incentive plan it did incorporate, somewhat uniquely for the 1940’s, direct involvement of the workforce, “utilising the experience of all members” (Krullee, 1955, p. 104), both in the introduction of the plan, and in the ongoing operation of it, by working collaboratively with management to improve business performance. The primary aim was “the joint achievement of increased productivity and of increased job satisfaction” (ibid., p. 103). This approach was successfully replicated in several USA manufacturing facilities.

Whilst the Scanlon Plan was more directly applicable to a factory setting, it did begin to exemplify that there needs to be a two-way component to engagement (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 9) with the organisation acting to engage the individual who in turn chooses the extent to reciprocate. It can become a self-reinforcing process.

Interestingly, despite its success there is no *formula* for implementing the Scanlon Plan. It is more a “set of principles or ideals” (Lesieur, 1958, p. 34), or a “philosophy of management... consistent with Theory Y” (McGregor, 1960, p. 110), reinforcing the concept that there is rarely a “one size fits all” solution to motivating employee performance.

Nevertheless, in order to influence engagement levels, it is necessary to *do something*. The question is what that should be. As a more specific exposition of the importance of psychological safety to personal engagement (Kahn, 1990, p. 708), Saks (2006, p. 609) demonstrated a high degree of correlation between certain organisational arrangements (or perceptions thereof) and job engagement and/or organisation engagement, which in turn led to positive organisational consequences. The arrangement (or antecedent) of “Perceived Organisational Support”, was the only significant predictor of both job and organisation engagement, but “Job Characteristics” were a predictor of job engagement, and “Procedural Justice” was a predictor of organisational engagement. Extra-role performance can be encouraged by delivering psychological contract inducements such as sending clear messages of expectations to employees and “proactively seeking feedback from employees” (Kiazad et al., 2019, p. 1336).

Although Saks’ (2006) work was based on a posteriori analysis of survey data, it does suggest the idea that focusing effort on improving these three antecedents could lead to improved engagement. By providing the detailed questionnaire content behind each of the antecedents, it also offers the

possibility to assess an individual's satisfaction level with each of them as a good proxy of their engagement level, as a "double check" against their stated engagement.

Employee engagement clearly includes significant aspects of involvement, participation, and empowerment. Whether periods or instances of top-down management control, perhaps necessary for survival during periods of instability and organisational stress, can be implemented without damaging attempts to enhance levels of employee engagement, will be relevant to many companies during current times. With their Change Leadership Triad (Participative, Collective, Directive), Kerber and Buono (2018, p. 58-59) offer a model where the management style may vary between different emphases of the three types as a project or situation progresses – the so-called "rhythm of change leadership".

However, even in a crisis situation, the leadership orientation, as distinct from actual decisions made, can influence individual and organisational outcomes (James & Wooten, 2011, p.5), including presumably the impact on engagement. Trust, good communication, concern, acting reliably and other positive leadership perspectives will contribute to better outcomes. The key precursor to trust, especially during periods of change, is *openness*, one of the guiding values of Organisation Development (French et al., 2005, p. 489) and of Lister's family ethos.

Some elements of the approach of improving the antecedents can be seen in the work by Smith and Bititci (2017, p. 1215). They performed an Action Research intervention, using "control" and "pilot" groups, in two departments of a UK bank. They demonstrated that moving to a more democratic/participative approach led to "improved employee engagement and performance". In this case there were already quite tight controls and measures in place, and this resulted in some relaxation of them. They suggest finding a suitable balance between, in their model, orthogonal axes of technical control and social control, in order to maximise employee engagement leading to overall performance improvement.

These authors give at least some practical insight into how to begin the journey to improving engagement. Quinn and Thakor (2018, p. 78-85) offer the approach used by Gerry Anderson of DTE Energy. He began by making a video that articulated the "higher purpose" of the employees/company which was then embedded by his senior team into all the onboarding programs, training, and other culture building activities. The eight-step process described in the article is as follows.

1. Envision an inspired workforce
2. Discover the purpose (by asking questions, listening and reflecting)
3. Recognise the need for authenticity



4. Turn the authentic message into a constant message
5. Stimulate individual learning
6. Turn mid-level managers into purpose-driven leaders
7. Connect the people to the purpose
8. Unleash the positive energisers (change agents)

These are certainly a useful set of pointers, underpinned by various examples, but they are still quite high-level with limited practical detail. This approach also assumes a “large” capability, more typical of a corporate than an SME.

The literature contains little in the way of a process, or toolkit, to follow to develop engagement. However, points 2 and 7 from the above example, do find their way almost directly into the Action Research process utilised in this project, as does the recommendation for leaders to become fully involved, *listen*, and to address resistance and roadblocks (Vienne, 2020, pp. 75-77) if they expect to drive engagement all the way through to advocacy.

There is a comparatively early book, by Bennis and Nanus (1985, pp. 73-78), concerned with how leaders can improve their business through leadership, which gave some hints of a process. The authors identified four key elements of what they termed “empowerment” which, based on their explanation, is at least a component of, if not equivalent to, engagement. Their four aspects of empowerment were significance, competence, community, and enjoyment. These were characterised as,

1. Significance – leaders creating a vision that “gave workers the feeling of being at the active centers of the social order”.
2. Competence – relating to personal development and learning (to suit the job)
3. Community – “akin to ‘family’” and “joined in some common cause”.
4. Enjoyment – “or just plain *fun*”. Bennis and Nanus contended that through this aspect empowerment “ameliorates not only the quality of work life but life itself”!

In the following pages they provided *some* indication of a process, at least in terms of the importance of creating and sharing a clear vision for the company and how the individual fits within that, and then continuing the communication process to create the social architecture or *culture* to support which helps “get people aligned behind the organization’s overarching goals”.

Again, these topics, especially the counsel to ensure that there is enjoyment in the job, have been taken forward into the AR project.

In a somewhat similar vein, Buckingham (2022, p. 69) identifies love for the work you do as “a precursor and an amplifier of performance”, which sounds remarkably like the claims for engagement. Although this may be an even more intangible construct than engagement to assess, a recent example from the Lister tube bending division reinforces this notion. We received an invitation to tender for some work that was being re-shored (production being returned to the UK from Far East production). It was a difficult job, bending extruded aluminium tube, to create an aesthetic and functional component, the handle of a golf trolley. The numbers were, by our standards, huge, and would significantly increase our profit. The technical team studied the design carefully and shared their concerns. Individually, each item was resolvable, and normally they relish a challenge, but it was clear that they were worried by the scale of this job. Even though it would ultimately be my problem if we were to let the customer down, and I was reasonably confident that we would succeed, which my colleagues knew, I agreed that we would decline this work. Their reaction to me was both to thank me for supporting them, and to reassure me that we had done the right thing, with their mood lifted completely. I was told later by another colleague that, even though they had expected me to trust their decision, given the size of the opportunity, they were also surprised that I had. They commented to him how happy they were that we had not put ourselves into a difficult situation. On previous occasions, we have also collectively agreed to avoid automotive work, due to the high stress levels that can lead to, of which a couple of us have had prior experience. I have subsequently had a conversation with one of them who commented how much he loves his job, which is surely amplified by not taking on stressful work. Causal or not, this part of the company has the fastest growth rate!

Most of the examples above do indicate that communication is a key aspect of facilitating engagement. There are reports that staff who feel listened to can be 4.6 times more likely to be empowered to give their best performance and 50% report that, if their bosses share information, the productivity and motivation is improved (Broadstone, 2021, p. 3). Although communication may be important, this apparent direct causation from communication (via engagement?) to enhanced performance is not to be accepted without question, as the following section elaborates and as illustrated in figure 5.

#### 3.4.4 Engagement as a driver of Performance

“The UK’s long-standing ‘productivity puzzle’ attracts competing explanations” and since “poor management practice and low job quality can impact of job performance and firm productivity directly and indirectly through the negative consequences for work engagement and innovative behaviours”

(Findlay et al, 2021, p. 132), understanding and addressing the importance of employee engagement “may be even more vital in the era of Covid-19 and its aftermath”.

Engagement is considered as important because there is strong evidence that it correlates with performance. MacLeod & Clarke (2009) were commissioned by the UK Government to undertake an in-depth investigation into employee engagement and the potential benefit for both organisations and individuals. They looked at more than 50 research and case studies as evidence and talked to hundreds of people during their extensive investigation. Their findings, for example referring to Gallup studies where businesses with above average engagement scores generated 27% more profitability than those with below average scores, (ibid., p. 36) supported the view that engagement correlates with performance. Importantly, especially as the study was undertaken during somewhat similar recessionary economic conditions to now, there was evidence that “*improving* engagement correlates with *improving* performance” (ibid., p. 11).

This reference to correlation, rather than causation, is significant. It opens up the possibility that something else causes both; perhaps a particular type of management, that drives business performance, creates engagement as a by-product, or co-product, maybe because staff become proud to be part of a successful organisation. Certainly, the initial findings at Lister suggested that we had engagement, of a sort, without necessarily the real drive for performance. Interestingly, the investigation by Saks (2006), discussed in the previous sections, showed that engagement was “significantly positively related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviour, and negatively related to intention to quit.” However, this is not the same as performance, which could perhaps be seen as another step on in that potential causal/correlation *chain*.

Figure 5 shows possible causal sequences leading to enhanced performance. The starting points are assumed to be the solid blue arrows, although a large part of the antecedents could be created by good communication, so this is seen as the primary input. The central horizontal band is adapted from a model presented by Saks (2006, p. 604). The vertical dashed lines represent the possibility that there may be direct causation, from communication to engagement to performance, but the causal chain may also be routed via Saks’ antecedents and consequences. The two curved lines indicate the possibility that many of the positive behaviours/attitudes may be self-reinforcing.

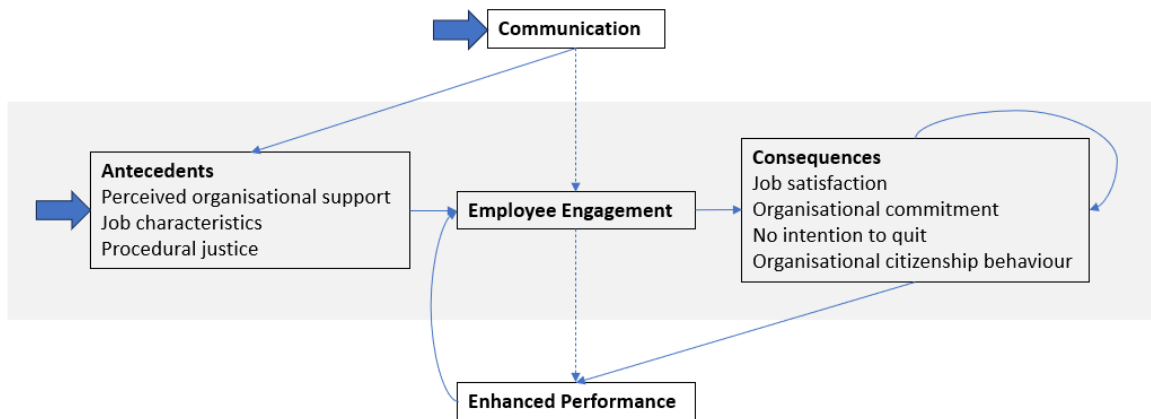


Figure 5: Causal or antecedent relationships between engagement related constructs

In fact, there are researchers that discuss engagement as an *outcome* of employee performance measurement and management (Smith & Bititci, 2017, p. 1209), those who do consider engagement (or somewhat related practices such as high-performance work practices) as a *cause* of improved performance (Tregaskis et al, 2013, p. 235-236), and then those that refer to correlation without explicitly ascribing causation.

Young and Gifford (2021, p. 3-10), based on their review of 229 meta-analyses and 123 primary studies on employee engagement, reached very similar conclusions to the above, identifying that there is a positive relationship between engagement and performance, that there is some evidence that this is causal, but only of a weak to moderate impact, but that there is also in some cases a reverse causality. In other words, some individuals who perform better at work are more engaged because of *that*.

It is, of course, reasonable to assume that many factors can influence employees' performance. For example, job performance is positively influenced by high-quality (mutual trust, respect and obligation) manager-employee relationships (leader-member exchange) in association with the quality of the employees' (follower's) relationships with their co-workers (Regts et al., 2019, p. 1284). Depending on the breadth of the definition of engagement chosen, one can see this as a further component part of employee engagement, emphasizing the importance of the emergent process including a specific focus on both the relationship with manager and with colleagues. Although there is a joint responsibility to ensure that these are positive, the position power of the manager in both indicates that for this element there is more of a top-down responsibility to ensure improvement. The importance of the relationship between an employee and his/her manager and colleagues is repeated in various guises from many sources including "perceived organisational and supervisor support" (Saks, 2006, p. 605) and "psychological safety" (Kahn, 1990, p. 703). It also ties in my personal

experience, mentioned in the My background section of Chapter 2, of the benefits of having a friendship relationship (or social bonding) with employees (Wang et al, 2005, p. 429-430; Venkataramani et al, 2016, p. 47).

Despite general acceptance in the literature that engagement is beneficial there is a cautionary note to be sounded. This is not the only way to drive business performance. Tightly controlled and directed workers, where decisions are managed by experts and performance is “optimised” (MacGregor, 1960, p. 18-20; Cappelli, 2020, p. 59) could potentially also yield strong results. There was some evidence of a return to this Theory X mentality during Covid shutdowns with some knowledge workers being monitored by “tattleware” software. Cappelli (2020, p. 62) argues that the task for managers is not to “choose between Theory X and Theory Y. Rather it is to find the mix of practices that actually, not theoretically, work” by incorporating optimisation and employee empowerment. This advocates finding a suitable blend of top-down and bottom-up approaches and a balance of control as discussed in the previous section (Smith and Bititci, 2017, p. 1215).

Cialdini (2007, p. 76-79) uses the example of the Korean war where the Chinese made American soldiers write statements and testimony to illustrate the committing power of written statements. He cites Amway Corporation as using this approach, by asking employees to write their targets down themselves, to drive their sales team to greater performance.

### 3.4.5 Engagement in SMEs

According to Antcliff et al (2021, p. 534) *“There is an extensive literature devoted to interpreting SME approaches to managing people (Atkinson, 2007; Lai et al., 2016; Nolan and Garavan, 2016)”* and *“the relative lack of formality of HRM in SMEs is likely to reflect the resource poverty of SMEs and their well-documented tendency to prefer informal work relations (Atkinson, 2007; Harney and Dundon, 2006)”* (ibid, p535).

One might therefore imagine that informal employee engagement approaches in SMEs would be well examined.

This is especially true given that *“Evidence suggests that failure to adopt good management practices is associated with poor productivity, and that SMEs adopt fewer such practices than larger organisations and are over-represented in the long tail of less productive firms (Office for National Statistics, 2017)”* (ibid, p532). It would seem to be a rich seam for exploration.

In fact, in an extension of the earlier comment about the paucity of literature on engagement generally, that written about engagement practices in an SME environment is scarce, with less evidence on the correlation between engagement and performance in SMEs than for larger organisations (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 50). In what the authors argue is the first narrative synthesis of all the evidence surrounding engagement, published as recently as 2017, the conclusion is that there is very little that can be stated with certainty about engagement as a topic more broadly, viz., “we do not really know what engagement means, how to measure it, what its outcomes are, or what drives up levels of engagement.” (Bailey et al, 2017, p. 47).

Nevertheless, there is some work available, either directly or peripherally relating to engagement in SMEs. The following review begins with references cited above by Antcliff, and then explores the relevant articles found from the *International Small Business Journal*, *Human Relations* and the *Harvard Business Review*, and other sources.

Atkinson (2007) undertook an interesting study, based around three small firm case studies, seeking to establish the extent to which transactional/relational nature of the psychological contract (or “obligation”) between employee and employer in small firms would drive business performance. The findings broadly supported the view that relational contracts (which we might loosely consider to be associated with high engagement) lead to enhanced performance and transactional contracts the contrary, although the direction of causality was not certain. What the paper did not elaborate on to any significant extent, since it was looking at a static state, was how to generate the more relational contract, or in our terminology, how to create engagement.

Lai et al (2016) used British large scale survey data to assess whether HR practices affected companies’ responses in times of challenging business conditions, of course relevant to our current period with the triple shocks of Covid, Brexit and Russia/Ukraine war. The findings, perhaps unsurprisingly, indicated that SMEs are more vulnerable, but that those with some HR structure were less so. They comment (ibid. p. 116), as do many sources, that “people management practices are generally more informal in smaller organisations” and mention Ram et al (2001, p. 846) who defines informal workplace relations as “a process of workforce engagement, collective and/or individual, based mainly on unwritten customs and tacit understandings that arise out of the interactions of the parties at work”. Interestingly, this is the only time in Lai’s paper that the word engagement is mentioned and, again, with no indication as to how this might be achieved.

Further developing this work, Lai et al (2017, p. 485) extended the implications of the work stating that the “appropriate choice of HR practices is likely to depend on specific organisational factors”. In

particular, that “management formality is not always desirable, or essential, in SMEs”, and that it may even jeopardise any competitive advantage generated by informality and any contingent employee satisfaction (that we might again consider a proxy or precursor for engagement). However, where there is low commitment, increasing formality may lead to improved employee and organisational performance. They comment that finding the right “balance of formality and informality might be challenging”. This analysis plays directly into the work of this AR project, where finding the right “light touch” of company /employee interaction is central to achieving increased engagement, without creating a “straitjacket” of systems that might stifle the very thing it is trying to engender.

Ram et al (2001, p. 846) were more focused on exploring how the “shock” of the introduction on the Working Time Regulations and the National Minimum Wage affected informality in small firms and, as such, is not concerned directly with engagement. However, in their reflection on pre-existing literature they do draw out a couple of important points. Firstly, “the erroneous conflating of informal with harmonious work relations [has been] shown to have little theoretical or empirical justification”. Secondly, “informality is dynamic rather than a fixed characteristic, and is highly context specific”. Both these points are particularly relevant to this AR project and, as will be seen later, the findings both re-enforce them and they also act to inform the AR processes (and the emergent engagement processes) to ensure that whilst still wishing to maintain the benefits of a friendly, family, small company atmosphere, with a comfortable degree of informality, there is sufficient clarity to actively promote harmonious relations and to adapt to specific contexts.

Nolan and Garavan (2016) undertook “A Systematic Review of the Literature” into human resource development (HRD) in SMEs. They said that HRD “remains understudied in the SME context” (ibid., p.85) and referred to it as “an emerging area of study” (ibid., p. 86). After a screening sift, they analysed 117 papers from 31 journals across the period 1995 to 2014. What is striking is that the word engagement only appears three times in their paper and once in the references, and in all these cases is used in the normal conversational sense, rather than referring to employee engagement.

The final reference from the Antcliff paper to be considered is Harney and Dundon (2006). Again, there is no mention of employee engagement. However, they do refer to “the informal nature of relations ..... helped leverage loyalty and motivation from employees” (ibid., p. 67). Loyalty and motivation seem like strong candidates for key characteristics of engagement, implying that an informal approach to HRM will promote engagement. There are some specific examples, such as banked hours or part-time and flexible attendance, but a recognition that responses need to be context specific.

An extensive literature review by Croucher et al. (2013, p. 2) again did not explicitly mention engagement but did find “considerable evidence that HR bundles in SMEs are positively associated with outcomes such as productivity, innovation, staff retention and customer satisfaction”. Bundles refer to formalised HR management including aspects such as recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, training and development, information sharing and employee voice. It is these *combinations* of practices that are associated with positive outcomes, with the implication that a single intervention or program would be less effective. Fortunately, we already had many HRM capabilities here in place at Lister, which could also be seen as establishing some of the antecedents (Saks, 2006).

Lara and Salas-Vallina (2017) present another analysis of engagement in SMEs, in this case Spanish SMEs, but this time from the perspective of the mediating role of organisational learning, specifically related to the presence of managerial competencies. By this they are referring to capabilities such as open-mindedness, delegation, customer orientation. On the basis that (ibid. p. 154) “Managers are essential to generate the background where employees feel passionate about their work to drive better results” their survey was directed at managers, and *their* engagement. Again, this is an “after the fact” analysis, based on 204 returned questionnaires. However, it does show that, in this context, managers’ engagement depends on their competencies, and this is mediated by the organisational learning capability. Although it does not provide a “how-to” process for enhancing engagement, it does provide the relevant concept for this project that engagement is more likely to be developed where the individual is in a role in which they feel competent. By extension, the more they are allowed or supported to develop that role within their area of competence (ie a bottom up approach) rather than impose expectations on them (top-down) that may move them outside this, the more likely it is that engagement can be improved.

#### 3.4.6 Removing obstacles to engagement

The earlier section on Creating Engagement discussed how having a suitable democratic or participative approach, and addressing certain organisational arrangements, such as “Perceived Organisational Support”, support the creation of employee engagement. However, when there has been a period of substantial intervention, like restructuring and downsizing, such as has been necessary at Lister, levels of emotional trauma can exist even amongst the “survivors” and “job attitudes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job involvement, and intentions to turnover become less favourable” (Allen, et al., 2001, p. 148).



Focusing solely on the positive approach “may lead an organisation to ignore those who are *broken* from the changes and in need of healing” (Mias deKlerk, 2007, p. 36). Mias deKlerk argues that change and organisational development programs should include a focus on loss and trauma. He suggests leadership behaviours that acknowledge the trauma and show awareness and vulnerability to similar feelings themselves are important in the healing process. Showing this compassion (Powley, 2011, p. 9), organising and repairing relationships (p. 3) and utilising the power of rituals and ceremonies (p. 14) can contribute to a healed organisation.

Baruch (2004, pp. 153-156) suggests that to minimise or avoid “survivor syndrome”, (Allen et al’s emotional trauma), characterised, for example, by “anger, anxiety, cynicism, resentment, resignation and retribution”, during a time of downsizing, a framework is needed which moves the organisation through stages of: redundancy; recognising the need for perpetual change; creating a new psychological contract; applying best practice. Fortunately, even without having been aware of this framework, at Lister we had largely followed a similar process, with a variety of business changes in prior years and, in preparation for Brexit, creating a familiarity and acceptance amongst employees that change was the norm. Creating the new psychological contract, explained by Baruch (ibid) as contingent on good communication, even over-communication, had also been part of our process, with carefully written and honest communication explaining the company situation, backed up by much individual, informal discussion filtered down throughout the business. Finally, we had operated both quickly and with fair and transparent selection criteria, which contributed to a “best practice” approach. Therefore, I was hopeful, although uncertain, that survivor syndrome would be a limited issue.

Especially during ongoing difficult times, having a vision and some *hope* for the future can positively influence employee satisfaction and business profitability (Carlsen, Hagen & Mortensen, 2011, p. 6) with Mishra & Spreitzer (1998, p. 569) labelling those downsizing survivors who have “hopeful” responses as “Active Advocates”, strongly related to trust in the management. Following the pandemic there will need to be a focus not just on “*getting back to work*”, but also on “*rethinking work*” and organisations should embrace *purpose*, *potential* and *perspective* in order to re-engage with the workforce (Schwartz et al., 2020, pp. 6-7)

At a more prosaic level “behaviours shift when our environment shifts” (Hughes, 2018, p. 149). Without addressing issues that distract from, or are in conflict with, engagement it is unlikely that progress can be made.

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH GOALS AND POSITIONALITY (what would define success within this project?)

### 4.1 Research goals

In simple terms my research goal was to find a way to improve company performance by enhancing employee engagement (EE). This had to be sustainable, in line with our family company ethos, and move us towards creating, in some sense, the *special* atmosphere that would enhance the employees' enjoyment of their work and their *professionalism*. The fundamental mechanism for the Action Research approach was to be meetings with the employees.

Coupled with the insights of previous researchers, mentioned in the last section, this goal can be broken down into several subsidiary elements, or questions, as follows.

1. Is there a meaningful **method to measure EE** by considering the pre-requisites of engagement (Saks, 2006)? What causes some staff to have higher levels of engagement than others?
2. Can **EE be increased** through enhanced two-way communication and personal goal/measures development (Smith & Bititci, 2017; MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 9)?
3. Is enhancing **EE a causal factor of improved individual and company performance** (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 11)?
4. Does a high level of **engagement contribute to enjoyment**, customer care (professionalism) and a special atmosphere?

Against the backdrop of the Covid pandemic and ensuing business challenges, and associated stresses, it was also important to consider the ongoing impact on individuals and the company, and also to investigate what sort of management approach could work to support survival through the period and, indeed, to regrow the business. This aspect has become even more relevant, as we have experienced the subsequent crises, and can be seen as something of an underlying theme of the whole project.

5. Is there **evidence of emotional trauma** within the organisation, and is it significant (Mias deKlerk, 2007)? If so, will it affect our business recovery and how can we **act to "heal" it** (Powley, 2011)? Is **"hope" an effective tool** (Carlsen et al, 2011)?

Finally, as an overarching research question.

6. What is the best balance between a **bottom-up or top-down process for implementing engagement**? Is it appropriate to **change the leadership/management approach** depending on the prevailing business conditions (Kerber & Buono, 2018; Ram et al, 2001)? Does this risk damaging the engagement process (James & Wooten, 2011) or family-values sentiment or is it unnecessary and/or “permitted” when engagement is high? Is it feasible therefore to **combine or synthesise an approach** such as the Change Leadership Triad of Directive, Participative and Collective management (Kerber & Buono, 2018) with an AR methodology, in the same way that a hybrid framework between appreciative enquiry and AR has been proposed (Egan & Lancaster, 2005)?

## 4.2 Ontological values

The variety and inconsistency of names, descriptions, and frameworks for ontological, epistemological and other philosophical components can be extremely confusing (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1168). Nevertheless, at a broad level most literature seems to accept the distinction between two main branches of ontology (Pickard & Dixon, 2004; Moon & Blackman, 2014; Blaikie, 2010), which seeks to characterise our understanding of the nature of reality. These are titled realism (or idealism by Blaikie), where one reality exists, and relativism, where multiple realities exist.

Although coming from a “hard sciences” (physics, engineering) background originally, my long involvement with managing and working with diverse groups of people has made me realise that an individual’s perception *is* their reality. It seems likely that any study where people are involved would sit best within a relativist ontology, and even more so in this project where the focus is around people’s attitudes, perception and alignment. Although there will be some use of questionnaires which can be assessed numerically, and some performance measures, all of these will nevertheless have to be interpreted to some extent qualitatively, since they are either judgements (questionnaires) or influenced strongly by external events (performance measures), thus reinforcing relativism as the most appropriate choice.

In order to ensure that the research methodology and methods are designed appropriately, and that appropriate conclusions can be drawn, it is relevant to consider which sub-divisions of relativism is most relevant. Moon & Blackman (2014, p. 1168) provide a useful explanation of the difference between the generality that a natural scientist would ascribe to a representative population and then extrapolate results from, versus the anthropologist undertaking an ethnographic study of a particular cultural group. This project sits somewhere on the spectrum in-between these two in terms of the type of interactions, but nearer the ethnography example.

From Moon & Blackman’s (2014, p. 1169) taxonomy, as seen in figure 6, this project will occupy a bounded relativism ontology. Because there are certain clear relationships, tasks, goals and ways of working within the business, even though they are subject to interpretation, they have more “substance” than would be suggested by “full” Relativism.

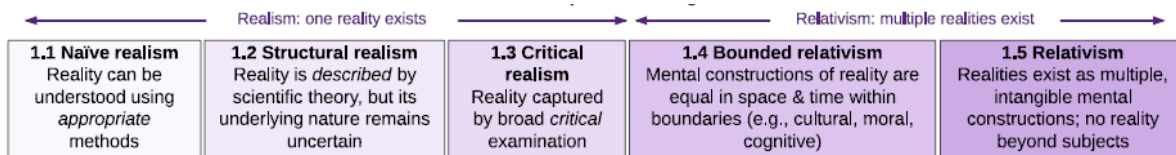


Figure 6: Moon and Blackman (2014) ontological taxonomy

Following Pickard & Dixon (2004, p. 1), referring to figure 7, the project will occupy Relativism in the Constructivism paradigm;

	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Post-positivism</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	Realist, singular reality	Critical realist. Social reality is 'real' but only knowable in a probabilistic sense.	Relativist. Multiple realities constructed by individuals. Multiple/Holistic

Figure 7: Pickard and Dixon (2004) ontological taxonomy

Blaikie (2010, pp. 93-94) offers six types of ontological assumptions:

1. Shallow realist
2. Conceptual realist
3. Cautious realist
4. Depth realist
5. Idealist
6. Subtle realist

The most relevant for this project would be either 4. Depth Realist (reality ranges from empirical, to actual, to the *underlying* real) or 5. Idealist (“reality consists of representations that are the creation of the human mind”).

This means that for this project the underpinning view is that, within reasonable parameters of the nature of our company, all employees’ views are valid interpretations of reality. Importantly, for their views to change, their interpretations of reality must change. This links directly to the importance of epistemology.

### 4.3 Epistemological values

In terms of how knowledge is created and understood (epistemology), most authors (Pickard & Dixon, 2004; Moon & Blackman, 2014; Blaikie, 2010) propose another spectrum of categories with broad alignment with the ontological range.

Within Moon & Blackman’s (2014, p. 1169) spectrum, as shown in figure 8, this project sits within the Constructionism perspective, tending towards Subjectivism, but not fully in that category for the same reasons mentioned in the previous section.

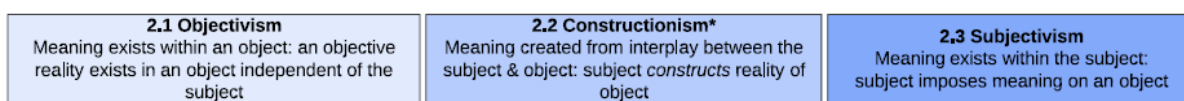


Figure 8: Moon and Blackman (2014) epistemology structure

Pickard and Dixon’s structure (2004, p. 1), illustrated in figure 9, is slightly different.

	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Post-positivism</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	Realist, singular reality	Critical realist. Social reality is 'real' but only knowable in a probabilistic sense.	Relativist. Multiple realities constructed by individuals. Multiple/Holistic
<b>Epistemology</b>	Objectivist. Dualist (knower can be independent of the known)	Modified objectivist (objectivity approximated by external verification.)	Subjectivist. Interactive. Researcher and subject are interdependent.

Figure 9: Pickard and Dixon (2004) Ontology and Epistemology

In this framework the epistemology of this project would be viewed as Subjectivist, especially given that I operate as an insider researcher, within the Constructivism paradigm (note the difference versus “Constructionism”).

Blaikie (2010, p. 95) directly links the first five of his ontological distinctions with epistemological categories. The relevant ones are:

Depth realist ⇔ Neo-realism: knowledge is derived from the structures that produce occurrences.

Idealist ⇔ Constructionism: knowledge is the outcome of people making sense of the physical world (note equivalence with Moon & Blackman).

In summary of this structure, new knowledge, and shared understanding, will be created through the interchanges between employees and myself, as the insider researcher.

A final perspective, that of Reason & Rowan (1989, p. xiii), which I have adopted, is particularly relevant because much of the project rests on qualitative inquiry. They advocate a form of inquiry called *objectively subjective* which is a synthesis of *naïve inquiry*, “normal” day-to-day/subjective thinking, and the totally “structured” “scientific” *objective inquiry*. This *objectively subjective inquiry* approach is quite distinct from Moon & Blackman’s Constructionism, even though both can be seen as occupying a form of mid-point between objective/ism and subjective/ism. The objectively subjective approach fits very well with an insider Action Research methodology (discussed in the next chapter) proposing, as it does, that one should clearly express ones positionality (political standpoint, work relationships etc), acknowledging underpinning intellectual debts, “include the earlier and later parts of the inquiry into the process, writing up these parts of the inquiry with as much love and attention as normally given to the main central part...” (Reason & Rowan, 1989, p. xiv).

## 4.4 Social and political values

The ontological and epistemological framework described above, means that there must be a high degree of interaction, interdependence (see figure 9 above) and co-creation between the researcher and the subject(s).

This indicates that social values of equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) will be most conducive to the research, and indeed success, with this type of approach (Ruzycki and Ahmed, 2022). This fits well with the culture, corporate social responsibility approach and family ethos of Lister.

One of my assumptions of the benefits of an SME, and particularly a family SME, where the most senior roles are held long-term by the same individuals, is that there is less incentive for internal politics, as there is less “jockeying for position” than can be experienced in larger, more remotely led organisations. This research approach should surface whether there are “office politics” at play and, in line with an EDI approach, provide opportunities to challenge and, where appropriate, address them.

In line with inclusivity, all (except the most extremist) political views are acceptable. Fortunately, at Lister, there has never been any indication that people’s political views have caused any divisions.

From a social perspective this project is aiming to avoid the “willing slave” trap pointed out by Buchanan and Badham (2004, pp. 231-233). There is no desire simply to encourage employees “to work longer and harder, and handle increased pressures”, which they state as the usual intent or outcome of organisational change processes. On the contrary, this project seeks to find a way, through engagement, to achieve “both-and”: *both* increased business performance, *and* a more enjoyable and interesting work experience.



## 4.5 Statement of positionality

My positionality is particularly relevant in research of this nature. Three compelling questions are

1. Does my positionality make me “fit” to undertake this type of insider Action Research?
2. Because of the interpretative nature of the project, will my positionality be likely to introduce significant and unstated/unconscious bias in the outcomes?
3. Is my positionality consistent with other colleagues who would be expected to perpetuate the program?

Because this project would require individuals to openly discuss their opinions much would rely on the right attitude from me, the researcher.

During the planning stage of the research project, I wrote a statement of positionality to serve both as a reference point for my activities during the project, but also as a base point from which, at the conclusion of the research, I could reflect on my personal research journey and how the experience has changed or strengthened my views. I will draw from that earlier statement here, but also, even ahead of presenting the research outcomes, present in broad terms some of that reflective commentary.

Of course, my views on people management have been strongly influenced by my previous experience. As explained in the second paragraph of My Background, section 2.3, I found early on in my career that my “natural” style of treating everyone with respect led, in most cases, to good relationships and positive outcomes. In fact, my view is that to go further and to treat colleagues as friends, even when sometimes there is limited common ground initially, is even more effective. This extends to stepping outside of normal arrangements to give extra support on occasions. A very recent example is where one of the team, who was acting as an executor of a will, and had no prior experience and limited legal understanding, had been visibly stressed by the situation. In one case she needed to urgently deliver a document to the solicitor and asked for time off to travel by bus to take it. Instead, I drove her there. I did it with a genuine desire to reduce her stress, as I would for any friend, but she was overwhelmed with what a “wonderful management” we have. When we got back, she was at pains to tell me how much harder she was going to work to “pay me back”! There are other similar examples later that have only served to reinforce my belief that this “natural” approach is one of the most powerful foundations of engagement.

This does have to be tempered with the ability to deal with situations when someone takes unreasonable advantage of the friendly and comfortable atmosphere, or when external circumstances

force difficult decisions. This does require a reasonably confident management approach, to be able to have difficult discussions with “friends”, but if approached with fairness and honesty (further key components of my positionality) then the friendship and business psychological contract that we have can be respected.

However, just as outside the work environment there are certain traits that I would look for in a friend, in a work situation one of the key attributes is a positive attitude. There is an oft quoted phrase “Hire for attitude - you can train for everything else”. Whilst this is a little simplistic, since for some roles there is a required work competency threshold, I am a firm believer in this underlying principle.

An example from the latter part of this research, in AR cycle 3, discussed in detail in the case study in section 6.6.2.4.2, is of a colleague who wanted to progress from a customer service role but could not see a path. Through discussion we identified that she was frustrated that some customers had ceased using us. She had never felt it was appropriate for her to contact these lapsed customers, but once given “permission” she became excited about the concept of undertaking a form of “inside sales” initially with customers that she already knew, but then progressing to other prospects that she could identify. After some in-house training she embarked on this new journey, not without trepidation, but with an enthusiasm that is likely to ensure results.

If you can “get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats” (Collins, 2001, p. 41), then “the problem of how to motivate and manage people largely goes away”, is another very similar perspective, to which I subscribe. Actually, I believe, and have experienced, that in many cases the right attitude is there, it has just not been allowed to see the light of day because of poor management. As part of the principle of “confront the brutal facts”, Collins’ research also uncovered the best practices of “lead with questions, not answers” and “engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion” (ibid, pp. 74-75), which became key elements in this project, and helped to expose and draw out positive attitudes. It is true to say that this was aided by the fact that we had already selected out some of the “less enthusiastic” individuals through the redundancy procedure.

However, even when people have a positive attitude, they often need help to identify how to apply their efforts; it is my experience that many people lack either the self-reflective experience or capacity to even realise that they are not considering the best channel for their efforts. My approach has always been to try to help employees with the right attitude succeed by helping them to find that focus, through a style of leadership blending paternalism (top-down guidance where needed) and servant leadership (integrating bottom-up enthusiasm and ideas).

Regarding the first question posed at the start of this section, I believe that this research project was, unsurprisingly, fully aligned with my approach or positionality, seeking ways to validate and systematise it, and to find the right balance between top-down/bottom-up. My collaborative nature would be a good fit for this insider research.

The question of whether I might introduce unconscious bias into the project outcomes is, by its very nature, impossible to answer. My positionality and corresponding management style does lead me to assume the best in people, until they prove otherwise. However, it also allows me to provide staff with a very relaxed and “safe” environment and interaction. As the data and evidence shows, many staff appeared to be extremely open in how they raised issues and concerns with, apparently, no fear of reprisals. The developed process seems to favour openness and honesty, which diminishes the risk of any personal prejudices or bias from colouring the data.

Finally, there is the question of whether other managers would have a similar enough positionality to mine to allow them to roll out the program. At a senior management level, there are three factors that give me encouragement that this is the case. Firstly, when I originally joined Lister, I was encouraged by the fact that the general feel of the company was similar to my personal perspective. To some extent it felt like “coming home”. Secondly, all the senior managers have been in post, and all appointed by me, for at least 10 years and I have worked closely with them across that period. Although, of course, we all have our differences, which is positive to avoid “group think” (Handy, 1985, pp. 169-170) they are similar enough to me to provide confidence that they can undertake engagement discussions in a similar and suitable manner. Finally, they have all been involved with me in several engagement meetings with employees and have seen the benefit. There may be more of a challenge with some of the junior managers and supervisors who, in some cases, may have a more directive approach. However, the process itself mitigates that. Also, the use of a “grandfather” meetings, where the employees’ boss’s boss is involved could be a useful strategy to both improve outcomes and indirectly coach some managers.

I was also seeking, through this research, to further develop my own capabilities, to validate my approach where possible, but also to challenge my existing perspectives where it seemed appropriate. Whilst I have many years of experience, I wanted to critically examine my assumptions and positionality under real conditions “for me” as well as for the wider world of the company and the fund of research knowledge (Reason & Marshall, 1987, pp. 112-113).

Although reflexivity can be considered to be tightly connected to positionality (Corlett & Mavin, 2020) I have commented separately on my approach to reflexivity in Chapter 5, section 5.5, since it is particularly relevant to the qualitative research approach discussed there.

## 4.6 Ethical considerations

In preparing the Research Proposal for this project I utilised the seven-point framework suggested by Gelling & Munn-Giddings (2011, pp. 102-106) to ensure that I had considered and followed a fair and ethical approach. That has remained consistent. In brief:

**Value:** The aim was both to aid the recovery and growth of the business and to enhance employees' job experience.

**Scientific validity:** This and the following chapter detail the ontology, epistemology and methodology that underpin the work.

**Fair participant selection:** one third of the workforce have been selected for involvement in the project, although ultimately all employees will be involved in the resultant processes. As explained in Chapter 5, selection has been based on justifiable criteria ranging from, for the pilot, the discreteness of a group, through to ability to conduct remote interviews, and then finally branch proximity and completeness of a branch/group.

**Favourable risk-benefit ratio:** The potential benefit, as mentioned in Value, was considered significant. The only real risk identified was that an employee may feel stressed by the approach, expectations or peer pressure. Both my, and managers', care and sensitivity in how we addressed meetings, coupled with the Company mental health support was deemed sufficient mitigation.

**Independent Review:** The project has not deviated significantly from the Proposal, which was approved via the Middlesex University PAP process.

**Informed consent:** All involved employees have received full explanations of the purpose of the project and the extent and expectation of their involvement. It falls within normal business "reasonable request" parameters.

**Respect for enrolled participants:** To highlight just two aspects of respect as it has applied to this project; I have maintained an openness and responded to all issues raised; Confidentiality has been carefully protected. Although I have related incidents and conversations, all names have been changed and, where necessary, some of the context has been slightly reconfigured or obscured so that only the individual (or their manager) would recognise themselves in the description.

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS (how and what data did I collect to inform the developing situation?)

### 5.1 Measurement of employee engagement

Trying to measure EE quantitatively was anticipated to be very challenging. Although it was easy enough to come up with a set of questions that respondents could grade themselves against (or I, as the researcher could discuss with them and attempt the grading), whether these gradings were particularly meaningful was always likely to be uncertain. Each person would have a different view of how to score, influenced both by their actual feelings, their desire to please (or otherwise) their manager/company, their attempt consciously or subconsciously to send a message, and many other factors. In practice, during the interviews there were many examples of where people commented that they couldn't really say why they had given a particular score, sometimes saying they must have been in a bad mood! Despite these concerns, I did develop a set of questions to be used for a preliminary questionnaire, and later reintroduced a variant of these as a mechanism for initiating conversations. However, the concerns about the validity of quantitative measures led to the use of a more qualitative approach, based around Action Research interview and Thick Description.

This raises a further question: If it is difficult to quantitatively assess the level of engagement itself, is it possible to measure its intended effects?

This would also turn out to be problematic, for two main reasons.

1. Very few staff are performing roles where there is an output that is specific to them. For example, a buyer must react to the demands placed on her by the sales requirements and by the production team and must transact more or less orders accordingly. It was beyond the scope of this project to develop the complex measures that would be needed to weight some purchase orders more heavily than others because they require more interactions with a supplier (or on-line ordering etc), and then repeat this task for the myriad of other functions, to make individual measurement quantifiable.
2. The constant disruption to business, and individual roles, caused by external macro-socio-economic factors across the period of the project preparation and research have been the most significant that we have witnessed for many years. Although there are some

quantitative measures possible, and presented later, while they mainly show correlation with the time frame of the project, it would be claiming too much to ascribe direct causation.

However, this research project does provide considerable qualitative evidence to support the link between EE and individual improved performance, much of it building on the work of Saks (2006) discussed in section 3.4.2.

## 5.2 Why Action Research? (Including literature review)

The motivation for this work began as a desire to make improvements (which would require action) in the real world setting of the company, in a way that was in keeping with our employee friendly ethos, and such that it was well-grounded and repeatable. This would require research; both in the local setting, but also reviewing existing research from which this project could benefit and build on. This is almost identical to the situation facing one of the founding fathers of the field of Organisational Development, Kurt Lewin, who began using and developed the concept of Action Research (AR) in his work at the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation (Burnes, 2007). I explain the specific stages of the Action Research cycle; diagnose, plan, implement, evaluate; in section 5.4.3.

Organisational Development (OD), as a discipline, is a combination of a philosophy based on people-centric values, a mindset about organising and managing, and a “customised” change approach of intervention, such that “If you know step two, it’s not OD” (Jamieson & Marshak, 2018, p. 95). There are many OD approaches including “team building, organisation design, quality of work life, large group interventions, appreciative inquiry, coaching” (ibid., p. 93) as well as Action Research, but the latter is aligned to “the powerful notion that human systems could be understood and changed only if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself” (Coghlan & Brannick, p. 54). In this respect Action Research sits very clearly in the “flexible designs” approach to research (Robson, 2002, p. 163).

A very clear exposition of the distinctiveness of this approach is that “the purpose of AR is to work towards practice change *during* the research process, not merely to explore and describe a situation ‘as it is’ with no guarantee that change will result from the research. It is the involvement of participants actively in all stages of the research process and the evolving nature of the research methods that causes the greatest challenges...” (Gelling & Munn-Giddings, 2011, p. 101), but potentially also the greatest benefits. Although this description captures the central features of improvement of *practice* and *situation*, through *involvement* of the practitioners, there is another important factor; the improvement of *understanding* of a practice by its practitioners (Robson, 2002, p. 215).

In their discussion of the current state of OD and the direction for the next decade, Shani and Coghlan (2018, p. 42) propose that there is a need for the development of frameworks and methods that will “enhance the simultaneous emphasis on ‘action’, ‘research’ and ‘collaboration’”. They explicitly point out that collaboration means that the research is “*with* people rather than *on* or *for* them”. Choosing Action Research, then, as a means to improve engagement, by working collaboratively with our

employees, provides a route to not only drive business improvement and job enjoyment, but also to contribute to an identified development area of OD.

There are some similarities, and potential for beneficial overlap, to Design Thinking, a rapidly growing approach to innovation (ibid., p. 40), which although originally used by companies such as Apple and Nike for product design has been extended to other organisations to deliver “solutions to complex adaptive challenges” (Chesson, 2018, p. 73). It has “an iterative and collaborative process that takes an empathetic approach to problem solving” (ibid., p. 74) and offers a four-stage model of Understand – Conceptualise – Experiment – Implement, with a focus on human-centredness and empathy. I took the ideas of empathy, journey mapping and collecting stories, that Chesson identifies as part of the Understanding phase, and the idea generation (balancing creative with analytical thinking) in the Conceptualise phase, into the AR meetings, as sub-processes to “unlock” employees’ enthusiasm and address any “blockers”.

As my work on this project has developed, my reflective skills have also undoubtedly improved, both in specific relation to engagement related interactions with my colleagues, but also more widely, so that I now find myself considering the potential causes and impacts in many other aspects of life. In parallel with undertaking both the formal meetings with staff and all the informal and observational content on which my research is based, I have continued to scour the literature for further insights both to help inform, direct and explain my findings. I have, of course, applied my newly-honed reflective skills to this activity, and have come to an additional *a posteriori* justification for Action Research, as explained in the following.

Much of the literature is either a literature review in itself or, even where it is based on original data, is attempting to draw conclusions based on static, historic data. Thus, the conclusions are often related to *why* particular events or outcomes have occurred. Even here there can be a selection bias risk that the base data self-selects out those enterprises that have failed. From my perspective as a practitioner, the more significant downside is that there is rarely any explanation as to *how* to achieve the various outcomes.

A good example of this is provided by Minola et al (2022) who discuss the circumstances under which family SMEs achieve high growth, from a behavioural perspective. The research is centred around the question of whether those under family ownership and control exhibit higher growth than SMEs with low or no family ownership, and how the presence or otherwise of a family CEO influences this. Although not directly related to engagement, this is very relevant to Lister, which is under strong family control, with a non-family, but highly integrated CEO (the author) and feeds into one of the key planned outcomes of the project i.e. growth.



In passing it is worth pointing out that despite utilising a sample of 39,631 firms across Germany, Great Britain, France, Spain and Italy, extracted from a financial database, there is no mention in Minola et al's methodology of including data on any firms that failed during the 2004-2019 study period. In fact, they explicitly mention 278,013 year-observations, which implies 7 observations per company, one per year, meaning that all firms survived the full period. It seems likely then that the aforementioned *success-only-selection* bias has been at play.

In brief, the findings of the research are that family SMEs are likely to experience lower growth, especially where the family ownership is not mostly or entirely in the family control, and that having a family CEO exacerbates this risk. Increased growth is more likely when there is a non-family CEO and/or when the family ownership is very significant. The latter description fits well with Lister. The problem from my perspective with this research is that, although there are some hypotheses and discussion around "high- or low-discretion slack" (ibid., p. 779) of resources, there is nothing which explains *how* those firms which have achieved growth have done so. In other words, how have they activated the resources which seem to contribute towards success?

From an engagement perspective some studies show that, *on average*, family firms score more highly on engagement than non-family firms but, although there may be a "family friendliness" (Azoury et al., 2013, p. 19) element at play, reliance on that alone would be unwise.

This is where Action Research can contribute so significantly. By combining theoretical understanding, practical research and iterative action, this engagement research project, as it has unfolded, has allowed the development of a method to achieve engagement, at the same time as being able to assess the success of the process.

There are, of course, criticisms of Action Research, particularly related to the rigour and effectiveness of its application, especially with inexperienced researchers, and due to questions over its repeatability, particularly in other settings. However, in the majority of cases, the benefits, including "observation of the impact of specific interventions" (Smith & Bititci, 2017, p.1212) involving participants in the design of the approach, and developing the theory in incremental steps, outweigh the limitations.

### 5.3 Why Thick Description? (Including literature review)

In a social or ethnographic situation, it is difficult to assign quantifiable variables to behaviours and, in any case, this would lose much of the richness and nuance of human interaction and motivations.

Madden and Bailey (2017, p. 118) state “Research may fulfil various criteria of scientific rigour, but in stripping out context, it is likely to fall short of providing accurate accounts of engagement and the experience of real, socially embedded people. Qualitative research can help to provide more authentic insights into these realities.” They continue, “Not only do we need more life-like accounts of engagement and disengagement, we need to think of other ways in which people experience it. By over-emphasizing the positive we disregard negative or mixed emotions as sources of appreciation and passion”.

A qualitative approach is therefore needed, and in trying to understand the topic of engagement it is clear from the foregoing that this will be centred around discussion, observation, and subsequent description to elicit meaning.

Although he was not the first to use the term Thick Description, Clifford Geertz was the social anthropologist who brought it to prominence (Geertz, 1973). *Thin* Description can be characterised as observation, description, and outline of a situation, whereas *Thick Description* adds the *interpretation* and *analysis* needed to gain understanding and new learning.

Specifically Thick Description requires documenting “detailed narratives or ‘vignettes’ explaining situations and their background ‘context’.” (Drew, 2019, p. 2). It is the “interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick”. (Schwandt, 2001, p. 255). There are five main characteristics that are important in Thick Description (Drew, 2019, pp. 6-8; Ponterotto, 2006, pp. 542-543);

1. Interpretation in context: as opposed to thin description where the description would not explain the cultural significance.
2. Capturing thoughts and emotions: interpreting the situation rather than just the surface details. For example, a pause could mean many things; was it due to shock, or a careful reply?
3. Assigning motivations and intentions.
4. Rich account of details: providing credibility and a sense for readers that they have experienced the event.
5. The meaningfulness of the situation is detailed.

By utilising Thick Description to pick up “the finer details (nuances) and interpret what meaning they have for a situation” (Drew, 2019, p. 8), whilst recognising and avoiding as much as possible the risk of “researcher bias” (ibid, p. 9), I have aimed to maximise the value from each meeting/interview undertaken as part of this project.

It is also worth commenting that the nature of Thick Description does require a degree of personal judgement, interpretation, reflection in action, and even intuition, in expressing the key aspects of an event or interaction in such a way as to draw out the most relevant learning.

Kump (2022, p. 638) suggests that the use of intuition, both *intuitive judgement* and *intuitive insight*, as forms of tacit knowledge, can have a place in organisational research. Although Thick Description itself is not mentioned in her paper, other techniques such as Grounded Theory, which bear some similarity in the sense of making sense of large volumes of qualitative data, are. In particular, “Findings from psychological experiments suggest that, when they are based on large amounts of data, intuitive outcomes can be highly accurate—and more accurate than conscious analytical processing” (ibid, p. 643). I contend that this may be particularly relevant in my situation, as an *insider researcher*, with an already deep understanding of the business context, and with existing relationships with the employees. Kump proposes that one may “report what they ‘felt’ in response to the data. Including intuitive outcomes could preserve some of the ‘richness’ of the data” (ibid, p. 649). This seems particularly relevant to Thick Description.

There is a general acceptance amongst most engineers, my original discipline, that, once you have a certain amount of experience, trusting to a gut feeling is a reasonable first response, because you have “trained your gut”, so that although you do not have an explicit explanation, the decision is no less valid. One might call this *experience-based* intuition.

However, this is not without its risks, in seeing what I want to see, and it is important that intuitive outcomes are recognised and signalled as such by the author, and that “In interpretive research, validity is established when findings are justified”, “that is, when intuitive interpretations are in line with the data and ideas, constructs, and observations correspond.” (ibid, p. 646). Throughout this work I shall seek to indicate where I have relied on intuition (by using “I felt” or “I believed”) and, where possible, how any findings are subsequently justified.

I chose Thick Description in favour of other approaches such as Grounded Theory (Newby, 2010, p. 487) because with a relatively small employee sample size, and many in quite different roles and with varied backgrounds, I anticipated finding enough direct commonality in the topics and conversations at the micro level, to suit a coding approach, to be challenging.

However, to then provide some structure in how I have applied Thick Description, I have utilised a broadly Thematic Analysis approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 77) "Thematic analysis is a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method within and beyond psychology". Obviously, this project is not explicitly psychology related, although in the sense that it explores aspects of conscious and normally unconscious thoughts and feeling, as well as behaviours, there is some adjacency. Certainly, their advice seems appropriate, "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set", and "Ideally, there will be a number of instances of the theme across the data set." (ibid., p. 82). In Chapter 6, the findings are presented as themes in this way, with each theme evidenced by one, or normally several, examples.

## 5.4 How Action Research was applied here

Action Research (AR) appears to be just as much of a *broad church* as is the topic of engagement. It can be considered an umbrella term for many forms of research done “either by or in collaboration with practitioners” including *collaborative research; cooperative inquiry; appreciative inquiry* and many more (Herr & Anderson, 2005, pp. 2-3). It can be considered as inquiry undertaken *by* (or *with*) insiders, via (“in”) action or cycles of action which, including the use of structured or systematic (scientific) reflection on the data and evidence generated, create or incite change in the organisation, the participants and the researcher (ibid, p. 3; Coghlan and Brannick, 2014, p. 6; McNiff & Whitehead, 1988, pp. 1-2)

Typically, for insider-led work-based research, including Action Research “the scale .... is likely to be relatively small.....and quite specific...suggesting something new and creative or evaluating a particular practice” (Costley et al, 2010, p. 3). These conditions precisely apply to this project and suggest a suitable fit.

There are several key factors to consider in the application of AR. Some of these are explicitly explored in the following sections. The detailed steps are explained in the following chapter.

### 5.4.1 Inside-outside and position power

I have described my role above as an insider researcher. However, considering my “social situatedness” (ibid, p. 1), it is important to recognise that whilst I am certainly not an outside researcher, since I am inside the Company, by the nature of my role and ownership, there is a significant power differential between me and all the employees. I am therefore not fully inside their “world”. My position lies somewhere on the continuum between inside and outside (Breen, 2007, p. 163). There are many potential consequences of being an insider researcher. For example, “greater familiarity can lead to a loss of ‘objectivity’”, “relying on informants with whom [the researcher is] most familiar”, and the risk of “erroneous assumptions based on the researcher’s prior knowledge”, or the “illusion of sameness” (ibid, p. 164). In a sense my slight *power-separation*, moving me a little along the continuum, may be beneficial to guard against some of these pitfalls. However, that power-separation, in addition to the perception amongst employees that I am even further removed from their experiences as a result of me acting as a researcher, may create “a barrier that separates [me] the insider from those in the setting they are researching” (ibid., p. 164). This *could* also have the

effect of diminishing my ability to “draw upon shared understanding and trust” (Costley et al, 2010, p. 1). Coghlan and Brannick (2014, p. xiv) make the further point, in relation to being aware both of how my role may influence how I view the world and how I am perceived by others, that insider Action Researchers should be “able to make choices as to when to step into and out of each of the multiple roles that they hold”.

Interestingly, Breen (2007, p. 164) relates the story of a researcher who volunteered to clean the toilets in “an effort to remain accepted by those she was researching”. During the pandemic, when we made redundancies at Lister (in June/July 2020), two of our three part-time cleaners were casualties. When the remaining one chose to leave a few months later (to assist in her son’s business), given the existential threat to the business at the time I decided that we would not replace her. It was agreed that the cleaning task would be distributed amongst the staff, although I chose to take on full responsibility for one of the toilets. I continued to do this from November 2020 (just as the AR project was commencing) until July 2022, when we finally employed another part-time cleaner (as the research stage was ending). Although my reasoning was simply based on not asking others to do something that I would not do myself, rather than any specific attempt to minimise the Action Research *barrier*, in hindsight it cannot have done any harm.

There was also a risk that I, or other managers, may use political power to influence employees. Some of this can be subtle, such as in the case study examples presented by Buchanan and Badham (2004, pp. 83-89), where such actions as “leading someone to believe” that another person or department wants them to fail in an attempt to provoke them to better performance, or seeding disparaging comments about a subordinate’s (actual) poor performance to their colleagues to encourage them to leave, were viewed by the authors as *strictly* unethical but not uncommon organisational practices. They do argue that an “ethical decision framework” can offer “contradictory assessments”, but in our company, and if we want to enhance engagement, the total lack of trust that such behaviour could cause when “found out” indicates that we avoid the use of internal politics. By being aware of this risk, and discussing with my fellow managers, we aimed to guard against it. This type of insider research carries an “ethic of care.... a moral obligation” and is “involving not observational” (Costley et al, 2010, pp. 43-44).

## 5.4.2 Three voices and three audiences

I adopted the approach, suggested by Coghlan and Brannick (2014, p. 7) of blending first-person research (inquiring into my own assumptions and behaviour) with second-person research (the primary objective of working with others to develop new learning) and third-person research (the structuring of this report, and my feedback to other colleagues, to disseminate the understanding gained and approaches developed). The audiences are, respectively, me, us and them.

An important element of my first-person skills development was the keeping of a journal, recording observations, experiences and reflections (ibid., p. 34). This proved very beneficial in elaborating some of the themes discussed in Chapter 6, with particular reference made to it in the third AR cycle.

## 5.4.3 Action Research Cycles

Each Action Research (AR) cycle has followed the classical steps originally suggested by Kurt Lewin, the progenitor of the approach, of choosing a “certain objective” followed by “a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action.” (Lewin, 1946, pp. 37-38). This can be expressed as

### 1. **Diagnosis or, as Coghlan and Brannick (2014, p. 10) put it, *constructing what the issues are***

In this stage the researcher seeks to develop an understanding of the issue or goal that is to be achieved. This will typically be driven by an organisational desire to improve performance either in terms of efficiency or effectiveness, or both. This need may be an innate wish for improvement or may be imposed by external forces. In the case of this project both my personal goal to create a *special* company and the impacts of the external factors explained at length in Chapter 2 shaped the requirement to create a form of practical employee engagement.

Feeding into the diagnosis to help establish clear objectives for each AR cycle, data collection is undertaken. This can take the form of quantitative data such as financial performance measures or more qualitative data including questionnaires, discussions and observations (of both the internal and external situation).

## **2. Planning, or designing, the Action**

The plan of action required to achieve the goals identified in the previous stage is then developed. This plan should be focused on producing a *change*. It is important therefore that to have clarity on what is being addressed and to have some measures in place, or some method of assessment, to allow either a before and after comparison or an ability to isolate the impact of the change. This stage also requires clear identification of the stakeholders that will be involved in the change process as active participants and how they will be enrolled into the project.

## **3. Implementation, or Taking Action**

In this stage the plan is acted upon. In a typical Action Research project, especially in an Organisational Development context, this will involve considerable discussion with the participants of the project. During this Action stage the original plan is normally followed reasonably faithfully to allow the next stage of Evaluation to be meaningful. Obviously changes to practical aspects of the organisation makes perfect sense in this stage as that is what the project is trying to achieve, but if it is appropriate to make significant changes to the AR *process*, then it is more suitable to bring this cycle to an end, move to the Evaluation stage and begin a further cycle as discussed below.

## **4. Evaluation**

Once the Action stage has been completed an evaluation of the success, or otherwise, of the planned change (and, ideally, how effective the AR process has been in effecting it) is undertaken, assessing either against the situation prior to intervention or by directly evaluating the change impact. In some cases, further change opportunities have been identified, either to AR cycle process or to implement within the organisation and it is appropriate to undertake a further cycle.

In this project, as illustrated in figure 10, there have been multiple AR cycles, with each feeding into the next, in a “Spiral of Action Research Cycles” (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014, p. 11) with, most importantly, “continually inquiring into each of the four main steps, asking how these steps are being conducted and how they are consistent with one another, so shaping how the subsequent steps are



conducted". The "reflection on reflection" or "learning about learning; that is, meta-learning" that elevates Action Research from "everyday problem-solving" (ibid, p. 13).

In Chapter 6 the detail of each step is documented to show how each cycle influenced the next.

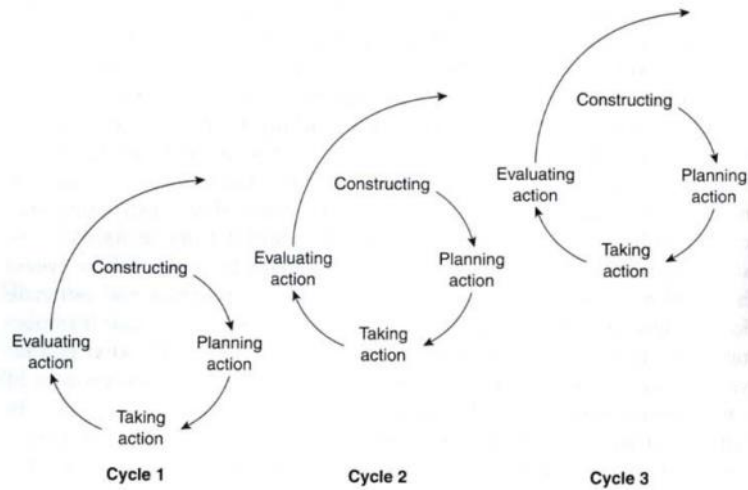


Figure 10: Spiral of Research Cycles (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014)

I have used the Evaluation step, in this project, primarily to evaluate the AR *process* and the tools in use, in each cycle. Although there are some passing comments about the organisational outcomes (improvement of performance, etc.) included in the Evaluation sections in Chapter 6, aligned mainly to considering how effective the process is, the main assessment of the business performance impact is provided in section 7.5.2.

## 5.5 Reflection and Reflexivity

“Reflexivity is considered an integral aspect of qualitative research,” (Corlett & Mavin, 2020, p. 377) because the whole point of Action Research is to *evolve* an outcome. Although reflection and reflexivity may be used interchangeably in some cases, reflection can be seen as a more single layer experience. It could be conceived of a sense-making exercise; to understand why something happened or what can be learned; but without, for example, a deeper consideration of the impact on oneself. Reflexivity is more multi-layered and/or considering multiple, perhaps interconnected themes. Corlett and Mavin (2020, p. 377) express reflexivity as “a self-monitoring of, and a self-responding to, our thoughts, feelings and actions as we engage in research projects”, along with questioning our ways of doing the research.

In practice this means not just reflecting on “why an employee said that”, but “how did I feel when they said that”, “why did I feel that”, “how do I think they felt about that and why”, “is it important to me to address this” and “how can I adapt the next cycle of the Action Research cycle to accommodate this”. This difference could be stated as: reflection relates to sense-making of the outside world, whilst reflexivity pertains to making sense of and modifying one’s own evolving understanding and approach both to the outside world and one’s own internal perceptions, or *mind-world*.

This perspective ties in very strongly both with the overall aims of Organisational Development, which include a strong people-focused values-based approach, a behavioural science perspective within an organisational environment (Jamieson & Marshak, 2018, p. 94), the iterative process of Action Research cycles, the use of a Thick Description type approach which requires an interpretive analysis, and the sort of *experience-based* intuition described above.

Because of the interpretation central to this type of project it is important to *pay attention*; “a process of reflection – the ‘*interpretation of interpretation*’ – involving critical self-exploration .... Including the researcher... social, cultural, intellectual, and linguistic traditions” (Corlett & Mavin, 2020, p. 379). “This form of reflexivity entails the researcher attempting to think about their own thinking” (ibid., p. 381).

I have tried to make explicit both my reflection and reflexivity within this thesis, both of which have been central in shaping the application of the Action Research as it has evolved in practice.

Reflection and reflexivity are also relevant *in the moment*. During interactions with employees how I respond, or do not respond, based on my “*in action*” self-questioning, can change the course and hence the outcome of the conversation. This form of “mindful internally-oriented self-regulated

attention” has been shown to correlate with perceived leader authenticity which coupled with “political skill, a form of external self-regulation of behaviours in interaction with employees” (Dietl & Reb, 2021, p. 489) results in perceptions that the leader is genuine and sincere. This leads to “better relations with employees, increased employee satisfaction, work engagement and job performance.” (ibid., p. 474).

## 5.6 Writing the thesis

McNiff and Whitehead (2009, pp. 49-57) point out several aspects that are distinctive about the form of an Action Research report.

Firstly, they caution against presenting the text in a “writerly” form, i.e. written for the ease of the writer, expecting the reader to do the work and to be “a creative thinker who makes meaning of the text”. This is a particular risk for AR where events can simply be narrated. Instead, one should produce a “readerly” report by “writing for their reader”, “providing some kind of framing device, through which they make sense of what they are reading” (ibid. p. 50). I have addressed this throughout via two main devices. Even though Chapter 6 follows a chronological sequence to most clearly demonstrate the AR cycle approach and benefits, I have written in a thematic style. In addition, I have provided reflection, at all stages, to aid sensemaking and to illustrate my own learning journey.

Secondly, McNiff and Whitehead suggest that “deconstruction” (ibid., p. 52) should be used to question assumptions and norms, even to the point of questioning the “reality” of the construction of my own written work. See, for example, the “Other reflections” section under AR cycle#1 in Chapter 6, section 6.4.3.

They also suggest that an “Action Research report communicates the generative transformational capacity of the research” (ibid., p. 55). I have evidenced this aspect both through comment and reflection in the general narrative, and more specifically in Chapters 7 and 8.

To aid in addressing these various criteria, and others relating to maintaining methodological rigour within a narrativised account, the organisation of this thesis is based on the outline contents structure presented by McNiff and Whitehead (2009, pp. 56-57) and guided by the structure of the book that Whitehead and McNiff (2006) wrote as a research report of *their* Action Research into educational research and specifically Action Research.

## 5.7 A note on appraisals and why this project avoids them

Appraisals are widely used in business, especially in larger organisations, but typically only as an annual process, and often seen as “increasingly archaic” (Broadstone, 2021, p. 8). They are intended as a process through which employees’ performance is improved and, of course, come in many flavours as each organisation adapts the concept to suit their needs. I have personally experienced several versions of appraisals, both as an employee and as a manager, and have talked to many others with similar experiences. Typically, at the core of the appraisal, as the name suggests, is an assessment by the manager, of the achievement of the employee against certain pre-agreed objectives, whether these be tasks, behaviours or development criteria. It is also the norm for rewards, either monetary, promotional or any other form of recognition to be directly tied to the appraisal assessment. Even if this is not the case, in my experience, there is frequently a suspicion by employees that it is.

When I started at Lister, in 2010, there were few professional management practices and I decided to implement an appraisal scheme, modelled on the version that had been used, in the main successfully, at my previous employer, Hager. I quickly discovered that, despite having given the people managers careful training in the implementation, the appraisal process caused several problems. Amongst other issues, in a culture that did not yet have an embedded sense of shared target setting and managers who did not have the leadership maturity to segregate personal relationships, strongly valued in a family SME, from individuals’ performance, the assessment of performance was extremely inconsistent. Some managers scored all their staff very harshly and others scored all their staff as almost perfect, and target-setting also ranged from very broad and unmeasurable objectives, to highly specific but often overly influenced by external forces. I removed the practice pending a better approach, also starting to seek more clarity over what exactly I wanted to achieve (which ultimately led to this research project).

This is not to say that appraisal schemes can have no place in personal target setting, managing, or rewarding staff, financially or through promotion or other recognition, but they fulfil a very specific purpose. The “personal reward for performance” element can force the target-setting into a negotiation, rather than being an individual’s aspirational goals (which is much more the case within an engagement discussion setting). They can also limit the flexibility in how a person sets priorities.

Buckingham (2022) links increased resignations (during the pandemic and post-pandemic period) to the fact that jobs can be seen as “stressful, meaningless and unlovable” (ibid., p. 69) and argues that this can be mitigated by following the three key principles of

- the people are the point,
- one size fits one,
- in trust we grow – make trust the foundation of all practices and policies.

Companies that have followed this approach, of “minimising standardisation in performance management tools, and trusting people” to “set their own goals” and “to accomplish goals in the way they see fit” have both improved performance and staff retention (ibid., p. 69). This supports the view that appraisals, at least in the traditional format, are less effective than the type of engagement conversations and bottom-up target setting which has emerged from this research.

Cialdini (2007, pp. 92-93), mentioned in section 3.4.4 concerning engagement as a driver of performance, and an advocate of individuals writing down their commitments to drive achievement, also talks about “the inner choice”. Aside from commitments being “most effective in changing a person’s self-image and future behaviour when they are *active, public and effortful*”, if they are made when “we think we have chosen to perform it in the absence of strong outside pressures” we accept more inner responsibility for the behaviour, making it more powerful and enduring. By avoiding the “pressure” of the appraisal process, there is potentially more likelihood of (self-) selected objectives leading to achieved performance.

## 6 CHAPTER SIX: TAKING ACTION, GATHERING DATA AND GENERATING EVIDENCE (how did the project progress?)

### 6.1 The starting point - Diagnostic (*what data or experiences could I use to demonstrate what the situation was like initially and validate my concerns?*)

To supplement the qualitative explanations of the background, or organisational starting point, given in previous sections, I also sought some more structured data, in two forms.

#### 6.1.1 Output measure

Although I had concerns about the impact of the unusual and extreme external factors during this period causing a dislocation in what might normally be expected to be a correlation between employee performance and business profitability, improving the financial performance of the company was one of the original drivers for the project. There are various ways to express this in relation to employee input (Prowle et al., 2017, p. 29; Philippi, 2020) with material margin per employee cost offering a measure that purports to be translatable across manufacturing and related businesses.

At the beginning of the project, I was only able to access aggregate data, for the whole company, to assess the consistency of this measure, and even so the margin figures and employee costs per month were available only for limited periods due to the accounting procedures previously in place (prior to the implementation of the new K8 computer system).

Figure 11 shows the decline in sales, through 2019, partly in response to Brexit concerns, and then the sudden drop in April 2020 as a result of the Covid pandemic, followed by a partial recovery. The margin data, where available, broadly mirrors this profile, indicating reasonably consistent margin percentages, although we know from experience how much this can be influenced by product mix on a month-to-month basis.

The numerical data is provided in Appendix 4.

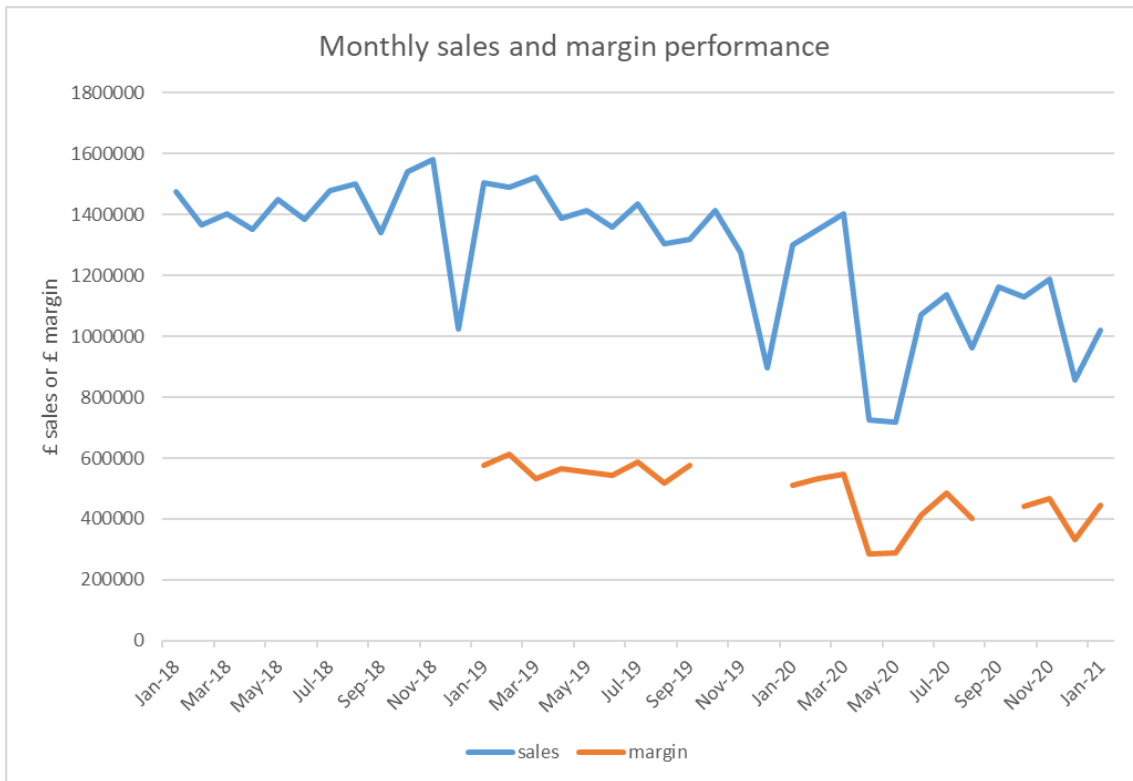


Figure 11: Lister's sales and margin performance Jan18 to Jan21

Figure 12 shows these figures presented as ratios against the number of employees.



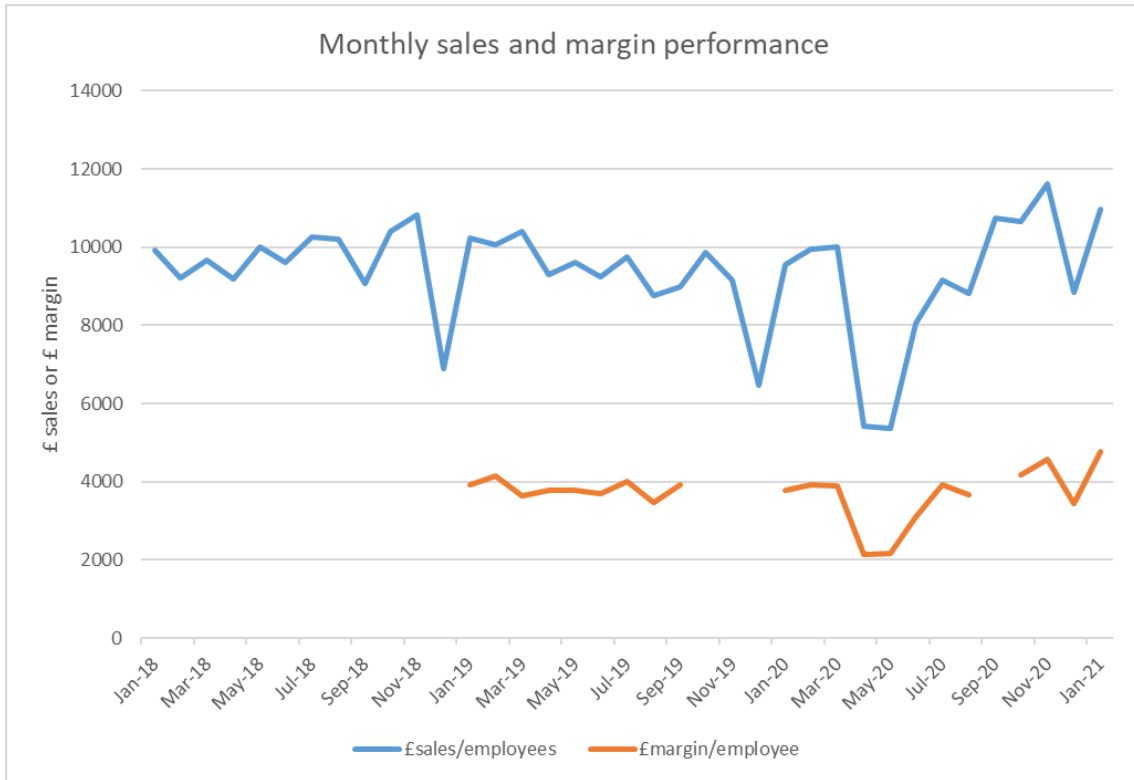


Figure 12: Lister's sales and margin per employee, Jan18 to Jan21

This appears to show some benefit of staff numbers reduction through redundancy, on “productivity” performance, with sales and margin per employee rising towards the end of 2020. One measure, therefore, of the success of this project would be to maintain/hold that gain and, if possible, improve upon it. However, to take into account wage inflation, a more suitable measure, as mentioned above, is material margin per employee cost.

Unfortunately, there is no sales and margin per employee cost data available for the latter part of 2020, and employee costs would, anyway, have been compromised by the impacts of redundancy payments, notice period payments, and furlough payments. Figure 13 shows the data that was recorded.

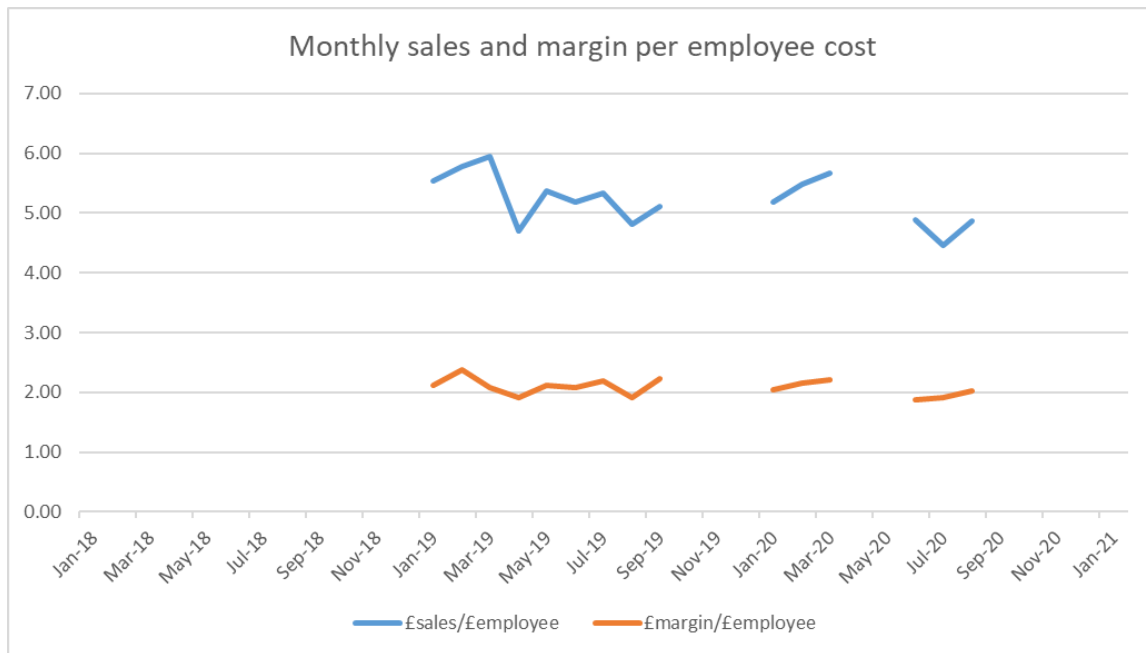


Figure 13: Lister's sales and margin per employee cost, Jan18 to Jan21

I therefore established recording systems to allow me to calculate these measures at a branch level going forward. The results are presented and discussed in section 7.5.2.3.

## 6.1.2 Questionnaire

Because of the challenges associated with using the above output measure, I developed a standardised questionnaire, which allowed some quantification of qualitative data, to act as a baseline. Whilst a useful starting point, I subsequently decided, as explained at the end of this section, that this tool was not suitable for measuring departures from the baseline state at the end of individual cycles and/or at the end of the project. The questionnaire was based around the type of questions that Saks (2006, pp. 617-619) utilised in his study, and those suggested by Hultman (2020, p. 44), but only covering those areas that were evaluated as antecedents of engagement, plus a couple of topical sections related to the effect of the pandemic. In total there were 30 questions scored on a five-point Likert scale.

I distributed 110 questionnaires, in three tranches, over the period October 2020 to May 2021 (overlapping the beginning of the pilot AR cycle). 79 replies were received back (72%). Although the

questionnaire could be returned anonymously, 21 employees either voluntarily added their name, or returned it with other paperwork identifying them.

All the individual, anonymised, responses are detailed in Appendix 2. A summary is presented in figure 14, where each horizontal bar represents the number of responses relating to that question. So, for example, to the question “how hopeful are you that the business will survive the Covid-19 pandemic?”, the majority (around two-thirds) of respondents answered “totally”, with around one-third replying “quite a lot”.



Figure 14: Engagement questionnaire responses summary

Excluding the pandemic questions, and looking only at the engagement antecedent questions, and allocating five points to “totally”, down to one point for “not at all”, we can gain a picture of the extent to which employees perceive that the engagement antecedents are in place. See figure 15.

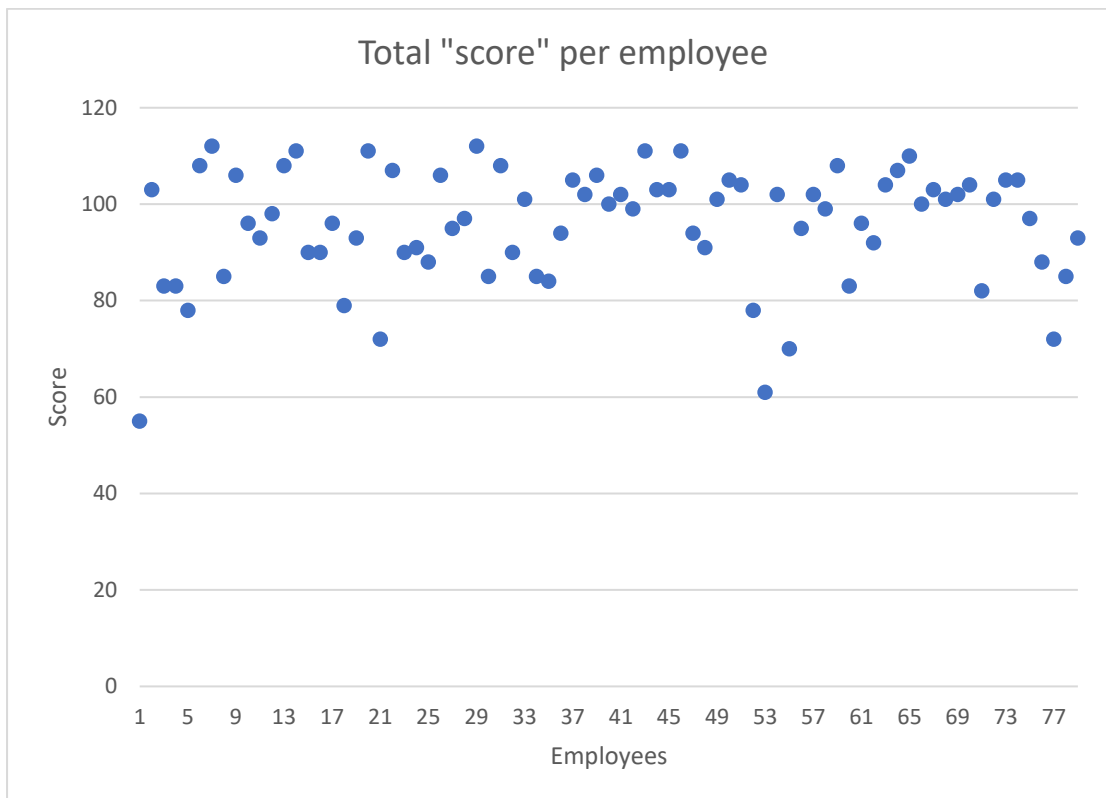


Figure 15: Engagement antecedent question responses - total score by employee

From a maximum total of 115 per person, the average score is 95.8 (83%), with only eight recording scores of less than 80 (70%). The two lowest scores of 55 and 61 come from two employees who I could identify. I knew both to be *difficult* individuals. One subsequently left the business as a result of very poor attendance.

Figure 16 presents the same information as a frequency graph.

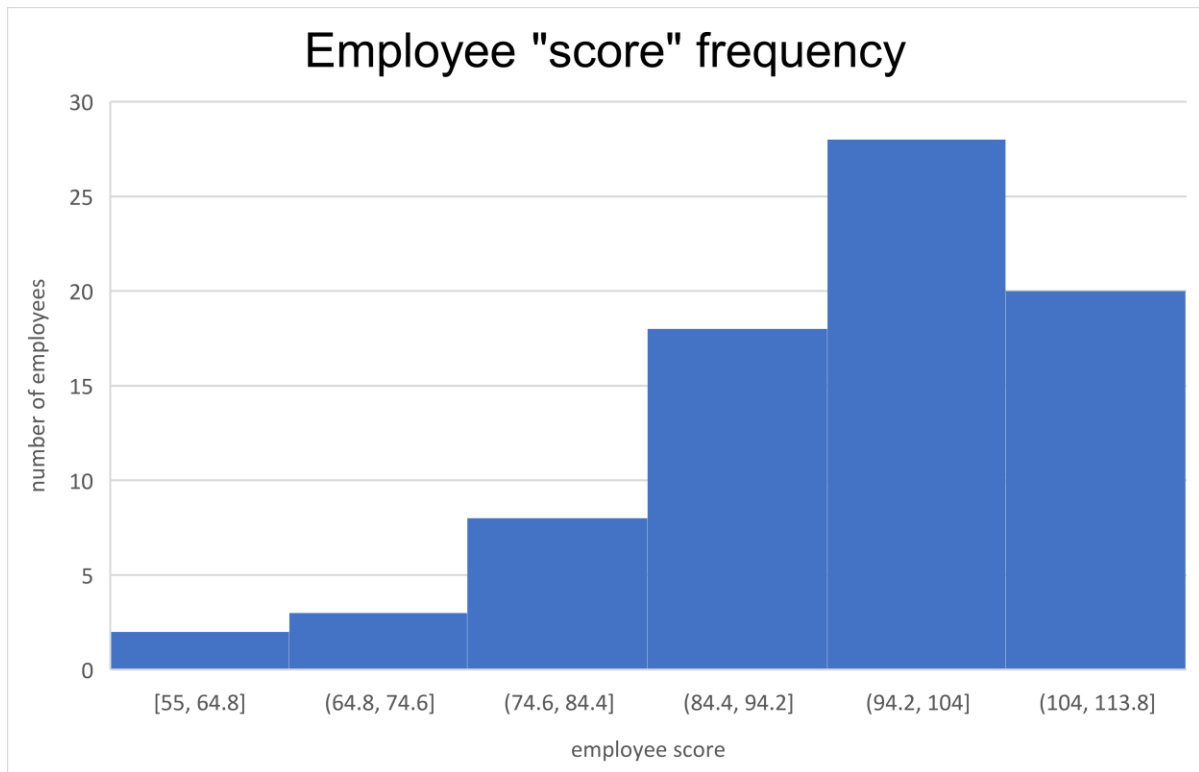


Figure 16: Frequency graph of employee total scores of engagement antecedent question responses

From figures 14, 15 and 16 several points are apparent.

1. The effects of the pandemic did concern people at this stage (although in subsequent meetings employees reflected much less concern than this data indicates, and it progressively became a less frequent topic of conversation). Most importantly there was an almost unanimous view that the company had responded well to the Covid pandemic, and very high levels of hopefulness and confidence that the company would survive the pandemic and thrive thereafter.
2. The overall picture is that broadly, almost all people have ranked most of the antecedents as “totally”, “quite a lot”, or to a much lesser extent “some”. This would imply that they are happy with the company and feel motivated and "engaged".
3. There are two questions where the “not at all” or “a little bit” responses, whilst still a small proportion of the overall responses are more notable, as follows:
  - a. do you feel that you could influence or appeal against procedures if they were being applied incorrectly?
  - b. do you have a way of measuring that? (in relation to “do you have a clear understanding of what a "good day" in terms of achievement is in your job?")

As a result of these findings, I modified some aspects of my original research plans.

1. Although I did ask employees about the effect of the redundancies on their roles, and about their view on the longer-term company prospects (see questions used in the Pilot AR cycle, in the section below), I did not pursue my original plan to further investigate the concept of “hope” or survivor syndrome within this project, because the questionnaire responses in the area were generally high and of low variance. I surmise that aspects of the family business culture, and high levels of communication to employees during the Covid and redundancy stages “support[ed] the value and practice of *resilience* via organization culture and structure” (Caza & Milton, 2011, p. 12) or to put it more simplistically, the questionnaire feedback indicated that there was already “permission” to make redundancies and presumably other *top-down* actions when needed and if well communicated.
2. My focus shifted to be less around how to engage employees, since they already seemed to view themselves as such, and more on how to refine that and then understand what they were engaged *with* and to help them align that with the company objectives.
3. I also needed to explore what concerns they might have, especially around fairness of the use of company procedures (by management).

I also decided not to issue further questionnaires. This was based on three reasons.

1. As discussed, the rankings on the first questionnaire were generally high so that any improvement variation would be unlikely to be statistically significant.
2. As explained below, I used a similar set of questions to structure the meetings/interviews, thus effectively performing a verbal questionnaire, but extracting much more contextual and qualitative data.
3. Due to a combination of the initial challenges of conducting face-to-face meetings, and the number of meetings that I held with each employee, resulting in the decision to base the project analysis on one third of staff, it would not be possible to match the initial anonymous questionnaires to the ultimate participants, thus rendering further questionnaires incomparable.

### 6.1.3 Observations

In addition to the questionnaire responses, at around the same time as they were being sent out, in late 2020, I was also consciously noting comments and the demeanour of staff, to feed into my assessment of our starting point. The following examples help to set the scene.

#### *Some trauma was evident*

At this time, while we still had some people on furlough, we were announcing the final stages of the redundancy program, but business volumes were recovering slightly. This put considerable workload on those staff who were at work. For example, one extremely conscientious delivery driver felt the stress so badly of not being able to complete the full workload, despite having been reassured multiple times that we all understood that he could only do his best in these very difficult circumstances, that he ended up being signed off work by his GP. He then felt even worse about letting us down that he begged to come back to work despite the doctor's advice. We insisted that he take some time to recover, unfurloughing someone else to help cover. When he did return to work, we had to carefully plan his load to be achievable. This, of course, put more work onto his manager. There were at least two managers who were similarly struggling with the challenges of running the business during this stressful time, with more awareness perhaps of the need to get sales back to a suitable level before furlough ended. Again, a lot of reassurance by me and other senior managers, whilst all of us were just as unsure what the future held, was needed to "steady the ship". These, of course, were just the ones of which I was aware but, certainly during the very early stages of recovery from Covid, reinforced the need to be aware of any "trauma" issues within the business, in line with research goal number 5 – although in practice this was limited to a very small number of individuals.

#### *Commitment driven by external forces*

Underlining these more extreme forms of concern for the business and doing the job well, was a generally very high level of support from all staff, with many taking on additional small tasks, often of their own initiative, left undone by furloughed or redundant colleagues. My reflection on this, informed by the occasional comment that I heard, was that this behaviour could be due to at least one or two causes. Firstly, we had retained the best people through the redundancies, so the "average" had risen, and within a good group there will not be any ridicule for doing a *bit extra* for the company. Secondly, many staff felt very grateful for how they had been treated through the pandemic and wanted to be as helpful as possible. Finally, there may have been some people who felt very

concerned and wanted to do anything to keep their jobs. A concern on the second (and to some extent the third) point was whether this would wear off, and what could we do to maintain this. Obviously, the engagement project should play a significant part as well as other ad hoc activities such as the 10 fabric washable face masks per employee that we sourced and distributed for employees' and their families' personal use in August 2020, at a time when such items were difficult to acquire.

### *Importance of communication*

On the other hand, I received feedback from one of the managers that there were questions at the main Smethwick branch asking if the toilet cleaning would be an ongoing requirement for staff. The comment was that lots of companies were re-recruiting cleaners (although I doubted that applied to manufacturing companies at the time) and *the staff felt like they were not being told*. He also said that there was a feeling that we had them "over a barrel"; they had to clean the toilets because everyone is *afraid for their jobs*. I did not know exactly which staff had raised these concerns, although I knew them well enough to have my suspicions. Over the next few days, I spoke with all the staff in the relevant areas, sometimes as groups, sometimes singularly, in an informal way, to ensure that they all understood the situation. I explained that *probably* we would recruit cleaners again at some point (which we ultimately did), but that my priority was to keep us all in jobs, and the time was not right to add further cost back into the business. *Everyone* responded very positively. Some said they really did not like having to do it, but understood that right now it was a necessity, and thanked me for the update on the situation. My impression was that this simple conversation contributed to a positive engagement impact, reinforcing, yet again, the importance of communication.

### *Directive management may be necessary in some circumstances*

At one of the branches an employee's daughter tested Covid positive so we asked the employee to work from home for two weeks. Another employee was on holiday for the same period, leaving the branch manager on his own. At this point trying to shuffle other employees around to provide support to him was a real challenge. The General Manager of the division came up with a plan to move the manager from another 3-person branch there to support. This would mean there were two employees at each branch. The second branch manager immediately protested and tried to offer reasons/excuses why he should not go, but one of his staff should be transferred instead. However, the reason that the General Manager had insisted on this arrangement was so that there would be at least one person at each branch who was effective at the more physical aspects of the role; the branch manager at the first branch, and the remaining employee at the second branch. The second branch manager was much better suited to administration tasks.



Once the confrontation began the General Manager began to question his own decision. I said to him, “You’ve made the decision, for good reason, stick to it”.

This felt like a good example of how, especially with low resources, and tough times, the management style may have to be directive rather than consultative, which begs the question, “How does that fit with staff engagement?” Possibly once you reach the fully engaged stage, with the right people, you don’t need to use directive management, but to get there, in a post-Covid, low staff level world, where you need to make sure everyone is working hard, perhaps you do. Part of the issue (for example, we had one driver whose performance was too low) is that employees may not even be aware how their performance compares with others or versus expectation. It may be necessary to remain quite “firm” whilst establishing those measures – and then get everyone to create a shared culture where those that do not perform do not fit. However, although we stuck with the General Manager’s decision in this case, both he and I, despite what I had said to him, felt uncomfortable with it.

This slightly modified my view of research goal 6, detailed in section 4.1, concerning whether one should change the management approach due to business conditions (Kerber & Buono, 2018) to be more based around;

*“Our intent is to avoid changing management style, and always be as much to the collaborative end as possible, because this fits with our aims and values. However, we had already seen during the redundancy process that we had to force down directives from Directors to GMs and from them to managers to make it happen. As we remain in survival, or at best recovery mode, is it possible to avoid being forced to stay at the directive end?”*

## 6.2 The research plan and process - Design

To implement the qualitative methodology, involving Action Research and Thick Description, described in Chapter 5, the following Action Research cycles were undertaken. In practice, each Action Research cycle informed the process of the next cycle, with some aspects of the incorporated in order to improve the next stage. At each cycle I have used a new group of employees, both to spread the impact as quickly as possible within the company (to help respond to external events) and to assess how improvements to the process are perceived by those being involved for the first time. Ultimately the refined process will be re-utilised with the previous cohorts. This section provides an overview,

with the remainder of this chapter dedicated to a detailed description of the Action Research cycles and findings.

### ***Pilot cycle***

This was performed with a small group of employees at a time when Covid concerns were very high and we were either strictly observing social distancing, or even having discussions via phone or Teams. I used the original questionnaire as a guide for questions to ask to prompt discussion. This cycle was aborted early, after only single meetings with six employees, due to Covid restrictions, but nevertheless generated some learning points taken through into subsequent cycles.

### ***Cycle #1***

This was the first substantive Action Research cycle where thirteen individuals were met with on multiple occasions, utilising a structured and expanded set of questions, mainly via Teams. The first tool, Sales Blackbox, was developed and introduced to assist in understanding the idea of what inputs can create certain outcomes.

### ***Cycle #2***

Nine staff (including five from the Pilot cycle) were involved in this cycle, with meetings back to being physical, which was much easier and felt more productive. By this stage the meetings had evolved into two parts. The first part involved discussing aspects related to engagement antecedents and addressing any perceived barriers. The second part was about how engagement could be aligned to the needs of the business. To support this, a tool called Job Focus Chart (JFC), the concept of which arose from discussions during the previous cycle, and which built on and replaced the Sales Blackbox tool, was used.

### ***Cycle #3***

This cycle involved a further seventeen staff. A further tool, the Engagement Support Chart (ESC), was introduced and developed, as a precursor to the JFC. The ESC invited employees to provide a score against ten questions/areas and then, in the meeting, to discuss their reasons. This strengthened and systematised the engagement antecedent discussions.

This brought the total of staff involved in to 39 people, and 100 direct structured and documented conversations.

In terms of measurement, although I began with a questionnaire, and measured scores, I have moved during the process to relying much more on a qualitative approach to assess engagement. Where I have deemed measurement to be useful it has been in trying to find some numerical assessment of the qualitative data e.g. word frequency, or number of issues raised. This heightened focus on the qualitative aspect reflects the very early realisation of the extreme importance of individual (and bespoke) conversations with each employee.

## 6.3 The pilot AR cycle

### 6.3.1 Diagnosis

Following from the overall diagnosis above I chose to begin the AR process with staff based at one of the branches where, potentially, any benefits would be more attributable.

### 6.3.2 Planning/Design

The initial interviews were intended to be just that: interviews. I was simply seeking to begin understanding what people were concerned with, whether the antecedents of engagement were in place, and whether employees understood what “good” performance meant in their role. At this point I had not formed a coherent view on how to move from any of those answers towards generating engagement, if indeed that was needed, other than perhaps addressing any immediately obvious company shortfalls.

At this point in the research process, I was exploring how to develop the meetings and simply had a set of “prompts”, to keep the conversation going, that were largely restatements of certain topics from the questionnaire, all focused on engagement “antecedents”, and refined following analysis of the questionnaire responses. These included:

- What do you perceive to be your role in the company?
- What does the company stand for?
- Do you feel engaged and part of the company?
- How has the redundancy process impacted you?
- What is your view on the longer term for the company?
- Do you have any concerns about how the company operates or the way you are treated by me or the company?
- What is your understanding of your job – how do you know what to do each day?
- Do you have clarity over how the things that you are doing fit within the companies aims?
- What measures do you have for your job – how would you define a good day or a bad day?

Within the first one or two meetings, which is why I include the comment here in the planning section, I realised that the conversations themselves were a critical part of the engagement process. Simply by being given the time and space, and a listening ear, employees reacted positively and engaged with, at a minimum, the process, if not their wider role.

One example was one of the general managers starting to talk to me about his desire to grow the business and specifically by visiting current and prospective customers. His role had been primarily customer reactive up to this point and this was the first occasion in which he expressly suggested effectively becoming an external salesman. It took two years and the recruitment and training of additional staff before we were able to free him up sufficiently from all his other duties to allow this transition. On his very first customer visit in his modified role, he uncovered an additional £100,000 business opportunity. This directly resulted from the initial in-depth *engagement* discussion!

During these meetings I was very conscious to be in listening mode (rather than telling mode) and to suspend, as much as possible, my own impulses and judgement, utilising some of the Dialogue (Bohm et al., 1991) approaches, even though this was a very small group of two or three people. As the meetings progressed, it was sometimes necessary to explain or expand on certain topics and I tried to develop and practice the skill of balancing inquiry and advocacy (Senge, 1990, pp. 198-202). This moved the style somewhat away from Dialogue, which is deliberately not task-focused, and away from the egalitarian *community of inquiry* approach (Torbert, 1976 and 1989) which, incidentally, Torbert admits (1976, p. 176) was only partially successful. It was necessary, with all the conversations, to keep them moving, by providing some element of top-down guidance, at least through controlling the direction of the discussion through questioning.

Progressively I came to see these sessions as a blend between active listening, coaching and some mentoring.

*Note: In the following descriptions of interviews, conversations and observations, all employees' names (and in some cases gender) have been changed, and wherever possible other details that would identify them have been removed or modified to preserve anonymity. Original recordings and notes will be retained securely by me only for as long as needed for the completion of this work.*

### 6.3.3 Implementation and findings

Obviously, although all the interviews are interesting, there is no merit in relating all of them word for word. I have generated evidence by a combination of analysing their content in various ways and by extracting vignettes which illustrate key points.

The Covid situation played a large part in some of the initial interviews. The first interview I held was with Adam, a manager with whom I had worked for ten years and who was, at the time, at home shielding. He was on flexi-furlough, working a few hours a week, providing guidance on quoting or other matters to colleagues, via phone and email. We had our conversation via Teams.

I had chosen Adam as the first interviewee because I knew him fairly well, and felt that we had a good relationship, although I knew him to be quite forthright. I hoped that, as I found my feet with the process, this discussion would not be too “difficult” but still content rich.

When the call began, I asked Adam whether he had received the initial questionnaire which I had emailed him the previous day. He said that he had not. At that moment someone appeared outside my office, and I took a moment to deal with that. When I got back to the screen Adam said that he had found the email now. He was clearly embarrassed with himself, “How the hell did I miss that?”, saying that he had checked through all his emails that morning. He was quite happy to give me his answers “live” even though it would normally be anonymous.

I reflected afterwards that the fact that he had missed the email had broken the ice and put *me* at *my* ease. Although perhaps obvious, a task in all future meetings would be to put the interviewee at *their* ease to ensure the best communication.

We went through the questionnaire and his answers were all positive and typical of the analysis shown previously.

I then moved on to using the “prompts” detailed above. These worked reasonably well in this conversation, probably because Adam had clearly had time whilst at home to be thinking about his job, even before I raised these points. There were two other specific exchanges in this discussion worth mentioning because they both feed into the development of the Action Research process.

When I asked Adam if he had any concerns about how he was treated, he paused for a moment and smiled at me, “No. I mean it's funny you should be asking this question in this situation. If it had been in a different situation, you know, it might not have been the same, but the way you've looked after me through the furlough, the way it has just been to support me – that has been great”.

I was a little perturbed by why he might have had a different view. I was nervous about what the answer might be, and whether I would open a “can of worms” by querying it, instead of just taking the compliment. However, in that split second, I made the decision, that has carried through into all the other meetings, to take the risk of opening up a difficult conversation. In this case the answer was “Well, the situation has proven what you have always said, if you know what I mean. You’ve always said we will look after you. Now you’ve actually done it!”. I knew that he was referring to the fact that we had continued to provide full pay whilst he had been shielding, and that I had refused to allow him to take any risks by coming into work, even though he had wanted to, when the guidelines had been somewhat unclear. Adam was normally quite reserved in his praise, sometimes even verging on critical, so the positive words and warm manner in which he spoke them was noteworthy.

What this interchange reinforced was the absolute importance of living up to promises, even implied promises. It set the tone for the very positive conversation, and outcomes that followed. It is my belief that the fact that we had supported him on this personal level, *and then* had this *engagement* conversation about it was the beginning of a very positive change.

The second topic we began to discuss was what Adam would focus on when he was able to return to work. He proposed to develop a full training plan for his team. This is something that had previously been subjugated to output focused activity. Although, for reasons discussed below, I did not hold another Action Research specific meeting with Adam for some time, this conversation was the starting point for the development and implementation of an extensive training program, and ultimately the complete reorganisation of this division, generating considerable business benefits.

This “opening up” of ideas by allowing people to explore possibilities in their job, without always being focused on a particular immediate target, is the second main learning point that I took from this first interview.

The second meeting was also with a manager who I had worked with closely for ten years. I knew that this meeting would be “easy” as we had frequently discussed related matters and I knew that this individual was a real advocate of me and the other directors versus the more dictatorial style that had previously been in place. The most important point that I took from this first meeting, in a positive response to the question about any concerns over the way the company operates and treats people, was a comment that “I work for people, and I work with people. I don't work for James Lister; I work for Peter Davies”. This interviewee also mentioned trust (in me), twice, unprompted, both from themselves and other employees.

That reinforces the critical role of managers/supervisors in the engagement process, but also the need to systematise the approach to engagement to avoid dependence on individual personalities.

The third manager meeting was similarly positive. He specifically highlighted the importance of culture, as something that he believes sets us apart from our competitors, “It’s a friendly atmosphere. We all like coming here. There’s always time to have a chat and catch up with what we did last night. There’s obviously a lot of laughing and joking because it takes some of the pressure off you because it is a stressful environment”, “nice atmosphere and help everyone out”. He also made the point that even though the company was still in survival mode at that stage that he saw that as a positive because the team had really “stepped up to the plate” and that it was a really good way of finding out who is committed.

I then met with another three interviewees at this location. These were physical meetings – we did not have the availability for Teams meetings with them. These were all positive meetings, but because at the time the country was still operating under “social distancing” arrangements I began to feel uncomfortable about sitting in a room, albeit more than two metres apart, for over an hour, for a “non-essential” purpose. Although I had only had the first meeting with each person, of what was intended to be a series, I decided to bring this pilot phase to a close, evaluate what had been achieved and learnt, and feed this into the next AR cycle.

#### 6.3.4 Evaluation

These pilot meetings were a very useful introduction to holding open, explorative discussions of a form that I had not previously undertaken. In all cases they were positive, and there were comments or indications that the individuals did seem *engaged*. There were a few specific points that emerged:

- It is important to keep promises and to build trust
- Some people are motivated to work for people, rather than “the company”
- The very fact of having these open discussions appeared to provoke positive reactions
- There is value in inviting employees to explore possibilities in their job
- Culture is important
- Having some company direction (from above) helps focus, i.e. the clarity of “why?” (Sinek, 2009, p. 65) can create inspiration over and above motivation (ibid, p. 102)



Obviously, these are single data points, but all six sessions reinforced these perceptions, as well as the importance of developing an engagement *process* that would strengthen the interaction and the understanding of all managers and supervisors of the importance of these issues.

It was also the case that five out of the six found describing any output measures for their job quite challenging. One described the pure sales figure output as his measure but, when challenged to think a little more, talked about having a happy team, that margin is more appropriate than sales figures, and that looking after loyal customers is important. Happiness may be difficult to measure, but margin and customer retention are clearly important and quantifiable.

However, I also realised that I needed a more structured, granular set of questions, to allow comparison between employees' responses, and to delve a little more deeply, and to get *them* to think about factors that may underpin engagement, ready for the second session which would consider personal performance measures.

From a personal perspective I had also come to realise the enormity of trying to transcribe recorded sessions. The redundancies meant that I had taken on more previously delegated business tasks myself, whilst Covid changing regulations and staff/family infections resulted in me being involved in constant staff resource reorganisation, added to which supply chain shortages caused further challenges.

## 6.4 AR cycle #1

### 6.4.1 Diagnosis

At this point I realised that the evaluation from the pilot AR cycle effectively formed the diagnosis for AR cycle #1. These chained AR cycles, as part of a larger overall AR project, provide the benefit of a rapid evolution during a research project. In future cycles the diagnosis phase is assumed as inherent within the previous cycle's evaluation.

Figure 17 illustrates this approach, which is a development from the classic portrayal of chained Action Research cycles presented by Coghlan and Brannick (2014, p. 11), and others, shown in section 5.4.3.

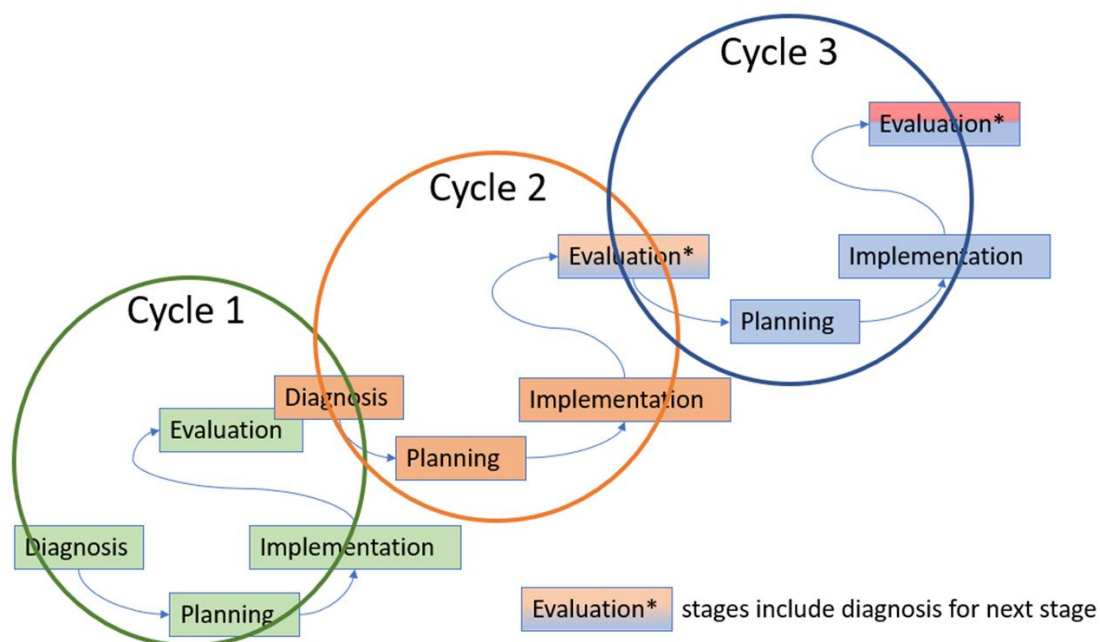


Figure 17: Chained AR cycles with Diagnosis stage integrated into Evaluation stage

### 6.4.2 Planning/Design

Addressing the need for more granularity, I expanded the original nine prompts to sixteen questions, grouped into three areas around:

- Engagement – does the employee understand the company aims, feel connected to them and see how their role contributes to them?

- Concerns – how does the employee feel about the redundancy and Covid situation, or the future prospects and how they are treated?
- Effectiveness – how does the employee know what to work/focus on and how would they measure their own performance?

Please refer to Appendix 3 for the full question text.

By putting these into the left-hand column of a spreadsheet, I planned to type comments in directly. The spelling may not be perfect, but I would capture nearly all the interactions “live”. Recordings would still be retained for checking purposes, and to listen back to for any nuances of expression. This approach would also allow comments from different interviewees to be compared side by side, one person per column.

To minimise the risk of Covid transmission I chose the employees for this next group on the basis that I could conduct interviews with them via Microsoft Teams. At this stage the use of Teams within the company was still relatively new, and availability was limited to certain individuals who had computers with microphones and cameras, which were difficult to source because of supply chain challenges. I therefore began with a group of six external sales staff, including their manager, who had laptops and were working from home.

### 6.4.3 Implementation and findings

I met with the manager, one of my direct reports, individually a total of six times, with him acting both as a subject to the process, but also as a collaborator in trying to develop the process to make it more effective. For the meetings with the other staff the first meeting was a one-to-one between me and them, but for subsequent meetings I told them that their manager would also be on the call. I pursued this approach, which I followed throughout the entire AR project, as the best compromise that I could envisage between gaining the direct feedback from staff and giving them freedom to comment on their own line manager or the company situation, in an open way, during the first meeting, whilst not undermining the manager’s involvement, or knowledge, in the development of their staff or interpersonal relationship.

There were several positive aspects to these meetings explained below.

### *Employees' views on the redundancies*

A couple of individuals did comment that the redundancy period had been a concerning time for them, but everyone said how fair the process had been, that they thought the company had acted correctly and that it was clear that the redundancies were fully necessary. A couple stated how much better it was now that certain individuals had left the business. My impression from these discussions was that there was no evidence of any "survivor syndrome", as discussed in section 3.4.6.

### *The reported positive impact from employees of simply having a discussion*

The following comments were received as to feedback on the first meeting in response to the question - *what did you think about the discussion while we were having it?*

- Manager - "extremely comfortable - thought provoking and positive. First one-to-one opportunity for some time. Really nice. Motivating. Thought provoking."
- Reece - "loved it, breath of fresh air. Really nice to have a voice and be listened to. The content was definitely relevant."
- Sid – "Good, talked about good stuff. Not every day you get a one-to-one with the CEO, with no interruption."

In response to - *what could I do better when I have first sessions like that with other staff?*

- Manager – "A good foundation - good open questions - give people time to answer - let them be frank. Open and honest - different with some who are less forthcoming. Can imagine some can be at unease. Bit like a sales guy with two ears and one mouth. Don't apologise for the questions you are asking."
- Sid – "No [nothing] - laid foundation..... came away feeling positive. You said you would follow up and you have!"
- Donald – "Conversations are good and communication. You are good at that, putting over your drive - both of you [Peter and Manager] are good leaders....., you're like our teachers."

These comments, and other similar ones, all confirmed the idea that talking to employees at least opens the possibility to create engagement. There were no negative comments on the process, although some concerns were raised about support from other areas of the business. I was pleased

that those comments were made, since it indicated that they felt “safe” to raise criticism about the business and other operational areas for which I am ultimately responsible.

By the time we got to the third meetings a couple of the team were specifically expressing how comfortable they felt about the level of support they were receiving, directly through this type of meeting “knowing that the support is there - I always feel that you are the guy at the top, but you have said your door is always open.”

### *Development of Sales Black Box and why needed*

After initial meetings with the manager, and then with the other team members, where all were positive and spoke in an enthusiastic manner, it was clear that there was a problem. They all, in various ways, reported wanting to achieve the goals of the company, but struggled to express how they decided what action to take to achieve profitable growth. When asked how they knew what to focus on each day, or how they would measure things that they could affect, many of the comments could be regarded as *hopeful*,

- “We all know our own strengths and weaknesses and each other’s - can support each other”
- “For the sales growth and Lister can't sit still. Need more accounts, and even more important is the margin - trick is to get the balance and then to get the repeat business”
- “If I pick up any sense of what I can attack. Even getting all your deliveries out is a good day. Bad day when you don't want to go to work”
- “By growing - more sales or more customers or both”

Some comments were more aligned with activity, but there was still very little in the way of connecting activity with planned achievement

- “Contacting existing [customers] and promoting new products, knock new doors, revisit before they go cold, follow up decliners”
- “Engagement with customers (even if he says go away), interaction with customer, enquiry, samples required, ... following chain from engagement to order.”
- “More emailing, focus more on a couple of target/key accounts”

I began talking during these early meetings about how they might know whether they had had a good day or a bad day to try to guide understanding of what they should focus on. What I *meant* was a good day would be ensuring sufficient time and effort spent on the right activities, with a suitable

measure in place, whilst a bad day would be where they had been diverted away from these future making actions. Understandably, in hindsight, good day/bad day was interpreted by the sales representatives as referring to the final achievements, e.g., the “getting all your deliveries out” example from above. As an example of *reflection in action* I began talking about inputs and outcomes during one of the sessions, and about the concept of a black box, where you can only directly control your inputs, but if you keep doing enough of the right things eventually the outcomes you want will emerge (and if they do not it means you need to adjust your inputs). Outcomes bore some resemblance to Intel’s Objectives and Key Results, OKRs, (Doerr, 2018).

I developed an image, which I called the Sales Black Box, shown in figure 18, to illustrate this.

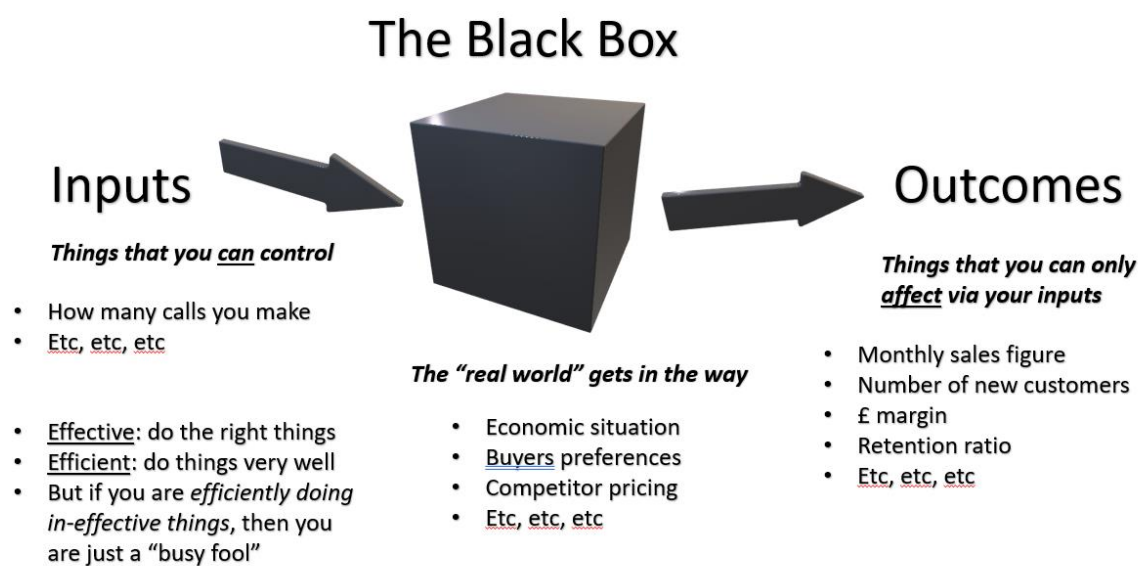


Figure 18: The sales “black box”

Sharing this image was very beneficial with certain individuals who had found it difficult to grasp the concept of really planning what to do in order to achieve the desired objectives.

From Terry – “I took more from second meeting than the first. I’ve been a busy bee. Inputs and outputs make sense when it is drilled home to you. I perhaps spoke more than I should have done, should have listened more.... I’ve put some data together to understand for rest of the year. 80/20 rule in front of customer; 80 listening 20 speaking.”

Terry had also picked up the importance of working on the right things, and had recognised that he still needed to clarify his approach, “Not been able to put into practice yet, but effective = efficiency?, not got an answer”.

With Donald, there was a slightly different challenge. He had such a positive view about everything that it was difficult to get him to appreciate that there could be ways to look for improvement. At the end of the first meeting, we had asked him to think about what inputs he should focus on in order to win substantially more business for his portfolio. His response, in the second meeting, was to start talking about how good he was at making a sales call with a prospect, rather than the more practical issue of making enough prospect calls. I explained to him that I valued his positivity but wanted to get under that to talk about some of the detail of how he operates. I explained again about inputs, because it seemed that he had not thought about them properly at all. I shared the black box picture which helped his understanding, with examples of why measuring inputs matters (so that he could challenge his own performance and look for improvements etc).

#### *Case Study : Impact on motivation of a specific individual, and using that to drive improvement*

When I had the first meeting with Reece it was only a few months since, because of the structural changes resulting from the Covid pandemic, he had had his “home” branch closed and he was now linked to our “head office” location, although still serving the same customer base and territory. I was aware from feedback from both the sales and operations general managers that this had caused some issues and that he was very disgruntled about the arrangements. They reminded me that there had been previous challenges with Reece having overly high expectations of the support that he would receive from the office. Now that he did not get the support he needed (in his perception) or was less able to monopolise staff (in their perception) they both considered that he was becoming quite challenging to manage. This was not helped by the fact that we had continued our policy, at this stage, of limiting physical visits into the offices by our external sales staff to minimise Covid infection risk.

My personal relationship with Reece, a seven-year tenure employee by this time, whose recruitment interviews I had originally been involved in, had always been cordial, although largely limited to sales team meetings.

At the first meeting, conducted by Teams, with just Reece and I involved, we were in our respective homes. I commented how cold it was, and he told me he had two pairs of socks on, the heating on

and the fire on. That established a comfortable opening and I explained that we were just going to have a general chat to begin with.

Using the standard format of my 16 questions, I began by asking if he was aware of the aims of the Company and felt that he understood them. He said yes but almost immediately said that it was useful to get an update. He confirmed that he had received a copy of the Project 2025 booklet but had not seen the wallchart summary version and used the branch closure as an excuse for having not seen it. Interestingly, I knew that there had been a copy of it on the wall in the branch office, that he had previously used, for many months.

When he did elaborate on what he understood the company goals to be, his answer was that it was all around growth, margin, and family spirit. He characterised the family element as being that we all care for each other and going the extra mile. Whilst these are relevant components of our company Project 2025, and it was promising that he could at least identify these if not express them more deeply, they are quite high level and omit two of the other main criteria of Service Excellence and Performance Culture.

His description of his own role, as an external salesperson, was quite superficial. He discussed meeting new customers, attempting to make a positive first impression, and having the perseverance to call repeatedly. Although he mentioned selling features and benefits, he was not able to articulate what these were or how they connected to the overall Company. Despite many discussions in sales meetings about a robust sales process and external sales training that he had attended, his description of a “typical” day and how he knew what to work on was quite haphazard. He mentioned some very lonely days when he had driven from call to call, and customers/prospects had refused to see him. He even described on alternate weeks working on his smallest customers, even those that only spend £10. This indicated that Reece was not following the approach that I knew his manager had requested, or indeed good sales practice – he was not preplanning and arranging calls, and he was not qualifying them before spending time travelling to them. A good day for him was when “[someone from our] office says have you been into so-and-so because they've ordered”, rather than him having achieved a suitable call rate on qualified customers.

This presented somewhat of a dilemma for me because I felt that if I began to criticise his activities it may damage any rapport which might limit the engagement building process and any ultimate benefits, but it was also clear that his practical approach needed to be modified for him to be effective.

On reflection, from this meeting and similar comments during other meetings, I concluded that



1. A wallchart is “wallpaper” – in other words most people do not read them with any depth and very soon they become so much a normal part of the décor that people would not even be able to say what topic they cover, much as most people would not be able to describe the wallpaper, or even the colour, in their own home.
2. Many people seem to not internalise company aims unless they are “forced” on them in some way, preferably by connecting them to their own experience and job.
3. Even with some clarity on the overall aims there needs to be a clear focus on how they can be achieved – what qualifies as effective activity (a “good” day).

In the evaluation stage of this AR cycle these latter two ideas fed into the design of a tool (the Job Focus Chart) to directly link an employee’s job with their understanding of the aims.

Nevertheless, Reece did express a positivity towards the Company, particularly citing how we had kept people safe through Covid, kept the business afloat (thus protecting jobs) and had been honest throughout. His general view on being connected and engaged with the aims of the Company was their importance as a guide to keep everyone working together.

When we spoke about the Company response to Covid and the impact on his job, he expressed true gratitude that he still had his job, but some frustrations with the performance of the internal staff, at the head office branch, began to emerge. He said that the systems “needed a few tweaks..... many years old now and it has grown in volume.... [they] are still trying to work the old way”.

Related to this he also made the first comment on his perception of the benefit of the meetings that I was having with staff, “these conversations are massive, Pete – you just speaking to everybody – no money involved”.

We closed the first meeting with me asking Reece to think about input and output measures, and how he might plan and track his activities.

When we met again, three weeks later, again on Teams, Reece’s manager Robert was also on the call.

I started by asking Reece what his thoughts had been about the discussion last time, while we were having it. He replied “loved it, breath of fresh air - really nice to have a voice and be listened to. Content definitely relevant”

When I, and Robert, asked him if he had had any further thoughts or if it had changed his approach, he raised again concerns about the systems and approach in place at our head office branch. He felt that there were bottlenecks and blockages, insufficient stock and disconnects between him and the office staff, including a lot more people involved. When we asked him for details, he just described it

as “strangled by our own systems” and said that this was something he had to accept and “get his head around”. His manner was friendly but frustrated, as though he was doing everything correctly, but was being hampered by others. Robert assured him that, apart from there being more people, the service levels should be just as high as at a branch and that we would work to address any of these concerns if he provided specifics.

In terms of outcomes, Reece described trying to win business from existing customers by filling in the whitespace (the term we use for gaps in the range that a customer takes from us). He described even winning a small order like this as being very significant and, after a little pushing, suggested that a target would be two new pieces of business like this per month with a minimum value of £500 each.

I was quite concerned that his aspirations were so low, especially compared to the aims that we had previously discussed in sales meetings, of growing each rep territory by more than five times that figure. However, I took the view that I would not create a potential conflict at this stage since, if we could develop a forward direction, then we could build from there. This was also part of “testing” the level of top-down versus bottom-up direction needed to gain alignment.

When I asked Reece what inputs he had in mind to achieve this growth his response was somewhat limited. He suggested that he would do more emailing to customers, focus more on a couple of specific target/key accounts and do more calls in a specific geographic territory, Coventry, where he had not been focusing.

I left Reece with the task to list the key activities that he undertakes to try to drive new business acquisition and set himself some targets against them.

After the meeting I reflected that having Robert involved in the meeting had both positive and negative aspects. I lost a little of the direct connection, but in many senses the conversation felt more “joined up” having the line manager there, who is inevitably closer to the practical issues. In addition, Robert had a consultative management style, similar to my own, so Reece seemed quite at ease and willing to be very open in his comments. Whether this would persist with other line managers remained to be seen, but in practice has proven to be the case.

In both this meeting, and one that we held with Sid immediately preceding it, I felt somewhat disappointed by the difficulty in getting them to think about actual numerical targets for the input measures. It seems unlikely that that was solely because they are afraid to commit, since both Robert and I made it clear that these measures are for them alone and there would be no comparison with others. Alternatively, perhaps it was because of lack of understanding, and I needed to be more specific in my requirements. I had been trying to avoid being too prescriptive, but I now considered

that so long as I was not top-down imposing the measures or the numbers, specifying the format may be the most appropriate way forward.

The following day I spoke again to Robert to gain his reflections. In comparing the meeting with Reece to that with Sid he said “Equally as good but for different reasons. He is not driven so much by measurement and goals, but in terms of guidance the relationship drives the end game in a different manner. He emailed me last night and said, ‘that was real, really enjoyed it - really happy! Something’s changed!’. He is being taken seriously – sees that people are listening to him - active part of the engagement and making things happen - feeling loved.”

At our third meeting, just over a week later, again via Teams, it was immediately clear that Reece had given the approach some serious thought. He explained, in a very animated way, with lots of hand gestures, how his inputs would be a combination of making phone calls and sending emails, underpinned by using the whitespace analysis (that is provided to him monthly) and by doing any relevant fact finding. He was also very excited about using a report that we had recently introduced that showed, daily, what quotes had been sent out from the office. Reece was planning to take a couple of them, especially linked to any of his targeted accounts, and follow them up directly. Despite his previous concerns about lack of support from the sales office, he was now much more positive, also discussing communicating with them to follow up any enquiries that had not actually been converted into quotes.

Where his description was still lacking was in how he would know whether he had done enough of any of these activities. I gave him the analogy of joining a slimming club, where the output target would be a weight loss of, say, one stone, and the input would be to track your calorie intake and hold it below, for example, one thousand five hundred per day. Achieving the calorie figure would be a “good day”. Reece nodded in agreement throughout and said before I could get the words out “you mean to have some figures”. He was worried that he would have to track everything he was doing every day, but I explained that some things were like doing the vacuuming at home, a hygiene task, whereas painting the fence could be something that you would put on your home improvement plan and measure your progress against. Reece responded, “Yes, I get you Pete, thank you.”

I suggested to Reece that I produce a recording sheet that he could use, and choose his own measures, to help structure the approach. He was very receptive to this. We agreed that he would come back to us when he had put something together.

I decided at this stage to hand over the following up of creating and tracking any performance measures to Robert, as I felt that in terms of influencing engagement these meetings had gone as far as they could.

I drew a lot from reflecting on the series of the meetings with Reece. In some senses they were typical of the other meetings that I was undertaking at the time; employees were unused to this process but reacted positively and progressed during the sessions to a better understanding of the concept of engagement as an alignment both with the company objectives and their job role. In another sense the meetings with Reece were more of an outlier, both because he found it more challenging to come to terms with some aspects of structuring his sales process, and because he showed a more significant shift than most from being somewhat disaffected following the organisational changes, to being much more overtly *engaged*.

It took a long time to help Reece gain clarity on the use of measures, which I had begun to see as an important mechanism to connect individuals' enthusiasm or even "engagement" to the goals of their department, division or the whole business. Even in the third meeting, I found myself having to guide him. Having provided him with an example format, I was more confident that he would start to produce and record some relevant ideas and track activity. However, I still felt that I would need Robert to follow this up (probably prompted by me). I questioned whether I was building a "house of cards", that only stays up whilst I am managing it, or whether I could embed a process to make it self-sustaining.

We had left Reece to his own devices for a while with the onus to come back to us when he had something. The balance in this, and similar to experiences I had had in many of the other 22 meetings I had so far held with various employees, felt like "leading without leading". Both Robert and I commented that it would be a measure of success if he did so without prompting, and if there was any quality to what he produced. Promisingly, I did receive an email from him the very next day saying that the recording sheet was great and that he would begin using it and let me know.

I reflected that "leading without leading" was a good way to express the top-down versus bottom-up challenge. A part of the problem is that many of the staff had little or no experience of anything like this process. Many of them seemed to like to be led, which may differ in a more highly qualified workforce, but Reece was a good example of where giving some scope to set his own approach (within the broad company framework) seemed to provide more motivation. I considered that I had to be prepared to move more slowly, and to progressively involve staff in more and more topics to do with the running of the business, to elevate their understanding. This AR Project is also changing me, as I realise that I need to be more thoughtful about my approach in all people interactions.

I was able to bring these considerations into play almost immediately by involving all six external sales staff in this division, along with branch managers, into a pricing project that I was working on. Although not directly related to this AR Project, I noted the positive impact on all of them by being involved both in terms of improved understanding of the reasons for some of the ultimate pricing decisions and a much higher degree of alignment and engagement with actioning the necessary steps. I also involved two senior managers in this process, partly because they could add to the topic but mainly because I also wanted to pre-sensitise them to the process, as I could envisage them as challenging, and not seeing the benefit, when they would get involved in the AR Project themselves.

To round off the case study on Reece, he did begin to track his activities to some extent, and his sales performance improved. The latter is difficult to quantify due to many other negative factors occurring in this business segment during the period. However, figure 19 shows his margin evolution across the period which, although showing a slight decline (around 7% over the 20-month period), compares favourably to market trends due to the impact of declining automotive business in our region, which affected the divisional £margin by around 13%. Reece was able to win extra business from existing non-automotive customers, as well as win some business from a few new, small customers. This seemed significantly as a result of the engagement process, since he had not previously evidenced winning new business for some time, and he continued to comment to Robert that he felt more involved, both with his role and with the company.

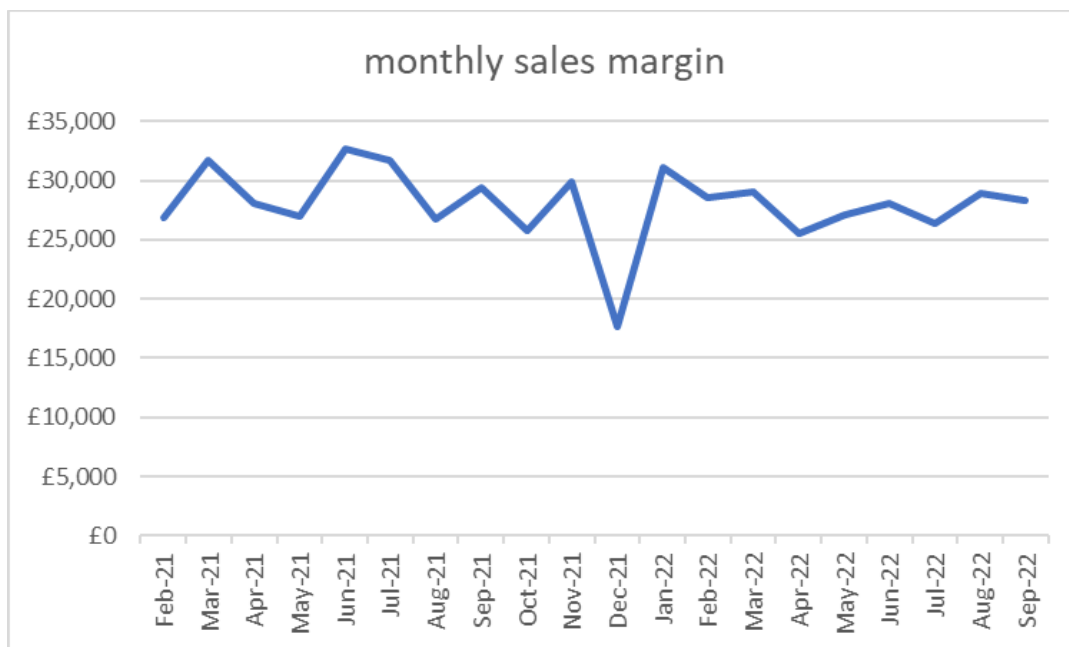


Figure 19: Monthly Sales Margin performance by Reece

A very noticeable and noteworthy impact was on his integration with the office team and generally improved attitude in trying to find solutions rather than problems. On several occasions, he commented that he felt “listened to”. It is worth pointing out that the office team also went through the same AR engagement meetings, so it is likely that there was “movement” on both sides to find a more constructive working relationship.

Robert has the last word; “Reece has proved one of the most willing individuals to take this on board - his level of communication has gone up by 200%. One of the things I wanted to achieve was better communications, and level of understanding and clarity. In terms of focus now it is really good on those customers that we want to pursue - more of sniper effect than the shotgun - his total wellbeing has changed completely - happier but has turned what was a negative of closing the old branch into a positive - extra communication here and downstairs [the sales office] an openness - what he has to say is really taken on board. Previously he felt not included or engaged. He considers now he has a voice, and it is heard rather than previously keep a lid on it - he is a changed individual.

This has come specifically due to this process and highlighted/focused from your conversations with him - level of engagement - the individual has a voice. Very focused on getting out there doing the job and winning customers and he is closing business. It will be measurable - not the best at putting stuff on paper - but I do see other new opportunities - going after it like a dog with a bone.”

### *Other reflections*

One of the most challenging elements that I first became aware of in these early meetings, was that of *assuming* a shared understanding before it had, in fact, been reached. This was especially an issue with senior, intelligent, employees. For example, it took four meetings with Robert before we felt aligned on what he was focusing on, although I initially believed after the first one that we were. Related to this, I realised that I needed to listen more and speak less, both to avoid leading the conversation too much, but also to practice a more active listening style. This is quite distinct from the more task-based conversations that we normally have during work-day interactions.

During our third meeting we had some good discussion around him not being sure if he was giving me what I wanted and feeling in some way that he was failing. My reflection to him was that that was not his failure but mine on two counts. Firstly, I had not found the right way to express it, and secondly, I did not want him to feel, nor should make him feel, like he had to give me what I want; this was a shared exploration together to find something that worked and should not be imposed by me. This

left me with the challenge to find a better approach to reaching shared understanding within this context.

At the end of the third (final) meeting with Sid, I reflected that we may have sharpened his focus, and that this would help him to strive towards better outcomes. It had been relatively easy to get him to take these ideas on board because he was already a careful thinker. I pondered whether this had increased his engagement. I felt from the tone of the conversation that the very fact of having the discussion had done this - but there has to be some content for the discussion. He clearly indicated that he liked the idea that he was creating measures for himself rather than having them imposed. I had offered him the sample recording format, that I had produced for Reece, but he did not ask me to send it, instead developing his own.

Although I was encouraged by that, two concerns arose. Firstly, I could not assume that simply establishing individual performance measures has any direct correlation with employee engagement and, secondly, if everyone generated their own format maintaining any alignment between everyone may become problematic. These were additional challenges to address in future iterations of the AR cycle.

The final point that I noted during these early meetings was related to the nature of the conversations. It was clear that some people had never given much thought to anything beyond doing the basics of their job. Suddenly asking them to think about it came as a surprise. A typical response, even to the simple question of whether we could do better in sharing the aims of the company than issuing the Project 2025 chart and booklet was "I took it as is, I'll have to have a think about that". This was somewhat of a surprise to me, and I realised that I normally immediately override any uncertainty from the other person and "tell" them what to do or think. Giving them the space, and *permission* to explore their own roles, seemed like it could be a part of the engagement process, but also required a different form of management conversation style and time allowance of multiple meetings, to which I was having to adapt.

### *Second tranche in AR cycle #1*

After the meetings with the external sales team were largely complete, I followed with a second tranche of seven internal sales/operational staff in the same division. These meetings used the same questions as previously, although wherever possible I used my learning from the earlier meetings especially in respect of leaving more space for individuals to talk and direct the conversation. Initially

these meetings were still via Teams, still following the pattern of the first being one-to-one with me and the employee, then subsequent meetings including their manager. For the later sessions, as we moved into May/June 2021, we held face-to-face meetings, although still at this stage sat at least two metres apart. Nevertheless, there was a noticeable benefit, in the ease of interaction, from being in the same room.

Again, I had five meetings with each of the two managers of this team. As with the previous manager meetings, it seemed that there was so much variety to their roles that they found it more difficult than other staff to “step outside themselves” and identify the core aspects of their job.

In this particular case the senior manager was so involved with day-to-day activities that, even when he understood the concept of inputs and outcomes, he initially argued that they were “one and the same” because “the inputs for me are the areas of focus that I can control, that are going to benefit the company and change the direction, what we actually do, product system, logistically, etc thing - those *are* the outcomes.” After much discussion, and thinking between meetings, he did find a clarity of focus on some key areas. What was most encouraging was that he began having meetings with his staff to discuss their forward workload, not in the format of the AR meetings, which continued, but in terms of agreeing a series of business improvement work and tasks he could share/delegate, rather than their work simply being driven in response to customer demand.

After the third meeting with him I noted that, similarly to the earlier phase and with the current group, it was very difficult to get anyone to actually document any of their ideas in between sessions. In some cases, this was because they found the concept of inputs and outcomes challenging, and in others it seemed to be about not knowing how to format or express their thoughts. What was encouraging was that a few of them began to talk about this giving them the opportunity to think about what they wanted their job to *be*.

During the course of the meetings both managers spoke about how (resulting from these discussions) they were now coaching their staff. It was interesting to note that they seemed to feel more comfortable doing that than coaching themselves – something that resonated with my own experience. The middle manager spoke very passionately about how this process had “unlocked” his thought processes, and he could now see much more potential for his role and the business.

All seven staff in this group spoke about how well they felt treated by the company and many commented on the importance of the family aspect.

With the five non-managers, I held three meetings each. There were recurring themes, mentioned by almost all of them.



Firstly, they all expressed some degree of surprise and appreciation to be afforded the time from the Chief Executive and their manager to talk directly to them like this.

Secondly, almost all had some issues that they explicitly wanted to be brought to attention, to improve the company. These ranged from concerns about deliveries not being picked quickly enough, to the use of single computer screens at some of the branches (with one comment being, “it is like going back to the dark ages”), to the idea to encourage a 10 second phone call in lieu of a long email.

Thirdly, the recent wage increase was well-received, but some individuals suggested that we shout more about all the good things we are doing and the confidence we have that the company will continue to survive for the long term.

Fourthly, and most importantly, all said they enjoyed or even loved their jobs, and spoke in animated ways about how they wanted to do the best for the company, many expressing the direct link back to the benefit that has for them - “I want the company to make money - that pays my wages. Everybody wants the same. If I can put something in that makes it more secure....”

Nevertheless, despite this apparent engagement, the challenge remaining was to understand, and for them to understand, how this could translate into improved personal and business performance. They all appreciated the message indicated by the Black Box diagram but most still struggled to express what they saw as their personal goals to drive improvement. One simply proffered that he would process all the orders that came to him each day, seemingly regardless of volume! A couple of them did reach a clear focus on driving up margin, with the others looking for more varied improvements. However, there was no structured or documented outcome so, at this stage, any follow up relied on the managers.

Some other reflections that I captured during or immediately after the meetings were:

1. Many staff, including managers, saw their job almost as firefighting and often relish that immediate problem-solving *responsibility*; “Some people say how do you know you've had a good day at work - I feel I've achieved that by getting something out of the door - or I've had a blasting down the earhole but I've sorted it out and we've got back friends again.” The challenge that I face is how to convert that enthusiasm and *engagement* into a more forward-looking approach.
2. Using stories to “set the scene” is a powerful tool. I used a story from my production management experience to illustrate how “the way things are” can get set in stone, but by someone questioning it great improvements can be made, especially in terms of making their

work easier and more enjoyable, and where the company management positively acts to provide job resources to match demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

3. Following the previous point, one of the employees almost immediately came up with an idea for improving how we communicate quotations to customers by adding personalised comments (so that we do not “look like robots”). Interestingly, in this case, the idea would not make his life easier, if anything it would add more work for him and his colleagues, but it would offer a better service to the customer. I was encouraged that this directly indicated a degree of engagement and assessing improvement ideas could be a crude approach for measuring engagement.
4. This suggestion to add custom notes in the auto-generated emails that accompany quotations from our company computer system turned out to be a relatively simple idea to implement. When I shortly afterwards later told the employee that we had put that functionality in place, he reacted with a mixture of surprise and great excitement, “really, you’ve done that, that’s fantastic. I didn’t think it anything would happen, or if it would be possible”. I asked him why he thought it might not happen and he said that he was not sure that I would have considered it as important enough. This conversation occurred in front of other colleagues, also going through the Forward Together meetings (Forward Together is the name used within Lister for this engagement project). Not only were they also very pleased with this extra facility, and equally enthused by the fact that we had done it so quickly, it gave me another opportunity to reinforce the point that we were genuinely open to implementing any improvements that they could come up with. They were all still talking about it some weeks later. From this simple interchange I drew two learning points (later reinforced by similar events). Firstly, the impact of *listening* to and reacting to relatively simple requests can have a quite profound effect on employees. It seems reasonable to suppose that a sense of appreciation would contribute towards further engagement with the company (in a sort of virtuous circle). Secondly, despite what we consider to be a very open and supportive culture, there are still many excellent ideas that are not surfaced because employees may consider them unimportant, impossible or low priority. The engagement process could be a vehicle to unlock this potential.
5. I again experienced the dual-handed challenge of trying not to talk too much and overly lead the conversation, whilst at the same time provide enough guidance so that the employee had some understanding of what we were trying to achieve. With one individual, in particular, harder to read and less facially expressive, I felt as I was talking that I was not being clear

enough but could not find a way to improve "in the moment". It led me to consider whether I need more prompting notes, perhaps to use only when necessary.

6. The same challenge as mentioned with the first tranche arose again, in the difficulty to get people to put down in writing some ideas of how they could link their jobs to the company aims and what they believe they should be focusing on.

Finally, there was similar feedback to that reported previously with respect to the redundancies, with those employees who mentioned the topic seeing it in a mainly positive light, with full acceptance of the need and appreciation of the fair way in which it was undertaken. One individual did mention concern over the future of the business, but he caveated that by saying he had a concern over the whole economy. There were a couple of people who said their workload had increased, but they understood the need. There was no hint of "survivor syndrome" (Baruch, 2004, p. 153).

#### 6.4.4 Evaluation

These meetings reinforced my view that the very act of spending the time to have conversations that go deeper than a social interaction or even a discussion of immediate work tasks, does provide a vehicle to strengthen engagement. At least with all these employees, who admittedly were the "survivors" of a redundancy exercise, so to some extent are already selected for positive attitude, the discussions were all convivial, with much positive feedback,

- "enjoyed it - looking how you plan your day, being more efficient - when you've been doing a while you get into routine - nice to have a rethink.",
- "I thought it very worthwhile very interesting - covered some good points",
- "yes, bit of spark into coming into work - made me feel appreciated",
- "good meeting - got me thinking - I took the mtg home with me in a good way - engaged is the word".

The difficulty that most people experienced in identifying and/or distinguishing their long-term or overarching aims (outcomes) from the actions (inputs) necessary to achieve them, or from their short-term daily activities resulted in some degree of confusion, or even frustration with some individuals, and certainly involved going over the same ground in subsequent meetings in most cases.

If employees are already showing elements of engagement, in terms of their stated affinity to the company, but are not connecting that to any *higher purpose*, in this case the company aims, then there does not appear to be what I began to term *well-directed engagement*.

However, from all the meetings so far, employees had reacted well to the concept of trying to find ways to connect their jobs to the broader goals of the company and the process had generated much positive discussion and identified factors that either they could improve for themselves, or they wanted improved by the company. By addressing many of these precedents of engagement my interpretation of the interactions was that the engagement level, although already positive, improved further.

What was needed therefore was a better method to help employees develop, and document, that *well-directed engagement* whilst still maintaining the benefit of the bottom-up approach where they would develop their own inputs and measures.

## 6.5 AR cycle #2

### 6.5.1 Planning/Design – development of JFC

The approach used in the first AR cycle appeared to be working in the sense that having detailed conversations with employees was providing them with opportunities to raise any issues about which they had concerns or for which they had improvement suggestions, as well as giving them a sense of being valued. All these aspects had generated for me, in every interaction so far, the sense that there was either an affirmation or increase in engagement. Therefore, the basic process seemed to be appropriate and worth continuing. However, the difficulty that most employees were having in structuring their thoughts about what was important in their job and how it would fit with the company objectives needed to be addressed.

I therefore produced a document that I called the Job Focus Chart with the intention that this would be useful for employees, but would also systematise the process, without being prescriptive about any actual measures, to aid the ultimate rollout when other managers would be leading the process with their own staff. I explicitly incorporated the inputs and outcomes concept, with the layout prompting the outcomes to be directly tied to factors underpinning the four themes of the company Project 2025.

This initial version is shown in figure 20.

**2.** How does that **contribute** to the Company Objectives and Project 2025?

SE				
PC				
SG				
MM				

**1.** What matters about my job?  
What **outcomes** should I try to achieve?

1				
2				
3				
4				
5				

**3.** How will I know if I am succeeding or making progress?

5	
4	
3	
2	
1	

**4.** What should I be doing to make this happen?  
What are my **inputs** and actions?

1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

**5.** What more information, 2-way communication or support would help?  
What would make my job better?


**6.** How can I **measure** if I am doing this well?  
What reports or charts shall I use?


**7.** What gets in the way?  
What would I like to change?


**8.** What processes can I establish to ensure continual focus on this?  
(For managers: consider your own activities and those of team)


**Forward Together Job Focus Chart**

	Name
	Date

Figure 20: Job Focus Chart - initial version

The use of this was designed to be self-explanatory, with the numbers indicating the sequence in which to complete it.

So far, I had met with some staff from two of the business divisions, so it was now my intention to begin working with employees from the third business unit, both to demonstrate even-handedness and in case any significant differences emerged. As we were now entering the second half of 2021, with Covid concerns and the need for social distancing lessening, I also planned to follow up and recommence meetings with the tube manipulation staff which had been truncated in the pilot AR cycle.

As I began this AR cycle #2, I had no expectation that I would modify the process further. In fact, there were only 9 employees involved, before I moved to AR cycle #3, for reasons described below. This compares to 13 staff in each of AR cycles #1 and #3.

## 6.5.2 Implementation and findings

Within this group there were five managers/supervisors, and four non-managers, across two divisions, so it provided an interesting opportunity to explore if there were any patterns of engagement by division or by hierarchy. As previously, where individuals had line managers other than me, they were involved in second and subsequent meetings.

### 6.5.2.1 *A change in notetaking and the impact on analysis*

During cycle #1 I had typed contemporaneous notes into an Excel spreadsheet, in cells against the particular questions/topics that I had predefined. A benefit of this was that I could have a column for each employee, so that all notes from a particular group were on the same document.

However, I discovered that Excel was not well-suited to capturing notes quickly, and I found that it had sometimes stunted conversation whilst I tried to navigate around the spreadsheet and catch up. Therefore, for all but the first two meetings in this cycle I switched to using a single Word document for each employee. I was still able to pre-populate with questions, but to then write more freely as conversations evolved.

A negative outcome from this approach, for the purposes of extracting information for analysis, has been the variation between the structure of the meetings, and the loss of the simple side-by-side comparison between employees without further data manipulation. For cycle #3, I have performed some textual analysis which has addressed some of these issues, but since cycle #2 was a relatively short and, as it transpired, a further developmental cycle, I have restricted comments here and evaluation below primarily to extracting a few key points that informed the third and final cycle.

### 6.5.2.2 *Use of the JFC*

In all nine meetings in this cycle the JFC proved to be a very useful tool to stimulate discussion. Below are excerpts and observations from each meeting.

1. *Manager*. Although the JFC was provided at the end of the first meeting, it was not completed ready for the second meeting. It was not clear whether this was due to pressure of work or

uncertainty of how to complete it. Our discussion was mainly around people issues within his team. He identified difficulty in motivating certain staff who were near to retirement or coming towards the end of their careers and said that he needed more capable staff. When he did provide a well-completed chart in the third meeting, he presented many of those issues as actions such as training in 5S, creating knowledge building workshops, setting targets for sales team, and for himself to have regular meetings with staff to promote project 2025 focus. We did recruit a couple more staff into the team, which eased some of the pressure. It is also the case that this manager did follow through on these objectives which have, along with input from many others detailed below, led to a much-improved working environment, with improved productivity.

2. *Manager*. This manager was quite negative in the first meeting, mainly around staff shortage issues; “I *wasted* a lot of time on [developing] X, but he is [now in another department] all the time”, as well as some historical personal *slights* that still rankle. Again, I issued the JFC at the end of the first meeting, but he had only added a couple of points on there by the second meeting. We had more discussion around “juggling skill sets”, and by the third meeting the JFC had much more content, now focused on underpinning OTD (on-time delivery) and acceptable margins; “Getting work through all areas efficiently” and “Building a stable, efficient, happy team”. However, as mentioned above, by this point we had recruited two more people (in part responding to the earlier criticisms). He was now much more enthusiastic; “Should all come together now... it has got better with people numbers,”. I asked him how he knew if the team were happy. He replied with a smile, “They are here! I don’t know how to measure [beyond] that.”
3. *Non-manager*. He felt that he had good clarity of the company aims; “Yes, definitely with the P2025, that doesn’t beat around the bush. Everyone knows the aims; it is just getting to them.” However, he did complain that communication “down there”, on the shop floor can feel lacking especially in terms of the progress the company is making. He did get the JFC largely completed ready for the second meeting but although he could highlight outcomes, he found it more difficult to identify inputs/actions and personal measures (although he did have some by the third meeting). However, he did bring forward some good ideas that we/he implemented, for example to track any part-done picks. He also directly got involved in training other staff as a result of these discussions.
4. *Non-manager*. Again, this individual produced a good JFC immediately at the second meeting. She highlighted people shortages as an issue, but also has “always” got involved in tasks that she should leave to others because otherwise “it will not get done”. An immediate impact,

after we had added a couple of staff, and she had completed the JFC, is that she has focused directly on her own tasks with a measurable improvement in sales performance. During the last meeting I stated, “the only thing holding you back is you,” to which she responded, “[now there] is nothing holding me back!”

5. *Manager*. This manager came prepared to the second meeting with a completed JFC but, in common with others, found it difficult to express achievement targets in a measurable way, saying, for example “More turnover whilst keeping focus on labour”. After a long discussion, we expressed some targets as “efficiency in terms of £added value per £labour to maintain, whilst increasing OTD from 90% to 98%” and “next volume target £2m (up from £1.5m now) in X time frame” for him to refine for the next meeting. However, we had to revisit this in the third meeting after his opening remark, “I’ve looked at it four or five times and got confused because I’m not sure what you want, in terms of targets etc, so I just ended up helping [one of my team] do his”.
6. *Non-manager*. Again, a well completed JFC, but the measures needed more development.
7. *Non-manager*. Good clarity on topics, but initially very unclear on measures.
8. *Manager*. One of the later ones in this group to receive the JFC, he raised the issue of lack of clarity of the layout, with the numbered boxes seemingly in a strange sequence. (I had originally created it that way to try to directly tie the outcomes to the four Project 2025 themes). Taking this concern on board, which I had begun to feel myself on seeing the difficulty others had found in really understanding the *connections* of the various boxes on the form, I found a way to make it more logical.

The revised version is shown in figure 21 and included as Appendix 5.



1. What matters about my job? <small>What (long term) <b>outcomes</b> should I try to achieve?</small>		2. How will I know if I am succeeding or making <b>progress</b>		3. How does that <b>contribute</b> to the Company <small>Objectives, Project 2025 or the SBU focus?</small>		Margin Matters	Sales Growth	Performance Culture	Service Excellence
1									
2									
3									
4									
5									

4. What should I be doing to make this happen? <small>What are my <b>inputs</b> and actions (<b>now</b>) <small>(may change over time)?</small></small>		5. How can I <b>measure</b> if I am doing this well? <small>What reports or charts shall I use?</small>		what frequency - daily, weekly, monthly?	6. What processes can I establish to ensure continual focus on this? <small>(For managers: consider your own activities and those of team)</small>	
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						

Forward Together - Job Focus Chart		7. What gets in the way? <small>What would I like to change?</small>		8. What more information, 2-way communication or support would help? <small>What would make my job better?</small>	
Name					
Date					

Figure 21: Job Focus Chart - final version

In this version it is clear that the top section relates to the longer term: outcomes, progress towards them and the link to company aims. The middle horizontal section is about short and medium term; inputs, how to measure that they are being performed and how to embed them. The bottom section focuses on what blocks or would aid progress. One loss in this format is that there is no longer a row connection suggesting that from each outcome there should be a corresponding input. However, I surmised that people would “naturally” include ways to achieve whatever they aspired to as outcomes, and this could be addressed anyway during discussion.

This version of the JFC bears some similarity to Intel’s well-proven OKR system, with the top row reflective of Objectives (O) and the second row reflective of Key Results (KR). It is also similar in respect of the way that employees write their own (Doerr, 2018, p. 27) although at Intel this was restricted to *knowledge workers*, most of whom it can be assumed were of a high educational achievement. The JFC provides more structure, explicitly requiring an explanation of how progress, of both inputs and outputs, will be measured – “if you measured it, things go better” (ibid., p. 38) and, even more importantly for the purposes of engagement, addressing matters that get in the way. It also harks right back to the suggestion by McGregor

(1960, p. 61) “to encourage a situation in which a subordinate can achieve his goals *best* by directing his efforts towards the objective of the enterprise” and, in this way, avoids the potentially engagement-damaging risk of a purely top-down management-by-objectives approach.

When I issued the revised JFC format to this manager he produced a very well-structured JFC, which covered all the main areas of sales, profit, people and quality. It was still a little light initially on numerical targets (although did link to some existing targets). He commented on the JFC of one of his team and confided: “There is a fear of numerical targets here because we are desperate to hit them. It can be rewarding but also damaging. [We] can have a target rate to grow at; *he* has a genuine fear of numerical targets”.

9. *Manager*. He had some good outcome measures but struggled with input measures/criteria. He was very driven by a total focus on achieving a sales figure (outcome). However, once we had discussed the concepts further, he began to think in a much broader fashion. During our third meeting he said to me “When you said to me that we could double production, now I think we could...”. By the fourth session he reported that he had “started giving people more training so don’t rely on one or two to operate machines”. It also led to conversations around achieving world class standard, which he was really excited about, and “also we win jobs because we do things that other people can’t... when I was at [my previous company] my attitude was do I need the aggravation.”

### 6.5.3 Evaluation

#### 6.5.3.1 Effectiveness of the JFC

My experience, and feedback from managers who ran the meetings with me, was that using the JFC helped employees to readily understand the concept of aligning their goals with those of the company, and then how they should work on things (inputs) that would ultimately lead to those achievements. The conversations in those sections of the meetings did flow more smoothly, although some individuals did struggle to work out on what they should focus. However, I consider that to be positive, since they were thinking carefully about their contribution.

The revised format of the chart, although only used by the last two in this group, was an improvement in the clarity of the process, and because it is more linear it helped the flow of the discussions.

Populating the Job Focus Chart, and subsequently discussing it, explicitly ties the employee's long term job outcomes to the contribution that they can make to the Company's objectives. This prompts employees to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the purpose of the business (or, if not, it will be discussed in detail during the engagement meetings) with which they can engage (Blount & Leinwand, 2019, p. 134). This process did appear to be contributing to *well-directed* engagement and would be carried forward into the next cycle.

The purpose of this research or this report is not to enumerate all the individual employee objectives. Some examples of completed JFC's, suitably anonymised, are included in Appendix 5, but suffice it to say that every employee did complete a JFC that, often with some tweaking following suggestions by their manager or me, was a useful plan. The very practice of compiling and discussing it appeared to contribute towards enhancing engagement. Conversations with employees about their JFC invariably indicated that they had thought, sometimes for the first time, about what was important in their job, how it fed into the broader company performance and that they wanted to make a successful contribution.

#### *6.5.3.2 The use of personal measures and quantifiable targets*

I found the comment from point 8, in section 6.5.2.2, very interesting. The idea that by setting a numerical target, particularly where there is no penalty for failing to meet it, could nevertheless, in someone with a desire to please, create discomfort to the extent that it could be considered "fear" and "damaging", was something that I had not been consciously aware of previously. I reflected that, in the family friendly (and long-term focus) culture of Lister, it was more important to gain engagement and commitment to moving in the right direction, even if numerical targets were somewhat vague, than to create any concerns over the process. In fact, this fitted with the Project 2025 approach, where we do not assign specific growth percentage targets, for example.

I resolved to remain more aware of identifying where this might be the case and practice this approach going forward, where it seemed appropriate.

However, in one of the meetings, in trying to better explain the concept of measures on inputs and outputs, I had also used the question: "If you had to present to the Board, how would you show facts,

of what you had planned to achieve and did achieve?”. This phrasing had unlocked the employee’s “block”, so I carried this simple question forward into the next cycle.

#### 6.5.3.3 *Engagement as a function of rank or department*

From all nine participants in this cycle there was a strong sense of motivation and engagement, although in some cases mixed with some degree of frustration, mainly around staffing levels, even though they all understood both our need to hold costs down, and the difficulty of recruiting competent personal during this period. For context it is worth pointing out that we had not recruited any staff from the end of 2019 (then had redundancies in mid-2020) until early 2021. Even then we held our total company staff level at around 100 (down from the original peak of 150) but were able to reduce certain admin functions to strengthen operations in the areas relevant to this group, during the period of this cycle.

This analysis indicates again, as seen in cycle #1, that there is, overall, a good standard of employee engagement already in place, across all levels and in different areas of Lister. The process of discussion appears to reinforce that, and with the use of the JFC, helps to align that engagement towards creating more effective local goals.

However, confirming what was seen previously, managers find it more difficult to express both outcomes and inputs, and particularly to identify suitable measures. Perhaps this is unsurprising, since their jobs are complex, particularly in an SME, where role specialisation is a luxury we can rarely afford. However, in order to achieve *well-directed* engagement amongst their team it is critical that they can translate company objectives into divisional and departmental goals. This strongly vindicates the use of the engagement meeting approach, spending sufficient time to help managers to articulate their local goals, and the use of a tool such as the JFC to facilitate that.

#### 6.5.3.4 *What was missing?*

With this group, in the first meetings, although I used the expanded question set (see Appendix 3), apart from staffing issues being raised by some people, the conversations seemed quite bland or even superficial. I reasoned, “in the moment”, that this could be a consequence of most of the individuals being either managers or long-serving staff who already felt well-embedded, well-engaged or well-

communicated to. However, in parallel to the specific meetings, I was maintaining a research journal where I regularly made notes and reflections of issues occurring that were relevant to this project. As I reviewed that, I realised that there were many situations occurring that indicated that actually, even with this group, there were underlying concerns or problems, that could be hindering full engagement, some of which may not have been being surfaced in the meetings we were holding.

A first example is when one of the managers, known here as Tom, who had already worked on his JFC, was struggling with some supply chain difficulties. A major supplier was letting us down, which had the potential to cause problems with some of our key customers. Tom was looking and talking dejectedly and appeared to be somewhat overwhelmed by the situation. I sat with him and worked together to establish a plan to gain clarity over exactly what we were facing so that we could then take suitable actions. This included him needing to document our expected supplier receipts and planned customer shipments. Tom said he would do that but made no notes and remained subdued. I was surprised that this problem, whilst an issue, was having such an effect, as he is quite capable of handling this type of challenge. Therefore, I asked him whether, once this was in hand, there would be anything else that was causing him a problem.

At this point, he opened up, and explained that he was feeling worn out by his staff constantly coming to him with problems that he had to solve when they could do it themselves. He mentioned one individual specifically. I said I was surprised because that employee had gone through the JFC and seemed to be clear on what he was doing. Tom then said that sometimes it was people just wanting constant praise and wanting to keep telling him what they were doing.

I asked Tom if he had told his staff clearly that he trusted them and that they should make the decisions. He said yes, but I was not convinced that he had done it directly enough. He said, "Perhaps I am too nice, too soft", to which I replied "Yes, you are very supportive of your staff, but you should still expect them to do their job" and gave him some examples of how I have had to "train" another of my direct reports to make decisions unaided. I suggested that he had meetings with each of his team and tell them his expectations and can then refer back to the meetings later.

My reflection on this was that even someone whom I considered to be a good (and empathetic) manager was struggling to get the right level of ownership from his team. Because I have a 2-weekly review with him I stand a chance of guiding him and recognising when there are problems, as here, and at least giving him praise and encouragement so that hopefully he does not suddenly decide the "grass may be greener" elsewhere. However, at this point, I was still the only manager who was running regular one-to-one meetings with my reports. I felt this could be a major deficiency. My team had not been "learning by example", so perhaps I would need to impose (top-down) at least this

element of structure. Nevertheless, that still left this problem, which was a major performance inhibitor for Tom and his team, and was causing discomfort (so, I surmised, likely to be counter-effective from an engagement perspective) and that had been under the surface for some time but had not been revealed through the current Forward Together and JFC approach.

A second example did arise during one of the structured meetings, but I include it here because it arose almost by chance, rather than directly being prompted by any of the JFC categories. Tom and I were talking with one of his management team, Steve, about how to measure and improve our on-time delivery figures. Steve was arguing that the measure that we could extract from our ERP system was not appropriate because it looked at whole orders and he felt we should measure by individual lines on the order. I explained that in the new ERP system, K8, that we were about to go-live with, it would be possible to measure by line item. Mentioning K8, more-or-less by chance, opened the floodgates to a very animated response from Steve. He was very frustrated that we had not given clear notice to him or his team of which Saturday we needed them in for the switch-over day, which was potentially only six weeks away. He asked how we could expect them to be available and was very supportive and defensive of his team. He also made it clear that he felt let down by the directors and senior managers that this had not been well organised and communicated. I said we should immediately talk with my colleague who was co-ordinating the go-live, which we did, and firmed up a date which Steve was then able to share with his team. What was surprising, given what I thought was a very open culture, was that he had not raised this issue previously (when I subsequently asked him about that his response was that he just expected to be told). There were other indications in our discussions with him that he felt "left out" of the decision-making process generally, and in particular, mentioning more than once "if people take my staff", by which he meant other managers or directors calling on some of his resources. To what extent it was factual or not that he was excluded from decisions when he should not have been was not clear. It may also have been to some extent a self-fulfilling belief, so Tom and I later discussed how we could be more proactive in encouraging Steve's input.

A positive outcome from this meeting was that Steve's approach to me, whilst never negative, became more friendly. This may also have been influenced by my greater involvement with him as HR support (since I was covering this role also at the time) but nevertheless our relationship became noticeably better. He even said to one of the other directors that he had deliberately given me an easier stocktake sheet to work on - joke or not it was a nice comment. This higher level of involvement and discussion is potentially an underlying part of creating engagement. The question that I had was whether it would permeate down to the next level. In practice he was very positive when he was involved in the Forward Together engagement meeting with the first of his team.

A third situation was when I was in conversation with two managers, showing them the JFC format for the first time. One of them, who had been isolating for a period during Covid, reminded me of a conversation we had had during that time when I had asked him to think about future plans for his department once the pandemic was over. Seemingly a little hurt, he said “You asked me to think about this, and I wrote a list of things and you’ve never asked to see them”. Somewhat defensively I explained that asking him for how he could develop the business was not really because I wanted to see it but because I was trying to challenge him to think about what his focus could or should be once we could get back to “normal” operation. At the same time (in-action) I reflected that I had not realised at the time that I had had that conversation that it was effectively part of this project. I explained that it is like now, “it is not that I want to see your JFC, as such, (although I do), but that I know you have worked on it, and continue to see it as a living document.” He was quite happy with this response. In fact, he has subsequently driven a complete and successful transformation of his department which he has “owned” because he has led it, whilst I have provided the commitment to support it (bottom-up, top-down, even within the first layer of management).

A final example of the nature of concerns or blockages that it would be important to uncover and address through an engagement process comes from a two-week interaction that I had with another member of staff. In this case, a small customer service team of only three people suddenly reduced to one as a result of holiday and illness. The remaining member, Karen, although extremely competent, was relatively new into the role. I stepped in to support and took on doing as much of the background administration work as I could. I sat at the desk next to Karen and spent some of the first few days reassuring her that although I knew she wanted to do a good job, if we missed a few things that was fine; we all understood the challenge she was facing. She appreciated that but still wanted to get everything sorted out, because “that is how I am”.

Although I already knew her a little, it was at a pure “work level”. During the first few days we interacted in a friendly fashion but there was little personal discussion. As time progressed, we spoke a little more (not too much because she was so busy) about our family lives, pets, and even previous jobs. We discussed a little about the poor management in one of her previous companies which affected employee’s mental health. I explained that we really wanted to look after our staff and work should be fun; that it was the responsibility of senior managers to set the tone and to know that they had no bad managers below them. She really liked that and said she could see that was how we operated.

It was very clear from how she repeatedly thanked me for my help and her general demeanour (including frequent comments like “it is nice to have an assistant”) when I did some of the tedious tasks that she had really appreciated having me there, even though she still did the vast bulk of the work.

I reflected that it was partly that “someone” was there, but also she had been quite surprised that I could find the time, as CEO. I explained that I could catch up on much of my work later, but she was on the frontline dealing with customers and that couldn’t wait. She seemed very pleased that I understood that.

As she became more confident to discuss things with me, she revealed some of her frustrations with certain aspects of the job. A first example was highlighted when I took a call from a customer who wanted some products made, the following day, to match a sample which he had already dropped off. We agreed a price and that I would send him a proforma invoice to be paid by credit card. What he actually did was to pay by bank transfer and then ring Karen the following day to say that he was on his way to collect. When Karen explained that she had had no notification of his payment he was quite rude to her. The problem was that if he had rung up to pay by credit card Karen would have directly known that the transaction had been verified. However, because it was a bank payment, she was reliant on our accounts department to confirm this to her. When she contacted accounts, of the two people who could have assisted, one was away from their desk and the other was too busy to do the check immediately. In the end they did check and get back to Karen, but it was a very stressful experience for her. I only discovered this when I explicitly asked her if the customer had paid! This was the second instance of needing to check payment that I had been involved in that week. I said that I would follow this up with the Accounts department and find a solution for either direct access or a faster response, although Karen was at pains to say that she did not want anyone to get into trouble over this. I assured her that would not be the case, and we did find a suitable solution. Karen was very pleased that we could solve it and impressed that I took the matter seriously and could understand the issue and discomfort that it was causing her.

So, although I did not have any *formal* Forward Together engagement meetings with her, I think that I achieved much of the same outcome, by showing a real interest, understanding what got in her way and working to remove it. There were other small examples like chasing up a lost order for a janitorial product ordered from our head office branch (which led the General Manager there to uncover a larger issue with lost interbranch orders), organising the repair of a vacuum cleaner for the office, and arranging with the IT department to immediately change a print run procedure to stop unnecessary printing of pick notes. I also gained a good understanding of what her personal ambitions were and



where we needed to follow up, as well as becoming confident through watching and listening that she has clear alignment with the company goals across sales growth, culture, teamwork, productivity etc.

One of the learning point reinforcements from this experience is that, for some people, there needs to be a degree of personal relationship, and probably liking and trust, before they will open up and raise matters of concern that otherwise they may consider too trivial, or they not wish to appear that they are causing trouble. This confirms that involving their line manager, who is more likely to have, or be able to develop, this closer relationship is an important part of building engagement through this process.

In summary I reflected that, in some cases, I had been quite keen to get through to the point where I explained the JFC, so perhaps, in some of the formal meetings with staff, I had limited the “space” to open up the discussion. Secondly, staff were coming to these meetings unprepared for what I was going to ask them, so may not raise topics that with pre-warning they would have thought about (and it had now been a long time since the original questionnaire had gone out). Thirdly, with some staff, even managers, it was also likely that there was both a conscious and sub-conscious avoidance of raising contentious issues, if I did not actually raise them first.

As is explained in AR cycle #3 Planning/Design, section 6.6.1, this led to the development of another tool to facilitate more open discussions.

#### 6.5.3.5 *Ukraine War and impact on performance and measurement*

Also, during this period, in early March 2022, the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the previous month, began to have an impact on supply chains. We received a letter from one of our key suppliers invoking *force majeure* and stating that both prices and lead-times could be changed without notice. We faced a challenging situation; currently very high demand volumes as customers “stocked-up” but the expectation of a sharp downturn as output would be throttled by supply shortages. We met with the managers, both of whom had already been involved in the engagement programme, in the affected division and explained the situation. In fact, the senior manager had immediately suggested that we involve his subordinate, “so that he would be engaged”. He, in turn, then immediately volunteered that, despite the prevailing challenges of meeting orders, we should suspend recruitment of more staff to add to his team.

We then involved the sales team in the discussion and explained the situation. They agreed, despite the potentially negative effect on their bonus earnings, that they would divert their action away from

selling product from the affected supplier and would take on more tasks themselves (to leave the focus of the rest of the team on satisfying current demand). We had a very positive and constructive discussion, which felt like a high engagement driven by full disclosure and involvement. One of the sales engineers specifically commented on how good it was to be involved in the decisions on how to proceed. From an engagement perspective this felt like an illustration that within this group there was evidence of an engagement culture taking hold.

However, the disruption caused by these events, as mentioned previously, directly impacted the ability of the business to perform at its optimal level, with the benefits of increased engagement probably being “absorbed” to counteract the negative external impacts. This severely hampers any potential to directly measure any financial benefit resulting from improved engagement.

## 6.6 AR cycle #3

### 6.6.1 Planning/Design

Before embarking on the third AR cycle, I reflected on the benefits of the Job Focus Chart in terms of how it facilitated the conversation. Even where the employee had struggled to complete it, that itself provided a good starting point for the conversation. Even by trying they were beginning to *engage*. In contrast, the first part of the discussion, where I was introducing them to the concept of engagement and inviting them to feedback their perceptions, I found it far more difficult, certainly with some individuals, to elicit much response. It put me under pressure to find a way to *lead* the conversation. Trying to draw thoughts from them, listen and respond to whatever they might say, plan my next questions, and make notes was very challenging. In addition, as explained in the *What was missing* section above, there were potentially missed opportunities to explore issues that could be important to removing both conscious or sub-conscious barriers to engagement. These could often have a deep-seated emotional or contentious element and should be resolved first before progressing to the no-less important, but more functional stage of re-enforcing and aligning engagement with job and company objectives, that the JFC addresses.

Therefore, I decided that I needed to systematise this element of the research (and implementation) approach and to get the employee to prepare some feedback ready for the meeting. Because I also wanted this stage to be the least intimidating possible, I settled on asking them to provide a very simple score of their view on several points relating to engagement. I had already been using, as a

“crib sheet”, the original questionnaire of which the questions had been based on Saks’s (2006) engagement antecedents. However, because the questionnaire had been anonymous, I did not have a starting point for discussion with individual employees. By asking them to provide a score, it would immediately provide the opportunity to ask them to justify it, whether high or low. Based on the original questionnaire topics and the similar ideas used in the “Energy Compass” developed to assess factors that affect the antithetical outcomes of burnout and work engagement (Schaufeli, 2017, pp. 122-123), I developed a tool initially called the Development Chart, later renamed to Engagement Support Chart (ESC).

I selected ten topics, each with a question against which to provide a “number”: 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) and for each a discussion point, which also helped to clarify or expand on the question, as follows.

### **Engagement with the company**

Do you feel engaged with the company?

What aspect of being part of the company motivates you?

### **Your colleagues**

Do your colleagues work well with you and support you?

Are there people who don't behave correctly or are not as motivated/engaged as you would like?

### **Your manager**

Do you feel that you have the right level of support and guidance?

Would you like more or less direction from your boss? Can you raise concerns openly?

### **How you are treated**

Do you feel well treated, recognised, and fairly rewarded by the Company?

What concerns do you have?

### **Communication to you**

Do you have enough understanding about what is going on with your job, your dept, your branch, the company?

What other information would you like to know about?

### **Communication from you**

Do you feel listened to?

What ideas or topics would you like to share with the company?

### **Your job content**

Do you enjoy what you do?

What aspects of your job would you like to change?

### **Making the job better**

Does anything get in the way of you doing the job as well as you want to?

What would make your life easier?

### **Your development**

Do you feel that you have job and career opportunities if you want them?

Would you like to learn more about anything? What training or career ambitions do you have?

### **Your job contribution**

Do you feel proud of what you do and what you contribute?

How important do you feel to the company? What about your job motivates you?

There are instructions at the top of the form that ask for a number to input for each section but there is no requirement to put anything in the notes or actions sections because these will be used during the meeting.

I deliberately provided the discussion point headings, both as further elaboration/clarification of the topic question and because I wanted to address the issue of staff coming to meetings with no idea of what we were going to talk about. Although there was no *requirement* for them to make any notes, by providing the sheet with a space for them to do so, they had the opportunity/permission, and many did.

A blank copy is included as Appendix 6, but a version is reproduced in figure 22 with some random scores already input. For those who completed this as a live Excel document (which most in the study group did) this populated a radar chart, in the centre, as can be seen. Several employees said that they liked to see that visualisation, and a couple explicitly commented that it made them think about or re-think their scores, which was my deliberate intention.

## Forward Together - Engagement Support Chart

Please put a number from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) in the "number" boxes against each topic. This will help to guide which subjects to discuss in more detail. You do not need to put anything in the notes/actions sections - these will be used during the discussion.

Name: _____	Manager: _____	Date: _____
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<p><b>Engagement with the company</b> Do you feel engaged with the company?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="5"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>what aspect of being part of the company motivates you?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	what aspect of being part of the company motivates you?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you		<p><b>Communication to you</b> Do you have enough understanding about what is going on with your job, your dept, your branch, the company?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="10"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>what other information would you like to know about?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	what other information would you like to know about?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you		<p><b>Communication from you</b> Do you feel listened to?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="10"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>what ideas or topics would you like to share with the company?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	what ideas or topics would you like to share with the company?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you	
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<p><b>Your colleagues</b> Do your colleagues work well with you and support you?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="5"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>are there people who don't behave correctly or are not as motivated/engaged as you would like?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	are there people who don't behave correctly or are not as motivated/engaged as you would like?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you		<p><b>Your manager</b> Do you feel that you have the right level of support and guidance?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="7"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>would you like more or less direction from your boss? can you raise concerns openly?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	would you like more or less direction from your boss? can you raise concerns openly?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you		<p><b>Your job content</b> Do you enjoy what you do?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="10"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>what aspects of your job would you like to change?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	what aspects of your job would you like to change?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you	
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<p><b>How you are treated</b> Do you feel well treated, recognised and fairly rewarded by the Company?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="10"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>what concerns do you have?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	what concerns do you have?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you		<p><b>Your development</b> Do you feel that you have job and career opportunities if you want them?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="10"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>would you like to learn more about anything? what training or career ambitions do you have?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	would you like to learn more about anything? what training or career ambitions do you have?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you		<p><b>Your job contribution</b> Do you feel proud of what you do and what you contribute?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">number <input style="width: 20px;" type="text" value="10"/></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Discussion points</td> <td>how important do you feel to the company? What about your job motivates you?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Notes</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for your manager</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>actions for you</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Discussion points	how important do you feel to the company? What about your job motivates you?	Notes		actions for your manager		actions for you	
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Figure 22: Engagement Support Chart example

By this stage, I had abandoned explicitly asking about the impacts of the redundancies, based on the lack of any concerns around survivor syndrome or lack of hope raised so far. I relied instead on letting anything of this nature emerge from the general discussion. In fact, nothing did, so our handling of the downsizing, unwittingly following the Baruch (2004, pp. 153-156) perpetual change model, seemed to have been effective.

For this final AR cycle of the project, I selected ten staff, all from one division/branch, where I had already met with four others, so that any positive engagement effects should multiply within this full team. It was also a group that could be considered representative of the rest of the organisation, including two operational managers, one support function manager, one external salesperson, three office customer service/buying staff, and three trade counter/order fulfilment staff.

There was also an eleventh employee included in this group from a separate branch but with a high connection/dependence with the main branch. This brought the total number of employees involved in the project to thirty-four, just over one third of the workforce, and a fully representative sample.

For this last group I also chose to involve their line manager from the first meeting in all cases. The reasons were two-fold. Firstly, in the meetings so far, my expectations, based on our family culture, of the confidence of staff to speak openly had been reinforced. I had seen no change in the manner or forthrightness of staff between their first meeting with me alone, and subsequent meetings also involving their manager, so there seemed little detriment. Secondly, although I had started it that way for good reasons, I had always felt uncomfortable *not* involving the managers in such important discussions with their staff, both from the perspective of undermining them and from excluding them from important discussions with their team. After all, this was not pure research, it was also action, with the intention to leave a lasting change, and the manager should be a part of it.

## 6.6.2 Implementation and findings

### 6.6.2.1 Use of the ESC

Most of this group emailed a copy of their ESC scoring prior to the meeting, occasionally including notes, and for those that just brought it to the meeting I made a point of collecting the individual figures. This has provided the opportunity to analyse the scoring.

The raw data is presented in Appendix 7 but is shown as a radar chart in figure 23. Radar chart visualisation is particularly appropriate for complex data sets (Newby, 2010, p. 440) where there are multiple variables per investigated subject and allows the possibility to “use shape to classify [subjects] into the same group” (ibid. p. 441).

In figure 23 each “Series” represents an employee.

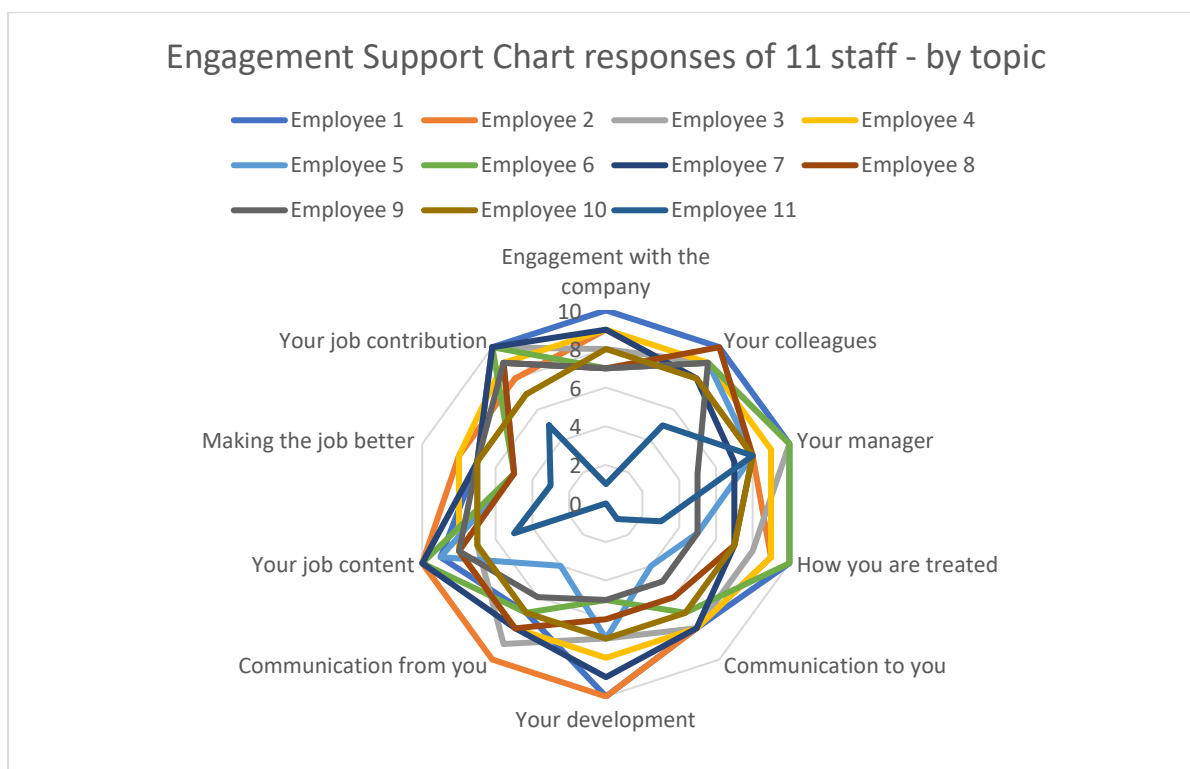


Figure 23: Initial Engagement Support Chart scores by topic from 11 staff

This visual representation shows clearly that, with one exception, the majority of employees can be classified as belonging to one group who have scored several, or even most, topics quite highly. In particular, engagement with the company, relationship and support from colleagues, enjoyment of job content, and pride in job contribution were scored consistently high at seven or above.

A couple of employees did comment, at the beginning of the meetings, that they did not exactly know what “engagement” meant. However, I had included this question, with the elaborative subtext of “what aspect of being part of the company motivates you?” in an attempt to get an overarching view of individuals’ opinions about their relationship with the company before we began the process. It is interesting that, even based on a “native” view of the meaning of engagement, employees marked it more highly than some of the other factors, which could be considered subsidiary components.

The fact that other topics were scored as low as 4 or 5 by some staff (again excluding the one outlier), was encouraging in the sense that they were comfortable to openly share their opinion with me, and their manager, about areas where they felt dissatisfied. The overall average (excluding the outlier) was 7.9, with the lowest average being 6.6 (although the outlier average was 3.1).

Figure 24 presents the same data from the perspective of each individual, which reinforces the averages data above, with some employees having a lowest score on any topic of 8, with others down to 4 (and the outlier down to zero on a couple of topics).

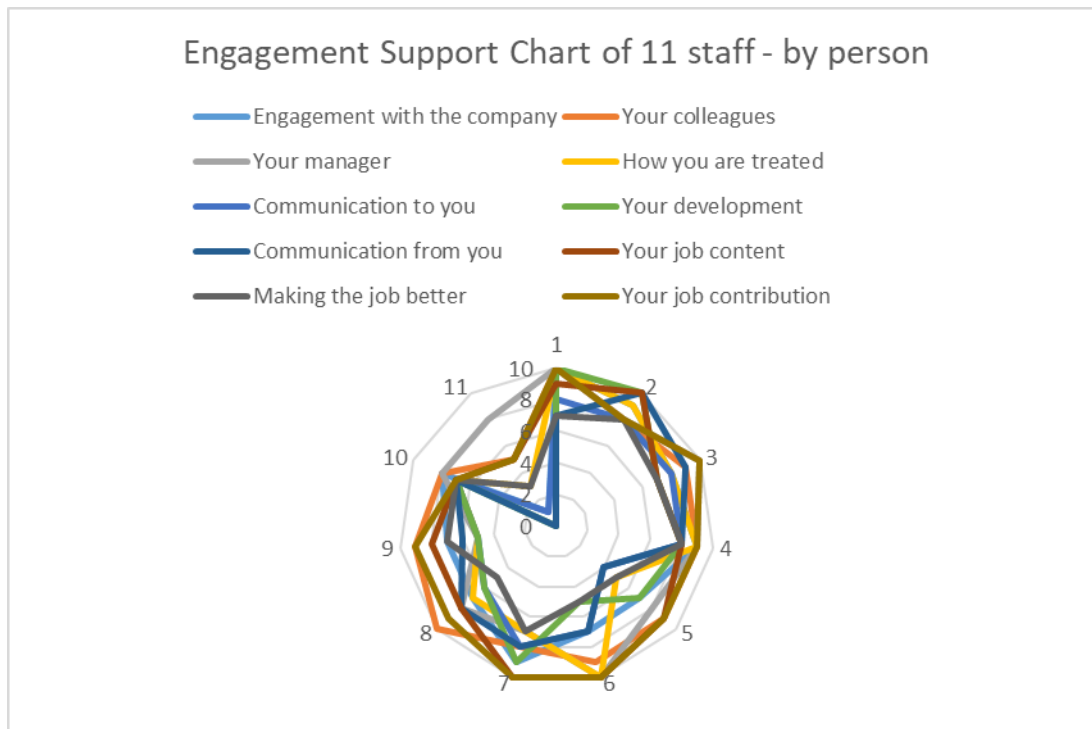


Figure 24: Initial Engagement Support Chart scores by individual from 11 staff

Importantly, *all* employees showed a reasonably wide spread of scores (except where bounded by the top score). I have considered that there may have been an element of conformance pressure with some of them, i.e. they may wish to make a point on some topics but not appear critical on everything, perhaps for fear of that making it a difficult discussion or because of any perceived repercussions. However, in discussions, the scoring seemed well-aligned with employees' initial comments although they often then said that their scores were too low or were influenced by just one or a few issues rather than being indicative of their overall experience. An example of this is provided in the case study, later in this chapter, relating to discussions with Cat. Another example comes from the conversations with Vicky. Referring to the score of 5 that she gave "How you are treated?", she said, "When I put a low score it was because something impacted me..... obviously I like the Company, I like my job, but there are just a few niggles".

However, it is also important to note that the scores are subjective to each person, so it is dangerous to read too much into numeric comparisons; their purpose was to act as a structure and starting point for a discussion.



The use of radar charts here has been beneficial for the reason described at the beginning of the section: allowing similar groups to be easily distinguished. However, there are also disadvantages to using radar charts such as the data becoming confusing if there are too many variables or too many data series. Even with only ten or eleven of each, as here, the diagrams are very “busy”, and it is difficult to discern some of the lines as they are obscured by others. Another risk is that the sequence of the “spokes” on the radar chart can significantly change the shape of the plot, and the area it encloses, and can influence understanding of the importance of any specific data set. The proximity of certain variables can also imply links where there are none.

In this case I consider that any confusion is slight, but with more data alternative graphical representations such as x-y plots or stacked bar charts may be more appropriate; although they bring their own pros and cons.

#### *6.6.2.2 Value Words*

During each interview I contemporaneously typed (transcribed) almost all of the discussion, taking particular care to capture the key words and phrases used by employees. Although I have primarily used a conversational version of Thick Description to extract key learnings from the interchanges, this detailed textual resource has also allowed a basic form of coding analysis. Because each employee has talked about matters largely relevant to their own job, the variation in topics has been very broad, so a full coding approach, let alone a grounded theory analysis, has not been utilised. Instead, a simpler approach of logging down the “value words” used by each individual has been employed.

The selection criteria that I used for choosing what were value words in the texts was to pick words that expressed emotion, words that related to effort or achievement (or lack thereof), or words that related to recognition or interaction (or lack thereof). This was necessarily a subjective choice, but I strove to be consistent in the type of words that I included.

Where a person used the same value word on multiple occasions throughout the meeting, I included that word multiple times. If a word was expressed in a different tense or form, I kept the original version so, for example, “motivation”, “motivated” and “self-motivation” have all been retained as distinct value words. Importantly, the exception to this was if a word had been used in a negative sense, I logged it down as such. For example, if someone said, “I do not feel appreciated” or “there needs to be more trust”, then I recorded the value word “unappreciated” or “untrusted”. I then separated positive value words from negative value words.

Although this remains primarily a qualitative approach, a quantitative aspect can be considered by considering the number of words of each type. Figure 25 illustrates how there were considerably fewer negative value words than positive in total, during the ESC discussions, with only two employees (numbers 5 and 11) reversing this trend in their individual discussions.

Person		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total
<b>Engagement Support Chart</b>	positive	7	16	11	10	8	29	14	10	28	8	5	<b>146</b>
	negative	5	3	1	1	16	6	5	4	9	2	12	<b>64</b>
<b>Job Focus Chart</b>	positive	5	13	9	5	6	9	12	8	11	10	8	<b>96</b>
	negative	0	1	0	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	<b>12</b>

Figure 25: Incidence of negative and positive value words in AR cycle 3 meetings

For the JFC meetings the ratio of positive to negative value increased considerably, although the total number reduced. This could be explained by the more objective focused conversations. During these meetings the negative value words decreased to only one or two per employee!

Although there were more negative than positive value words recorded during the ESC with employee 11, they were actually beneficial. The sometimes fractious discussion (at one point I challenged why he was still at the Company if his views were so negative about it) did open up several misconceptions and historic grievances which his manager and I were largely able to address during the discussion. During one exchange he referred to a manager, long since retired, who had told the employee that he was never allowed to come upstairs to my office and speak to me, whatever the circumstances, and he had persisted with that understanding. His current manager and I were both aghast at that and assured him that was definitely not the culture that we had. Obviously, he should involve his manager in any issues of concern first, but could always come to me anyway, and especially if he wanted to share improvement ideas. By the end of the discussion his attitude had changed completely, even to include his commitment to try to share his knowledge with some of the younger members of staff. This much more positive attitude persisted, with him regularly speaking to me and stopping me as I walked past his work area to show me improvements that he had made. That this change became permanent is the most positive feature. He subsequently began to work closely with other members of the team, where there had previously been antagonism (from both sides).

That there was a benefit in negative value words was also true with employee number 5, the other outlier. Again, there were some topics where perception and lack of full communication may have played a part, for example some issues over the difficulties encountered in changing over to the new

computer system, but there were also some more substantive issues that could be addressed – some specific examples are detailed later.

The full Value Word lists are contained in Appendix 8. However, it is difficult to see clear patterns directly from this raw data. As described by Newby (2010, p. 473) “There will be occasions when we have textual data but no clear idea... of themes or emphases”. A word cloud representation (ibid., p. 474) offers a visual representation to help identify the types of most commonly used words and whether there is a “concept worth pursuing”.

Therefore, I have used word clouds created via the free Word Cloud Generator resource at <https://www.jasondavies.com/wordcloud/>, to illustrate both the variety of value words used and the more commonly used words. The larger the word is displayed, the more frequently it occurred. For example, in figure 26 the word “happy” had been used eight times, while “proud” was used four times and the smallest words only once.

Figures 26 to 29 show the word charts for, respectively, Positive Value Words from ESC meetings, Negative Value Words from ESC meetings, Positive Value Words from JFC meetings and Negative Value Words from JFC meetings, from which I have then been able to make some assessment of the engagement level of the employees and the impact of the discussions.



Figure 26: Engagement Support Chart meetings - Positive Value Words in AR cycle 3

Note that in figure 26, which shows the Positive Value Words recorded in the AR cycle 3 ESC meetings, occasionally I have concatenated words for the purposes of displaying on the word cloud, for example “payrise”, and that hyphenated words drop the hyphen and appear concatenated anyway, e.g. “well-treated” becomes “welltreated” (a function of the software).

The sample size is probably too small to ascribe significant meaning to these words in isolation, but looking at just those that I recorded three or more times the frequency is

8 happy

4 proud

4 love (“love” was mainly used in the sense of “love my job”)

4 like

3 trust

3 support

3 motivated

3 learning

3 great

3 good

3 better

The fact that the most frequent value words are around the concept of being happy, proud and loving or liking their job or how they were treated, indicates what came out clearly in the conversations, that almost all staff start from a position of having an overarching positive attitude to the company. This almost certainly influences the nature of the ultimate outcome of the engagement project. With a less positively inclined workforce the engagement processes that I have developed may be less effective in “moving the needle” towards full and well-directed engagement.

Reinforcing this is the fact that most of the more frequently occurring negative value words are related to poor communication rather than mistreatment or disinterest, as seen in figure 27.





Figure 28: Job Focus Chart meetings – Positive Value Words in AR cycle 3

The Positive Value Word frequencies in the JFC meetings, shown in figure 28, are relatively low:

- 4 focus
- 2 training
- 2 time
- 2 research
- 2 learning
- 2 help
- 2 benefit

However, the four instances of focus came not from employees repeating the title of the session but from them commenting how helpful the process had been in helping them to find clarity in what they were doing, with the words help/benefit complementing the same topic. The training, learning, research word cluster also highlights some of the developmental conversations that were sparked by these sessions.



For completeness I include the Negative Value Words from the ESC, shown in figure 29, although the number is too small to provide insight.



Figure 29: Engagement Support Chart meetings - Negative Value Words in AR cycle 3

*Inclusion of some AR Cycle #2 data*

Within the second AR cycle there were four individuals who were part of the division addressed in the third cycle. The JFC chart data is obviously directly analogous. Although for the earlier sessions employees were not “prepared” by having completed the ESC, the meetings nevertheless covered similar ground. I have therefore produced equivalent word clouds incorporating this earlier data. The differences are necessarily incremental (adding four data sets to eleven) but do illustrate a couple of important points which justify their inclusion.

The numerical summary of value words is in figure 30.

	Person	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Total
<b>ESC (or equivalent discussion)</b>	positive	7	16	11	10	8	29	14	10	28	8	5	18	5	6	10	<b>185</b>
	negative	5	3	1	1	16	6	5	4	9	2	12	5	15	2	6	<b>92</b>
<b>Job Focus Chart</b>	positive	5	13	9	5	6	9	12	8	11	10	8	4	9	9	6	<b>124</b>
	negative	0	1	0	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	6	0	0	<b>20</b>

Figure 30: Incidence of Negative and Positive Value Words in AR cycle 3 meetings plus four data sets from AR cycle 2 meetings

Employees 12 to 15 are the additions from Cycle #2.

Figures 31 – 34 show the relevant word clouds.



Figure 31: Positive word cloud from ESC or equivalent meetings (eleven staff from AR Cycle 3 plus four from AR Cycle 2)





Figure 32: Negative word cloud from ESC or equivalent meetings (eleven staff from AR Cycle 3 plus four from AR Cycle 2)



Figure 33: Positive word cloud from JFC meetings (eleven staff from AR Cycle 3 plus four from AR Cycle 2)



Figure 34: Negative word cloud from JFC meetings (eleven staff from AR Cycle 3 plus four from AR Cycle 2)

The word clouds from the ESC meetings changed remarkably little with the addition of the non-ESC employees. Two words to notice, in figure 32, that become more prominent, although still only two instances each, are “unsupported” and “lack-of-time”. In the JFC negative word cloud, figure 34, “staffing” is prominent (also two instances). When the Cycle #2 meetings were occurring, we were trying to recruit staff for this division. Although the team were aware of this the challenges of operating undermanned came through clearly. By Cycle #3 the resource level had been addressed, which explains why these words did not appear in the Cycle #3 data alone. This points to the challenge of, especially in small data samples, the analysis being skewed by a current issue taking precedence. In practice, at the conversation level, this is appropriate, because any issues that are affecting the engagement, whether real or perceived, need to be addressed.

A similar point is the emergence of the word “efficient” in the JFC positive word cloud, figure 33. This arose because one individual used it three times during the meeting.

As previously explained, word clouds offer a simple visual method to appreciate the most frequently used words and to look for concepts or themes that emerge from textual data. The big advantage of word clouds is their simplicity in highlighting certain words that are often used. The corresponding

disadvantage is the importance of suitable selection of relevant words from the original data. Obviously, a simple analysis of every word used would result in “and” and “the”, and other common words, appearing as very significant, which would not convey any useful information.

By being specific here and focusing on “value words”, and separating them into positive and negative, I have been able to provide more useful analysis, which has reinforced some benefits of the ESC/JFC approach. However, the frequency of individual words alone does not convey some of themes of the conversations well. This approach also does not provide the opportunity for digging deeper into the data.

In summary, whilst this form of textual analysis can provide some insight, a more detailed review of the meeting transcripts can yield richer information and is pursued in the next section.

#### *6.6.2.3 Affirmations of benefit*

With the “engagement process” now refined, one of the most important questions was whether it was providing any benefit. Here, I consider the “in action” perspective of benefit, firstly as expressed by the employee during the meetings.

Eight of the eleven employees made specific comments about the usefulness of the process/meetings, which express well the direct and immediate benefits.

- “If we can have everyone having those conversations then I think your sales would be better”
- “Useful to get it all in one place”
- “process is not too bad - you really have to think about it.....putting it down in writing it has made me realise that I do need to stop asking [my colleague] to do that and I need to do it [to learn]”
- “I’ll be honest the actual chart [JFC] does focus the mind... the radial one [ESC] may be good for everyone because it forces you to ask some questions”
- “that’s what this is for I suppose” in reference to how we solve some of the support issues raised. “I think this is a really good process,” and “you guys are listening to me and taking things on board which you’ve said yourself.”
- “some extra work, but nice to talk about it, it did help writing it down [JFC]”
- “I did [find it a useful exercise] - it helps to ground and balance yourself and look for goals rather than be blinkered with the day to day tasks”

- “This meeting has been the best thing we've done in nine years”

For the remaining three, although they made no specific statement of benefit, one appeared to welcome the opportunity to air concerns and most importantly to discuss his career aspirations. The other two appeared to show by their manner that they enjoyed the discussions, with further training being put in place at the request of one of them. One person became very animated when we started discussing how we can expand and develop the business, including looking for other businesses or people to add into our portfolio. He has brought forward several acquisition ideas, and although none have yet come to fruition, he continues to be enthusiastic about proposing further opportunities for how to take the business forward.

Another perspective on the value of the conversations were comments made by the employees' managers made either during the meeting, or in discussion with me immediately afterwards, or my own reflections shortly after the meeting, as mentioned below.

The QEHS Manager, having newly taken over the role, commented on the value of the process and how he could see that this form of deeper conversation would assist in the task of better engaging managers around the business in their QEHS responsibilities. Subsequently, although not using the form's structure, he has established a working method where there are more in-depth conversations to establish area specific solutions rather than a simple blanket task approach. This has led to a noticeable change in the distributed ownership of QEHS with improvements in housekeeping, accident and near-miss reporting, and up-to-date training across the company.

With another manager the conversation opened up a discussion around her areas of discomfort. Although completely committed to the company, and willing to work on whatever was asked of her, she explained that there were areas that created high levels of stress and concern, particularly around sales activity with customers. She discussed an incident that had occurred a few months previously where she felt that she had let a customer down and that had “worried the s\*\*t out of me”. Although not perhaps a completely new revelation, this clarity did cause us to restructure this individual's role to better suit her, otherwise very strong, capabilities again creating an overall more efficient organisation. Our overt acceptance of her comments resulted in a very visual relaxation. She literally sighed and settled back into her chair. This alignment could only have a positive effect on engagement.

With a third manager, two direct and interrelated benefits arose. Firstly, he expressed a desire to further develop his career within the company, but secondly and most importantly identified areas in which he would like to progress. This included further training on some topics, especially around use

of the computer system. In particular, there were some current areas where he did not have the understanding to do some tasks and was reliant on one of his team. It would be, and was, very easy to train him to have these skills. Why had he not asked before? Perhaps there was some embarrassment, lack of time, or perhaps even the desire to do so (thus preparing himself for future roles) did not arise until he considered it, as part of these discussions. When I (delicately) asked the question, he said that if he had just come and told us he needed more training on the computer system we would have questioned what he had been doing for six months. With this individual, quite a mild and deferential person, this process provided a “safe” forum to explore how to develop his role and career within the business and, in his words, it gave him "permission" to raise the topic. What strengthened this point further was that after the meeting I discovered that one of my co-directors had had a conversation with him previously where he had responded that he preferred to focus on the hands-on stuff and leave the computer input to his colleague. My surmise is that he was embarrassed to admit to a director that he was not confident on how to do it, which reinforces the value of this engagement process that he felt gave him that *permission*.

There were a couple of other examples of employees who, it seemed, needed the “permission” provided by these meetings in order to share their career development wishes. One of these was a particularly eloquent and confident individual who, once the topic arose, surfaced a very clear ambition to develop his career into a senior management role. It was troubling to reflect that this may not have been revealed without a conversation of this type, and he may have found it easier to look for another job outside of Lister.

In another case the JFC brought out the desire of one of the team to be able to progress and to negotiate himself with suppliers. He commented that he wanted the confidence to do that but “struggled with change”.

Although I had been getting people to complete the JFC, after reading Cialdini (2007), discussed in section 3.4.4 – Engagement as a driver of Performance - I started to be much more explicit during discussions in asking people to think about their specific short-term targets and to write them down in their own words. The individual being discussed was the first case in point. Even though I explained to him exactly what I was asking him to do and the *self-reinforcing commitment* reason behind it, it still seemed (during the meeting) to have a profound effect on him. By actually writing it down, he was much more precise in stating what he was going to do.

In this case the commitment was the personal target to be proactive in creating three opportunities to setup and lead meetings with suppliers, during the following three months, to gain better terms of supply. We agreed that we would support him in these meetings but that he would have the

opportunity to lead. It took a little longer than three months for this to be done but the confidence developed by this process was noticeable.

An interesting example of an immediate tangible benefit of the process came when, later in the day after the JFC meeting, I found one individual, with whom we had had a very good conversation around the topic of focus, thoroughly tidying his work area.

It is important to state that with *every* employee in this group there were specific actions that arose during the discussions for them to address to, in some way, make their job, or their enjoyment of it, better. In most cases there were also tasks for their manager or me to address that would further improve matters. Some of these have been mentioned above, but a complete list is included as Appendix 9. These are distinct from, and in addition to, the individual's ESC inputs (actions).

I considered all of these to be direct benefits from the engagement process and the particular format of ESC and JFC meetings that was emergent from the AR approach.

#### 6.6.2.4 *Other positive discussions and outcomes*

With some members of the team there were less revelatory outcomes, but in all cases the discussions definitely helped create focus on the individuals' work and, in some cases, the next steps to grow the business. These arose from both the ESC, typically related to comfort and enjoyment of the job (the removal of *irritations*), and the JFC, where often benefits or improvements were identified by resolving blockages (the removal of *roadblocks*). Almost always there was a mixture from both.

##### 6.6.2.4.1 *Improvement outcomes – tangible and intangible*

The following are just a small selection of examples of *direct* business improvements.

- the redirection of certain types of account queries directly to Tom, rather than via one of his managers who invariably had to refer it on to him anyway. This saved many hours per month
- a re-communication of the priorities of picking goods for shipment to the remote branch, which created immediate improvements in customer service
- A member of the customer service team commented that one thing he was taking from these discussions was that he was now checking emails for importance rather than order of arrival.



We also discussed the possibility for him to pro-actively advise customers of order progress. He said, “Yes, that would be good because I have lost the service element” and also “to be able to chase quotes up – I haven’t had chance to do that. That would fill in that service excellence box as well.” The enthusiasm with which he said this was quite amazing. I reflected that this single interchange was the most important outcome of the entire meeting, and that we had to act to protect this “nugget” of both business improvement and engagement. It was another good example of where someone was doing an acceptable job, but had the desire and capability to do more, but lacked the opportunity or “voice” to do so, without some intervention such as this engagement process. By reorganising some work roles, we were able to free up sufficient time for him to do this. An example of the direct benefit was that in early 2023 one of our large customers, who had previously split their demand between us and a competitor, decided to move all work fully to us. They cited our excellent service and communication as the reason. This top-down (the engagement process), bottom-up (proposal of improved service), top-down (providing resource), bottom-up (excellent service resulting in success) cycle was repeated with many other staff in various ways throughout the AR project.

- during the discussions, Connor volunteered himself to provide more training for the new starters in the department. He followed that through enthusiastically, even when there were further changes in manning in the area. He was ultimately promoted to supervise part of the area.
- the change of the way that we operated with a large supplier. The level of frustration that one individual felt at not being able to ensure accurate stocks, and his request for a meeting with all relevant parties to find a better approach suddenly gained traction through the Forward Together meetings. It transpired that others involved also had similar issues. Following several internal discussions and with the Supplier, we ultimately changed our ordering system. That resulted in a much-improved stock accuracy and an annual stocktake write-off reduction of at least £10,000 per annum.
- the monthly production of reports for certain staff, to help direct activity – especially for sales team members who are less familiar with data manipulation. One commented “I don’t think trawling through data is the best use of my time, but like everybody I can get blinkered in the day-to-day and it is hard to get out the box and look forward”. Once we defined a suitable format so that he can “see the wood for the trees”, he is now making good use of the information to address any down-trending accounts.

In some other cases there were improvements that we made, that were identified during the engagement meetings process which, whilst they did not directly generate a business improvement, could be considered as *engagement underpinning improvements*, or engagement enablers. In most of these examples it is the removal of a blockage or frustration that is the key to igniting more engagement.

- converting a rarely used office into an additional “break room” to address the problem that the existing "canteen" was too cramped so that staff ate at their desks and were then interrupted during lunch. This was a completely unknown concern to me prior to these meetings, but arose from a few employees, and the room is now well-used by many staff. I received substantial positive feedback on making this change (especially about how quickly we were able to respond), even to the extent that a remotely based manager who used to use the office when he came into the branch commented that he thought it was fantastic that we had done that for people (I had made arrangements for him to use another location – otherwise solving one issue would have simply created another!)
- agreeing to fully redecorate and upgrade the main sales office
- several requests for additional training such as financial understanding so that the individual feels more confident in their understanding of how their area is performing
- re-instigating the role of cleaner (where we had shared the task, including me, during the financially uncertain times at the height of the pandemic) – but people wanted to focus on their core jobs
- many comments around communication especially wanting more understanding of the company as a whole and about other employees – this led to significant improvements in the six-monthly company newsletter that I produce, including a lot of content provided by employees on their hobbies, interests and events.
- linked to the point in the previous list, Connor also became passionate about keeping his area organised, with all processes running efficiently. His manager supported him in this, by allowing daily time to devote to reorganisation of the area. When we were audited, in early 2023, to maintain certification to ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management System, ISO 14001:2015 Environmental Management System, and ISO 45001:2018 Occupational Health and Safety Management System, we received no major or minor discrepancies or even OFIs (opportunities for improvement) in that section of the company. In fact, at the close-out meeting, the auditor specifically commented on the exceptionally high standards in this area, and the noticeable positive attitude of Connor and his team.



I was also pleased that the process uncovered some more difficult topics. There was an example of a strong dislike that had arisen between two members of the team, primarily driven by their perceptions of lack of support from each other. This came to light during the independent ESC discussions. Through discussion with each of them, their line manager and I were able to put a different perspective on some of the perceptions that each held, which resulted in a much better working relationship, even if it stopped short of friendship, between them.

#### 6.6.2.4.2 Case Study : Surfacing and addressing concerns and turning them into drivers for engagement

Despite my expectations that there would be many requests for higher pay, several staff commented on how appreciative they were, both of the support through Covid and for the more recent pay increases. There were a few who mentioned wanting to increase their income, including one who stated his aim to double his salary, but he expressed that as an ambition to “develop into a senior management role” over a five-to-ten-year period.

However, there was one specific complaint about pay within this group. I have related the following interaction virtually verbatim, because I consider it to be such an important example of how taking the time to have proper conversations provided the opportunity to not only surface and address a matter of concern in a clear and unambiguous way, but also to address some related misconceptions/perceptions, and ultimately to drive personal and business improvement and engagement with the department and company aims.

Cat had scored “How you are treated” as a five. When we came to that topic she said, “I must have been in a bad mood”.

I replied, “So, go on”.

Cat leaned back in her chair, paused, and pursed her lips. I could see that she was wrestling with how to approach the subject. I waited.

She leaned forward and pointing at her copy of the ESC, said, “See that is the thing. It is not about how I am treated because I have no issues with that. It is the fairly rewarded.” Here she was referring to the subsidiary question from the ESC of “Do you feel well treated, recognised, and fairly rewarded by the Company?”

Cat continued, "It is the 'fairly rewarded' I think, maybe that's why. Only because in the past I have been, not offered a pay rise, that's wrong, but I have asked for them. I've also been told, 'yeah, in six months', but it has been six years, and it's not happened. And it seems like, you hear on the grapevine, oh so-and-so has handed their notice in, but they've offered them more money so now they're staying. That's how I feel, that if I came in and said 'Right, I'm leaving tomorrow, I've got another job', they'll say 'Oh, hang on a minute, we can give you this now'".

Without a pause, in a very animated voice, she continued "And it's gets to that point [where it feels like] the only way I'm going to get any more money or the only way I'm going to do anything is to leave, and then you get rewarded after the fact, not for actually what you're doing while you're working here. That's what that's about!", Cat exhaled.

I paused for a moment, and to lighten the situation a little said, "Ok, little bit of passion there."

She replied, "Six years Pete, you know", and she laughed, in a slightly exasperated but friendly manner, "it's only because when I started Tom said 'We'll see how you get on for six months'. Like I said it has been six years. I'm obviously doing a good job because I'm still here. Then [one of my colleagues] left and then he said, 'Give it six months'" doing like two people's jobs, 'and we'll see how you get on'. Nothing ever came of that."

Then she explained how there had been a change of office, and she asked again, but "got told no, which I understand because of the pandemic", "other people threatened to leave, and then they get rewarded. I don't want to get to that point. Well, I'm sick of asking now, so if I leave then.....,", she paused, looked down, and looked back up at me and said, in almost a begging voice "Because I don't want to leave!", and then looked down again for a moment.

Her manner implied to me that what she was saying was her genuine perception, that she had been misled and that she was missing out compared to others.

I reflected in the moment that I had to handle this carefully, to find a way that she would stay, but also to open the possibility of building engagement, which was clearly at risk while she held such feelings. I could not remember her salary level, but I had a memory that we had given her quite a high starting salary when she had first joined the business. I therefore needed to find a way to temper any expectations. I also knew that I could not resolve the issue there and then, but I wanted

to continue the meeting to cover all the other topics, and could not leave this topic without, in some sense, “rounding it off”.

I started by explaining that I obviously had not been party to the discussions so I could not have a pay discussion with her right then, as she would appreciate. She nodded and said “Yeah”, in a friendly manner. Encouraged by her reaction I went on to explain that, of course, it was perfectly reasonable for her or anyone to ask for more pay, but we have to then make that decision. She had asked and Tom had decided. I would have a conversation with him, and he may come to the same or different decision. I then explained that it was definitely not the case that every time someone resigned that we offered them an increase. I was not saying that it never happened, if we realised that we had not been paying a market rate, but there were other cases where people handed in their notice and we said, “ok, see you”. Cat nodded, “Yeah”.

“So,” I said, “for anyone to do it as a way of trying to get an increase it is a dangerous game, unless they are truly ready to go.”

“Oh, yeah, I know,” agreed Cat.

I went on to explain about the uncertain economic situation we, as a company, as well as all of us as individuals, were facing and how we had to be careful to ensure business survival. She leaned forward, and listened intently, as I shared with her the cost of a 1% increase for all staff equalling around £50,000, so that the 4% we had already given everyone (in January 2022) had cost around half of our annual profit. I explained that this did not mean we would not do more (in fact, at this point in early August, I was already anticipating the further general increase of 5% that we would apply from September 2022, due to the spiralling cost of living). By sharing this level of detail with Cat, which she had probably never realised before, I considered that if the decision was not to increase her pay, she would have more understanding of the context, rather than it feeling like a personal slight. She listened carefully to everything that I said.

I said “On average I think we are doing a good job. Now for you as an individual you have every right to say ‘Yeah, but what about me?’ and that’s fair. I get that.”

Cat nodded, “Yeah, yeah.”

I finished off with, "And that is a difficulty sometimes when you do have a situation where somebody says I got another job and you have to think 'do I offer them more?'. Because what we don't want is to end up with people doing similar jobs..... We do have a lot of variety; actually, we've got a hundred people and probably got sixty unique jobs; but nevertheless, they are of similar levels. So, if you suddenly pay someone more money you have to think that is another five of them that I've got to do that for, can we afford that? So, all those things come into play. Anyway, you've aired the point and I'm glad you have. Because that is part of what this is about. I'll go back and get Tom to at least be aware that this is in your head and we'll see where that goes ok?"

Cat nodded again, "Yeah." Her earlier irritation had completely subsided. We were now able to move to the next topic, which was 'Communication to You'. As we started to discuss that, I made a note at the time that "*she seemed perfectly happy, no hangover from salary discussion*".

After the meeting finished, I met with Tom and asked him about the pay situation. He explained that when her previous colleague left, she had asked about a pay increase and he had said that he could not promise anything but would consider it, once the situation had settled down. However, due to other factors the work volume of her task had reduced, and he had had a further conversation with her, notifying her that an increase was not available, and that her salary was already high for the role she was doing.

Tom continued, "Then, a few months ago, since the office move, she asked me again about salary. I said that I never made any promises about a salary increase, and that there will be no further increase at this stage. She is well paid for the role she does. However, we have provided a vehicle for her, and we are paying the fuel, so she has that additional financial benefit."

We checked again and confirmed that her salary put her in the top salary band for her type of role.

A few days later, I spoke to her, one-to-one, on another matter, at her request. Interestingly, it was a complaint about another member of staff, but she was at pains to say that she did not want them to get into trouble. When I gave her another perspective, she agreed that their comments were understandable, but she said she had wanted "to tell me, because she *had my attention*".

I found that a fascinating comment, and subsequently noticed many other people mentioning things to me, in passing, that perhaps they would not have done before the Forward Together

meetings. Often, they were minor points, frequently comments on successes they have had, but demonstrated a real interest in how the company is performing, a pride in their own area and work, and, I believe, a demonstration of their desire to show their connection, or *engagement* with the company.

I took the opportunity then to respond to her question about salary. I explained that, versus comparable jobs within the business, she was already very well paid, which was coupled with other benefits we were providing. In the current role there would be no change, but that I wanted to be up-front and clear about it. She took it very well, saying that she understood and appreciated the feedback and clear answer. Later that day, I issued a letter to all staff notifying them that there would be a general 5% salary increase, with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2022 (on top of the 4% awarded in January) to assist with cost-of-living increases resulting from the economic impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite her acceptance of the earlier news this can only have helped soften that.

The very next day, I held the second planned Forward Together meeting with Cat, this time along with Tom, to go through the remainder of the ESC topics. Her manner was extremely positive, with no mention of the salary issue. In fact, she raised some ideas of improvements that we could make in her area of work, particularly related to training that some other colleagues would benefit from to aid their performance and to assist in how she could them support them. Her manager took this training task and acted upon it. At the end of this session, I gave her the JFC and explained the concept.

When we held the next meeting, she opened the JFC sheet but had not written anything on it. She said she had “been looking at it on and off” and had “got notes in here”, tapping her head. I was a little frustrated and gave a wry smile. She noticed and quickly said, “I’ve written some notes,” and opened her notepad, “but been going back and forth. Hard to put down on paper because in the day to day you just do it.” Seeing that she had some notes, I said, “That is the whole point – you don’t sit above yourself and focus on what matters.”

As we started to discuss her notes, and I encouraged her to transcribe the key points onto the JFC as we developed them, it became clear that she had given this a lot of thought.

When we reached “How will I know if I am succeeding or making progress”, Cat said, “I would like to know more about if we are making profit or not and looking after the customers. I would like to get more [customers]. We’ve tried. The only issue with that is that I can only go so far. I’ve given lists to [the sales reps].”

I responded, “I can only go so far – what do you mean?”

Cat replied “I can research customers in a certain area. I can look back at the customers we’ve had before, and send them in, but sometimes.... that doesn’t work.”

I suggested “You could try ringing lapsed customers up. My impression is your job is lumpy; sometimes very busy and sometimes you have quiet periods.”

Cat was nodding, “So long as I don’t have to go out, I would [be scared to do that]”.

I replied, “I wouldn’t ask you to, but you might find once you’ve spoken on the phone it would be easier.”

She said, “I wouldn’t even ring the Chinese.”

Obviously, Cat does ring customers up regularly to provide updates, or to follow up order numbers, but her point was clear; she was nervous about making unsolicited calls.

I said, “We all start like that, but if you are serious then Tom and I will train you like we have [some of the sales representatives]. I wouldn’t force you, but it is a way to grow your career and your role, like you said you wanted when we spoke with Tom, and you said you love your job but want it to grow.”

Again, Cat leaned forward, and said, a little hesitantly, “Yes.”

As we moved on to the next JFC, and I asked her how she would know if she was looking after the customers well. Her reply was, “If I was doing some cold calling we would see the sales growing, get the [team] working harder!”.

At this point, I knew that she had *engaged* with the idea. I asked, “Do you know the term ‘creeping commitment’?”

She smiled and replied, "I used to do a bit [in a previous company], thrust into it, you [find that] know more than you think."

It was only after she had "signed up" to the idea that I mentioned that, if she was successful in this expanded role, especially in winning new customers, we would be able to consider some improvement in her salary, because it would now be a different job.

As mentioned before, this was a great example of someone expressing a desire to understand more and ultimately expand their role, and being able to explore, through this process, in a way that perhaps would not otherwise occur, how that might be achieved, creating the opportunity for both personal and business improvement.

Tom and I gave Cat some focused one-to-one training and within a month she had regained one lapsed customer and had commitment from another to use us again. This pattern continued over the following months, with a small but relevant number of previous customers being re-engaged by Cat's actions, supporting the activities of the external team. As she grows in confidence, and begins targeting new prospects, we are hopeful that she will be able to expand the business. What is clear is that her engagement level is high and well-directed.

Another very interesting aspect of this case was how the topic of pay appeared to have *bled over* into the scoring that she gave in the ESC into at least four other categories, with scores of five for all of Your Manager, How You Are Treated, Communication To You, and Your Development. In fact, perhaps a better characterisation of this is that pay itself was never the core issue here, it was her perception of unfairness. It was also interesting to note that once we were in the conversation about her ESC she softened many of the poorer scores, with comments like "I must have been in a bad mood", "the same as the previous discussion" (this related to the pay issue, i.e. she explicitly confirmed that she had scored more than one topic low *for the same reason*), and "don't know why I marked it low". During the discussions (both ESC and JFC) she repeatedly used the phrase "I love my job", and it was said in a fully sincere way.

#### 6.6.2.4.3 Research Journal “vignettes”

During this period, I had continued to maintain a research journal in which, most days, I recorded either my additional thoughts following one of the formal Forward Together meetings, or details and reflections on other employee interactions, in light of my more awakened or awakening perceptions. In some of this thesis I have described the engagement process as relatively straightforward, linear even, with an almost inevitable positive outcome. In fact, although so far the discussions and follow-ups have all been positive, for me and the other managers involved in the meetings and subsequent interactions, whilst we have been “in the moment”, it has often felt confusing and uncertain. I have often had the image of the swan in my head during these encounters – graceful on the surface but paddling furiously beneath!

The following examples, taken from the journal, illustrate some of challenges.

##### *Celebrate the non-problems*

With one employee, a manager who reports directly to me and whom I know very well, we had talked through all the lower scored (although still quite high) topics on the ESC. Most of them related to historical matters and were no issue anyway, which he volunteered. In this case, I had shortcut the process slightly and given him the ESC and JFC together, but asked him to complete them in sequence, because I was very confident that we would skip through the ESC with no problems. I was therefore about to move onto the JFC, but he said, “Don’t you want to hear some good things?”

I had been so focused on the ESC being about solving problems that I had not even considered that he might want to talk about non-problems. That was an important realisation that I carried into the following meetings: that discussing positive matters could be just as reinforcing of engagement and the positive culture as removing problems.

He talked about the topic “how are you treated”, and all was very positive. He seemed proud and pleased to have the opportunity to give this feedback. He especially raised the point that I had ordered him an adjustable sit/stand desk, because he suffered with back problems, and I hadn’t asked for “proof”; I had just trusted that he needed it. He was quite “blown away” by how ready I had been to find a way to address his back problem. I knew that I had partly done that to gain appreciation from him because I knew I was asking him to take a lot on in a new role. He was absorbing a large part of



the work of another manager so, although I had been genuine in my desire to make his life easier, I felt a little uneasy receiving praise.

Anyway, he then mentioned that another individual, who we both knew also suffered considerable back pain, would benefit from one. I felt personally disappointed and embarrassed that I had never even considered that, and it made me realise how our thoughts can run down a narrow, focused path, aimed at just solving the one problem right in front of us.

So, there were several learning points from this interaction.

1. Discussion of positive matters may be important to reinforce good behaviours and strengthen engagement. It is important to allow time for this.
2. Useful learning and self-reflection can also arise from this sort of conversation.
3. Where there are solutions identified it is important to consider how they can be extended to resolve wider issues.

### *Tapping potential*

On one day I held three meetings, along with Tom, with three of his managers/ supervisors. They had all scored their ESC highly, expressed themselves as being happy in their roles and the conversations were positive. However, reflecting the above experience, in all cases we uncovered issues that would make their work lives and enjoyment better. These were things that, despite the good working relationship that Tom had with them, had not been discussed previously, at least in a way that had prompted real action.

Some of the issues were around availability of stock for their specific customers or areas. They had largely accepted that “this was the way it was” and so did not complain. Tom, thinking on his feet, was able to identify and implement a couple of solutions during the same day (reserving stock against a specific customer on K8, and organising for a report to be produced that would identify internal transfer shortages for action).

Another important topic was their career aspirations. Two were clear that they wanted to stay in their existing roles but were hungry (much more than we had understood) for growth. We agreed some new recruitments and, in one case some training, to support this. The other had a longer-term aspiration to move into other areas of the business, and away from a very hands-on role. Again, we immediately organised a training and communication plan to facilitate this.

These examples further reinforce the notion that, even with very good, committed people, a lot of the potential can be left untapped, and some form of structured conversation can unlock it.

### *Talking unlocks problems*

Most interestingly, and encouragingly, in respect of the importance of communication, has been the development of some managers. A couple of examples relating to the same individual illustrates this.

Sometime after he and some members of his team had been through the Forward Together meetings, Josh mentioned to me that despite a previous conversation with him to minimise overtime, one of his supervisors, who headed a small separate business section, had put in another claim for a full week of overtime payments. Josh was about to send him a stern email reminding him to keep the overtime down. I suggested that Josh speak to him instead to understand whether he is genuinely busy before he challenges the situation. Following the meeting with him, Josh told me that it was a very, very positive discussion. The supervisor had several proposals and actions to try to increase sales. He had been undertaking the overtime because a backlog had built up when he had been off for 3 days with Covid and his colleague had been struggling to keep up. However, that had already been resolved. He mentioned many plans for his spare time going forward to the point that Josh had to ask him if he would still be available to do overtime when it is needed, to which the supervisor agreed. Clearly this was a good result compared to how it might have evolved if an email had been interpreted (or meant) negatively.

There have been several other such examples, with the most recent being when Josh told me about a meeting that he held with a different one of his supervisors and their subordinate. In this case the worker was a driver/warehouse operative. He had expressed frustration and annoyance when asked to leave some of his warehouse duties to do some deliveries in the van. Josh said to me, "In the past I would have just had him in the office and given him a good telling off for not responding appropriately to his supervisor. But now I sat them both down and we had an open discussion". It transpired that the operative had behaved as he did not because he wanted to avoid the delivery driving job but because he was so concerned about the impact on other customers if he neglected his warehouse role. He apologised for his behaviour, and then his supervisor explained that they had assessed the priorities before making the decision but realised that they had not explained this. Josh said, "All three of us agreed that it was an example of poor communication, but it proved to me yet again the need to discuss these things before misunderstandings get out of hand. I'm trying to do it every time now!"

As mentioned previously, one outcome from the meetings was to improve the content of the six-monthly newsletter, the Company Update. The day after the issue of the first upgraded version I received some very positive feedback from one of our staff. His wife (who works in a global corporate) had really enjoyed reading it, especially the sections about the training that people had received and about their interests. She said it really showed the family feel. At her company the newsletters are very corporate and all about the business and numbers. This was very positive feedback, that demonstrated how powerful a slight change in the type of communication could be.

I mentioned this to Tom who said he had had the opposite reaction. He had been accosted that morning by another member of staff complaining “why are all these people getting training and I am not getting any?”. Tom had explained that it was relevant to their job, but that we were happy to train the individual, if he wanted to progress. Tom and I discussed this and agreed that whilst it was not nice to be “accosted” actually it had been a positive because we wanted people to say what they want and push for it.

### *Creating trust*

A different employee came to see me to ask for help with understanding the letter that he has been sent from the CSA, showing his salary, and asking for more money for his wife/daughter. He came in and asked if I could spare a minute – looking very nervous. I said of course and he shut the door behind him. I thought, “Oh no, I hope he isn’t going to hand his notice in”, but he then said, “It’s about this letter”. He showed me and explained that his wife wants him to have his child more of the time and when he said he could not she had gone to the CSA to get more money. He wanted to check the figures were right before he rang them and made a fool of himself challenging the numbers.

I was relieved that it was not his notice and said, “Yes, let’s see if we can check your salary and the other bits.” He said that it might be the value of the car (which it turned out to be, as a major part on top of his salary). Then he said, “Don’t worry if you are busy”, but I immediately said “No, no problem let’s sort it out.” It had become apparent to me how significant these issues are and I wanted to “prove” to him how seriously I take helping him.

The key point is that I believe that he would never have come to me like that before we had had our Forward Together meetings and, if he had, I probably would have previously asked him to leave it with me. Although the figure was correct, so not the answer he might have ideally wanted, he was very grateful that I had checked it out for him.

### *Creating community*

One of the team members had to leave early, at noon, on the Saturday of stocktake, because it was his son's seventeenth birthday. He had been telling me, whilst we had been working together that morning, that his son was about to begin college, and all about the course that he was excited to study. He said that there was going to be a strike but that none of his teachers were affected. On the Tuesday he made a point to come and show me a photo of his son arriving there to be faced with a picket line, as some of the lecturers are on strike. This reinforces the relationship building so that we have more of a friendship relationship than employer/employee.

### *Theory X managers*

All the managers who were directly involved in the Forward Together meetings, initially as the "subject" and then, alongside me, meeting with their staff, behaved and discussed the process in a fully *bought in* manner. I did, however, have a discussion with a senior manager not yet directly involved whose view gave me cause for concern that with certain managers it may not be so straightforward.

I had been discussing with Arthur the challenges that I had been having trying to get the gap insurance arranged on a new car that I had bought. I had ultimately rung up the insurance company myself because I had not been able to rely on the car salesman to resolve the issue. I quite flippantly mentioned that you could not rely on people to do what they promise.

He said he had just been experiencing the same challenges with Frank, who he had been working more closely with on a particular project. He thought he was not very engaged with his job, and didn't put enough effort in. He said, "That is what you are working on isn't it, Pete? How do you do that, how do you get people to take their work seriously?"

I shared with him some slides that I had produced giving an overview of:

1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs
2. McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y
3. Sources of power (from legitimate through to referent)

4. Perception vs Reality
5. Transactional Analysis – Parent, Adult, Child

He understood all the concepts very quickly and at one point mentioned that you could use these to manipulate people to do what you want. I said that is a word that I would tend to avoid as what we are trying to do is engage them so that they actively and willingly want to improve their work and the Company. At this stage I also explained the concept of antecedents of employee engagement, especially perceived organisational support, job characteristics and procedural justice.

Arthur then started to express that his view of Frank had been changing as he had worked with him, he now seemed to be more responsive, and was getting the tasks done.

I explained that this could be either that Arthur had had a preconception (a perception) of Frank that had been changed as they worked more closely together, or that Frank's attitude and performance had changed as he felt more valued because Arthur is working closely and directly with him – his work felt more valued, and he felt more important. Arthur conceded that may be part of it but said that he had now decided that it was the colleague that Frank worked closely with who was the bad influence on his attitude, and because he had been on holiday that week Frank had been performing better. I suggested to Arthur that he might have a certain perception of that individual, but it may be just that, a perception. He somewhat grudgingly accepted that but still stated that he thought he was right about him.

It was at this point that I reiterated my Theory Y view that creating the right atmosphere and removing the blockages that stop people from achieving their full potential, is a more productive approach. I shared with, and explained to Arthur, the Job Focus Chart. He particularly liked the section "What gets in the way?" as he said he saw a large part of his task was to find the [tangible] things that get in the way and remove them.

When I suggested that he might like to have a go at completing the chart for himself, his response, somewhat as I had originally expected, was that it was not for him [as a senior manager]. Only by asking him to do it for me, as part of my project, did he relent.

This interaction illustrated that whilst, intellectually, there is a high degree of understanding of the benefits of this approach, the deep-seated views, often Theory X type views, that Arthur and perhaps other managers may hold, may make creating an engagement culture somewhat challenging.

### 6.6.3 Evaluation

#### 6.6.3.1 Effectiveness

One of the most important points to draw from the third Action Research cycle was that the combined ESC and JFC process proved effective in leading the employee through a form of self-reflection, gently guided by the top-down structure of the format but allowing significant scope for bottom-up input.

The process was also extremely effective in unlocking opportunities. Some examples of business and engagement improvement activities and actions arising from these meetings have been given above, and more are listed in Appendix 9, but what is most notable is that tangible and agreed ideas arose with *all* of the eleven employees involved.

In addition, this approach had a significant positive effect on the attitude and behaviour of some individuals, primarily by addressing some of their perceptions or misconceptions. Cat, in the case study above provides one example, but the most dramatic change was “employee 11” mentioned in the “Value words” section above.

#### 6.6.3.2 Permission and expectation

The value-words analysis did indicate “that almost all staff start from a position of having an overarching positive attitude to the company”. This undoubtedly simplified the application of this process, although there were two employees, number 11 particularly, who had less favourable views, but by using this approach to address some issues, a negative perception could be (spectacularly) turned around, as just mentioned.

Along similar lines, it was no surprise to me that I would learn things that I had not heard before through this process because most of the staff involved were not my direct reports. What did surprise me was, given the friendly family culture (which was constantly remarked upon and reinforced by employees), the extent to which staff mentioned things that they had seemingly never overtly raised

before. One of the managers said to me, after a meeting with one of his staff, that there were "a lot of things coming out in these meetings that they never say directly" to him. He said sometimes when he came into the [general] office they were talking but then it went quiet when he was in there. Even though he asked them if there was anything wrong, they would very rarely raise any issues.

Despite his good relationship with his team, which was evident during the Forward Together meetings, when employees would openly discuss matters of all sorts with he and I sat in front of them, they had not been doing so previously.

When I subsequently asked some of the employees why they had not raised topics previously, I received answers like, "I thought he knew, and couldn't do anything about it", "I just thought that's the way it was", "I've never really thought about it before".

My reflection was that this *engagement* process provided both permission and a *safe space* for employees to speak freely. In fact, it went further than that. It encouraged them, or even demanded from them, to consider aspects of their working life or job role that they normally unthinkingly accepted. The earlier section "Research Journal 'vignettes'" provided several direct examples to reinforce this point.

To summarise the emergent view from this project; If employees, as in our case, are fundamentally disposed to be engaged (a Theory X view), the challenge is to get them to verbalise the things that may be limiting or blocking that engagement and then to align that engagement with what we are trying to achieve.

### 6.6.3.3 *Transmission – increased managerial awareness*

As the Forward Together meetings were being undertaken there were various conversations arising from them between the managers and me, sometimes with three or four of us involved, and sometimes including managers not even yet part of the process.

What became clear was that this approach was changing the view of certain managers, and reminding others, towards being much more inclusive and communicative in their dealings with their team, as well as much more aware of giving primacy to any commitments made to employees. One example to illustrate this was that Tom had had a conversation with one of his team who had not been through the Forward Together program but had indicated a desire to move from an internal role to an external engineering position. Even though, at the time, this was going to create other changes for Tom, he

discussed that he understood just how important it was to for the engagement and long-term retention of the employee and the good of the business to act on this. He did so with considerably more focus than he may have done previously, and the result was that the organisation was considerably strengthened.



## 7 CHAPTER SEVEN: NEW LEARNING IN PRACTICE AND THEORY, AND ITS VALIDITY AND LEGITIMACY (What has been achieved, learned and can be justified?)

### 7.1 Nature of engagement

In Chapter 3 I used the analogy of “if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck!” to illustrate the difficulty in defining engagement. Through the AR Project it is clear that I have evolved a process-based approach to igniting, unlocking or reinforcing engagement. The meeting and discussion method, coupled with the two document forms, lead both the manager and the employee through a sequence of steps, largely prescribing the process (top-down), but allowing total freedom of the content (bottom-up). However, I have constantly reflected during this project on exactly what this process is doing or affecting within individuals. The numerous examples detailed in Chapter 6 show that this process generates change; within this project it has always been positive change; both in tangible activities/results and, in most cases, in behaviours. These changes are, of course, outcomes. Using the black box concept mentioned in AR Cycle #1, this could be represented as shown in figure 35.

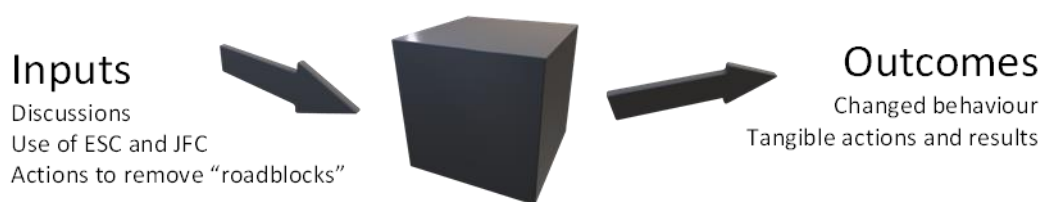


Figure 35: Engagement as a "black box" linking inputs to outcomes

The real question is whether whatever is inside the black box is “engagement” and whether that can be isolated as something distinct from the outcomes that it generates. Based on the many discussions that I have had with staff I have become convinced that engagement, or at least what this process achieves, which I choose to call engagement, is primarily a mindset. In part, it could be considered as helping to create a self-belief in people that they possess agency and can implement it.

All the examples in the “Other positive discussions and outcomes” section under AR Cycle #3, along with numerous other points explained throughout this document, illustrate that undertaking the Forward Together process/meetings with an employee invariably “opens the floodgates” to create new, and sometimes unexpected, outcomes from them. There seem to be two main types of change.

1. Removing roadblocks (either real or perceived – sometimes giving them permission) so that they then do something.
2. A clarity of focus for them, so that they prioritise different things, seek training etc. This is aligned with a leader-leader type approach (Marquet, 2012, p. 161).

In both cases, they end up with a different view (or mindset) compared to how they were previously.

So, my revised understanding of engagement is that, at its core, it is about having a different mindset, or perception, that is best aligned to the goals of the company. This is more aligned to the “state” rather than “process” view (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 8), although clearly a process approach to engendering it is beneficial.

One of the contributors to MacLeod and Clarke’s report (David Guest, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Human Resource Management at Kings College London) talked about whether engagement is an attitude, a behaviour or an outcome or, indeed, all three. In those terms, I would say that it is primarily an attitude, but we can only be aware that it is present (or improved) by seeing the effect through behaviours, and ultimately, outcomes.

This has led to my definition, stated above in section 3.4.1, of;

**“Engagement is (1) the outcome of, (2) the workplace approach designed to achieve, (3) the ongoing business and personal (manager/employee) *process* of sustaining, and (4) the employees’ psychological states such that they feel a strong sense of belonging and alignment with the company and motivation to exert maximum effort for the achievement of their part in reaching the company goals.”**

Point 4 is related to mindset, perception and attitude. Points 2 and 3 relate to the process approach to support engagement which lead to point 1, the ultimate objective of achieving outcomes (which can include behavioural change).

The clarity of this definition, which ties together the concepts of states of being, process to achieve, and tangible outcomes is, itself, a successful outcome of this project, providing a structure to link the otherwise sometimes perceived disparate elements of engagement.

## 7.2 Have I answered my research questions?

The research questions, first enumerated in Chapter 4, have remained relevant throughout the project.

Although listed as the fifth question, in practical terms understanding whether there was a need to address the following question had to be a starting point.

5. Is there **evidence of emotional trauma** within the organisation, and is it significant (Mias deKlerk, 2007)? If so, will it affect our business recovery and how can we **act to “heal” it** (Powley, 2011)? Is **“hope” an effective tool** (Carlsen et al, 2011)?

The evidence from the questionnaire, coupled with feedback in the initial discussions, showed that, in fact, there was surprisingly little emotional trauma persisting from the Covid pandemic. The view, repeatedly expressed, was that the company had responded in the right way, most importantly by consistently providing good communication and by treating everyone in a fair manner, which is fully consistent with the Powley's (2011, p. 6) “compassion” view. There was also a general confidence within employees that they were being well led and the business would survive; a form of *self-generated hope*. As explained in section 6.1.2, apart from noting yet again the importance of communication to the positive morale (and engagement?) of employees, I did not pursue this line of enquiry further.

In answer to:

1. Is there a meaningful **method to measure EE** by considering the pre-requisites of engagement (Saks, 2006)? What causes some staff to have higher levels of engagement than others?

The questionnaire did show that it was, of course, possible to measure responses to antecedent related questions. However, two people with the same “real” level of engagement may rank themselves differently. The development of the ESC provided a similar tool, in the first stage of its use. However, again comparing numbers could be problematic, as shown by the examples where one concern “bled over” into multiple topic rankings, or employees were “having a bad day”. Nevertheless, the ESC, still based around engagement antecedents, does provide a very powerful process for developing a qualitative measure of employee engagement, *and providing opportunities for enhancing it*, on a case-by-case basis. In summary, yes, we can measure EE, but most effectively in a qualitative rather than quantitative manner.

The answer to the second part of question 1 has clearly been shown to be related, at least in part, to addressing concerns, sometimes perceived and sometimes tangible. This feeds directly into the next point:

2. Can **EE be increased** through enhanced two-way communication and personal goal/measures development (Smith & Bititci, 2017; MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 9)?

I have been able to clearly demonstrate, through this AR project, that the use of two-way communication and the processes (ESC and JFC) that I have developed, do lead to an increase in engagement, evidenced by attitude and work focus.

3. Is enhancing **EE a causal factor of improved individual and company performance** (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 11)?

There are some specific examples of individuals who have directly improved their performance in a quantitatively measurable way because of this project. For example, Cat has re-acquired customers. At a wider level, it has not been possible to directly attribute company performance improvement specifically to increased employee engagement, due to so many other factors, both positive and negative, impacting on the company. However, from a qualitative and anecdotal perspective there is little doubt that it has made a significant contribution in a short time and can reasonably be expected to be significant in shaping the future success of the company.

4. Does a high level of **engagement contribute to enjoyment**, customer care (professionalism) and a special atmosphere?

This can be answered as an unqualified yes. The engagement meetings have fostered an (even more) friendly atmosphere, several staff are undertaking training at their request, or are taking on additional tasks or roles, and there is a general air of positivity in those areas where staff have been through this process. Customer facing staff have typically included customer care related objectives within their JFC.

6. What is the best balance between a **bottom-up or top-down process for implementing engagement**? Is it appropriate to **change the leadership/management approach** depending on the prevailing business conditions (Kerber & Buono, 2018; Ram et al, 2001)? Does this risk damaging the engagement process (James & Wooten, 2011) or family-values sentiment or is

it unnecessary and/or “permitted” when engagement is high? Is it feasible therefore to **combine or synthesise an approach** such as the Change Leadership Triad of Directive, Participative and Collective management (Kerber & Buono, 2018) with an AR methodology, in the same way that a hybrid framework between appreciative enquiry and AR has been proposed (Egan & Lancaster, 2005)?

Explored further in section 7.3.3, the project has shown that a blended top-down bottom-up approach is most effective to engender employee engagement. I found that, done with good communication, and from a starting position of trust and probably an already reasonably high level of (un-directed) engagement, it was appropriate to be much more top-down (during the pandemic). Generally, however, a top-down or bottom-up only approach would not be as successful. One aspect is the importance of the breaking of barriers between managers and their staff and creating open communication.

Once the managers were exposed to the engagement process, and saw the relationship benefits, it became, for most, the default mode for them to devote time to discussion and understanding, rather than to dictate. I have therefore not explored further the concept of synthesizing a Change Leadership Triad with an AR engagement approach.

Finally, although not explicitly asked as part of my research questions a further point to consider is:

7. Will the changes be self-sustaining after the completion of my project, and might the changes I have successfully achieved in the company outlast my presence as Chief Executive?

By the time of finalising this report almost 12 months have passed since the completion of the Action Research cycles. My observations of the behaviours and attitudes from those employees involved indicate that levels of engagement remain high. In most cases, employees have continued to undertake the additional activities or training that emerged from the project. Company performance has further improved with the profit result for the year ending September 2023 almost double that of the previous year. Much of the improvement has come from the business section where most staff were involved and experienced the final version of the process (referred to as Group A in section 7.5.2.3). However, as in any business there is a need to adapt to changing circumstances and for engagement to remain strong and well-directed it seems sensible to repeat the ESC and JFC processes. I have taken all senior managers through the process for a second time, and they are beginning the cascade through their teams. The intention is to implement this as an annual cycle. By embedding a

constant refresher and reiteration so that this becomes “the way we do things around here” there is more likelihood that the positive changes that have resulted from this project will persist long-term.

## 7.3 How I have contributed to new forms of theory

There are two areas where I consider that I have added new forms of theory, detailed below in 7.3.1 and 7.3.2, followed by three other points where I offer slight nuances to existing theory.

### 7.3.1 A third level of communication - Engagement Communication

The first addition is related to the broad way in which we communicate at work. As this AR project evolved, I reflected on the nature of the conversations that I, and other managers, were having with staff, both within the “formal” Forward Together sessions, but also separately. We had all become sensitised to explore deeper than the superficial conversations that normally occur in a workplace environment. I began to characterise this as a third level of communication.

The first level of communication can be considered as task based, “Please do this piece of work”, “How long will it take for you to prepare that analysis?”, “We should visit the customer”, “How can we get around this problem?”.

The second level of communication is social interaction, “Did you watch the football last night?”, “I like your new shoes”. In some companies, general “chit-chat” is expected to be minimised during the working day, but at Lister we have always held the view that this is an important part of the glue that holds the organisation together, especially in a family SME and, within reason, we allow time for social interaction. Within this category, I would also include a manager asking one of his team “How are you?”. The reason for this is that, for the most part, everyone actually hears this as virtually another form of words for saying hello, and for the most part that is how the manager meant it. The response is normally quite superficial, along the lines of “Fine, thanks”. Even if the employee does respond stating a problem or concern it is invariably related either to a personal situation, e.g. “I’m a bit worried about the doctor’s visit that my partner has today”, or to the current work situation, “I’m struggling to get this done, because Fred is off today”. In the former case the manager will try to help, or at least be understanding, and in the latter case the conversation will move back into task-based communication.

However, in order to increase engagement, a more substantive communication is required.

This third level of communication I have called engagement communication. Here the “How are you?” question is reframed as a series of more fine-grained questions, such as “what aspects of your job

would you like to change?” or “What (long term) outcomes should you try to achieve?”. These require specific answers and subsequent *two-way* discussion.

During many of the later meetings I have specifically explained this concept of the third level of communication to employees and their managers, partly as a way of reinforcing the purpose of the Forward Together meetings. In all cases employees have understood and agreed with both the concept and the benefit of engagement communication. This approach could be considered to include elements of active (or empathetic) listening, with the awareness of either neutral or agreement response (Nugent and Halvorson, 1995, p. 155), and this at least should perhaps have already been taught to individuals at school or college. However, it is also about specifically exploring antecedents of engagement, which is aided by the questions provided in the ESC.

This process does take time and effort and can be uncomfortable for managers for several reasons. Firstly, one never knows what topics will be aired, so there can be some trepidation about opening a potential Pandora’s Box. Secondly, related to this, there is also a concern that these conversations can create unrealistic expectations, and that employees may start to expect that whatever problem or concern they raise will be solved. In addition, there can be some threat to a manager’s own self-worth. They may fear discovering that they have been presiding over a situation that they should have been aware of, or already dealt with.

Engagement communication may also be uncomfortable for employees. They may, for example, fear looking foolish either because they do not understand the terminology (for example, during my research, several individuals struggled, somewhat surprisingly, with the distinction between inputs and outcomes), or because they cannot coherently articulate their responsibilities or their issues (for example, during my research, almost all employees found it challenging to express how they would measure their own activity).

Part of the challenge then, of actively and deliberately using engagement communication, to gain the benefits of a much more engaged team, is to find ways to mitigate these risks. The use of the Engagement Support Chart and the Job Focus Chart tools developed in this project help to address this point.

### 7.3.2 Well-directed engagement and how to achieve it - ESC/JFC

The evidence to support the practice of seeking well-directed engagement emerged from the evaluation of AR cycle #1, where employees considered themselves to be *engaged*, but could not



articulate with what. This led directly to the development of the JFC, which was very effective at creating an alignment with the overarching aims of the company, explored in the review of AR cycle #2.

A combination of using the ESC to create the right environment for self-reflection, discussion around engagement, and to remove potential barriers to engagement, coupled with use of the JFC to create alignment with company objectives have proven to be a powerful tool for moving towards well-directed engagement.

This perspective appears to be a novel way of characterising engagement. Engagement is often separated into engagement with the job or with the organisation (Saks, 2006). A quantification of the *level* of these types of engagement may be attempted but breaking that engagement down into with what the employee is engaged seems to be lacking. Recognising this absence is perhaps the great advantage of being inside the organisation and part of the process, rather than how many academics have observed from outside the organisation.

Jamieson and Marshak (2018, pp. 97-98) mention the term “meaningful engagement” both in the sense of expectations [of employees] having increased because of the advances in information technology, and in the sense of the ontological nature of work., but neither of these perspectives address the “alignment” issue.

Sacrifice-embedded employees (those who have a lot to lose by leaving) experiencing sufficient fit with the goals and values of the organisation, or interpersonal fit, have been seen to be motivated to perform extra-role services (Kiazad et al., 2019, p. 1321; Hom et al., p. 840). When the “fit” is with the organisation goals, leading to personal and company goal alignment, this phenomenon could be seen as, at least a component of, *well-directed engagement*. However, one would hope that it is not extra-role services that are achieved, but mission-critical activities.

This research has provided both the concept of well-directed engagement, but also a proven approach to facilitate it, utilising the ESC and JFC and the accompanying two-way discussion methodology.

### 7.3.3 Top-down versus bottom-up – distributed leadership for engagement

The foregoing analysis has consistently highlighted that, despite the starting point of good industrial relations, there were several issues that had not been surfaced. Only by creating a two-way interaction (ESC) were these matters raised (and resolved). It has become clear that the top-down

imposition of a suitable process has been needed to facilitate the bottom-up input, or even self-awareness in some cases, to elevate issues of concern or improvement and to generate a sense of ownership.

When it comes to developing employees' own reflection on their job role and engagement with it, although they are *directed* to create a JFC, the content and *direction* comes from them, with as light a touch as possible from their manager, only to ensure that it is aligned with the needs of the business. This approach avoids the criticism of many empowerment programs which fail "because they are just that, 'programs' or 'initiatives', rather than the central principle.... behind how the organization does business" (Marquet, 2012, p. 59).

It is also important to tailor the particular blend of top-down, bottom-up to individual or circumstance. A good example of this comes from an email from a quite senior employee who outlined the sort of work that he wanted to undertake but also stated, "I think I work better when there are goals and projects with time frames to work to – that are then explained to everyone that this is what I am supposed to be working on. I think if my workload came from the top down and was agreed upon, it would be respected – rather than me just taking it upon myself to introduce things that might get pushed aside by the constraints of meeting production due dates."

Another employee, a supervisor, similarly requested his manager to *tell* him what to set himself as outcomes and inputs on the JFC, as he felt "outside of his comfort zone" in trying to come up with those ideas himself. With some coaching, he did contribute considerably towards it!

Both examples illustrate the point that there is an expectation and a requirement from certain, even quite senior and intelligent, people for a lot of structure, guidance, "top-down" direction and even *referred authority*.

This project has contributed to the theory of top-down versus bottom-up management by evidencing the applicability and success of blending a top-down guidance and direction setting with a bottom-up, listening and employee led (distributed leadership) approach to enhance engagement. This approach appears to have been particularly suitable during a time of crisis and recovery in an SME environment. It also advocates an approach tailored to the individual, the particular circumstance, and that "how you do it", particularly in terms of good communication, remains the key to utilising top-down management successfully whilst retaining trust.

### 7.3.4 Verbal Thick Description

Thick Description in its classical form (Drew, 2019), as discussed in Chapter 5, extends beyond simply recording conversations, but adds in context and interpretation, especially including and based on behaviours, facial reactions, and other physical expressions. For example, Geertz (1973, pp. 6-7) uses the example of a wink. In “thin” description the report could be “He winked”. In Thick Description this would be placed within context and culture, so it could be referred to as being in conspiracy, ridicule, acknowledgement or invitation.

In this project, although I have included some reflections and interpretation based on body language, gestures, tone of voice, or emotions of interviewees, the majority of description and interpretation has been centred around the actual words spoken. This is to some extent dictated by the fact that the format of a structured meeting, or interview, forces most of the experience to be verbal, albeit with associated expression. This is, however, very different from the more free-flow behaviour that an ethnographer may be able to record in a less controlled or contrived social setting.

I would argue that, for an insider researcher, who already has some relationship with the subjects, and understands, at least in broad terms, the context within which they are operating, it is possible to use Thick Description in this much more textual version. This is especially true in an Action Research setting, where some of the meaning behind comments can be “teased out” by deeper questioning, but to fully explore and then frame the interpretation within the individual and company culture norms, the verbal interchange needs to be explored, and *interpreted* in some detail.

I suggest, then, this “Verbal Thick Description” approach as an extension to the classical use.

Nevertheless, for Verbal Thick Description to still be considered a part of the Thick Description stable it should still achieve the five characteristics described by Ponterotto (2006, pp. 542-543), elucidated in Chapter 5, whilst seeking to avoid the criticisms often levelled of researcher bias. Although there can be selection bias, to be guarded against, in the sense of choosing which elements of a conversation to analyse, there is less scope for researcher judgement in the *recording* of the base data, in this case the spoken word, than there is for the more nuanced content of a classical Thick Description encounter. Whilst this use may lose some richness, in this one sense at least, Verbal Thick Description offers some advantage over a more descriptive and subjective recording of the totality of an interaction.

I believe that I was able to use this approach successfully, and would suggest this guidance to others, for two main reasons. Firstly, perhaps as any ethnographer should be, I was insatiably curious. I really

wanted to understand the thought processes that underpinned the actions and behaviour of the employees, so I probed responses, and continued to ask “why” until it felt like there were no further “layers of the onion” to unpeel. This produced both a good understanding for me, and crucially for the subject, about why they felt the way they did and what they wanted to do within their role. Secondly, I had developed and refined a questions framework that allowed this rich data to be assessed comparatively.

### 7.3.5 Chained AR cycles – evaluation and diagnosis combined

This last point, explained in section 6.4.1, is a subtle simplification to the “classical” approach to chained AR cycles. The image presented there as figure 17 and repeated here in figure 36 explains the concept.

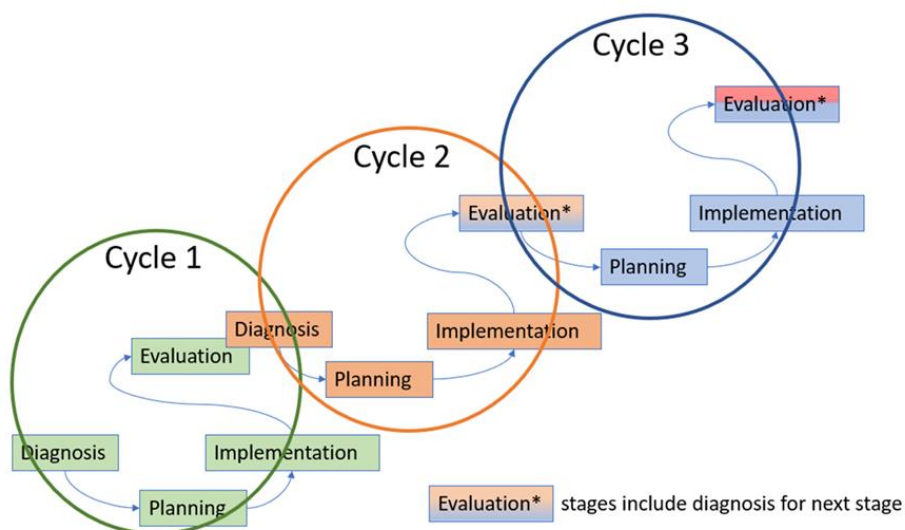


Figure 36: Chained AR cycles with Diagnosis stage integrated into Evaluation stage

It has also been the case that, to some extent, there has been a combining of implementation and evaluation within each AR cycle. This *fluidity* between stages of a cycle, supported by in-action reflection and reflexivity, has allowed rapid development of the emergent processes.

### 7.3.6 Kaizen within Action Research

In the standard form of Action Research, the evaluation stage is used to consider whether any changes have been beneficial and, in the diagnosis and planning stage, any further changes are decided upon and effected in the implementation stage. Because of the nature of the employee discussions, and the need to react quickly to address various points that were raised, I made changes incrementally throughout the entire project. Some of these changes were related to business operational issues, such as sales planning/reporting systems (see section 6.4.3), and others were changes to the engagement process itself, such as modifying the Job Focus Chart (see section 6.5.2.2).

This continual and incremental change approach is reminiscent of *kaizen*, a Japanese management concept often expressed as “continuous improvement” in Western businesses (Berger, 1997, p. 110). Although I was not consciously following a *kaizen* approach, it is interesting to note how closely the project followed its three core principles of process orientation, small step improvement and people orientation (ibid., pp. 110-113).

Process orientation – a robust process is required (and then results will follow), otherwise good results may be temporary. The development of the various tools in this project such as the Sales Black Box, ESC and JFC are examples of the systemisation advocated by a *kaizen* approach.

Small step improvement – *kaizen* requires a constant focus on improving standards and making small improvements and iterations to maintain standards. The “engagement-unblocking” purpose of the ESC discussions, and the constant realignment with company objectives that should result from the JFC align well with this philosophy.

People orientation – *kaizen* assumes that all employees have an inherent desire to perform well and product quality work. This is also the underpinning belief behind my approach in this AR project (see the explanation of my positionality in section 4.5).

This, albeit inadvertent, blending of a *kaizen* approach with a chained AR cycle approach has proven very effective in creating a dynamic project that allowed contemporaneous business improvements alongside the research work.

## 7.4 How has my practice evolved – what learning is there?

This project is centred on employee interaction. For those interactions that are “formal” Forward Together meetings, clearly there is a defined process now established. However, just as importantly, there are various perceptual and behavioural shifts in the way that I now interact. It is challenging to fully identify the changes since many of them have been gradual, but I have identified four main topics detailed below. In some senses they all fit under the banner of trying to achieve trust, for which a key precursor, especially during periods of change, is *openness*, one of the guiding values of Organisation Development (French et al, 2005, p. 489).

### 7.4.1 Storytelling

Although I have not used storytelling to a significant extent to effect or influence change on a wholesale company-wide basis (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2017) I found myself beginning to use a small, consistent, and true, set of stories, from my own experience, in many of the employee meetings. This helped employees to appreciate aspects of the engagement process, particularly in the sense of connecting this new approach to their existing experience - memorialising and revisioning (ibid., p. 666) - and for all appeared to *bring to life* – sacralising - the meetings. This use of stories to make something that can seem complex become “readily comprehensible” so that an “audience intuitively grasps *what* the change involves, *why* it might be desirable as well as pointing to *how* an organisation or community might change” (Denning, 2002, pp. 2-3) has now become an important part of my practice.

I have learned that the stories that are most effective are usually the simplest and those that the audience can readily imagine in their own experience. One example that I often use, told in a little more detail than this brief sketch, concerns a factory environment, in India, where the employees were highly obedient. A worker was scooping powdered material from a bin, then walking in a loop around the back of the bin, before putting the material into the press. He repeated this routine all day long, in a sweltering hot environment, probably walking some 15 miles per day, and consuming unnecessary process time. When I tell the story like that people immediately ask, “Why didn’t he move the bin closer?” Of course, the answer is twofold. Firstly, it most likely did not occur to him that there was a problem because it had always been that way, and secondly, even if he did, he would not think that he had the authority to change anything. This always opens a powerful engagement

discussion around looking *naively* at what you do, to see what is just done that way *because it always has been*, and secondly, that all Lister employees have considerable authority and autonomy to make their improvements, or at the very least to raise the question. This reinforces the comments that I made in section 7.3.4 concerning how a Verbal Thick Description approach can be so successful in this type of scenario.

#### 7.4.2 Reflection, reflexivity and mindfulness

In section 5.5 I discussed reflexivity and *in-action* mindfulness. It is one thing to understand these concepts intellectually, it is something else to practise them. The difference is as significant as understanding the physics of riding a bicycle compared to getting on one and doing all the myriad of things necessary to stay balanced, until eventually becoming practised enough to enjoy the ride. When I began this work, I found that I had to work very consciously at in-action reflection and reflexivity, whilst at the same time trying to capture research notes. The more meetings that I had, and the more that I *consciously* worked on being *conscious* the easier I found this skill, although by its very nature, and this is where the bicycle analogy falls down (sic), it will never become an unconscious talent like riding can be. I have explained it to some of my colleagues, that I am coaching to develop this ability, as imagining another version of yourself looking on at how you are thinking and feeling as an event unfolds and feeding back to your first-self and especially reminding yourself to be calm, not to overreact or allow preconceptions to colour your views. It is like being an observer of yourself, with the benefit that action-self and observer-self are at the same time one person.

Most importantly however, this has now become such an embedded part of my interactions with staff, that not only do I focus on mindfulness during the ongoing Forward Together engagement meetings with my direct reports, but I practise it during all interactions (somewhat easier when not note-taking at the same time). Initially I thought that it would mean that all conversations would take much longer, by consciously giving employees space to talk but, in fact, that is not normally the case, although it does significantly increase the *value* of the conversations for both parties.

In this way reflection and reflexivity have been embedded throughout the project. They have been used to drive change and progress and they have made changes to those taking part including to me as the researcher.

A more recent example occurred when, because of storm weather, we experienced a small section of the roof inner lining of our factory falling in. This resulted in an asbestos “scare” and the full

evacuation of the factory, until it was confirmed, by testing, to be clear. However, I was offsite when the incident began and received a phone call from the manager responsible for health and safety, who is relatively young and inexperienced. I had never experienced an incident of this nature before, was uncertain of the protocol and, as we talked through our response and the urgency required, I recognised my own stress levels rising. In a way that I would not have done prior to my conscious practice of reflection and reflexivity I realised that he, onsite and as an extremely conscientious individual, would be experiencing the same and perhaps to a much higher degree. That led to a brief, but important, conversation that I believe helped lower both our stress levels and I then joined him onsite while we resolved the issue.

This particular example feeds directly into the empathy topic discussed next.

### 7.4.3 Empathy

In Chapter 2, I discussed my background, largely from a professional perspective. During the course of this doctoral study programme there have also been some significant events in my personal life, that have influenced and contributed to my *learning journey*.

Having lost my father in December 2018, one year prior to commencement, my mother-in-law passed away quite suddenly, in early 2020, just before the pandemic began. Understandably, the remaining partners have needed varying levels of both practical and emotional support, with my mother ultimately having moved into a care home, which has itself been a somewhat traumatic transition.

Like many other students, my eldest son, working on *his* PhD and living at home with us, experienced the challenges of isolation both from friends and university support, during the periods of pandemic lockdown.

On a positive note, but still a significant event, my youngest son got engaged and the simultaneous fun and stress of wedding planning began to overlay many other activities.

These personal family events have, of course, been contemporaneous with the tumultuous macro conditions of Brexit, Covid, the Russia/Ukraine war, all the subsequent business and political turmoil, and the deeply saddening experience of losing one of our own employees to Covid.

Why this is relevant is because they have conspired to cause me to reflect on the intersection of business and personal activities especially in respect of how to interact with people and have influenced and shaped the mindset that I have held whilst undertaking this Action Research. I would



characterise it as trying to find a way to accept, understand and integrate everyone's feelings and frustrations but to channel them towards a positive direction.

At the core of this is the idea of empathy (or *Shu* in the Confucian tradition). The acceptance, that I have illustrated repeatedly in the vignettes of Chapter 6, that an employee's perceptions are their valid reality, is a core part of this empathy approach. I have come to believe, through all these business and personal experiences, that the most effective way to help people move forward, to *engage*, with them, probably in all circumstances, but especially in a family situation, or in a family business, where there is a desire to maintain a long-term positive relationship, is to work hard at finding and feeling an empathetic connection with them. It can sometimes be difficult or uncomfortable and time-consuming because of the wide range of starting points that we can all have. Sometimes one may question whether it is worth the effort with particular individuals, but I am convinced that it is because even regardless of business performance, the improvement in the culture and *feel* of the workplace is tangible when this approach is adopted.

This empathy approach then has come to fully underpin my personal practice and the coaching and processes that I espouse to the rest of the organisation.

#### 7.4.4 Teaching, Learning, and Coaching

An extension of the previous point about empathy is how to translate that into something useful for the employees and the organisation. Rather than, as is often the case, ignoring the individual as a component of organisational studies, it has become clear to me that it is important to "help people understand their work" and to support them to improve their experience (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000, pp. 46 & 31). There is a delicate balance to maintain here, because simply "instructing" employees, through top-down directives, is likely to be ineffective in achieving this aim. Ideally, they should "identify their own problems and work out for themselves how to solve them" (ibid, p. 53). Providing a blend of teaching, guidance, coaching and mentoring to do this, of which there have been many examples throughout this project (for example specific training on the sales process, and much coaching of managers) is a perfect blend of bottom-up, top-down collaboration.

Managing is not normally seen as a teaching role (ibid, p. 47). In fact, probably the most significant shift in my practice, linked to a change to my underlying understanding of my own role, as a result of my experiences through this project, is to now consider teaching (including coaching, mentoring and

any other form of support designed to bring about personal development in my colleagues) to be the most important part of my job.

The starting point must be the senior managers, and their initial exposure to this engagement project has begun the journey for some of them that I have already been on. The difference is that they are not studying relevant literature in parallel. Few have a penchant for *book learning* so I am trying to distil and synthesize some of the concepts that may be useful for them to understand and to shift *their* perspectives. This includes even such simple topics as helping them to realise that when they criticise their subordinates for poor communication back to them, they should first consider that they, themselves, may be causing or contributing to the problem. Step by step the managers are absorbing and practising a more inclusive approach.

It is interesting to note that much of AR theory has grown up around the field of Education, which is perhaps explained by teachers being more receptive participants to their own learning and self-development, and naturally having a more academic orientation to how to approach it.

## 7.5 The evidence base of my claim to knowledge

### 7.5.1 How I have contributed to employee engagement (including myself!) and organisational development

As described in Chapter 6, all invited employees participated wholeheartedly in the Forward Together process and several specific examples have been provided of the ways in which this led to improvements in communication, work practices, facilities and attitudes.

The Evaluation steps of each of the AR cycles drew out several learning points that are worthy of summarising here.

From the pilot cycle, in section 6.3.4, there was a reinforcement of the importance of creating trust and in allowing employees to develop their own ideas about the objectives and possibilities of their jobs. It also became clear very quickly that many employees found difficulty in conceiving of measures of their own output. This highlighted the importance of developing a *process*, including questions that introduced some granularity or structure, to assist in creating engagement.

In Action Research cycle 1, evaluated in section 6.4.4, came confirmation of the benefits of discussion that extend beyond immediate work or social interaction, leading to the “third level” of engagement conversation. In addition, the need for clarity between long term outcomes and current inputs needed to make them happen became apparent. This fed into the concept of *well-directed engagement* to link the bottom-up development of inputs into a top-down company direction.

For Action Research cycles 2 and 3, all employees produced Job Focus Charts, finding practical benefits through their use, and worked to improve them to align their activities to the business objectives. The JFC proved particularly helpful to managers in understanding and translating their goals in relation to the company and departments aims, and then into how that would interact with their teams.

Collectively, these aspects serve to evidence an improvement in employee engagement, especially in *well-directed engagement*, from what seems to have been an already reasonably good starting point (in large part *positively* influenced by the actions of the company during the Covid pandemic).

AR cycle 2, evaluated in section 6.5.3, also demonstrated the need to surface underlying issues before working on engagement aspects. This led to the development of the ESC tool.

Combining the use of the ESC and JFC within a structured meeting process, in AR cycle 3, proved to be very successful, as discussed in section 6.6.3. There were many examples of things said, and resolved, that had never been raised before. This process gave “permission” that allowed this in a way not previously experienced. This led to “tangible and agreed ideas” arising from all eleven employees involved in this stage.

There are a few staff whose roles have been explicitly changed or who have been given greater responsibility, largely at their own request, as a result of the engagement conversations. All these exhibit “supercharged” behaviours. One who has, in some senses, moved back a step to learn a new part of the company, with the aim of future development, whilst he was always a good employee, has stepped up another notch. Some of the enquiries that he handles normally require a director to review them, due to complex contractual terms. He has taken the initiative to do a pre-review, providing the director with a summary of the key points of issue, and providing his suggestions.

The type of conversations that are now common are managers talking to me about how certain actions may improve or reduce employee engagement. The level of communication has noticeably improved. It is difficult to evidence an improved atmosphere, other than to say that many staff in the Smethwick Fluid Power division, where the majority of staff were involved with the Forward Together program, frequently comment on what a nice environment it is, and how we now have a great team. Most interestingly, the constituents of the team have barely changed; what appears to have improved further is their interaction.

If it was possible my own engagement has also increased. I am now more engaged than ever with finding a successful way forward for the business and the good enthusiastic employees that are a part of it.

### 7.5.2 Impact on the business performance

There have been several positive impacts on the business performance that can be ascribed to this project, and nothing that has been observed to be negative.

### 7.5.2.1 *Employee Retention*

In addition to the positive qualitative impacts of engagement expressed in Chapter 6, and despite the difficulties (especially during the turbulent economic period during which this research was carried out) of directly ascribing quantitative business performance improvement to improved engagement, there has been a measurable impact on staff retention (Croucher et al., 2013, p. 49; Gallup, 2022, p. 6). Especially in some of the specialist fields in which we operate, and given the tightened availability of labour post-Brexit, this has saved significant cost, time and business knowledge.

Of thirty-four staff involved, thirty-one have remained with the business (or, in the case of a couple of them, retired after long service) through into early 2023; a period of between two years to six months after their initial discussions. One of the leavers was a salesperson who was being challenged for poor sales performance and chose instead to take another job; we could reasonably exclude this employee from the “by choice” leavers. That results in a 94% retention rate over an average fifteen-month period.

Over a similar fifteen-month period there have been a total of twenty leavers for the company as a whole, but again excluding the two retirements and three dismissals (two for attendance/performance and one for theft), that equates to an 85% retention rate, across the overall business with an average of a hundred employees. Thus, there is a >10% improvement in retention amongst staff involved in the project versus the overall company average.

The group involved in the AR project does include a higher proportion of managers than the companywide figure, due to starting with managers as part of the cascade process. It could be argued that this may account for some of the retention benefit, so extracting them from the figures in each case results in retention (of non-managers) from the engagement project group of 91% and from the total company of 83%, or versus the non-engagement project (“control”) group of 75%. So, after normalising the figures in this way, there is a >15% improvement in retention amongst staff involved in the engagement project versus those not involved.

It is also the case that, coincidentally, the groups selected to be involved in the engagement project, consisted largely of slightly longer serving staff than the company average. This again could skew the results to some extent, since there is more churn in shorter serving staff than those that have “settled in”. However, there is a significant enough difference in the retention percentages to reasonably conclude that there has been a positive impact on employee retention rate as a result of this engagement project.

There have also been examples of employees considering leaving for other jobs, where having been involved in the engagement project has probably been a contributory factor in how they have approached having a conversation with their manager before becoming completely committed to moving. In one case, even after being offered another job, the employee met with his manager and I, and we were able to use the topics that we had discussed during the engagement meetings with him to reaffirm his desire to stay at Lister, with only a modest salary adjustment, versus the less suitable role that he would otherwise consider moving to. In another case, a manager who had not been through the engagement program was offered another job, accepted it and was not open to further conversation. After a few months he was in contact asking if he could return.

#### *7.5.2.2 Broadening of job roles*

There have been specific activities that have been initiated or improved. These include many employees developing broader tasks within their job roles. Many of these have been detailed above but include; enhanced negotiation with suppliers; improved trade counter customer service response because the team support each other better; contacting and winning lapsed customers; role changes to strengthen weaker areas; requests for (and action on) role-focused training; and many more. Although it is difficult to directly attribute business improvement outcomes to some of them, collectively they have contributed to customer retention and growth.

#### *7.5.2.3 Employee productivity improvement*

Finally, there is the question of whether there has been a material improvement in the margin per employee cost measure explained in section 6.1.1.

Looking at the company as a whole, the monthly sales figures only recovered consistently to something like pre-pandemic levels by early 2023, driven by the slow recovery of many large customers, hampered by the following shocks of the Ukraine war and “Trussonomics”. Refer to figure 37.

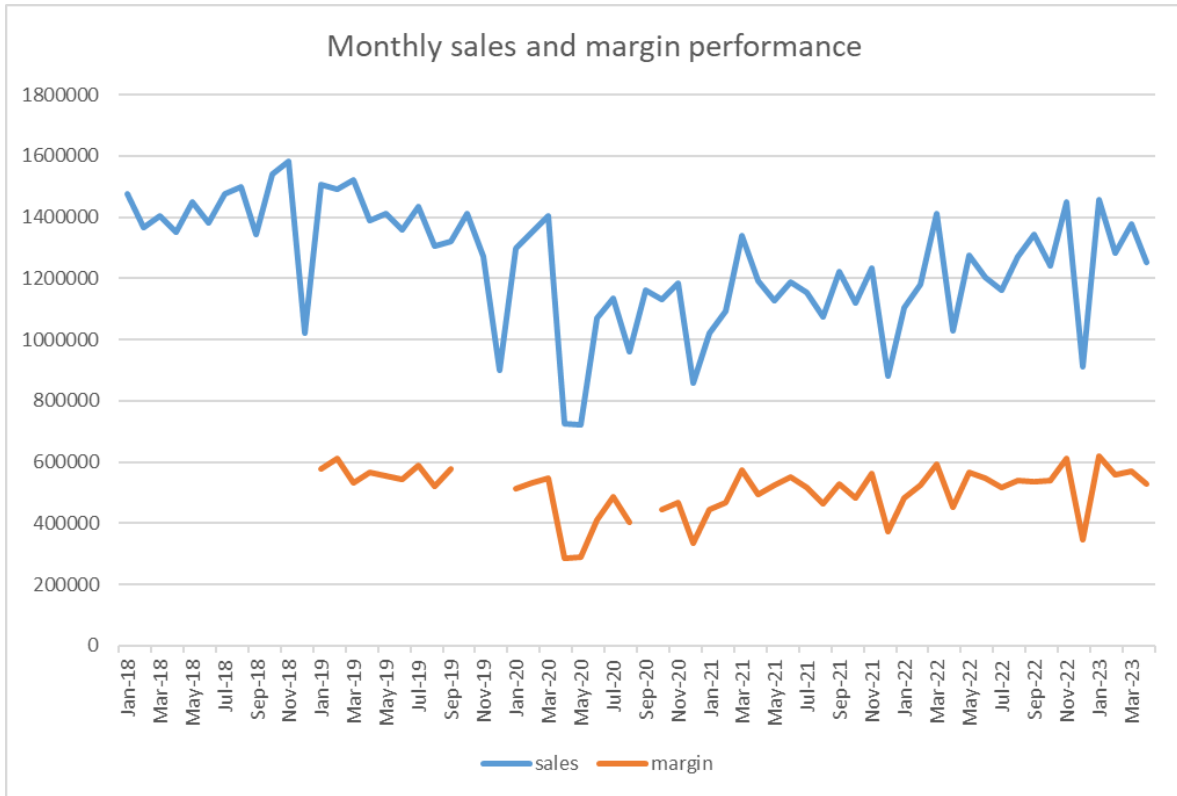


Figure 37: Whole company sales and margin performance 2018 to early 2023

With the reduced staff numbers maintained throughout the post-Covid period the performance per employee looks very favourable as shown in figure 38.

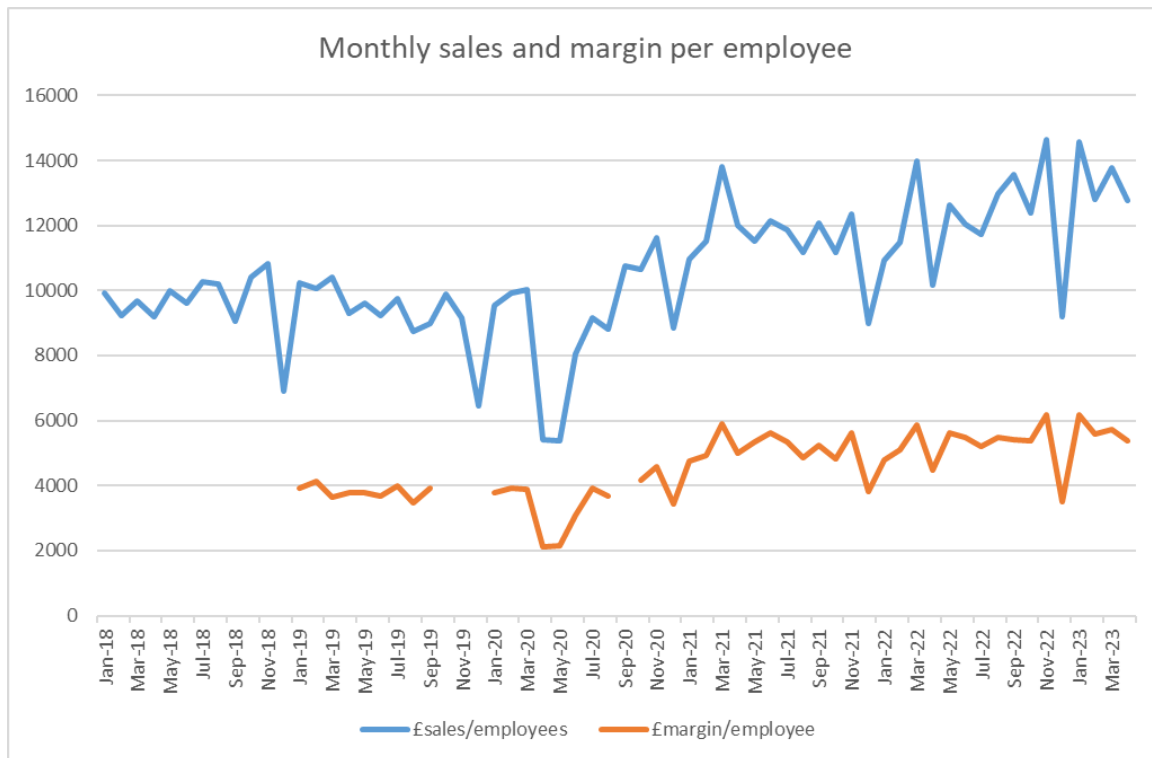


Figure 38: Whole company sales and margin per employee performance 2018 to early 2023

It is clear that there is a significant improvement in sales per employee and margin per employee. This improvement began in the second half of 2020, as the total employee numbers fell through the redundancy program, but the sales figures began a steady recovery, prior to the first Action Research activity in January 2021. From early 2021 both sale and margin per employee are averaging just above 20% improvement versus pre-Covid.

This step change in “apparent productivity” has been driven by a number of factors, partly related to redundancy of low-performing individuals and “unnecessary” roles, plus some IT-driven efficiencies but, predominantly, material price inflation. However, there have been considerable inflationary impacts across this period, and looking at the normalised measure of margin per employee in the figure 39 any improvement is much less perceptible.



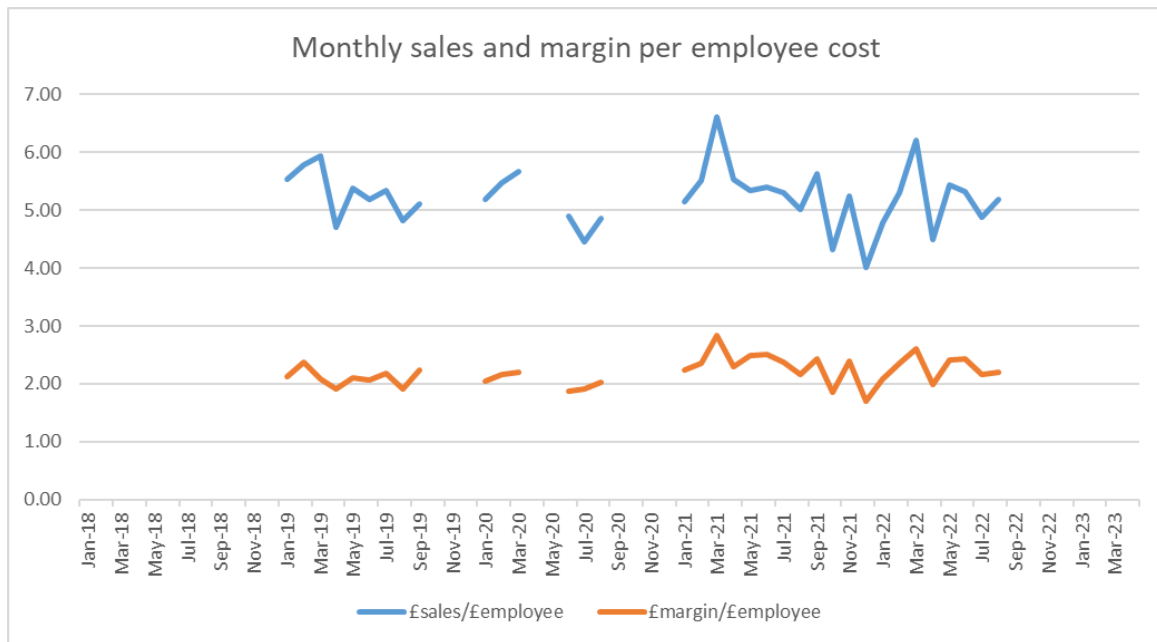


Figure 39: Whole company sales and margin per employee cost performance 2018 to early 2023

This is explained by the fact that even though margin per person has improved, there are several other macro effects at play:

1. It has been very difficult to pass on all purchase cost increases, whilst still attempting to regrow volumes, so although £ margin has improved, it has probably not fully kept pace with real industrial inflation.
2. The redundancy process selected for us to keep the most competent, but also the more highly paid staff, thus skewing margin versus labour rate calculations.
3. We have further increased salary levels, across this period.

However, the Action Research project affected some specific sections of the business and, utilising the data that I recorded during the period of the project, it is possible to compare the margin per employee cost trends for different business areas. First, it is important to point out, that for significant numbers of “operational” staff, the administration related workload had increased in 2021. In 2020 we had closed one branch and made several central administrative staff redundant. Some of the latter’s roles had been replaced by automation of processes but, in both cases, there were tasks redistributed amongst other staff. This meant that even retaining the early 2021 performance figures would be a challenge.

There are three main groups:

- Group A: a branch where almost all the staff have been through some version of the Forward Together meetings, eleven with the final version of ESC and JFC in AR cycle #3, and four others as part of AR cycle #2. This equates to fifteen people.
- Group B: a branch where around half of the staff went through AR cycle #1, before either the ESC or JFC had been developed. This equates to twenty-eight people.
- Group C: the rest of the company. This equates to around forty-four people, of whom most have not been directly involved in the Forward Together AR project. This does include one branch where the pilot AR cycle, and subsequently AR cycle #2, was used with five people. This is included in the main group, rather than as a separate group, for two reasons. Firstly, the staff involved only equated to about one third of the total team there, and secondly, for strategic reasons we chose to maintain a high level of staffing even whilst some customers were going through a quiet period, which would mitigate any productivity gains observed.

For group C, the largely uninvolved group, the £margin per £employee cost has slightly reduced over the period, as demonstrated in figure 40 (see the grey line and trend line). Note that here the “central” administration staff are excluded, so like-for-like “branch staff only” are considered.

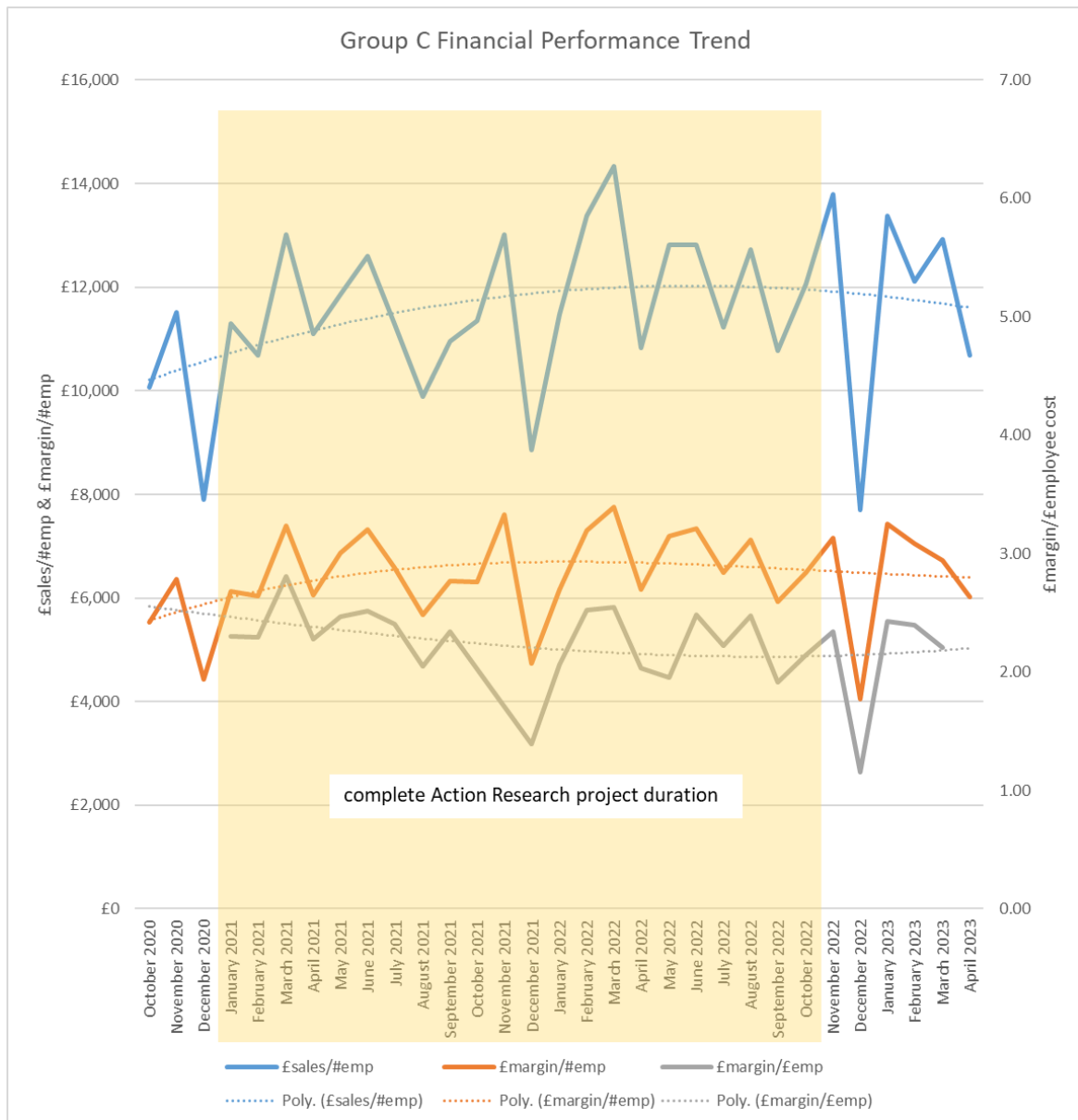


Figure 40: Sales and margin performance measures for group C employees

For group B, some of whom were involved in the earliest version of the engagement process, from February to June 2021, the sales and margin trends are shown in figure 41.

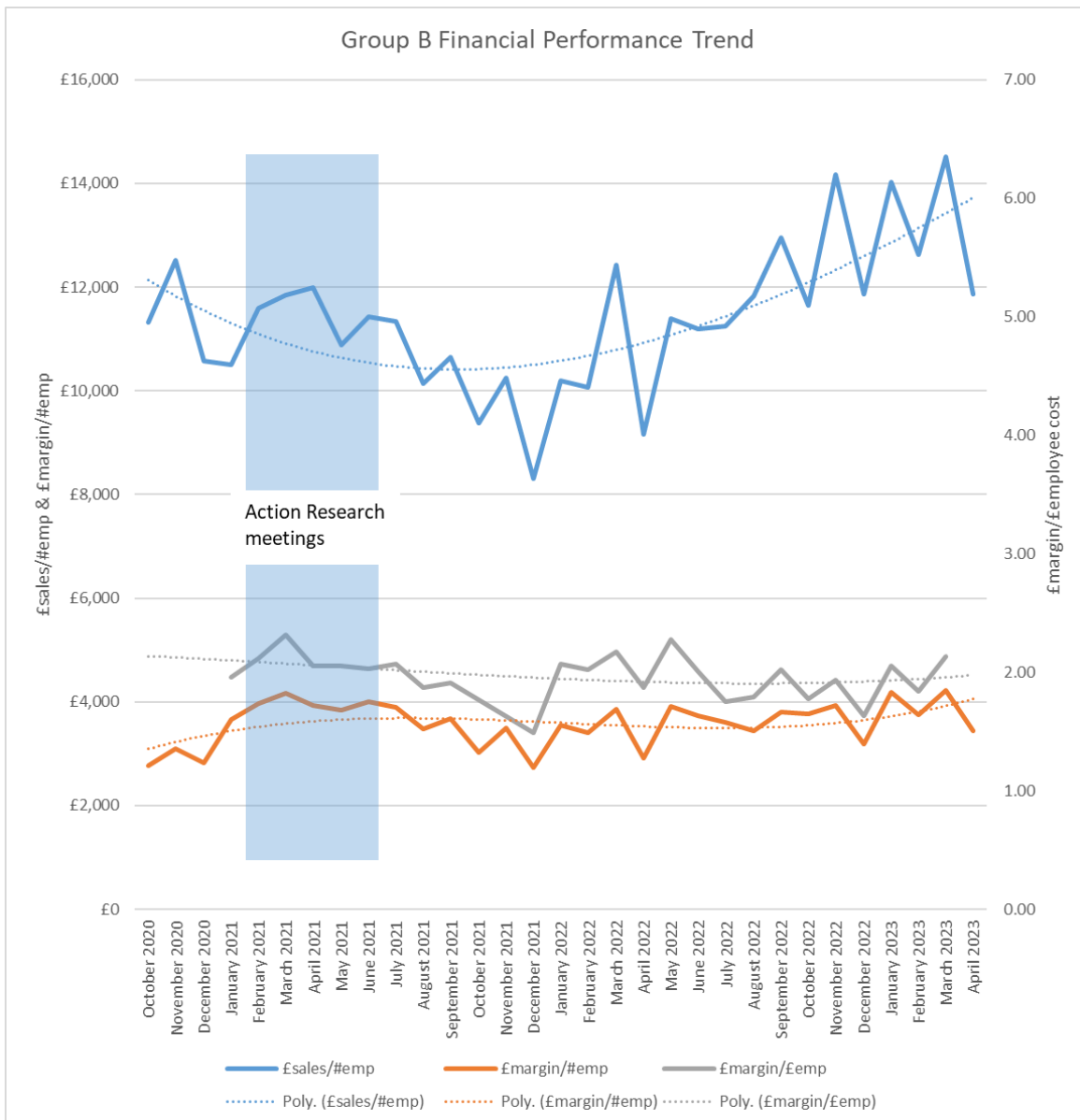


Figure 41: Sales and margin performance measures for group B employees

Although the sales per (numbers of) employee has shown a considerable increase (blue line), driven strongly by price inflation, the £sales per £employee cost (grey line) followed a similar profile to group C, declining slightly before levelling off and then showing a very slight recovery trend across the last five to six months. Given the challenging economic environment over the period, this largely flat performance, with a slightly lower decline, and somewhat less variability versus the “control” group C, may demonstrate some mild benefit from even the early version of the engagement process. In neither case, however, has the performance by this measure fully recovered to the earlier levels, prior to the major inflationary, recessionary and supply chain shocks of 2021 and 2022.

However, for group A, who experienced the full refined version of the engagement process, there is a more positive result, as can be seen in figure 42. Again, there had been a decline in the £sales per £employee cost but it immediately began to climb as the Action Research meetings commenced with this group, with a continuing trend of improvement following the meetings period. Performance has, more or less, recovered to previous levels.

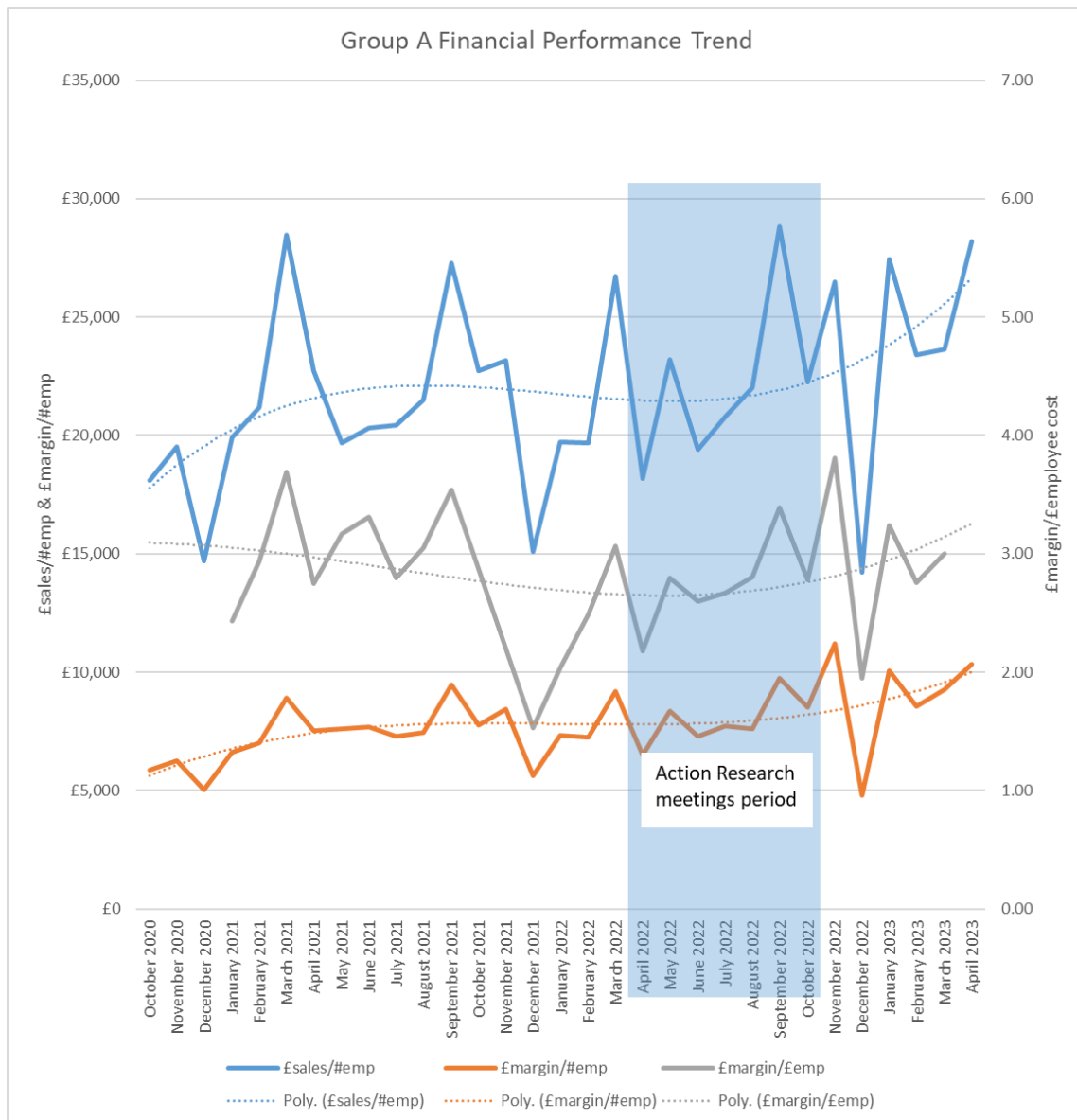


Figure 42: Sales and margin performance measures for group A employees

In truth, even with these latter results, any improvement in £margin per £employee costs is affected by a complex mixture of positive and negative influences, particularly on the £margin. The continuous material purchase cost inflation, and corresponding sales price increases that the team have worked

to apply to the market, during the period considered, plus ongoing changes in product (and hence margin) mix, could affect the results even if employee performance remained consistent.

Nevertheless, the combination of measurable employee retention increase, specific business activity improvements, and some indication of gains in £margin/£employee cost, against a backdrop of a most difficult economic trading period, does provide evidence to support the view that this project has led to increased employee engagement, which in turn has led to, or at least correlated with, improved business outcomes (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009), as discussed in section 3.4.4.

Indeed, as I tracked these measures during the period, and reflected on the difficulty of directly attributing causes, I nevertheless realised that an important part of the “task” of this research can be seen to have evolved into understanding the extent to which, and creating the conditions for which, employees acting in a suitably engaged way will “lock-in” these gains. Therefore, an important element of the engagement project has become to help employees to find ways to sustain the current performance levels through simplifying their roles, focusing attention on the most important aspects, and elevating motivation. The engagement process needed to achieve this through “high-quality relationships” to avoid the risks that “bottom-line mentality” can have on employee performance (Quade, McLarty & Bonner, 2020, p. 1172).

Finally, to show the overall company performance at a sales and profit after tax (PAT) level, figure 43 shows the results for the years 2020, 2021 and 2022 added to the chart shown previously in figure 3 in section 3.1. Unsurprisingly, sales dropped dramatically in 2020 as the pandemic began and lockdown was imposed. Despite help via the UK Government Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the profit figure was negative. However, in the following two years, although sales remained below pre-pandemic levels, the profitability has risen to match or exceed previous results and does appear to be “locked in”. As mentioned above, many factors have contributed to this, including a considerable reduction in central overhead/staff, with the remaining employees absorbing some of this load (where it could not be ceased or automated), and aspects of this engagement project affecting one third of the staff directly, and more through the “osmosis” of inter-staff discussions and managers adopting new practices and engagement conversations with their other reportees.

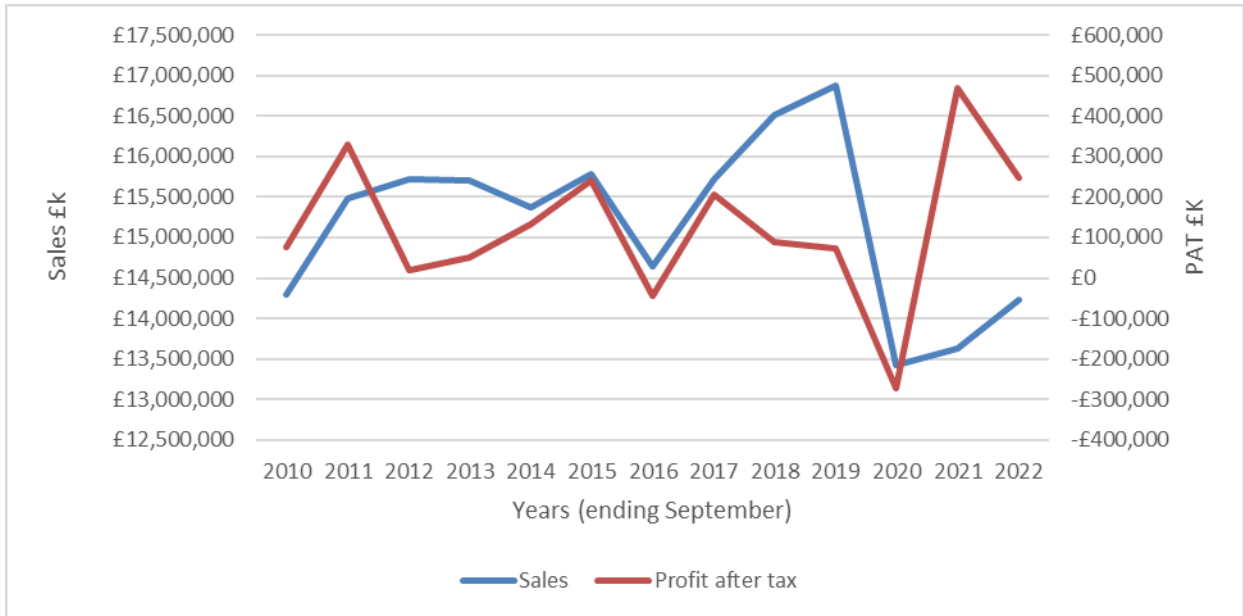


Figure 43: Long term company performance trend

As mentioned in section 7.2, the profit improvement continued after the end of the research project with the 2023 result being almost double that of 2022.

## 7.6 Demonstrating the validity and legitimacy of my claims to knowledge (*how do I show that any conclusions I come to are reasonably fair and accurate?*)

My claim to knowledge is that I have developed a powerful approach to enhancing engagement and to creating *well-directed* employee engagement, through structured communication, that is potentially applicable to other organisations, and that I have developed my own learning and practices through critical and reflective review of relevant literatures and the use of the Action Research process.

For my claims to be valid they must be shown to be true and supported by evidence. I have shown in Chapter 6 how I have drawn evidence from over 100 meetings as well as additional observations to provide qualitative justification for the conclusions that I have reached. I have also explained, where appropriate, how they fit with or build upon the existing literature, and how I have tested their validity by repeating the process numerous times at each stage, maintaining a consistent methodology. I have also tested my understanding by frequent conversations with my senior managers/direct reports who have been involved in the engagement meetings first as “recipients” and then as co-leaders with myself.

In section 7.5, I have shown that there is measurable evidence to support my claims of the gains to both the employees and the business, and in section 7.4 I have evidenced and justified the evolution of my own learning and practice.

Finally, for my claims to be legitimate, they should be reasonable and appropriate. This means that they should be logical and well-reasoned and that, unless there is justification to the contrary, they should fit with existing theory. I have demonstrated these points in section 7.3.



## 8 CHAPTER EIGHT: EVALUATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND DISSEMINATION (What can be taken forward from this project?)

### 8.1 Evaluating the account of the Action Research (*and how did/do I modify my ideas and practices in the light of my evaluation?*)

The simultaneous benefit and challenge, from my experience/reflection, of Action Research, is that the research element, both the practical but also the literature/theory, is undertaken contemporaneously with the action. The benefit is that the action can evolve in response to the findings in a very dynamic manner, meaning that, especially relevant for a real-world example, the time frame to positive benefits can be shortened. For example, the evolution of talking about “good-day/bad-day” evolved quite rapidly, once it became clear that some individuals were struggling to identify examples or wrestling with the meaning, into the much more targeted Job Focus Chart.

The downside can be that theoretical understanding and structuring of the research, may be less effective “upfront” because this underpinning stage has been time-compressed, so that the “action” can begin. My literature review has continued throughout the AR cycles, as will be seen by some of the very recent dates of the references. Knowing “what I know now”, informed by the work of other researchers, I may have jumped more directly to something akin to the final process, more robustly underpinned by the emergent hypotheses from the start, that instead emerged from the AR cycles. Conversely, perhaps what I know now has been influenced by my developing understanding, informed by the Action Research, so that I have been more receptive to literature that aligned and built on my context-based experiences.

Another factor inherent in this approach has been the evolution of the research process itself. I have discussed previously how I modified my note taking, but I also changed my view on how many employees to involve in this research. Originally, I had intended to work with one hundred people (my entire staff) but as I discovered that each interaction became significantly more than a single interview, I decided it would be more useful to undertake more in-depth discussions, spanning several meetings, with each person. Ultimately thirty-four employees took part directly in the research meetings, although this still amounted to more than 100 hours of detailed meetings, plus a significant volume of additional observations.

There is no doubt that my personal practice has evolved considerably since the beginning of this research. Although already present to some extent, the depth of my appreciation of the importance of communication has been significantly increased. This now permeates all my interactions with colleagues.

Rickinson et al. (2020, p. 3) define effective use of research evidence as “thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence, supported by a blend of individual and organisational enabling components within a complex system”. This definition seems particularly relevant to the type of Action Research project undertaken here, where the research evidence interactively modifies the ongoing project and dynamically changes the organisational dynamics.

My evaluation of the benefit of this approach has led to the decision, fully supported by the HR Manager, that we will roll-out the final developed program through the organisation, post-research completion.

There is a final point to mention. In reflecting on the outcomes of the project and reviewing the starting point questionnaire (see section 6.1.2) I recognised that I had not directly resolved the concern raised around the fairness of the use of company procedures (by management). In some of the early meetings I did ask about this point but never found anyone who would or could provide any reasons or perceptions to support these concerns. The feedback on the Engagement Support Chart to the question “How you are treated” was high (see Appendix 7), except for some specific feedback discussed in sections 6.6.2.1 and 6.6.2.4.2. My supposition is that these topics (use of company procedures, how you are treated) become catchalls for any topics that have not been well-addressed, or discussed, by the individuals’ managers. The Forward Together process developed here provides a forum to raise these specific issues, such as a question over pay, or “right” to talk to a director, and this *washes away* the less well-defined concerns.

## 8.2 The significance and implications of my research for new practices in employee engagement (*how could I articulate the significance of my Action Research?*)

Although this AR project has, by design, been focused specifically within my own company, I have now spent many years reading about and thinking about engagement. I have also discussed it with many other business leaders, in both smaller and larger firms, to understand what I could learn from their practice. Many of them say that they would like to think that their employees are engaged, and especially well-directed in engagement, but that actually they do not really know.

A director of a company with around 800 UK-based staff (8000 globally) explained to me that they used to have a very structured appraisals process. They engaged an external consultant to assess employee engagement and the biggest issue raised was that staff did not understand the career path opportunity. The outcomes were to create a document to illustrate career progression prospects and to simplify and train managers on how to do appraisals. Did this increase engagement? It was clear that he thought it did, but he actually had no evidence. The company offered flexible working patterns, arranged many social events, and purported to have a family atmosphere, but 50% (!) of the workforce were contract workers who “could be laid-off to cope with variable demand”.

The approach developed through this project, whilst it will not provide a reliable “engagement score”<sup>1</sup> will provide some justifiable confidence that employees are “engaged” and are engaged with the right things. This confidence will be supported by the structured *third level conversations* that permeate up and down throughout the organisation. Where employees are not engaged, for any reason, this will be known about and can be addressed.

For any research to be useful in a broader sense, outside of the immediate context, it should be well theorised, and the practices standardised (William, 2020). I have shown in Chapter 6 how taking employees through a structured discussion about topics that are antecedents of engagement, and by taking appropriate action to resolve any highlighted discordances, noticeably affects their motivation. I also showed that this outcome is strongly underpinned by established theory and research, particularly related to psychological contract understanding. Similarly, the second stage of the

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<sup>1</sup> It is, of course, possible to create an engagement score, by simply totalling the points on each ESC, either initially or a second version, after they have been through the full process, and averaging them for all employees. I would caution against considering this particularly reliable, since staff can apply quite different ranking levels. The purpose of the individual scores in my research approach is purely to provide a starting point for discussion. It is the conversation that is the important element of the process.

“practice”, where employees develop their own objectives but ensure alignment with department and company objectives, through a balanced bottom-up-top-down interaction with their manager, is also supported by theory around concepts of a democratic/participative approach.

However, most importantly, through the creation of some simple forms, company and role agnostic, the practice has been largely standardised. It does require a consistent, consultative, unbiased, and reflective approach by managers to implement in a fully standardised manner, but their coaching and oversight can, itself, be structured into a replicable process by their own manager utilising the ESC and JFC approach developed here.

Despite my search for engagement approaches in the literature I have only latterly become aware of the significance, and indeed the actual questions, of the Gallup Q<sup>12</sup> survey, although it is mentioned briefly in the extensive report by MacLeod & Clarke (2009, p. 41 and p. 81). The Q<sup>12</sup> survey is a series of 12 questions which Gallup have developed as a survey tool to assess engagement levels but also “to start a conversation between managers and each of their employees” (Gallup, 2023, p. q12) so that managers know what to work on to improve engagement. Gallup charge a fee for providing the use of these (and subsidiary) questions and guard them fiercely as their proprietary property, refusing to allow them to be reproduced without their written consent. What is very encouraging for my research is that, having now compared their survey with both my ESC and JFC, it is clear that I have developed, independently, a process which is analogous to, but significantly more extensive than theirs. However, my approach is available for anyone to use freely, and adapt to suit their individual organisation’s purposes.

I mentioned in section 3.4.5, the statement from Bailey et al (2017, p. 47) that “we do not really know what engagement means, how to measure it, what its outcomes are, or what drives up levels of engagement.” The significance of my work is that I have developed an innovative and mould-breaking approach which goes a long way to addressing these concerns.

In summary, the learning from this project, of using a balanced top-down bottom-up approach and utilising a “third level” of engagement communication, systematised through the use of the Engagement Support and Job Focus charts, is generalisable to any organisational context. In particular, it would be suitable for SMEs, who would often not have the human resource management structure of a larger company.

For larger organisations, it may be appropriate to slightly modify the roll-out process. My experience of working within three large companies, earlier in my career, suggests that there may be more challenges with maintaining the top-down bottom-up nature of the process because of more

hierarchical layers within a company. This risks delays or breaks in addressing issues that may be roadblocks to engagement which may *bubble-up* especially during the ESC meetings and can typically be handled rapidly in an SME. This may be compounded by the possibility of more instances of Theory X managers, discussed in sections 3.4.4 and 6.6.2.4.3, at mid-layers of the organisation. My suggestion to address these issues would be:

- to ensure top level management buy-in before commencement (needed in an SME environment as well).
- to implement some *shortcut* system to allow rapid response to engagement roadblocks.
- to provide structured training and coaching to managers in how to implement the engagement process.
- to establish some form of assessment of the quality of the ESC and JFC meetings throughout the organisation.

These additional systems would increase the workload of implementing the engagement programme but could be managed by the HR department of a larger business.

### 8.3 Areas for further research

Even with people whose meetings with me were two years ago, my perception is that there is more of a depth and closeness to our relationship than previously. This is more noticeable with non-direct reports (because I already knew my direct reports well) but indicates that this has a lasting impact not just on performance but also group cohesion. This begs the question as to whether engagement creates a more positive environment for interpersonal relationships, or whether the detailed discussion (a shared event, an opening of previously undisclosed views/aspirations) itself creates this space. For this project there were already a number of factors that probably contributed to a positive result; those involved had been “pre-selected” by avoiding redundancy; the environment was already positive with most staff already considering themselves engaged to some extent; I already knew all the staff involved. To test the general applicability of the approaches used in here it would be useful to undertake similar research in multiple settings including those where some or all of these factors were not present.

Throughout the course of this AR project, I have been leading the “formal” interactions (interviews/meetings) with employees, although where they are not my direct reports their managers have also been in attendance. I have been consciously mentoring the managers in readiness for when they take over in subsequent sessions with their staff. At the time of writing, I have begun a second round of engagement meetings with my direct reports, which for most of them is the first time they have “been on the receiving end” of the finalised process and provides a further mentoring opportunity. I am no longer documenting these meetings from a research perspective, nor will they with their staff, as I want the full focus to be on the engagement process. However, I am very interested to see how this will cascade through the organisation once I am not guiding every meeting, since the various senior managers have slightly different leadership styles. This would be another useful extension to this research.

During my literature review I found limited evidence of research at the intersection of leadership (or, indeed, followership) models and engagement, although Hultman (2020, p. 38) reports on Gallup findings that 70% of the variance in engagement is explained by the quality of the manager. There is some work on “authentic” leadership by Avolio and colleagues and others, summarised in Avolio and Mhatre (2011), and how that can generate hope, trust, and positive emotions and states, which subsequently lead to “higher levels of follower commitment, job satisfaction, meaningfulness and *engagement*” (ibid., p. 5), mediated by the “level of identification with the supervisor and the follower’s feelings of empowerment” (ibid., p. 12). An interesting perspective would be whether

utilising a structured approach for building engagement can actually generate a more authentic leadership style within managers, or even produce more of an awareness/perception amongst followers that this is present. In addition, although authentic leadership may be the aspirational style, another question worthy of further investigation is whether alternate approaches (although presumably still underpinned by integrity) may be utilised to achieve engagement.

My research has touched on this by looking at the top-down versus bottom-up balance that seems to best facilitate engagement, but there is clearly scope for considerably more work to be done in this area.

This is particularly relevant in times of great disruption, where leaders look to “self-disrupt” in order to take their businesses to even greater levels, “everyone will need to do [what is necessary] to get there, and ensure that all efforts are directed to a common goal” (Zeringue, 2020, p. 33); clearly an engagement requirement.

The purpose of trying to improve employee engagement is to give the staff a better work experience whilst at the same time maximising the performance of the company. That these two objectives are inextricably linked sits at the core of my personal positionality and is accepted by most modern managers. For the course of this project the direction of the business has been regarded as mainly static; a combination of survival and recovery from the pandemic and other external threats, and the broad mission expressed in Project 2025. However, in reality, the future direction is not static and must be regularly reinvented in light of events and revised ambitions. This future re-visioning may be undertaken using storytelling (Rosenberg & Bina, 2019; Smith, 1994; Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2017; Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975) but is likely to lead to better engagement where employees’ inputs are incorporated into the vision (Rosenberg & Bina, 2019) or where they are an active part of developing it; “the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we’ll figure out how to take it someplace great” (Collins, 2001, p. 41). In this project I used storytelling to a small degree within some of the employee meetings; a further area for research would be to investigate the extent to which engagement can be further embedded when employees play an active role in the development of the future direction of the business, where the “groundwork” of well-directed engagement explicitly linking their personal objectives to those of the company, has already been undertaken. This would probably require several longitudinal studies.

The concept of Psychological Capital, or “PsyCap”, offers the possibility that engagement could be further enhanced. PsyCap is defined as a “psychological state of development that is characterized by four things: confidence, optimism, hope and resiliency, but where confidence means accepting and striving to achieve difficult tasks, and hope means persevering towards goals” (Luthans, 2007, p. 3).

Although engagement, per se, was excluded from the construct of PsyCap (Luthans et al, 2007, P.158), it was included in the list of potentially related/overlapping constructs, and the authors provide examples of collective PsyCap efficacy (confidence) assimilated into a high-engagement culture to provide a successful outcome at an Egyptian hotel. The prospect of being able to “train” for PsyCap (Luthans, 2007, p. 4) alongside enhancing engagement through the process developed in this research, warrants further research.

Finally, whilst it should be used very cautiously as it can easily be viewed as manipulation, the *libertarian paternalism* approach (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008, p. 5) used to such great effect by the UK government’s Behavioural Insight Team, or Nudge Unit (Halpern, 2019, pp. 50-51), to encourage positive behaviours may act as a valuable precursor to engagement. By first changing behaviours, by creating the desired *course of least resistance*, it may prove easier to subsequently change attitudes and, in turn, pave the way for increased engagement.



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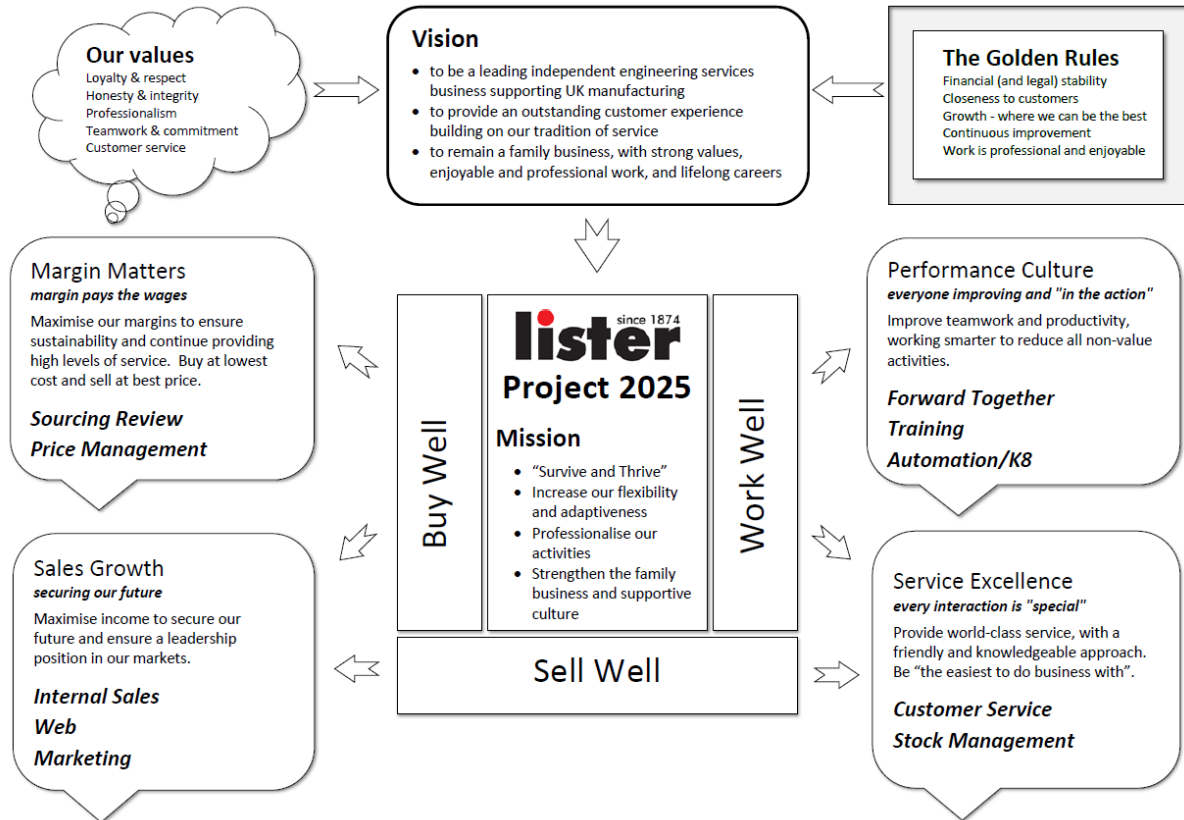


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# 10 APPENDICES

## 10.1 Appendix 1 - Project 2025 chart and booklet



# Project 2025

## Overview

As we enter the third 5-year Project since the current Board of Directors took control of the business in 2010, we are in one of the most turbulent periods in Lister’s long history. We continue to be guided by our underpinning philosophy of remaining a family business with strong values, staying true to our engineering roots, priding customer service and quality above all, and taking a long-term view.

The extremely difficult and painful decision to make redundancies in many parts of the Company, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, was nevertheless forced upon us by circumstances beyond our control, to secure the survival of the business. However, we endeavored to treat everyone involved fairly and with dignity, and it is also true to say that it is only because of the significant improvements

that we have made during the last two Projects that we have been able to undertake this downsizing effectively. Those improvements have ranged from implementing international QEHS standards through to significant refinements in our product range management, and steady progress in many of our customer service measures.

Although there are many challenges still to face, it is this progress, and the superb commitment of those of you striving every day to operate at peak levels, of whom we are immensely proud, that allows us to move into the next Project with total confidence that Lister will succeed in its long term ambitions to remain independent, provide world-class service, and combine a supportive and enjoyable working environment with professional performance.

In Project 2025 we go back to the basic principles, first mentioned ten years ago, that the key to success in our businesses is to buy well, work well and sell well. Coupling these with the themes of Service Excellence, Performance Culture, Sales Growth and Margin Matters, sets the landscape for the sub-projects on which we will focus during the next 5 years.

None of this is possible without full involvement and commitment from the most valuable resource that the Company has, which is all of us, as people in the business. One of the most important aspects, therefore, and at the heart of Performance Culture theme is the Forward Together programme. This is an engagement project which will help to elevate our internal communications in both directions between employees, management and directors and our shared understanding of, and input into shaping, the company aims and our contribution to them.

## **Pandemic**

As we enter Project 2025, in late 2020, we are still living through the Covid-19 pandemic, with the number of cases per day, in the second wave, continuing to increase. Positively, the mortality rate seems to have reduced, perhaps at least partly due to improved medical treatments. This can give us some confidence that there will not be further government supported industry closedowns to the same scale, either in the UK or in the wider global supply chain, which has caused so much long-lasting damage to the economy and our customer base.

The impact on Lister has been significant. Although we have lost no significant business to competitors and, in fact, have won new customers during the pandemic period, demand volumes from many of our existing clients have reduced. In April 2020 our sales were only 55% of the pre-Covid levels but had risen back to 75% by June 2020. Since then the volume recovery has been slower, 82% for

September 2020, with our expectations that levels will not get beyond 85% by the end of the year. There has also been a lot of variation in these demand levels, with some parts of the business, such as Tube, seeing higher figures, and others lower, and the week-to-week demand fluctuating considerably.

As you know, we acted quickly to restructure the Company to operate at this reduced demand. Firstly, we took full advantage of the Job Retention Scheme, while it operated from April to October 2020, and everyone responded excellently with their acceptance of how we worked through this – whether at work and trying to juggle numerous tasks, or remaining at home for extended periods until we were able to bring people back. Secondly, even though we had been slowly reducing headcount, as people retired, in preparation for a possible Brexit downturn, we also had to make some redundancies. From a peak in April 2019 of 152 staff (including directors), we were down to 138 in January 2019, and have now reduced to 95 staff to take us through the end of 2020. That means that we are at 70% of the pre-Covid workforce level but handling over 80% of the volume. This is challenging, but necessary because we still have many fixed costs that cannot be reduced. We have also all seen now that we can achieve it, although obviously, it requires working in better and more flexible ways, with only the most committed and enthusiastic people, with more automation, and focusing only on what really matters. These are all areas that we must build on further during Project 2025 to cement our success.

We looked carefully, in the “new normal”, at the best way to serve customers, and moved to a more centralised logistics approach with most delivery drivers based out of Smethwick. This also allowed us to make a small reduction in our infrastructure costs by closing the Aston branch, which had very low trade counter business, and had the lease coming due at the end of the year.

By acting quickly to preserve the business, careful cost and stock management, focusing on what we do best and serving customers throughout the period, we have come through the first phase of the pandemic in relatively good shape. With our new cost structure, the Company is sustainable if demand remains consistent at current levels or slightly above.

## **Brexit**

At the end of December 2020, the Brexit transition period ends and whatever trade deal can be agreed in the final days, or no deal, will take effect from 1 January 2021. It is unclear exactly what the business or economic impact will be, although there are now almost no commentators who believe that it will be positive. In any sort of deal there will be new customs arrangements and it seems certain that this will create significant delays for goods coming into the UK from Europe, and probably cause logjams

affecting goods from everywhere else. Although we import very little ourselves, we are heavily dependent on the imports made by our suppliers. There will also be tariff (import taxes) and freight cost increases. Many of our customers are significant exporters into the EU and expect their businesses to suffer considerably because of Brexit, with a knock-on effect of reducing their purchases from us.

So, we can expect shortages, price increases and reduced customer demand. Only the scale and duration of these impacts is not known.

We will increase some stock levels in preparation, but obviously investing further cash during these very uncertain times is challenging.

## **Our Values and The Golden Rules**

Against that backdrop, staying true to our fundamentals is more important than ever. The way that we act as individuals, and work together as a team, remains our consistent core ethos.

### **Our values**

Loyalty & respect

Honesty & integrity

Professionalism

Teamwork & commitment

Customer service

The approach to how we do business are also enduring principles that underpin Project 2025.

### **The Golden Rules**

Financial (and legal) stability

Closeness to customers

Growth - where we can be the best

Continuous improvement

Work is professional and enjoyable

## Our Vision

Why does Lister exist? Why does it matter if our company survives? What are we here to do?

These are the questions that we must answer if we want to have a clear view of the future that we are striving towards. And to make that vision a reality everyone in the Company must share it and be contributing to it. That also means that it is dynamic, not static or fixed in stone, because everyone's views, input, and ideas, constantly help shape and influence it.

What makes Lister special is the attitude of all the staff, the customer service ethos, the strong work ethic, and the fact that we all believe in being *nice* to each other and everyone we deal with. We want to preserve that long tradition, stretching back to 1874, of really looking after our customers and being easy to deal with. Why? Because we want to support all the manufacturing and engineering businesses that are the backbone of this country. The pandemic has shown just how important it is to have UK-based manufacturing, and the important role that we play as part of that supply chain in the areas that we operate. So, our long-term goal, our vision, is to do more and more of that.

We want to remain an independent family business because we believe that that gives us the flexibility to operate in ways that other businesses cannot, and to focus on our long-term development rather than short-term profit. It also means that, in the long run, we can choose which customers and suppliers we deal with, so that we can keep our work enjoyable.

We also want to do what we are good at, and “stick to the knitting”, which is providing engineering services and supply to other companies. Even where we have products like valves and air jacks under our own brand, they contribute to being part of some other engineered product, rather than being an end-product in themselves.

We can say that the basis of our vision is:

- To be a leading independent engineering services business supporting UK manufacturing
- To provide an outstanding customer experience building on our tradition of service
- To remain a family business, with strong values, enjoyable and professional work, and lifelong careers

## Our Mission

These next few years, characterised by the practical and economic shocks and uncertainty caused by both Covid-19 and Brexit, are going to be challenging for many businesses, and especially those in the manufacturing and engineering sector. It is highly likely that some companies will fail. Those could include some of our customers, suppliers or competitors, thus providing us with both threats and opportunities.

**Our mission is clear. We must not only survive, but thrive**, driving our business forward to minimise the impact of any threats and maximise the gains from any opportunities.

Over the next 5 years, we will need to be flexible, adaptive, “stay in the game” and continue the process of professionalising the company whilst retaining all the benefits of being a family-owned business.

To be professional means to have all the needed skills, to be committed to excellent service, to interact with our customers and other colleagues in the most respectful manner, and to have a positive and engaged attitude to developing the business.

With everyone fully engaged - understanding where the company is going, their part in that, and contributing enthusiastically - supportive of each other and creative in working with limited resources whilst we get through the immediate survival phase, we will definitely achieve our mission!

## Our core tasks

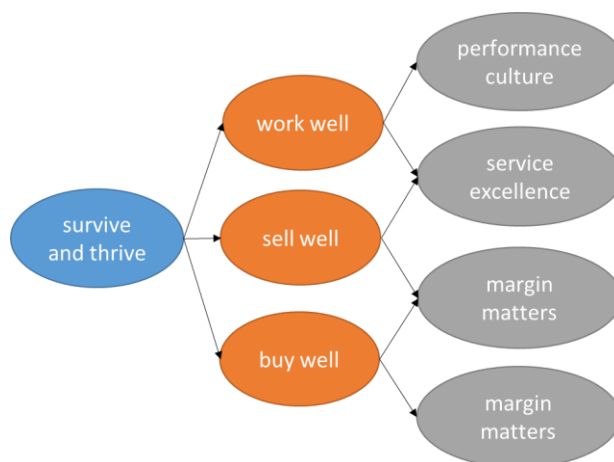
As a trading, assembly and manufacturing company, the core tasks that we must get right to succeed in our Mission are

- Buy Well
- Sell Well
- Work Well

The challenge is to buy at the right cost, i.e. the cheapest whilst still getting good quality and delivery, and sell at the right price, i.e. maximise our margin, without threatening our good customer relationships. To do that, consistently, and to minimise our operating costs and drive efficiency in all our activities through every means possible is to Work Well.

## Our Business Themes

The four main business themes that we had in the previous Project align with these Core Tasks to achieve our Mission.



### Performance Culture

In a performance culture everyone is fully involved, “in the action”, and is striving to improve, to make each day better than the previous one. This means trying to improve our productivity in every respect, both by working hard, but most importantly by working smart, reducing all non-value-added activities.

### Service Excellence

This means making every interaction special for our customers. It means providing world-class service in terms of meeting agreed delivery dates in full, every time; holding the right levels of stock to support customer demand; being able to provide knowledge feedback about products and availability; and being friendly, approachable and unflappable.

### Margin Matters

It is, of course, margin that pays our wages. Although we must treat our customers well and fairly, it is perfectly appropriate for us to maximise our margins. Only by generating sufficient profit can we ensure our sustainability and continue to provide high levels of service. We need to always buy at the lowest available cost and sell at the best price that the customer/market can sustain.

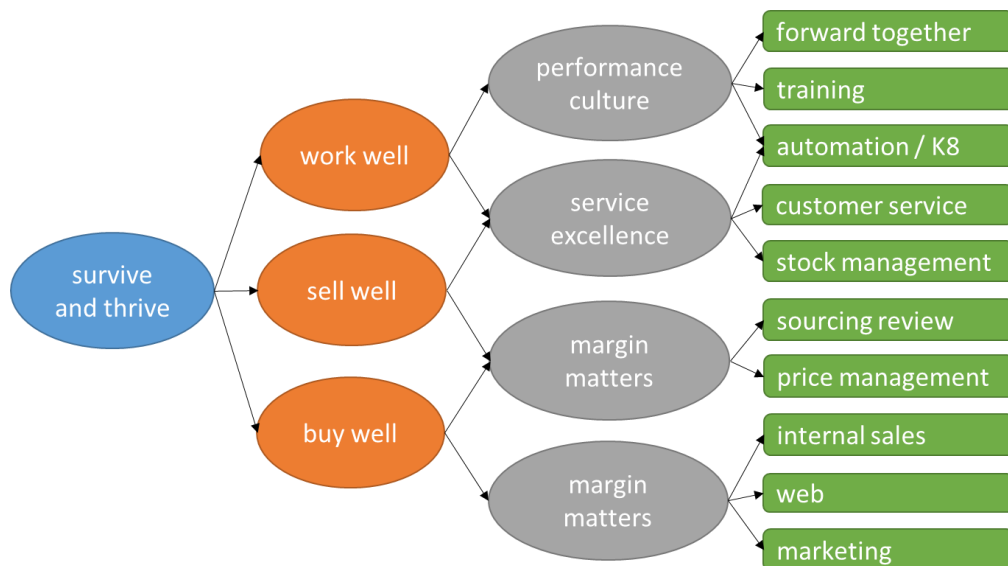
### Sales Growth



The more we can grow, the more income we will have to cover our overheads, thus securing our future. Also, our vision of being a leading engineering service business implies that we must become significantly larger.

## Projects

To actually make these things happen we have initially identified 10 sub-projects that we will be working on over the next 5 years. Some of these, such as the Forward Together engagement project, will directly involve every person in the Company.



**Forward Together** - Underpinning all our other activities and critical to our future success, the Forward Together programme is a two-way engagement project, focusing on

1. How we all understand and can influence our company vision and shared objectives
2. Our individual contribution to them
3. How we work separately and collectively to achieve them to drive productivity and growth

This project combines the intention to re-enforce our family values culture, to build our professional attitudes, and to develop a truly two-way communication approach, including much more company performance data being shared, leading to high levels of empowerment and engagement with the Company by all of us.

The ultimate aim is for us to be successful in achieving our business goals which will yield benefits for us all, as well as ensuring that all our work is highly enjoyable, valuable, professional and something in which we can all take great pride.

**Training** – We all have to become more flexible to operate in a rapidly changing world. As we add additional automation and IT solutions and as we strive to “up our game” in customer service and our professional approach, the amount of training that we will undertake will continue to increase. Almost everyone in the Company will need to be learning something new, ranging from operating forklift trucks through to using new software, or learning and practicing new sales methods and customer service approaches. Our training project will map out the skillsets that we need and the timetable to develop towards them.

**Automation/K8** – Certainly during the first half of Project 2025 we expect the economy and our marketplace to remain uncertain and unpredictable. Therefore, we need to be as efficient as possible, operating at the lowest possible costs. That means “doing more with less”, especially in terms of people. However, there is a limit to working harder. We need to work smarter. We have to simplify and automate tasks so that we become as productive as possible. This will include investing in specific pieces of equipment to remove or reduce human effort, but the first major element of this project is the implementation of the new version of Kerridge, known as K8, that will be rolled out across the business, starting with the Supplies division in December 2020. This is very feature-rich program, and we expect to progressively implement elements of it to increase our capabilities over the life of Project 2020.

**Customer service** – How we interact with our customers is at the very heart of our business; a large part of our reason for existing as a company; what makes us different; and something at which we must excel to facilitate our growth. Almost everything that we do impacts on our customer service in some respect, and many of the other projects feed into this one. It is our goal to make every interaction easy, pleasant, and special for our customers. This project will focus on how we can

improve our ability to meet our customers' requirements, especially in terms of our speed of response and fulfilment to enquiries and orders, as well as how we can enhance the dynamic, professional and respectful manner with which we engage with them in all circumstances.

**Stock management** – Being able to meet our customers' expected demands, by holding the right levels of the right product, is key to our customer service. If we hold too little, we risk losing business and if we hold too much we consume valuable cash and risk losses through product obsolescence. The new version of Kerridge, K8, will assist us in refining our stock level "logic" to constantly improve our performance in this delicate balance.

**Sourcing review** – By ensuring that we are sourcing from reputable suppliers at the lowest possible cost we can support our margin achievement. We will be undertaking a full review of all our product lines to identify opportunities to maximise profitability, whilst making sure that quality, lead times and market-place brand strength are not compromised. We will also be seeking to extend our portfolio of related products to increase choice and expand our market penetration.

**Price management** – We must sell at the best price that we can achieve whilst protecting our long-term customer relationships. This is a long-term project to ensure that we all share a consistent logic on how to set sales prices and/or customer terms, how to implement them within K8 so that the on-screen figure does not require overriding, and how to pass on price increases resulting from either supplier cost increases or changes in buying demand patterns. The improved reporting, within K8, on supplier supported pricing will also support us in identifying where sales prices increases must be applied.

**Internal sales** – Amongst the many changes that Covid-19 has driven, some of which are unlikely ever to change back fully, is the way in which Sales Executives can operate. With many customers' purchasing staff working from home, and physical customer visits often restricted to essential only, the traditional practice of "door-knocking" if not obsolete, is much diminished. Instead, successful companies are migrating their sales development activity to "internal sales", ie the sales team is based largely inside, using research, phones, and video-calling technology to make contact and develop

relationships with new prospects. Already started, we will continue to improve our approach and capability in Internal Sales.

**Web** – Along with the new Kerridge software, K8, we have also invested in a website that will be fully integrated with it. This will allow us to provide an online searchable catalogue and an online ordering platform for account customers, as well as pulling most of our communications websites together into one place. Setting up and developing the catalogue and ordering system, whilst finding effective ways to maintain the personal contact and support which is a key element of our customers service approach will be a significant and ongoing project. The communications aspect of the website is a connected but distinct project to maximise our web presence for marketing purposes.

**Marketing** – Each part of our business has different target market segments. We need to ensure that we have the right sort of presence in each one so that prospective customers are aware of us, what we can offer and how to find us. Our enhanced website is one part of that, as is networking, but we will also be working on direct access approaches to some specific market segments, such as Defense, where there might be significant opportunities across our business units.

## 10.2 Appendix 2 - Questionnaire responses

79 completed questionnaires were returned from the initial 110 that were distributed. The individual scores per employee per question are shown here based on 5 = totally, 4 = quite a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little bit, and 1 = not at all.

		employees >																																										
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40			
effect of the pandemic	how concerned are you about the effects that Covid-19 has had on the business?	4	5	3	5	3	5	5	5	4	3	2	4	4	2	1	5	5	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	5	4	5	3	4	4	2	4	3	2	4	5	4	4	4	3	3		
	how emotionally affected were you by the redundancy program?	4	4	4	3	3	2	5	3	1	4	1	2	4	1	1	4	4	3	5	2	5	4	4	4	4	5	5	3	4	4	3	3	4	1	2	5	4	2	3	4	4		
	how significant has the impact of the business response to Covid-19 been to you personally?	3	5	3	4	3	4	4	4	4	3	2	2	4	1	1	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	3	1	4	5	3	1	3	5	4	4	4	3	2		
	to what extent is your job now more demanding or difficult to do compared to pre-Covid-19?	3	5	4	4	3	5	4	4	3	2	1	2	4	1	1	3	3	5	2	3	4	3	5	4	5	5	2	4	5	5	5	4	2	5	4	3	2	2	3	5	4		
company response to the pandemic	to what extent do you think that the company has responded in the best way to the Covid-19 situation?	4	5	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	4	3	4	5	1	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	2	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4		
	how hopeful are you that the business will survive the Covid-19 pandemic?	5	5	3	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	1	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	4	4	3	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	2	5	4	4	4	
	how hopeful are you that the business will thrive once the pandemic is over?	5	5	3	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	3	5	1	4	5	5	4	3	5	5	4	4	3	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	
	how much do you enjoy your job?	3	5	3	3	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	3	5	3	5	4	5	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	
job engagement	to what extent does your job engage your interest and enthusiasm?	2	5	3	3	4	5	4	4	4	3	5	4	5	4	3	5	3	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3		
	do you have a clear understanding of what a "good day" in terms of achievement is in your job?	2	5	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	3	5	5	5	5	4		
	do you have a way of measuring that?	1	4	4	4	1	3	5	4	4	2	4	2	3	5	5	4	2	5	4	2	5	4	4	3	3	4	4	5	4	4	3	2	5	4	5	3	4	4	4	5	4	3	
	to what extent can you decide yourself how to go about doing your job?	2	5	4	4	3	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	3	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	
job characteristics	does your job involve doing "whole" identifiable pieces of work (rather than a small part, finished by others)?	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	5	3	5	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	4	3	5	3	4	4	3	5	3	5	4	5	1	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	
	is there variety in your work (doing different things, and using various skills and talents)?	1	4	4	3	3	4	5	5	4	3	4	5	5	3	5	2	3	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	3	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	
	how significant or important do you feel your job is?	3	5	3	4	3	5	5	4	5	4	2	5	5	3	5	1	5	5	3	5	1	5	5	5	3	4	4	4	4	3	2	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	3	
	for disciplinary and employment procedures do you believe that the company applies processes fairly?	3	5	4	4	4	5	3	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	4	3	3	4	5	3	5	3	5	3	5	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	2	3	4	5	5	4	5	4	
management procedures	do those procedures uphold ethical and moral standards, and reflect the family spirit of the company?	4	5	4	4	4	5	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	3	4	4	5	3	4	4	5	3	5	3	5	3	3	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	
	do you feel that you could influence or appeal against procedures if they were being applied incorrectly?	3	1	4	3	1	5	3	5	4	5	4	5	5	2	2	3	2	5	3	5	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	5	3	2	3	2	4	2	2	2	5	5	5	5		
	do you feel that the company cares about your wellbeing, goals and values?	2	5	4	3	4	5	3	5	4	4	5	5	4	5	3	4	3	2	3	5	2	5	2	5	4	4	5	5	5	3	4	4	5	4	5	2	4	4	5	5	5	5	
	how confident are you that the company would forgive an honest mistake by you?	4	5	4	4	4	5	3	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	5	2	5	2	5	3	3	4	5	3	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	5
organisational support	how flexible is the company when you have a problem or need support?	2	5	3	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	2	4	4	4	3	5	2	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	
	does your direct supervisor/manager care about your opinions?	2	5	4	3	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	2	5	5	5	5	5	2	5	5	3	4	5	3	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	
	does your direct supervisor/manager care about your wellbeing, goals and values?	1	5	4	3	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	2	5	5	5	5	5	2	5	5	3	3	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	5
	do you feel there is the opportunity for two-way communication between you and the company?	1	5	3	3	3	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	2	4	4	3	3	5	1	5	4	4	3	2	5	5	3	5	4	3	3	5	5	4	3	5	5	5	5	5	
organisation engagement	how much do you like working for/with?	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	3	4	4	4	5	4	
	to what extent do you feel "at home" here?	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	4	5	2	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	2	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	4	
	to what extent are you motivated and excited by being part of the company?	2	5	3	3	4	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	3	5	3	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4
	how much do you get involved in trying to improve and drive the business forward?	1	5	3	4	3	5	4	3	4	3	1	4	5	3	4	4	4	5	4	5	1	5	4	4	2	4	5	3	5	3	5	5	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	
effect of the pandemic	do you have a clear understanding of what the company stands for and our objectives?	3	5	3	4	4	5	5	3	5	4	3	5	4	4	4	4	3	3	5	3	5	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	
	do you know how your own job/performance contributes to those?	1	5	3	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	3	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	2	5	4	5	3	3	4	4	5	3	4	5	4	5	3	3	5	4	4	4	5	4	5		

## 10.3 Appendix 3 - AR cycle #1 questions

### 1. Engagement

- a. do you think the aims of the company are well explained and readily accessible?
  - i. do you have copies of the Project 2025 booklet or wall chart?
  - ii. could we do that better?
- b. what do you understand the aims of the company to be?
  - i. if I asked you what we stand for would you add anything else?
- c. do you feel connected and engaged with our aims and values?
- d. what do you perceive your role to be, and how does it fit in with our aims?

### 2. Concerns

- a. how did you feel about the redundancy process?
- b. has that, or the general Covid situation significantly changed your workload or approach?
  - i. what might we do better?
- c. what are your thoughts on longer-term company survival, job prospects and job security
- d. how do you feel about the way the company works or you are treated?
  - i. again, anything we might do better?

### 3. Effectiveness (in meeting our aims)

- a. talk to me about how you know what to work on each day
- b. how do you know how that connects with our aims?
- c. with that in mind, for things you can affect, what is a good/bad day (week/month) and how could you measure it?
  - i. think about input and output measures

## 10.4 Appendix 4 – Business performance data

Table of company aggregate sales and margin data for charts in sections 6.1.1 and 7.5.2.3

date	#employees	£sales	£margin	£employee	£sales/employee	£margin/employee	£sales/£employee	£margin/£employee
Jan-18	149	1476600	#N/A	#N/A	9910	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Feb-18	148	1364589	#N/A	#N/A	9220	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Mar-18	145	1402727	#N/A	#N/A	9674	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Apr-18	147	1351793	#N/A	#N/A	9196	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
May-18	145	1449677	#N/A	#N/A	9998	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Jun-18	144	1382789	#N/A	#N/A	9603	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Jul-18	144	1478000	#N/A	#N/A	10264	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Aug-18	147	1500000	#N/A	#N/A	10204	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Sep-18	148	1342000	#N/A	#N/A	9068	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Oct-18	148	1539349	#N/A	#N/A	10401	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Nov-18	146	1582176	#N/A	#N/A	10837	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Dec-18	148	1022258	#N/A	#N/A	6907	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Jan-19	147	1505633	576711	272192	10242	3923	5.53	2.12
Feb-19	148	1490058	613182	257744	10068	4143	5.78	2.38
Mar-19	146	1520691	531813	255840	10416	3643	5.94	2.08
Apr-19	149	1387367	565420	294470	9311	3795	4.71	1.92
May-19	147	1411847	553985	262688	9604	3769	5.37	2.11
Jun-19	147	1359206	543162	262092	9246	3695	5.19	2.07
Jul-19	147	1435526	587997	268657	9765	4000	5.34	2.19
Aug-19	149	1305128	518839	270874	8759	3482	4.82	1.92
Sep-19	147	1320000	575642	258034	8980	3916	5.12	2.23
Oct-19	143	1412549	#N/A	#N/A	9878	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Nov-19	139	1273287	#N/A	#N/A	9160	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Dec-19	139	898145	#N/A	#N/A	6461	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Jan-20	136	1298687	512332	250786	9549	3767	5.18	2.04
Feb-20	136	1351456	532670	246806	9937	3917	5.48	2.16
Mar-20	140	1402354	545645	247066	10017	3897	5.68	2.21
Apr-20	134	727125	285135	#N/A	5426	2128	#N/A	#N/A
May-20	134	719679	289280	#N/A	5371	2159	#N/A	#N/A
Jun-20	133	1071804	412371	219168	8059	3101	4.89	1.88
Jul-20	124	1135013	485929	254537	9153	3919	4.46	1.91
Aug-20	109	960291	401214	197392	8810	3681	4.86	2.03
Sep-20	108	1160576	#N/A	#N/A	10746	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Oct-20	106	1130673	442914	#N/A	10667	4178	#N/A	#N/A
Nov-20	102	1185849	466487	#N/A	11626	4573	#N/A	#N/A
Dec-20	97	857000	334122	#N/A	8835	3445	#N/A	#N/A
Jan-21	93	1020183	443557	198458	10970	4769	5.14	2.24
Feb-21	95	1094000	467961	198215	11516	4926	5.52	2.36
Mar-21	97	1340624	573331	202634.81	13821	5911	6.62	2.83
Apr-21	99	1190000	495460	215193.66	12020	5005	5.53	2.30
May-21	98	1128171	524964	211182.91	11512	5357	5.34	2.49
Jun-21	98	1189925	551515	220452.4	12142	5628	5.40	2.50
Jul-21	97	1152230	516826	216941.11	11879	5328	5.31	2.38
Aug-21	96	1072723	464843	214330.27	11174	4842	5.00	2.17
Sep-21	101	1220907	528706	217115.2	12088	5235	5.62	2.44
Oct-21	100	1118421	481090	259203.24	11184	4811	4.31	1.86
Nov-21	100	1234000	561226	235267.38	12340	5612	5.25	2.39
Dec-21	98	880020	374211	219427.03	8980	3818	4.01	1.71
Jan-22	101	1105289	483902	231097.99	10943	4791	4.78	2.09
Feb-22	103	1182134	524873	223328.43	11477	5096	5.29	2.35
Mar-22	101	1413327	592562	227359.66	13993	5867	6.22	2.61
Apr-22	101	1028384	453115	228914.58	10182	4486	4.49	1.98
May-22	101	1274883	567269	234652.64	12623	5617	5.43	2.42
Jun-22	100	1203053	547980	226136.43	12031	5480	5.32	2.42
Jul-22	99	1161462	515006	237854.65	11732	5202	4.88	2.17
Aug-22	98	1272711	539011	245035.89	12987	5500	5.19	2.20
Sep-22	99	1342996	537000	#N/A	13566	5424	#N/A	#N/A
Oct-22	100	1239493	538090	#N/A	12395	5381	#N/A	#N/A
Nov-22	99	1448853	612999	#N/A	14635	6192	#N/A	#N/A
Dec-22	99	910485	345749	#N/A	9197	3492	#N/A	#N/A
Jan-23	100	1458820	618238	#N/A	14588	6182	#N/A	#N/A
Feb-23	100	1281106	560211	#N/A	12811	5602	#N/A	#N/A
Mar-23	100	1376208	571299	#N/A	13762	5713	#N/A	#N/A
Apr-23	98	1251456	526489	#N/A	12770	5372	#N/A	#N/A

Margin per employee cost data by engagement employee groups for charts in section 7.5.2.3

	Group A							Group B							Group C						
month	£sales	£margin	£emp	#emp	£sales/#emp	£margin/#emp	£margin/£emp	£sales	£margin	£emp	#emp	£sales/#emp	£margin/#emp	£margin/£emp	£sales	£margin	£emp	#emp	£sales/#emp	£margin/#emp	£margin/£emp
October 2020	£307,362	£99,841		17	£18,080	£5,873	#N/A	£362,485	£88,807		32	£11,328	£2,775	#N/A	£462,903	£254,266		46	£10,063	£5,528	#N/A
November 2020	£292,846	£93,874		15	£19,523	£6,258	#N/A	£375,505	£92,888		30	£12,517	£3,096	#N/A	£506,994	£279,725		44	£11,523	£6,357	#N/A
December 2020	£205,920	£70,284		14	£14,709	£5,020	#N/A	£306,902	£81,985		29	£10,583	£2,827	#N/A	£323,993	£181,853		41	£7,902	£4,435	#N/A
January 2021	£279,030	£92,608	38084	14	£19,931	£6,615	2.43	£304,500	£105,911	54053	29	£10,500	£3,652	1.96	£452,008	£245,038	£106,321	40	£11,300	£6,126	2.30
February 2021	£317,976	£105,475	35924	15	£21,198	£7,032	2.94	£336,199	£114,790	54176	29	£11,593	£3,958	2.12	£437,982	£247,696	£108,115	41	£10,682	£6,041	2.29
March 2021	£427,098	£133,421	36183	15	£28,473	£8,895	3.69	£367,241	£129,127	55744	31	£11,846	£4,165	2.32	£546,422	£310,783	£110,703	42	£13,010	£7,400	2.81
April 2021	£341,129	£112,876	41111	15	£22,742	£7,525	2.75	£371,496	£121,806	59435	31	£11,984	£3,929	2.05	£477,631	£260,778	£114,645	43	£11,108	£6,065	2.27
May 2021	£315,011	£121,522	38335	16	£19,688	£7,595	3.17	£326,354	£115,294	56135	30	£10,878	£3,843	2.05	£498,086	£288,148	£116,709	42	£11,859	£6,861	2.47
June 2021	£304,750	£115,492	34917	15	£20,317	£7,699	3.31	£365,706	£128,173	63070	32	£11,428	£4,005	2.03	£529,267	£307,850	£122,461	42	£12,602	£7,330	2.51
July 2021	£306,404	£109,343	39084	15	£20,427	£7,290	2.80	£362,551	£124,348	60093	32	£11,330	£3,886	2.07	£485,351	£283,135	£117,761	43	£11,287	£6,585	2.40
August 2021	£322,831	£111,837	36673	15	£21,522	£7,456	3.05	£334,794	£114,738	61291	33	£10,145	£3,477	1.87	£415,098	£238,268	£116,360	42	£9,883	£5,673	2.05
September 2021	£409,233	£142,113	40153	15	£27,282	£9,474	3.54	£351,593	£121,152	63428	33	£10,654	£3,671	1.91	£460,081	£265,441	£113,528	42	£10,954	£6,320	2.34
October 2021	£340,830	£116,586		15	£22,722	£7,772	#N/A	£309,222	£99,515		33	£9,370	£3,016	#N/A	£477,069	£264,989		42	£11,359	£6,309	#N/A
November 2021	£347,295	£126,636		15	£23,153	£8,442	#N/A	£338,047	£115,074		33	£10,244	£3,487	#N/A	£546,402	£319,516		42	£13,010	£7,608	#N/A
December 2021	£241,737	£90,128	59026	16	£15,109	£5,633	1.53	£274,233	£90,154	60489	33	£8,310	£2,732	1.49	£362,850	£193,929	£139,684	41	£8,850	£4,730	1.39
January 2022	£315,659	£117,325	57554	16	£19,729	£7,333	2.04	£326,437	£113,573	54988	32	£10,201	£3,549	2.07	£470,329	£253,004	£122,722	41	£11,471	£6,171	2.06
February 2022	£315,059	£116,251	46724	16	£19,691	£7,266	2.49	£321,879	£108,830	53907	32	£10,059	£3,401	2.02	£548,209	£299,792	£118,793	41	£13,371	£7,312	2.52
March 2022	£427,411	£147,041	48001	16	£26,713	£9,190	3.06	£384,999	£119,541	54932	31	£12,419	£3,856	2.18	£602,439	£325,980	£128,161	42	£14,344	£7,761	2.54
April 2022	£290,917	£103,952	47763	16	£18,182	£6,497	2.18	£284,221	£90,586	48380	31	£9,168	£2,922	1.87	£454,814	£258,577	£127,181	42	£10,829	£6,157	2.03
May 2022	£371,580	£133,461	47733	16	£23,224	£8,341	2.80	£341,831	£117,535	51680	30	£11,394	£3,918	2.27	£563,987	£316,273	£161,659	44	£12,818	£7,188	1.96
June 2022	£330,186	£123,925	47680	17	£19,423	£7,290	2.60	£324,447	£108,100	53976	29	£11,188	£3,728	2.00	£551,265	£315,955	£127,254	43	£12,820	£7,348	2.48
July 2022	£353,333	£131,571	49234	17	£20,784	£7,739	2.67	£326,037	£104,477	59678	29	£11,243	£3,603	1.75	£482,670	£278,958	£125,736	43	£11,225	£6,487	2.22
August 2022	£396,251	£136,841	48849	18	£22,014	£7,602	2.80	£331,068	£96,198	53644	28	£11,824	£3,436	1.79	£547,344	£305,972	£123,639	43	£12,729	£7,116	2.47
September 2022	£518,884	£175,630	51851	18	£28,827	£9,757	3.39	£362,876	£106,667	52860	28	£12,960	£3,810	2.02	£463,559	£254,703	£133,138	43	£10,780	£5,923	1.91
October 2022	£400,889	£153,626	55308	18	£22,272	£8,535	2.78	£325,897	£105,279	59245	28	£11,639	£3,760	1.78	£518,815	£279,185	£130,479	43	£12,065	£6,493	2.14
November 2022	£476,947	£202,113	53038	18	£26,497	£11,229	3.81	£396,696	£109,954	56955	28	£14,168	£3,927	1.93	£579,598	£300,932	£128,756	42	£13,800	£7,165	2.34
December 2022	£256,204	£86,525	44337	18	£14,234	£4,807	1.95	£332,458	£89,256	54769	28	£11,874	£3,188	1.63	£323,467	£169,968	£146,954	42	£7,702	£4,047	1.16
January 2023	£493,752	£181,418	56002	18	£27,431	£10,079	3.24	£392,483	£117,057	56946	28	£14,017	£4,181	2.06	£575,470	£319,763	£131,784	43	£13,383	£7,436	2.43
February 2023	£397,719	£145,250	52676	17	£23,395	£8,544	2.76	£353,335	£104,809	57064	28	£12,619	£3,743	1.84	£533,217	£310,152	£129,600	44	£12,119	£7,049	2.39
March 2023	£402,140	£157,507	52508	17	£23,655	£9,265	3.00	£406,642	£117,947	55205	28	£14,523	£4,212	2.14	£569,052	£295,845	£134,316	44	£12,933	£6,724	2.20
April 2023	£450,971	£165,465		16	£28,186	£10,342	#N/A	£332,136	£96,115		28	£11,862	£3,433	#N/A	£469,973	£264,909		44	£10,681	£6,021	#N/A



## 10.5 Appendix 5 - Final version of JFC and some examples

<b>1.</b> What matters about my job? What (long term) <b>outcomes</b> should I try to achieve?		<b>2.</b> How will I know if I am succeeding or making <b>progress</b>		<b>3.</b> How does that <b>contribute</b> to the Company Objectives, Project 2025 or the SBU focus?		Margin Matters	Sales Growth	Performance Culture	Service Excellence
1									
2									
3									
4									
5									

<b>4.</b> What should I be doing to make this happen? What are my <b>inputs</b> and actions ( <b>now</b> ) ( <i>may change over time</i> )?		<b>5.</b> How can I <b>measure</b> if I am doing this well? What reports or charts shall I use?		what frequency - daily, weekly, monthly?	<b>6.</b> What processes can I establish to ensure continual focus on this? (For managers: consider your own activities and those of team)	
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						

<b>Forward Together - Job Focus Chart</b>		<b>7.</b> What gets in the way? What would I like to change?		<b>8.</b> What more information, 2-way communication or support would help? What would make my job better?	
Name					
Date					

**1. What matters about my job?**  
What (long term) **outcomes** should I try to achieve?

1	Pneumatics - OTD
2	Motorsport - stock management, primarily air jacks
3	Distribution of acquired job-knowledge - assemblies across Valves, Motorsport, & Pneumatics, processes and functions I perform daily written as work instructions. Look to use this for training staff.
4	Drive to increase air jack sales after stock issues are resolved (2023) Stock issues not necessarily limited to figuring out when to order - also impacted by material availability and suppliers' (((Mako))) ability to manufacture in a timely manner
5	Adjustment of JLSMotorsport website - narrow down focus and improve visibility of our primary offerings (custom brake hoses while you wait, XRP, air jacks), redirect to K8 linked website for online purchases

**2. How will I know if I am succeeding or making progress**

OTD reports run through K8, and from Ishida, should both see a reduction in amount of late deliveries
Reduction in number of late deliveries to scheduled orders, less phonecalls from customers chasing air jack parts
Goal setting, complete each section by X date & attempt to quantify my efforts in terms of estimating how much of my role is documented, through work instructions and any other meaningful way to pass knowledge on.
Return of air jack stock management issues @ increase in sales of air jacks
Colleague/management feedback, potential increase in enquiries and sales

**3. How does that contribute to the Company**  
Objectives, Project 2025 or the SBU focus?

	Margin Matters	Sales Growth	Performance Culture	Service Excellence
Buy/Sell/Work well, stock availability not holding jobs up allows us to hit OTD targets and continue delivering excellent service	✓	✓	✓	✓
Buy/Sell/Work well	✓	✓	✓	✓
Allows for training of other members of staff, in events of emergency absence or to cover periods of increased activity.			✓	✓
Service Excellence, Sales Growth	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sales Growth - Web/Marketing		✓		✓

**4. What should I be doing to make this happen?**  
What are my **inputs** and actions (**now**) (may change over time)?

1	Raise issue with upper management, let John know my requirements for targetted reports to make negative stock without any active purchase orders visible
2	Eyes on physical stock more often - this is the first indicator that we're low on something, then check K8 stock figures, if it looks off check to make sure stock isn't hidden in a box somewhere etc., begin re-order process
3	Make a list of the functions I perform across my roles, then break that down into processes that require documenting
4	Website adjustment as per [5], identifying potential teams or car builders and reaching out to attract interest
5	Mike has already passed me the login details for the Motorsport website, chip away at it in free time

**5. How can I measure if I am doing this well?**  
What reports or charts shall I use?

Monthly OTD report	Monthly
Goal setting - aim to document X number of processes per month	Monthly
Air jack sales, list of potential customers and report on results	Monthly
Overall business sales, web traffic, check in periodically for feedback	Monthly+

**6. What processes can I establish to ensure continual focus on this?**  
(For managers: consider your own activities and those of team)

Order Line Status report shows lines on SBO and date required allowing us to catch them before we're late, Ishida also send their own report of lates and bring forwards for us to work through every Monday
Re-order sheet, make list of primary air jack parts (top level part numbers only) and ask John for a report that pulls out part number & stock count - physical, allocations, and free stock
Identify staff who could potentially pick some of these roles up and begin working with them to have them participate or work through some on their own. Valves/air jack builds can be done live, could use K8 Test System and provide worksheets for staff to practice on in preparation for a real environment

**Forward Together - Job Focus Chart**

Name	
Date	

**7. What gets in the way?**  
What would I like to change?

Set-up of consignment stock, Location 8 & 1 (K8 isn't smart enough to filter backorders into "if no stock in 8 then pick from 1" so we need to manually adjust this regularly, this can be rectified with some work, or consignment can be abandoned and we manage our own stock.
Stop being reliant on physically checking stock - our air jack stock isn't perfect but it's one of the few things we usually have a good count on so K8 data should be adequate; it's just difficult, for me, to get it all onto one spreadsheet right now
No issues with documentation, just with sharing that info with colleagues. Our staffing number is limited, and I don't know how busy people are on a given day - or if they would proceed with training without speaking up about being busy. Some staff may already feel they're stretched a little thin and resent the "extra workload".
Experience, approaching the key persons involved in purchasing or otherwise engineers with decision making authority - without these, especially in OEM type business, you're literally just mailshotting, and if the buyer doesn't know an airjack from a steering wheel the advertising is wasted. Smaller 1-2 car teams might have more success with mail advertising, but still something that probably needs some direction
Time, but this is not time critical.

**8. What more information, 2-way communication or support would help?**  
What would make my job better?

Stock value - I don't know Motorsport's current stock value, their target value, or if I can or should increase levels to streamline air jack production. I've been ordering the same quantities of parts for many years, 250-300 units, and have considering increasing that lately. This one is definitely on me to have brought up at some point in the past 2-3 years, but now is a good time to mention it. Not just for air jack parts - I don't have much feedback on stock management, so I keep doing what I'm doing but my reorders have always been based on intuition rather than data.
Some of my Motorsport tasks have suffered this year in favour of completing work in Pneumatics, primarily on the purchasing side. I don't feel I'm unable to continue with this at the moment and could have managed my time better, but it would be good to know that if my workload is ever too much with any of the roles, there is somebody able to pick up on Motorsport side eventually, especially if we are successful with increasing sales for 2023.

**1. What matters about my job?**  
What (long term) **outcomes** should I try to achieve?

1	Improved accident/near miss reporting
2	Fewer quality issues reaching customers
3	Increased levels of staff engagement with QEHS and change in staff perception of QEHS
4	Implementation of 5S culture
5	Improved use of the incident log

**2. How will I know if I am succeeding or making progress**

Increase in the number of accident/near miss reports
Fewer customer related issues and returns on the incident log*
Staff raising issues to me rather than me finding issues or dictating to staff
General housekeeping would significantly improve and this is a major issue
Increased number of incident reports with the correct markers against them and useful preventative/corrective action suggestions

\*skewed because this is not currently always done

**3. How does that contribute to the Company**  
Objectives, Project 2025 or the SBU focus?

Allows us to eliminate issues which could result in injury to members of staff - time off work - reduced sales.	Margin Matters	Y		
Higher levels of service leading to greater customer retention	Sales Growth			Y
Makes staff feel more involved rather than feeling like they are just being told what to do - better performance culture	Performance Culture		Y	
People taking more pride in their own area would result in them taking more pride generally in their work - also less	Service Excellence		Y	
Allows us to see exactly where any issues are so we can address them and put appropriate controls in place to limit		Y		Y

**4. What should I be doing to make this happen?**  
What are my **Inputs** and actions (**now**)  
(may change over time)?

1	Improving processes for reporting near misses and accidents (near miss poster, near miss books, ability to do it quickly and
2	Consider whether the company could consider quality checks on goods in and well as prior to despatch to reduce quality
3	Involving staff more through staff meetings or possibly setting up a 'what can I do to make your life easier?' program
4	Taking 5S course and then spreading the ideas throughout the company - leading by example with my own area
5	Highlight need for log to be filled out correctly and communicate regularly regarding number of entries, time

**5. How can I measure if I am doing this well?**  
What reports or charts shall I use?

Number of accidents/near misses logged	Monthly
N/A - would have to discuss whether this is possible first	
Increase number of staff H&S meetings / general attitude of staff when asked about QEHS or asked to do QEHS-	Monthly
General housekeeping would be better throughout the warehouse - I believe there is a weekly form to fill out too?	Weekly
Check number of entries on the incident log and note any particular recurring issues which could be addressed	Monthly

**6. What processes can I establish to ensure continual focus on this?**  
(For managers: consider your own activities and those of team)

Regularly review near miss log and if it is not being done hold staff talks with small groups to stress the importance and point out what sort of thing should
N/A - depends on whether we are able to implement. If implemented we would see increased no. of issues with goods on receipt and reduction in
Set up meetings with staff at regular intervals to ensure I always have an understanding of their grievances and what we could be doing better to help
We would need to set aside the last ten minutes of each day to have everyone tidy their area and then check this before leaving site
Ensure that I regularly review the incident log and consult with managers to check that any issues they have had through the month have actually been

**Forward Together - Job Focus Chart**

Name	
Date	

**7. What gets in the way?**  
What would I like to change?

Culture of 'it will be fine' or it being too much effort to report accidents or near misses
Time - with low staff levels it would be difficult to implement quality checking on receipt of goods without hiring
Perception that nobody listens to what people have to say and therefore they do not bring any issues they may have to the table
Managers will say that time is better spent getting goods out of the door than tidying up because they are assessed against sales and margin above all else
Maybe sometimes incidents are not logged as people think they will be told off/blamed for errors - also time it takes to fill out

**8. What more information, 2-way communication or support would help?**  
What would make my job better?

Changes currently being incorporated should make it easier for people to report
N/A
Increased levels of communication through meetings discussed above and people feeling they are able to come to me with issues rather than being
Highlight to managers that this actually saves almost a week a year tidying up for audits
N/A

**1. What matters about my job?**  
What (long term) **outcomes** should I try to achieve?

1	Increase Sales
2	Increase Margin
3	Reduce Operational Costs
4	Reduce Supplier Costs where possible
5	Streamline Product Sales and the knock on operational effects

**2. How will I know if I am succeeding or making progress**

Monthly Sales Figures
Monthly margin figures
TJC report
Purchase Savings log
Product Training and Rep Runner

**3. How does that contribute to the Company**  
Objectives, Project 2025 or the SBU focus?

Sales Growth	Margin Matters			
Margin Matters	Sales Growth			
Performance Culture	Performance Culture			
Buy Well	Service Excellence			
Performance Culture & Service Excellence				

**4. What should I be doing to make this happen?**  
What are my **inputs** and actions (**now**)  
(may change over time)?

1	Rep Runner, monitor Execs activities, retrain and drive the process
2	Product training, supplier workouts to offer best product for application, added value sales
3	Study format of staffs working practices and cut out unnecessary activity, avoid adding in new employees. Improve teams care and
4	Task the buyers to wear deerstalker hats and investigate more supplier opportunities.
5	Train staff to sell more of the products that make us more margin and less of the timely low margin return items.

**5. How can I measure if I am doing this well?**  
What reports or charts shall I use?

Branch Measures	daily
Rep Runner	monthly
Sales Margin Figures via Vecta	monthly
New Biz Figures	weekly
Purchase Savings	weekly

**6. What processes can I establish to ensure continual focus on this?**  
(For managers: consider your own activities and those of team)

Make sure the team complete the reports themselves
Discuss with the team regularly, same timescale as no5
Drive each process through my reports, managers, buyers, logistics etc
Drive new biz through DC and have 1-2-1 meetings
1-2-1s with H & Martin

**Forward Together - Job Focus Chart**

Name	
Date	

**7. What gets in the way?**  
What would I like to change?

Junk Mail/Speculative Emails/Email Opportunities... from many sources including suppliers.
Yesteryears work ethic and the time to change this, in particular Execs.
Lack of website product info creating additional manual work companywide. Selling and then having to source oddball products. General walk in office
Inability to view Execs performance electronically
Reduced number of Sales Exec(s) that perform effectively. We are now running a far better system with the Execs than before but have less, thus

**8. What more information, 2-way communication or support would help?**  
What would make my job better?

Quality of staff who work for me Operationally, that's Managers and their ability to manage their own teams.
Better focus on the style of products that we hunt for and try to sell.
Better visible selling aid in the format of an active website catalogue showing a detailed range with logins for our customers (or potential new customers), focus stock
Active CRM system to Email targeted customers with products and promotions.
Quality and number of Execs. Specialist Execs should be a consideration.

# 10.6 Appendix 6 - Engagement Support Chart (ESC)

## Forward Together - Engagement Support Chart

Please put a number from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) in the "number" boxes against each topic. This will help to guide which subjects to discuss in more detail. You do not need to put anything in the notes/actions sections - these will be used during the discussion.

Name:		Manager:		Date:	
-------	--	----------	--	-------	--

**Engagement with the company** number   
 Do you feel engaged with the company?

discussion points	<i>what aspect of being part of the company motivates you?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**Communication to you** number   
 Do you have enough understanding about what is going on with your job, your dept, your branch, the company?

discussion points	<i>what other information would you like to know about?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**Communication from you** number   
 Do you feel listened to?

discussion points	<i>what ideas or topics would you like to share with the company?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**Your colleagues** number   
 Do your colleagues work well with you and support you?

discussion points	<i>are there people who don't behave correctly or are not as motivated/engaged as you would like?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	



**Your job content** number   
 Do you enjoy what you do?

discussion points	<i>what aspects of your job would you like to change?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**Your manager** number   
 Do you feel that you have the right level of support and guidance?

discussion points	<i>would you like more or less direction from your boss? can you raise concerns openly?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**Making the job better** number   
 Does anything get in the way of you doing the job as well as you want to?

discussion points	<i>what would make your life easier?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**How you are treated** number   
 Do you feel well treated, recognised and fairly rewarded by the Company?

discussion points	<i>what concerns do you have?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**Your development** number   
 Do you feel that you have job and career opportunities if you want them?

discussion points	<i>would you like to learn more about anything? what training or career ambitions do you have?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

**Your job contribution** number   
 Do you feel proud of what you do and what you contribute?

discussion points	<i>how important do you feel to the company? What about your job motivates you?</i>
notes	
actions for your manager	
actions for you	

## 10.7 Appendix 7 - Engagement Support Chart scores – for 11 employees

<b>Engagement Support Chart</b>												
Engagement with the company		10	9	8	9	7	7	9	7	7	8	1
Your colleagues		10	8	9	9	9	9	8	10	9	8	5
Your manager		10	8	10	9	8	10	7	8	5	8	8
How you are treated		10	9	8	9	5	10	7	7	5	7	3
Communication to you		8	8	8	8	4	7	8	6	5	7	1
Your development		10	10	7	8	7	5	9	6	5	7	0
Communication from you		7	10	9	8	4	7	8	8	6	7	0
Your job content		9	10	7	8	9	10	10	8	8	7	5
Making the job better		7	8	7	8	5	5	7	5	7	7	3
Your job contribution		10	8	10	9	9	10	10	9	9	7	5
<b>Total</b>		<b>91</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>31</b>

## 10.8 Appendix 8 - AR cycle #3 Value Word lists

### *Engagement Support Chart Meetings*

#### Positive Value Words

motivated, progressing, family, supportive, approachable, rewarding, process, moulding, customer, opportunity, learning, responsible, engaged, influence, long-term, expansion, progression, development, control, trusted, involved, motivation, achieving, goals, myself, trust, values, amenable, prioritise, communication, enjoy, proud, included, help, supporting, like, like, support, happy, better, better, love, motivated, like, appreciate, happy, fabulous, longevity, good, great, relationship, mates, respect, mutual, amazing, family, culture, newsletter, happy, payrise, comfortable, listening, love, engagement, variety, happy, customer, returning, happy, contribute, proud, great, interacting, opinions, learn, knowledge, achievement, appreciated, banter, good, more, enjoy, important, helped, stress-free, perfect, great, team, plan, ambition, future, progress, trust, support, busy, happy, automate, engaged, motivated, like, job, atmosphere, relaxed, trusted, targets, get-on, support, structure, variety, structure, well-treated, flexible, love, happy, learning, new, involved, open, expand, listened-to, positive, resolve, love, proud, contribution, self-motivation, secure, best, ok, happy, fixed, learning, proud, well-treated, trust, believed, remember, help, better, listened, best, good, constructive, dedication, amazed

#### Negative Value Words

unconsulted, remote, uninformed, afterthought, worry, unclear, bombarded, niggle, unappreciated, niggle, ignored, poor, uninformed, ignored, negative, overridden, horrified, nervous, dread, stressful, disconnected, sore, need-to-know, earlier, prioritised, pressure, behind, catchup, lateness, sickness, urgent, sickness, divisions, busy, unchecked, block, uncertainty, wondering, unrewarded, pay, unsupported, unclear, frustration, annoyed, more-input, taken-for-granted, staff-skills, stress, busy, help, struggling, ignored, untouchable, hurting, ignored, respect, annoyed, playing, joke, clockcard, told-off, expelled, no-stock, no-investment,

### *Job Focus Chart Meetings*

### Positive Value Words

success, measures, training, organised, learning, learning, sharing, reflection, openness, contribution, support, focus, training, satisfaction, useful, knowledge, achieve, competency, measurable, assessments, volunteer, concentrate, benefit, teach, encourage, coach, 5S, engaged, well, excellence, accurately, confidently, opportunities, square, importance, happy, customer, checking, better, helps, control, good, finished, ready, on-time, efficiently, morale, positive, focus, help, enthusiastic, feedback, guide, influence, focus, done, resolution, discussion, process, focus, plan, aiming, service, make-money, profit, growing, help, research, trying, efficient, time, try, research, goals, accuracy, seeking, upselling, look-forward, information, resourcing, margin, promotions, expansion, related, easier, great, benefit, like,

### Negative Value Words

time-constraints, procrastination, moaned, distractions, volume, reliant, dismissive, lateness, complaints, time, errors,

Additional Value Words from AR Cycle #2 employees in same division as AR Cycle #3

### *First session(s)*

### Positive Value Words

initiative, good, secure, insight, prioritise, goal, family, friendly, progress, focus, conversation, flexibility, input, structured, successful, nice, honesty, integrity, friendly, loyalty, engaged, involved, mentor, structure, challenge, well-treated, enjoy, provided, easier, enjoy, challenges, correctly, covering, exciting, aims, attitude, prioritise, control,

### Negative Value Words

hard, unsupported, busy, annoyed, reactive, lack-of-time, workload, lack-of-time, recruitment, retention, incentives, stuck, deadlines, stationery, stretched, unfinished, negative, fumbling, lucky, no-growth, busy, staffing, harder, worse, juggling, *workload*, *poor-communication*,

#### *Job Focus Chart*

#### Positive Value Words

bonus, happy, satisfaction, unrestricted, turnaround, organised, growth, improvement, skills, margin, efficient, plan, praise, assistance, efficient, useful, easier, feeling, efficient, communication, monitor, challenge, targets, achieve, friendly, professional, customer, feedback,

#### Negative Value Words

busy, shortages, mess, staffing, guesswork, juggling, perception, staffing,



## 10.9 Appendix 9 – Actions arising from AR cycle #3 meetings

### Employee actions arising from AR cycle #3 meetings

- continue with developing the QEHS related conversations with all staff
- come back with some ideas on mechanisms to ensure spending enough time on the things he has identified
- keen to start leading the implementation of 5S
- happy to drive the K8 learning himself
- continuing to try to develop the business especially on untapped customers
- recruit delivery driver, recruit new engineer
- consider what training for self (possible on finance) and team
- organise meeting and leading negotiation with suppliers
- check emails for importance rather than order of arrival
- chase up quotes
- work on training the new starters
- draft spec of airjack MRP
- think about ""safer"" airjack assembly process
- write some text for airjack website
- work on developing career plan (5-10 years ambition)
- improve communication with managers (email/text) when moving between jobs
- share with colleagues that we still have ambition to grow vans but locally, not nationally, so no need for reps
- follow up on support of one colleague to another
- follow up cross promoting email responses
- keep eye out for suitable acquisition (or recruitment) prospects
- train himself on any developing technologies
- start collating list of items asked for on counter
- lead by example on cleaning the fridge
- try to change the language used - not old school and kids, but all one team - and grow respect

## Manager actions arising from AR cycle #3 meetings

- clarify role to Accounts to better direct queries
- find mechanisms to improve branch support, especially picking
- ensure employee given sufficient time/training to really get to grips with K8
- create step by step training guide for how to create new parts in K8
- find better communications system especially on stock availability
- improve day-to-day comms to branch staff
- restart sending P&L details on branch performance
- create shared maintenance log
- create canteen space
- recruit cleaner
- increase support in office (not just to forward emails) – reallocated permanent resource
- have FT meeting with “difficult” colleague (done, with positive results)
- produce Company Update more frequently
- agree a new process for consignment stock with large customer to simplify task for staff
- develop an MRP system for the airjack range to ensure stocks and reduce stress!
- Director to train team member in adwords so they can progress into this role
- HR to find apprenticeship options to develop enthusiastic team member
- set up internal sales training
- produce flier to cross promote tube/FP
- look for next business area to move into
- investigate if we can extend quote retention period
- start giving employee some managerial responsibilities, and the training to go with it
- find a good solution to employee having time, away from trade counter, for lunch break
- look at improving the state of FP sales office

## 10.10 Appendix 10 – Timeline of key external impacts, project stages, and business performance

	Brexit	Covid	Ukraine	Lister key people actions	#empee	Esales/working day	Esales/working day/empee	K8 system implementation	DProf
2016 June	referendum					\$5221			
2017 March	article 50 triggered - 2 year process - leave 29 March 2019					64968			
2019 March	extension of exit until 22 May 2019				146	72414	496		
2019 April	extension of exit until 31 October 2019				149	69368	466		
2019 May					147	67231	457		
2019 June					147	67960	462		
2019 July					147	62414	425		
2019 August					149	62149	417		
2019 September					147	62857	428		
2019 October	extension of exit until 31 January 2020				143	61415	429		
2019 November					139	60633	436		MBS4200
2019 December					139	69088	497		MBS4200
2020 January	31 Jan 20 UK withdraws from EU	first 2 cases in UK			136	59031	434		MBS4200
2020 February	transitional period until 31 Dec 20	first British death			136	67573	497		MBS4200
2020 March		12/3 self-isolation "advice", 20/3 "stay at home" and furlough		furloughed 46 staff	140	63743	455		MBS4200
2020 April		15/4 - one of our employees dies from Covid		furloughed 6 Tube & 16 Aston/Telford branches (closed)	134	36356	271		MBS5060
2020 May		one-way system implemented		furloughed rest of Tube, concerns over cashflow, planning redundancy	134	37878	283		MBS5060
2020 June				announced redundancy of 22 (from 131 to 109 staff) - Phase 1	133	48718	366		MBS5060
2020 July		Issued face masks to all staff		further 2 redundancy and 1 resign (down to 106) - Phase 2.	124	49348	398	training started	MBS5060 - planning the research
2020 August				announce Aston closure (2 red) - total: 26 red, 4 left/dismiss - Phase 3	109	48015	441		MBS5060 - planning the research
2020 September		cases up from 1000 per day to 3000 per day, 2nd lockdown		another 5 (Accts, Telford, polyflex) redundancies (down to 96) - Phase 4	108	52545	487		MBS5060 - planning the research
2020 October		full screens installed in all trade counters		Tube signed up to 6 month trial of 4 longer days	106	51394	485		first questionnaires sent out
2020 November	customers pre-stocking	another lockdown, 3 tier rules, furlough extended until end March		relayout of Supplies office!, clearance of Aston	102	51399	554		
2020 December	end of transition period - with a "brexit deal"	3 families can mix for xmas, 40,000 cases		started K8 invoice matching, mezz down at Aston	97	50412	520	go-live Supplies & Accts	
2021 January	custom issues challenging	first vaccines being administered - infection rates slowly falling		most people back to work now, staff working from home where poss	93	51009	548		Pilot AR cycle - 6 staff
2021 February	delays in goods, price increases	covid now like business as usual			95	54700	576		AR cycle #1 - first tranche - 6 staff
2021 March	20 million had vaccine - including me	all shielding ended - most staff back from flexi-furlough			97	58288	601		AR cycle #1 - first tranche - 6 staff (continued)
2021 April		covid levels very low again			99	59500	601		AR cycle #1 - second tranche - 7 staff
2021 May					98	59377	606	go-live Tube	AR cycle #1 - second tranche - 7 staff (continued)
2021 June					98	54088	552		AR cycle #1 - second tranche - 7 staff (continued)
2021 July					97	52374	540		
2021 August					96	50755	529		AR cycle #2 - 9 staff (includes 5 from Pilot)
2021 September					101	55008	545		AR cycle #2 - 9 staff (includes 5 from Pilot) (continued)
2021 October					100	53258	533		AR cycle #2 - 9 staff (includes 5 from Pilot) (continued)
2021 November					100	56091	561		AR cycle #2 - 9 staff (includes 5 from Pilot) (continued)
2021 December					98	51766	528	go-live Fluid Power	AR cycle #2 - 9 staff (includes 5 from Pilot) (continued)
2022 January				pulled fwd pay review from 1st April - awarded 4% (at time above inflation)	101	55264	547		AR cycle #2 - 9 staff (includes 5 from Pilot) (continued)
2022 February		all covid restrictions are lifted "live with covid"			103	59107	574		AR cycle #2 - 9 staff (includes 5 from Pilot) (continued)
2022 March					101	61449	608		
2022 April			invasion by Russia		101	54125	536		AR cycle #3 - 11 staff
2022 May			supply chain impacts begin		101	60709	601		AR cycle #3 - 11 staff (continued)
2022 June					100	60153	602		AR cycle #3 - 11 staff (continued)
2022 July					99	55308	559		AR cycle #3 - 11 staff (continued)
2022 August					98	57851	590		AR cycle #3 - 11 staff (continued)
2022 September			govt announce fuel support	5% pay increase awarded (so 9.2% within 12 months) - to match high inflation	99	63952	646		AR cycle #3 - 11 staff (continued)
2022 October					100	59023	590		AR cycle #3 - 11 staff (continued)
2022 November					99	65857	665		write up
2022 December					99	53558	541		write up
2023 January					100	69468	695		write up
2023 February					100	67500	675		write up