ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS:  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY MYVOICE JOURNEY AND  
ACHIEVEMENTS  
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ABSTRACT  
This paper provides a case study for utilising the results of an employee engagement or organisational climate survey as a launching pad for engaging management and staff in improving organisational culture and practices. It explores how a tertiary education institution has responded to the survey results by implementing an innovative approach for gaining the buy-in of senior management and for engaging staff in addressing key areas for improvement. The survey results highlighted areas of strength and weakness in organisational, management and human resource practices. A number of strategies were implemented including the establishment of working groups to support sustainable change in eight challenging and critical areas for maximising employee engagement, and to harness the engagement of the institution’s leaders as mentors and sponsors. The paper also discusses significant achievements and lessons learned for engaging managers and staff in successfully implementing a complex organisation-wide project.  

KEY WORDS  
Employee engagement, staff engagement, organisational development, human resources management, universities.  

INTRODUCTION  
Most Australian universities now conduct an employee engagement survey. The experience at the University of Western Sydney provides a case study for how the employee engagement survey results can be utilised as a strategic driver for engaging stakeholders – senior management, schools, research centres and divisional units, and academic and professional staff – to improve organisational culture and management and work practices, at the local and organisational-wide levels. 

The common experience for organisations conducting a survey is to achieve a reasonable response rate and assess how well the organisation has performed, benchmarked against previous surveys and the sector, then to announce the results to staff and identify areas for improvement to be actioned by a senior manager(s), with variable results in achieving organisational-wide outcomes.  

The University of Western Sydney conducted its first engagement survey in 2012. Eighty-three per cent of academic and professional staff provided feedback on a range of organisational and management practices. The overall level of satisfaction with working at the University was one per cent higher than the sector average. This was surprising as significant organisational restructuring had occurred in the six months before the survey.
Responses highlighted a number of strengths as well as areas for improvement. The Office of Organisational Development seized the opportunity for utilising the survey results as a launching pad for initiating organisational cultural change.

Gaining the buy-in of senior management and staff is critical for actively engaging in university initiatives and for changing organisational culture. The MyVoice Staff Engagement (MyVoice) Project demonstrates the benefits and challenges of adopting a whole-of–institution, top-down, bottom-up approach.

This paper presents some of the outcomes achieved from the establishment of working groups to address key areas of improvement identified from staff feedback and survey results. The working groups enabled a forum for the staff voice to be heard. The University of Western Sydney is a multi-campus university and it was important to have a cross-representation of academic and professional staff from each of the campuses. A critical success factor for engagement was for the university to be seen by staff to respond to their feedback, given the unfavourable results directed at university management and some organisational practices. Communication with staff, particularly by the Vice-Chancellor, and achieving visible and tangible outcomes both at the institutional and local levels, were an important element for engaging staff following the survey.

A second survey will be conducted in May 2015. This will provide results within the context of a three-year period of continuous disruptive change in organisational structure, systems and leadership and management including a change of Vice-Chancellor and senior leadership in early 2014, and changes in the higher education landscape and government policy. A key challenge remains in how to create sustainable change in organisational culture while maintaining motivation and momentum in employee engagement.

What is Employee Engagement?

Employee engagement is defined as ‘the extent to which employees are willing to invest discretionary effort (both emotional and intellectual) to accomplish the work, mission and vision of an organisation’ (i4cp, 2012, p4).

Employee engagement is a measure of the commitment and loyalty to the organisation, how proud people are to be a part of it, and how passionate they are about their work and workplace. It includes people’s satisfaction with the work they do, the sense of personal accomplishment that their work provides, and also their desire and intention to remain with the organisation. Employee engagement has been shown to be strongly connected with productivity, innovation, turnover, and a range of other factors (Langford, 2009, 2010).

An engaged employee therefore is one who is fully involved in and enthusiastic about their work and who will act in a way that furthers the organisation’s interests. It includes an emotional attachment to the job, colleagues or organisation, and influences the employee’s performance and willingness to learn and contribute.

Smith (2014) believes that employee engagement is ‘largely a result of people feeling like they have an opportunity to make a difference in their role. The ability to express their opinion, feel like they have been heard and feel that there was consideration given to a view is extremely powerful in achieving that’. A culture where individuals are not listened to, or
where people do not feel safe to speak up when they have a concern, places the organisation at risk of experiencing critical failures in systems or processes (Smith, 2014).

Management practices such as leadership, job design, recruitment and selection, training, compensation, performance management, and career development, can all strongly influence an employee’s level of engagement and commitment (SHRM, 2012).

**Engagement Survey and Results**

Employee engagement surveys are widely regarded as efficient measures of work practices and outcomes. They are increasingly used by universities for diagnosing and improving engagement, culture and leadership. Surveys measure a broad range of work outcomes such as job satisfaction or employee engagement; assess how well the organisation is performing and the relative importance of specific work practices; describe the climate or culture of the organisation; benchmark performance against other organisations; and estimate which management practices are more important than others for influencing employee outcomes such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction and intention to stay (Langford, 2009).

The Human Resources Leadership Council (2012) conducted engagement surveys of more than 11,000 employees across all industries. They found that engagement strategies with lasting impact are those that account for past, present, and future measures of engagement, and target engagement efforts by critical workforce segments, rather than a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. They include action-planning approaches with both immediate and longer-term impact.

Using a well-validated and normed survey (Langford, Parkes & Metcalf, 2006) to measure employee engagement and perceptions of organisational performance along a broad range of management practices, Langford (2009, 2010) benchmarked work practices and outcomes in Australian universities against other industries. In examining the results across seventeen universities, Langford (2010) identified common areas with lower scores that included cross-unit cooperation, career opportunities, managing change, involvement, processes, trust in leadership, recruitment and selection, facilities, and learning and development. He found that higher scoring practices and outcomes in universities were teamwork, role clarity, belief in mission and values, job satisfaction, talent of staff, organisational commitment, supervision, motivation and management of diversity.

Langford’s (2010) research indicates that cross-unit cooperation is a significant predictor of outcomes, including productivity, management of change, innovation, and customer satisfaction. Of particular interest is that cross-unit collaboration in universities receives unfavourable scores yet, according to Langford, it is also a key predictor of performance. As Table 1 shows, the University of Western Sydney received an unfavourable result for cross-unit collaboration and therefore identified this as a key area for improvement.

As will be demonstrated in this paper, the establishment of working groups are exemplars of cross-unit collaboration, and along with other targeted areas, it is expected that improvements in performance, management of change, and innovation will occur in the next survey.
Table 1. Comparison of survey results against common lower and higher scoring areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common lower scoring areas</th>
<th>UWS % Favourable</th>
<th>All Universities % Difference</th>
<th>Like Universities % Difference</th>
<th>All Industries % Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change &amp; Innovation</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
<td>-18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>+23%</td>
<td>+34%</td>
<td>+11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment &amp; Selection</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
<td>-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Unit Cooperation</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
<td>+6%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning &amp; Development</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Opportunities</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common higher scoring areas</th>
<th>UWS % Favourable</th>
<th>All Universities % Difference</th>
<th>Like Universities % Difference</th>
<th>All Industries % Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisational Commitment</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>+9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>+11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission &amp; Values</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Clarity</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation &amp; Initiative</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
<td>+11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key strengths emerged including a belief by staff in the mission and values of the University (86 per cent), commitment to the University (77 per cent), job satisfaction (81 per cent), role clarity (84 per cent), and the level of teamwork amongst colleagues (86 per cent). There were weaker results in areas such as cross-unit cooperation (34 per cent), quality of and support for entrepreneurial activities (35 per cent), and managing change (38 per cent).

The results were consistent with other universities and rated, in general, more than one per cent higher than the sector average and four per cent higher compared to other multi-campus universities. The key outcome measures of staff engagement and satisfaction with the University’s achievements and progress were on par with other universities, at 76 per cent and 55 per cent respectively (see Table 2). The most important drivers of staff engagement and perceptions of organisational progress were having trust and confidence in senior leadership (45 per cent), effective recruitment and selection procedures (49 per cent), and the ethics of the University (75 per cent).
Table 2. Comparison of UWS engagement and progress results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UWS % Favourable</th>
<th>All Universities % Difference</th>
<th>Like Universities % Difference</th>
<th>All Industries % Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passion/Engagement</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
<td>+14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four key priority areas for improvement were recommended by the consultants, Voice Project. These were: building confidence and trust in senior management through greater visibility and more effective two way communication with staff; increasing transparency in decisions by implementing a thorough consultative management approach and involving staff throughout the decision making process with regard to major change initiatives; facilitating information flow and breaking down silos by encouraging greater collaboration and partnerships across the University; and improving the transparency of recruitment and selection procedures and ensuring managers are aware of the type of people the University needs to employ.

**PROCESS**

How did the University engage staff in the survey and outcomes? A MyVoice project team was established comprising the project leader and project officer (the authors), an organisational development consultant, internal communications manager, and senior human resources partner. The project team oversaw the implementation of the survey in the lead-up to, and following, the survey. The project team reported to a reference group whose membership included senior staff members who were highly respected by their peers, staff and senior management, and who acted as champions for the project. The reference group provided support and guidance to the project team.

Adopting a project management methodology, one of the first steps was to consult with those with previous experience to learn what worked well and what did not. Four Australian universities were consulted which were either multi-campus or which had a longer track record in implementing engagement surveys. Commonalities and differences in processes and outcomes provided valuable information for the project team to identify key considerations for successfully implementing a staff engagement survey.

Critical for the success of any university-wide initiative is having a clear and comprehensive engagement strategy and project and communications plan, the endorsement of the Vice-Chancellor, a senior management champion(s), and the provision of adequate resources. The project and communications plan outlined the purpose, background, objectives, key stakeholders, organisational requirements, approach, timeframe, inclusions, exclusions, critical success factors, constraints and risks. This enabled the project team to establish clear goals, roles and responsibilities, keep within budget, have clear communications channels, and monitor and evaluate performance.

Working closely with the Internal Communications Unit is another critical success factor, utilising their expertise to develop a strategic communications plan to encourage maximum participation and engagement with the survey. Strategies included broadcasting a number of key messages delivered by the Vice-Chancellor which highlighted the importance of staff
feedback, that responses were confidential and anonymous, and what the University intended to do with the results. A wide variety of communication channels were employed with MyVoice branding on emails, posters and postcards distributed to all staff, along with a range of incentives to encourage group and individual participation.

A unique approach was adopted to encourage survey completion. For every survey completed the Vice-Chancellor donated five dollars to student scholarships. As a result of the high response rate, a two-year scholarship was awarded to a student confined to a wheelchair to enable her to complete her studies. Schools and work areas were encouraged to host a MyVoice morning tea to bring their staff together and thank them for taking the opportunity to have their say. Individual prizes were randomly drawn at the end of each day where staff elected to enter a prize draw on completion of the survey. A video clip of staff sharing their views on why it was important for staff to have their say was produced. As the survey end date approached, the call centre was employed to call and invite staff to complete the survey or thank them if they had already completed the survey.

The detailed, comprehensive and well thought-through communications plan was vital for maximising participation in the survey. The high response rate of eighty-three per cent ensured that a wide demographic of staff was represented and that the results were meaningful.

A key message in the lead up to the survey was a commitment by the University to respond to staff feedback. Immediately following the release of survey results, it was therefore critical to inform staff how the University was responding to their feedback and acting on the results. A key lesson shared from other universities was that inaction could lead to staff having little reason to complete another survey and generate high levels of mistrust in senior management.

To ensure the authenticity of the survey results, the external consultants presented the results and recommendations to the Vice-Chancellor, Board, Executive, senior managers, and schools and divisional unit management. This was particularly important for areas that received unfavourable results in order to acknowledge staff feedback. Managers were provided with information packs to then communicate and discuss the results with their staff with the support of the Project Team.

For the wider university community, the Office of Organisational Development presented the results and recommendations to staff in each work unit. This also enabled the development of in-house expertise in the survey instrument and interpretation of results, and ongoing support to areas. A series of emails from the Vice-Chancellor to staff communicated the high level results, how the University was planning to respond, and invited staff to ‘Town Hall’ meetings to discuss the results. The creation of a MyVoice website enabled staff to access the results and remain informed of actions being taken.

To ensure responsibility for acting on results at the local level, deans and directors were required to develop and implement action plans that targeted key areas for improvement specific to their MyVoice results, to include these in their operational plans, and to provide six-monthly progress reports to the executive.
Post-Survey Implementation Phase

Working groups were established to address the recommendations by the external consultants and a total of eight areas of improvement were identified to support sustainable change. These were senior management communication, inclusive decision-making, cross-unit collaboration, career development for academic and professional staff, recruitment and selection, supporting new staff, and responding to workplace bullying. The survey results identified these areas as critical for improving organisational performance and maximising employee engagement, in alignment with the organisation's strategic goals.

Membership of the working groups was an important factor for ensuring academic and professional staff representation from across nine schools, four institutes, three divisional portfolios, six campuses, and from early career to senior levels. Deans and directors were asked to nominate staff representing a broad cross-section of the University and who would positively and actively contribute to discussions, represent the best interests of the University, gather ideas from others and help keep colleagues informed. This process facilitated support from senior managers and helped ensure that engaged staff were selected. The project team reviewed the nominations to fill any gaps in representation from all levels of staff, campuses, schools, and divisional units. Staff received a personal invitation from the Vice-Chancellor to join the working groups, and the support of their supervisors was sought for their participation.

Reference group members also chaired the working groups. This enabled cross-unit collaboration and information sharing using a distributive leadership approach. The working groups were supported by the project team and a dedicated project officer, and mentored by a member of the Executive and a dean, enabling a flow of communication up and down with senior management and staff. Each of the working groups developed comprehensive action plans and the Vice-Chancellor provided seed money to implement their plans.

The working groups have met bi-monthly to implement their plans. All working groups are brought together every six months to participate in a MyVoice forum attended by the Vice-Chancellor and mentors, to showcase achievements and engage in discussions on key areas of focus leading to the next survey in 2015. MyVoice forums have been successfully designed to engage staff and senior management using innovative processes such as café conversations engaging participants in focussed discussions that generate high levels of energy, participation and identification of common themes.

Working group membership continues two years following the survey with the majority of original members continuing, a testament to the commitment of staff whose involvement is entirely voluntary. Over ninety academic and professional staff continue to be involved in the working groups.

OUTCOMES

A number of tangible outcomes have been achieved at the university-wide level. These include:

- ‘Meet the Executive’ campus forums, regular email and social media (Yammer) communication from the Vice-Chancellor, and opportunities for small groups of staff to meet informally with the Vice-Chancellor over coffee
• a framework for decision-making using guiding principles
• an online recruitment process map, glossary and guidelines
• ‘Effective Emails’ web page and desk tent card
• an improved welcome pack for new staff
• a booklet on Checklists to Capture Evidence for Academic Achievement, mentors and resources for promotion applications, and a speed mentoring program for early career academic staff
• online modules on career development for early career academics and professional staff
• an improved Professional Development Policy and increase in the Education Support Allowance, and
• an online stop bullying toolkit and information sessions for responding to workplace bullying.

At the school and divisional level, reported outcomes include: piloting a mentoring program for professional staff in the Library and School of Science and Health to enhance career opportunities and increase cross-unit collaboration; changing the culture and leadership model of the Library to one of open communication and empowerment; establishment of gardens and sporting events in the School of Science and Health to improve staff wellness; reengineering end-to-end processes and building leadership capacity in Information Technology Services; holding BBQ lunches and a Community of Practice Forum for cross-unit information sharing in the Office of People and Culture; and introducing a program for creating a positive culture to foster positive workplaces.

DISCUSSION

The Gallup State of the Global Workplace Report (2013) estimates that 24 per cent of Australian employees are engaged, that is, about one in four employees are psychologically committed to their jobs and making positive contributions to their organisations. They estimate that 76 per cent of Australian employees are either not engaged (60 per cent) – that is, lack motivation and are less likely to invest discretionary effort in the organisation’s goals or outcomes, or are actively disengaged (16 per cent) – that is, are unhappy and unproductive at work and liable to spread negativity in the workplace (Crabtree, 2013; Gallup, 2013). It is estimated that a disengaged worker costs approximately $US13,000 in yearly productivity losses (Gallup, 2013). Shuck et. al., (2011) estimate that employees who are disengaged cost organisations in the United States approximately 35 per cent of their payrolls and disengaged employees cost organisations US$343 billion annually. Thus, the costs of a disengaged workforce are significantly high with low levels of engagement among workers globally continuing to hinder gains in economic productivity and quality of life.

Various authors have researched the relative importance of employee engagement on performance (Baysinger, 2012; Gallup, 2013; HRLC, 2012; Langford, 2010) and on trust in senior management (Rees, Alfes & Gatenby, 2013; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). A meta-analysis of studies on engagement (Gallup, 2013; Reilly, 2014) confirms that employee engagement relates to nine key performance outcomes and that strong correlations between engagement and performance are highly consistent across different organisations from diverse industries and regions of the world.
How much change is achievable? Langford (2010) believes that measurable improvements can occur when a long term view is taken, achievable change is benchmarked, expectations are managed, quick wins are planned and achieved, and what is working well is continuously reviewed and polished. With these perspectives in mind, the business case for investing in a short- to long-term engagement strategy that is comprehensive and integrated into school and business unit operations is critical for having an engaged workforce that positively contributes to the organisation’s mission and goals, and increases employee engagement and organisational performance.

A number of lessons have been learned through the MyVoice Project for engaging employees.

The first lesson relates to identifying the critical success factors. Langford (2011) describes a number of traps to avoid when conducting an employee survey. The University of Western Sydney has managed to avoid and turn these traps into critical success factors for responding to staff feedback. These include: an organisational willingness to act on feedback; providing the survey results to staff when the final results were available, and by doing so, demonstrate a level of employee trust and engagement; requiring work units to develop an action plan and report on progress, thereby demonstrating accountability for addressing areas of improvement; and specifically targeting improvements in areas that have shown the greatest improvement in performance and engagement. Of the areas identified by Langford (2011), the University performed well in staff understanding organisational direction and the quality of facilities, and performed less favourably, and therefore targeted improving trust in senior leadership, career opportunities, satisfaction with recruitment and selection processes, and involvement in decision-making.

The second lesson related to leadership and employee engagement. Although there is little research on the impact of leadership on engagement in the higher education sector, we can draw on studies such as that by Wang & Hsieh (2013) who examined the effect of authentic leadership on employee engagement in over 1,500 Taiwanese companies and found that supervisors’ consistency between words and actions and moral perceptions are positively related to employee engagement, and that employee trust was positively related to employee engagement.

Improving the level of trust between staff and senior leaders is a stronger predictor of engagement and performance than the relationship between staff and supervisors (Langford, 2011). Langford (2011) suggests that senior management must actively promote and communicate the survey and results and demand concrete action from all work units. He suggests that staff expect the Executive to respond to the survey results and staff feedback and that this should not be delegated to managers. Langford (2011) also suggests that managers should have the freedom, resources and be rewarded for being innovative in addressing areas for development. Thus, leadership is key to employee engagement with the mission of the organisation and improving performance and productivity.

The third lesson relates to effective communication with staff. According to Langford (2011), failing to communicate to staff what was done and how it was linked to what staff asked for is a trap that should be avoided. Communicating the actions and achievements and linking these back to the survey results is critical for staff to understand the usefulness of the survey and that their feedback is taken seriously and is making a genuine difference to the workplace. Internal communication underpins organisational effectiveness and positive
relationships by enabling communication between senior managers and employees (Welch, 2012). A two-way flow of communication both top-down and across the organisation is essential for promoting and maintaining employee engagement and motivation (Groysberg & Slind, 2012). Communication helps establish transparency of decisions and gaining trust in leadership, the building of positive relations and interactive dialogue, a sense of involvement in the organisation, and commitment by management to responding to feedback.

Partnering with the Internal Communications Unit was a key measure of success at every point in the pre-, during and post-survey process and in responding to feedback directed at university management and organisational practices. The development and implementation of a communications plan has facilitated ongoing engagement and being seen by staff that the University and Vice-Chancellor have been responding to their feedback. Communication with staff, particularly by the Vice-Chancellor, and achieving visible and tangible outcomes both at the institutional and local levels were important elements for the project’s success.

The fourth lesson relates to the role of human resource partners and organisational developers. Langford (2011) believes that throughout the survey and results implementation process, the role of the Office of Human Resources is important for supporting and overseeing the development of action plans at the university-wide and local levels, while school and business unit managers are responsible and accountable for making and implementing the action plans within their work units.

The fifth lesson relates to employee-led engagement initiatives. Cardus (2013) discusses five levers for achieving employee engagement including hiring competent managers, setting broad goals and objective measures of progress, providing sufficient autonomy and appropriate resources. Autonomous employees tend to feel responsible for the choices they make. Involving staff in the working groups, inviting them to contribute ideas for addressing areas of improvement and providing seed funding to implement their ideas, creates the conditions for leveraging engagement and supporting autonomy and responsibility.

There is little research on the effectiveness of employee-led rather than management-driven initiatives. A United States government department undertook a substantive employee-led, employee engagement initiative, resulting in improved employee satisfaction and sense of ownership in creating a positive place to work for public service workers (Shuck et. al., 2011). The working groups at the University of Western Sydney have essentially been employee-led and the tangible outcomes that have been achieved demonstrate the kinds of initiatives that can be produced by staff to make a difference in the workplace.

Finally, a comment should be made about the value of benchmarking. Benchmarking survey results and practices, either externally with other universities, or internally between schools and divisional areas, is considered favourable (Langford, 2010) under several circumstances if:

- appropriate comparison organisations or areas are identified
- the comparison data is interpreted in the context of different organisational cultures and operating environments
- valid, reliable and generalisable measures are used
- management is committed to act on identified gaps, and
- the benefits exceed the costs of the benchmarking and change process.
Benchmarking with over forty universities in Australia and New Zealand has the potential to provide the University with valuable data on a range of work practices to inform workforce planning.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to conducting engagement surveys and the interpretation of results. One limitation is that, despite various reassurances and mechanisms for ensuring anonymity, staff may not believe they will remain anonymous or that their feedback is confidential. On this basis, they may either choose not to participate or question the interpretation of the results. The demographic questions relating to position levels, gender, organisational unit and campus, may lead staff to believe they and their responses are identifiable.

A second limitation is that staff opinion is influenced by both the reality and perception of the item being rated, and the communication of the rating (Langford, 2010). Feedback from employee engagement surveys are dependent on self-reported scores that are influenced by both the organisational context at the time of undertaking the survey and employee interpretations and perceptions of that reality (Langford, Parkes & Metcalf, 2006). The timing of the survey and what is happening in the organisation will therefore be reflected in the survey results, and the rapidly changing higher education context and organisational priorities provide caution in how the results are interpreted and benchmarked against other organisations. It is too early in the experience of the University of Western Sydney to benefit from a longitudinal perspective of survey results.

A third limitation is that, despite the concerted effort at engaging staff through the processes outlined in this paper, whether these efforts result in improved engagement and performance will not be known until the second survey is conducted in 2015 and the results benchmarked against the first survey and the sector. This will provide results over a three-year period of significant organisational and leadership change. The key challenge remains in how to create sustainable change while maintaining motivation and momentum in employee engagement.

Finally, Langford (2011) suggests that choosing too many things to improve or trying to achieve too much, acts to thinly spread attention, time, and resources, rather than focusing on a few things and doing them well. Only the results of the next survey will prove the success and effectiveness of the approach taken by the University and in the choice of the eight areas for improvement.

**CONCLUSION**

Organisations that have or develop high levels of employee engagement, benefit from increased engagement and commitment to the organisation, increased job satisfaction with lower staff turnover, and higher levels of performance and productivity. The business case for universities capitalising on employee engagement surveys to measure engagement and performance is clear. There is a distinct competitive advantage in having higher levels of engagement.

Most research on employee engagement focuses on leveraging outcomes toward increasing performance. There is little research or focus on identifying the conditions that nurture
sustained employee engagement and performance (Shuck, & Rose, 2013). This paper suggests several factors or conditions for sustained employee engagement and harnessing the commitment of management and staff in collaboratively working towards addressing key areas for improvement and producing tangible outcomes that are communicated and seen by staff to be responding to their feedback.

This paper presents a case study for what strategies an organisation, and specifically human resource or organisational development practitioners can employ to cultivate positive conditions for employee engagement and for gaining the buy-in of management. The experience at the University of Western Sydney provides a model for cross-unit collaboration where the success of an organisational-wide project is dependent on strong and collaborative partnerships and relationships, linking the survey results and actions to the organisation’s strategic goals, and identifying and communicating quick wins and outcomes to staff on a regular basis.

The use of working groups with cross-representation of staff from all areas, roles and job families, with a focussed area of improvement, and with mentoring by a member of the Executive, provides an effective approach to reframing engagement within the context of meaningful and purposeful collaboration that crosses the academic and professional staff and manager and staff divide, whether real or hierarchically imposed.

Together these provide an organisational development and employee-led rather than management driven approach and perspective from which to view the conditions that effectively cultivate sustained engagement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge Dr. Peter Langford from Voice Project for the provision of support and reference materials, members of the project team including Leanne Findlay, Phillip Marler, and Abigail Srinivasan; members of the reference group including Jonathon Allen, Scott Christensen, Susan Hudson, Tatiana Lozano, Jennifer Purcell, Deborah Sweeney, Ann Tout and Chris Youness; and mentors and all members of the MyVoice working groups. The authors also acknowledge all who provided helpful comments on the draft of this paper including Leone Cripps and Reena Dobson. Further information on the MyVoice Project is available from the authors and website at www.uws.edu.au/myvoice.

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