

The Groupness Factor – A TOOL FOR HIGH ENGAGEMENT



Photo by: Lise

Imagine yourself during the tea break at a public conference. You don't know anyone, but you see a group of three people standing around a table having a lively discussion. You grab a cup of coffee and approach this group. You find that they're talking about the benefits and the disadvantages of flexible working hours.

Ask yourself: Is this a topic that interests you? Are you even passionate about it? Or does it not really matter to you?

Your want to connect with this group and the level of your interest in this topic will probably determine the effort you will make to contribute to the discussion. And the level and quality of your contribution will have an impact on whether or not this group – which might have formed just a few minutes ago – will 'accept' you as an additional group member.

The sense of belonging to a group (unity, cohesion) is termed as 'groupness'.

A recent simulation study by the University of Sussex, U.K. on human behavior during an emergency evacuation clearly found that the level of groupness was the best predictor of whether or not fallen strangers would be helped. It was more important than the danger of death or the number of other people present.

If you look at very influential historical leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr. or even Adolf Hitler, you will notice that they managed to greatly raise the level of groupness among their following.

Obviously, if you are able to create high levels of groupness among the members of your team or organization, leadership will become increasingly effortless. Because your people are not just motivated by short-term incentives but are truly engaged, chances are good that their performance will improve considerably.

When groupness reaches high levels, every group member will work hard to help achieve the objectives of the group. Low performers will either be pressured by their colleagues to do better or will sooner or later drop out of the group. In fact, in such situations, the team members may take over the leader's unpleasant job of creating an up (better performance) or out result.

Enhancing groupness

During my research for the book "The Groupness Factor" I discovered three key elements that great leaders use – intentionally or subconsciously, it doesn't matter – to enhance groupness:

1. Giving a Clear Direction
2. Creating Strong Differentiation
3. Developing a Compelling Image for the Group

The good news is that you as a leader can make use of these elements even if you are not the CEO or President of the company. They can be applied at the division or department level, for any kind of group like non-profit organizations, etc.

But what do these elements mean?

1. Giving a clear direction ('Where do we go?')

In a corporate context, the direction typically includes:

- Vision
- Mission Statement
- Strategy
- Goals

In this article, I won't go into the details of how to develop an inspiring vision or an engaging mission statement. There is also more than enough literature available on strategy development and goal setting. Instead, I will focus on how direction is communicated.

In my role as an executive coach and leadership trainer, I often ask managers to tell me the direction of their company. Frequently, I receive answers that are rather vague. The lower the management position of the people I ask, the higher are the chances that they actually don't know it. Well, if management is not crystal-clear about the direction of the company, how much can we expect from staff members?

When confronted with these findings, some senior managers say that they can't share things like strategy or vision with all staff members as these contain confidential information. In return I ask: If you were the leader of a rowing boat and want the oarsmen to take you as fast as possible to your destination, would you hold back any essential information about the direction and the destination? Wouldn't you want to make sure that they fully understand where you are going?

Even in companies with more open cultures, I often come across similar situations. The problem in these cases is not that important information about the direction is being held back but that the leaders simply don't communicate sufficiently.

Hewitt Associates' research on Best Employers revealed that the CEOs of the best employers communicate their strategy, goals and results three times more often than the rest (approximately 27 times versus 9 times per year). So, if you have developed these components of your direction, don't forget to communicate them effectively and frequently. Follow up to make sure that every person in the organization has heard and understood them.

Developing and communicating a clear direction is the first key to greater groupness. Of course, it is important to get the group's buy-in to the direction presented by the leader.

2. Creating strong differentiation ('How are we different?')

Differentiation is perhaps the most powerful tool to enhance groupness.

Nowadays, it seems politically incorrect to promote differentiation from other groups. Alliances, co-operations, joint ventures and the like are in fashion and in many cases they can help expanding business



more rapidly than without them. By no means am I against this trend as long as we don't forget to also make it clear to our group members how different we are from other groups, particularly from our competitors.

To determine your group's uniqueness, consider three different levels:

- Product/service level (eg unique product features)
- Performance level (eg unique ways of responding to clients' requests)
- Organizational level (eg a unique corporate culture)

Working out these differences will give your people a stronger sense of belonging. As a positive side effect, you can use these factors to develop Unique Buying Propositions for your sales people to use with their customers.

Apple Computers, Inc. is for me a perfect example of taking differentiation seriously. They differentiate on the product level (iPod, iMac, etc.), performance level (iTunes) and organizational level (Apple culture).

Again, as in the case of giving direction, it is

important to clearly and frequently communicate with your people how you are different from your competitors. Not only will it enhance groupness, but it will also instill pride in working for your organization.

3. Developing a compelling image for the group ('Who are we?')

The image your members have about your group gives answers to the question of 'Who are we?' and is influenced by:

- The values of your group
- The brand image of your organization
- Your corporate culture

This part is perhaps the most challenging of all three elements for enhancing groupness.

It is important that the image supports the direction of the group. For example, if your organization develops, manufactures and sells mobile phones, your mission might be to make mobile communication as simple and enjoyable as possible for your customers. Your values would need to support this mission. The value 'innovation' would certainly support it better than the value 'saving cost'. Also, you need to make sure that your marketing communication portrays a brand image that is aligned with the mission.

In the given example, you might want to develop a culture of innovation and customer orientation to further support the given direction. It is a known fact that the behavior of group leaders has a strong influence on the culture of their group. You need to lead by example to develop the desired culture.

Conclusion

I admit that developing strong groupness is not the only way to achieve high levels of engagement. However, our experience and research clearly show that it is a very effective and powerful approach. Besides higher engagement, strong groupness also results in considerably higher retention rates. Most people like to belong to a group they can be proud of. If you, as the group leader, manage to achieve constructive groupness (con-groupness) which supports your objectives, leadership becomes not only easier but a more pleasant job as well.

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