

AS A LEADER IS YOUR APPROACH TO YOUR STAFF INTENTIONAL... OR TRANSACTIONAL?

Let me ask you something equally direct.

Do your staff go above and beyond, or are they doing the bare essentials?

The answer to the above provides clues whether you treat your staff like they are an Asset or a Cost to the business?

As an example, whenever you hear about a business that is facing economic pressure because margin or revenue decreases the first thing they tend to do is cut staff.

I run a business and all businesses go through ups and downs. Let me share my approach.

In good times I engage my staff to develop ideas as to how we can do even better. In bad times I engage my staff to develop ideas on how we can recover from a challenging situation. One constant in good times and bad times is that I always pay myself last and my team knows this well. The reason is simple. I view my staff as an Asset and an Investment, and therefore I trust them, nurture their growth and listen carefully to their thoughts and ideas.

Most leaders I work with genuinely care about their people. They invest in engagement surveys. They run leadership programs. They discuss culture during Strategy Days and they also encourage managers to support their teams.

The intention is honorable, but the execution is questionable. The proof of this is that almost every global employee engagement study says that a majority staff are not engaged.

And yet many organisations still operate transactionally when it comes to their staff. This usually happens because the organisation has never made the shift from *'managing staff performance'* to *'deliberately designing employee engagement'*.

Just like customer loyalty, employee commitment is created deliberately through leadership discipline. This shift in leadership strategy towards employee engagement changes everything.



Christopher Roberts

BRAND INTERVENTIONIST
Author of "10 Reasons Why CX/NPS"
Programs Fail & Your Surefire Solutions to Succeed"





The Transactional Leader

A transactional approach to managing staff often appears logical and structured on the surface. It focuses on operational delivery and accountability through:

- KPIs
- Targets and deadlines
- Role clarity
- Performance reviews
- Output measurement

The language of transactional leadership sounds familiar in most workplaces:

- “Did you hit your target?”
- “Is the task complete?”
- “That falls outside your role.”
- “Let’s review your performance metrics.”

None of these questions are inappropriate because organisations require structure and accountability to function effectively. However, when leadership becomes primarily transactional, people begin to experience the relationship differently. That is when staff begin to feel like they are merely:

- Resources
- Headcount
- Cost centres

In a transactional environment, the relationship becomes conditional where if you deliver results you are valued, but if your performance dips, pressure increases. When someone struggles, the conversation often becomes operational rather than developmental. Over time, the organisation ends up with employees who comply with expectations but rarely go above and beyond. The end result of this is a workforce that is technically performing but is emotionally detached. And just like emotionally uncommitted customers, emotionally uncommitted employees are unlikely to stay invested in the organisation’s success.

The Intentional Leader

Intentional leaders approach people leadership through a different lens. They do not only ask whether tasks were completed, but go beyond that and self-introspect upon deeper questions about motivation, purpose and development. For instance, they may ask themselves:

- *What motivates this individual to do their best work?*
- *Do they feel valued or simply evaluated?*
- *Are we building capability or merely extracting effort?*
- *What would they advocate for this organisation if they left tomorrow?*

Intentional leaders understand a simple but powerful truth about human behaviour: Staff Discretionary Effort cannot be demanded. It can only be inspired. They focus on designing staff engagement by creating conditions where people naturally want to contribute their best work. In practice, this often includes:

- Clear expectations combined with clear meaning behind the work
- Feedback that builds confidence and capability, not just correction
- Development conversations that happen regularly rather than annually
- Psychological safety that allows people to speak openly about issues
- Alignment between personal ambitions and organisational goals

Intentional leaders recognise that employee capabilities need to be developed and their energy needs to be unlocked.



What Intentional Leaders Design

Just as customer experience requires deliberate architecture, employee engagement also requires structure. Organisations that lead intentionally tend to crystallise three important disciplines.

1. Purpose and Line of Sight

People perform better when they understand how their work contributes to something larger than their individual role. Intentional leaders ensure employees have a clear line of sight between their day-to-day responsibilities and the organisation's broader mission.

2. Development and Growth

Engaged organisations actively invest in building capability. They identify strengths, nurture potential and create pathways for people to grow within the organization.

3. Leadership Behaviour and Culture

Culture is not created by values posters on the wall or internal communications. Culture is created by the behaviours that leaders model, reward, tolerate and reinforce every day. In fact I define Culture as “*The way we do things around here in the organisation*”.

Given the crucial role of Culture, transactional leaders inspire transactional behaviour from their staff. Whereas, intentional leaders strengthen employee engagement.

4. Recognition

Leaders tend to be quick to criticize and slow to praise. If something goes wrong there is great attention to what went wrong and why. Sadly, leaders are reticent to apply the same energy when something goes right. According to Engaged Strategy's Employee Engagement Studies, Recognition is one of the strongest drivers of employee engagement.

5. Sell your strategy don't just tell them

One of the most powerful drivers of engagement is not just awareness of the strategy, but belief in it and commitment to making it succeed. We often refer to these individuals as Champions. Creating Champions requires two things:

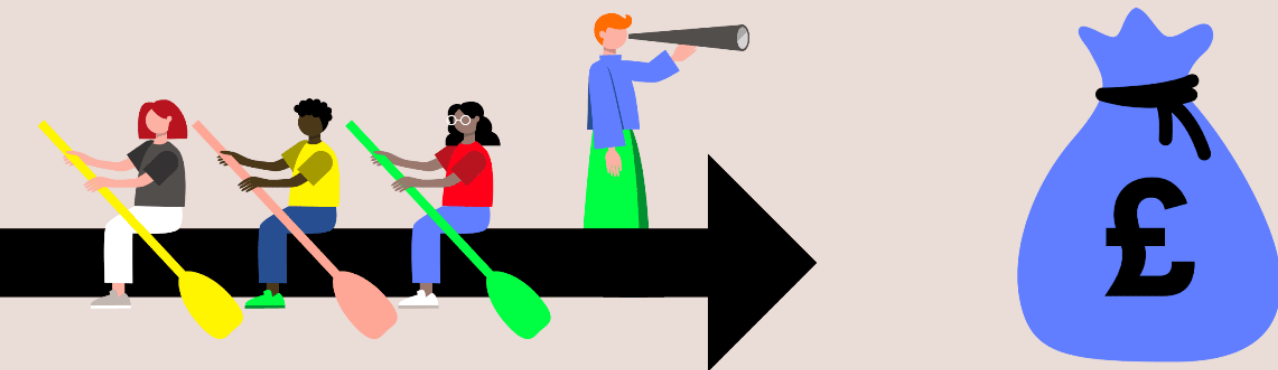
(i) **Clear understanding:** People need to know what the strategy is, why it matters and what must change. This is not about broadcasting information — it's about helping them see the strategic importance and their role within it.

(ii) **Personal commitment:**

Commitment does not come from being told. It comes from being involved.

When people contribute to shaping the strategy, even in small ways, they begin to take ownership. Involvement in design can be as simple as sharing the direction and inviting input. Involvement in delivery comes from clearly outlining what each person must do and how their actions contribute to success.

Because ultimately, without involvement, there is no commitment.



Where Many Organisations Drift

The theory of employee engagement is widely understood. But executing employee engagement is where most organisations struggle.

I have worked across 20+ industries and I frequently observe the same pattern. Leaders know that engagement matters, yet the organisation still manages people through transactional systems. They introduce leadership workshops, run engagement surveys and communicate new cultural values. But they often fail to truly engage their staff.

The Economic Reality

Even though I have been mentioning organisational culture often in this article, this is a strong commercial discussion. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2023 report estimates that highly engaged teams outperform disengaged ones by up to 23% in profitability.

Transactional people strategies often lead to:

- Higher turnover
- Increased recruitment and training costs
- Loss of institutional knowledge
- Lower productivity
- Rising absenteeism

However, intentional people strategies tend to lead to:

- Higher engagement levels
- Stronger retention
- More internal promotions
- Greater discretionary effort
- More stable organisational performance

It is well understood that engagement compounds over time. A single highly engaged team member often contributes far beyond their job description, while a disengaged employee can quietly reduce productivity across an entire team.

Leadership behaviour ultimately determines which environment becomes the norm.

The Real Difference

Transactional leadership tends to produce:

- Compliance
- Short-term output
- Limited emotional attachment
- Quiet quitting behaviours
- Minimal discretionary effort

Intentional leadership tends to produce:

- Ownership
- Staff go above and beyond
- Advocacy
- Innovation
- Long-term organisational loyalty

One observation consistently holds true across sectors. If employees feel managed transactionally, customers will feel served transactionally because culture always leaks outward.

Customer experience is simply

Internal Culture Expressed Externally.

If employees feel energised and supported, customers experience that energy. If employees feel managed as resources, customers eventually experience the same detachment.





Designing Engagement Across the Organisation

Intentional leadership follows a clear, disciplined approach.

Step 1 – Define the Outcome

Be clear on what you are trying to create:

- Higher employee loyalty
- Proactive, “go above and beyond” behaviour
- A culture of innovation
- A culture of customer obsession

Without clarity of outcome, engagement efforts become fragmented.

Step 2 – Design Your Employee Engagement Strategy

This is where intent becomes structure:

- What is your Employee Value Proposition (EVP)?
- What emotional experience do you want employees to feel?
(*This should mirror the experience you want customers to have — valued, cared for, supported.*)
- What leadership behaviours & style will enable this?

Step 3 – Align and Build Commitment

A strategy only works if people understand and believe in it.

Leaders must clearly answer:

1. What are we doing?
2. Why does it matter?
3. How will we do it?

4. What support, resources, & training will be provided?

Clarity builds commitment.

Step 4 – Measure What Matters

Engagement must be measured systematically, not assumed. Use detailed engagement studies supported by regular pulse checks to track:

- Organisational engagement
- Leadership effectiveness
- Team-level experience
- Understanding of strategy and direction
- Alignment to values
- Fulfilment of core human needs at work

Most importantly, identify key drivers & pain points.

Step 5 – Govern and Act

Measurement without action erodes trust.

- Develop clear action plans based on insights
 - Establish governance to prioritise and track initiatives
 - Ensure accountability for execution at all levels
- Engagement improves when insights consistently translate into action.

When these disciplines operate together, engagement shifts from being an abstract concept to a practical leadership capability. I have found that organisations that treat employee engagement as a strategic discipline rather than an HR initiative tend to see measurable improvements in performance, retention and culture.



Leadership Reflection

Leader to leader, consider these questions.

- *When was the last time you asked a team member what energises them?*
- *Do you know the ambitions of your strongest performers?*
- *Do your managers coach their teams or simply supervise tasks?*
- *Is development proactive, or only addressed when something goes wrong?*
- *Are your staff loyal and do they go above & beyond in their jobs?*

The last question matters more than many leaders realise.

Today's workforce has options, and talented people increasingly choose environments where they feel respected, challenged and supported.

Transactional leadership may sustain short-term performance, but Intentional leadership builds long-term commitment.

The Real Question

The ultimate question is not whether your staff are performing, but whether they are engaged by design or they are surviving in the organisation by necessity.

In today's volatile environment, transactional leadership represents a risk strategy, while intentional leadership represents a growth strategy. Organisations that thrive in the coming decade will not only design customer experience deliberately, but also the employee experience that delivers it. Because one always shapes the other.

So where does your organisation truly sit today?

And more importantly, what kind of leadership environment are you creating for the people responsible for delivering your strategy every day?

These are the very questions we explore with leadership teams of our clients as we help them shift from managing performance to designing engagement, often revealing gaps that aren't immediately visible, but commercially significant.