World Changers Podcast

Season 3, Episode 9

Reset or rise?

Elle Bradley-Cox – 00:17
Welcome to World Changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead.

What happens when striving for a better work/life balance has the unintended consequence of complacency? Managers need to have difficult conversations without drifting back to the bad old days of grind and hustle culture.

Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum says that the pandemic gave us a rare but narrow opportunity to reflect, reimagine and reset our work. But that window is quickly closing. And while our relationship with work and our expectations have changed, many leaders' attitudes have not, leading to a fundamental clash when it comes to issues of mental health, wellbeing and development.

I sat down with director of consultancy Lu McKay to talk about the give/get contracts, and how leaders can deliver in this new world of work. But first, we had a few questions for our colleagues and comms friends.

What are you observing in client's worlds? How have return-to-work mandates been rolled out, if they have? What's an example of a good worker/manager conversation? How do you encourage that kind of interaction?

Jo Stark – 01:31
Hi, my name is Jo Stark, and I'm a senior consultant here at scarlettabbott.

Managers have to walk a real tightrope when it comes to work/life balance. They need to make sure that their teams are super productive, but not overstretched. I've been talking to a number of clients about having meaningful conversations with their teams. And it all starts with having open and honest conversation about where the company is heading, what's expected from the team, and how, as a team, they can achieve their objectives while still respecting everybody's work/life balance. And it's not just about having conversation once. It's about having these conversations on a regular basis. And that's really key. Ultimately, you want everybody to know what's expected of them, and what they can expect in return.

Lindsay Kohler – 02:18
I'm Lindsay and I'm scarlettabbott's resident behavioural scientist.

An example of a great manager conversation starter I came across recently, it's actually quite simple. In it, the manager asks, 'What is the biggest barrier to your success right now? And how can I help?' What that does is three brilliant things. First, it doesn't put anyone on the backfoot by starting from a place of 'why haven't you achieved what you should have by now?'. Second, it helps people to problem solve in a really practical way. And third, it indicates to the employee that their manager is on their side.

Russ Norton – 02:56
Hi, my name is Russ Norton. I'm director of client experience here at scarlettabbott.

Return to office is increasingly being mandated. So it is very much now 'we expect you to be in a couple of days a week, two days a week, three days a week'. Some organisations are being a bit more flexible; they are asking for a percentage of time within a month period, for example. So if you have a lot of work to deliver within a single week, maybe you might choose to work at home that week, and then maybe you'll spend a full week in the office the following week. There's a little bit more flexibility.

But in general, the overarching trend that I'm seeing is that senior leaders are now requesting, demanding, expecting that their people are in the office more than they have been recently.

Alex Gapud – 03:43
I'm Dr Alex Gapud, scarlettabbott's resident cultural anthropologist.

So when it comes to what I'm seeing in clients' worlds, when it comes to return to work mandates, I think the best clients are doing two things. One is they're actually talking to their people, first and foremost, and understanding where their people are, what their needs are. And there's a lot of trust in those relationships. If people don't trust the leaders, they don't trust their managers, there's going to be some problems when it comes to motivation, and ultimately behaviour.

But the other thing that companies that do this really well are doing is they're also not taking anything for granted. They're working on defining and communicating what we use the office for, why is it important that people come in, and actually restructuring the work day and expectations around those work days when people are asked to be in the office with their teams. They're not taking anything for granted.

And actually, some really good practice I've seen in that space also involves decisions being made maybe more locally at team level as opposed to from the CEO down when it comes to good worker/manager conversations. Trust is everything. If you know that your manager is for you and not against you, if you know that they're for your wellbeing, your growth, your development as opposed to thinking that they're out to get you, there's going to be a massive, massive difference in how any difficult feedback is handled. So I think, actually, in terms of thinking about good worker/manager conversations, it's not just about the immediate conversation itself, it's also about the wider context of what's the dynamic, what's the relationship?

And if there isn't that trust, then I think actually managers would do well, to invest that time in getting to know their people, and having that sincere interest in them as well. Where are your people going? Where do they want to go? What do they want out of their role? That could just be a pay check, that's fine. But let's actually have that conversation and be honest and open about it. So that we can actually have that relationship, and be both be transparent and clear about what the standards, what the goals, what the expectations are.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 05:52
We also wanted to hear what's happening in the HR and comms space. We spoke with Daniel Cave, journalist and head of content at Executive Grapevine for the inside scoop.

Daniel cave – 06:00
I think the short answer to how are managers coping in the face of changed employee expectations is, to be honest, overall, not that well.

This can be shown in the stats. We've got a recent global study in early 2023, about managerial resilience, and it shows that a quarter of managers in the UK are struggling to keep positive. The reasons for this, of course, employee expectations and change in employee demands, and

expectations are going to be an important factor in this. But I'd say the overall picture is a bit more complex.

So let's start with those changed employee expectations. So I'd say after the pandemic, employee/employer relations have broadly realigned. We've got employees feeling emboldened, and like they need to turn to their businesses for support with their health and wellbeing, for more mental health provision, with the want for flexibility, for autonomy over their working conditions, for better pay remunerations. And, of course, managers are going to be the frontline of getting requests all about this and having to manage and respond to these changed demands. And what I'd say is that the frequency and the volume of these requests that come on the back of changed employee expectations, it is getting more, it's getting more frequent, it's getting louder, and there can often be very, very good reasons for this.

You can see the change of structures of the world around this. But what we can say for definite is that this adds stress onto the manager's role. And we can see that managers are the obvious caught-in-the-middle point for these tussles between the employer and the workforce around pay, around working structures, around flexibility, etc, etc.

At the same time that that changed world that is encouraging or forcing employees to change their expectations and demands from the business, the business is then turning to the manager and adding onto that the need to change the way that they manage to get better productivity, to transform in the face of economic uncertainty and business challenges, to deliver in new ways. And all of this is coming just after the mega stress that was the pandemic. So we can see that uncertainty in the macro business outlook. Demands of the business, changed employee expectations are all kind of circling around the manager. And it points us towards this state of play where these individuals have too much on their plate.

And often, they aren't formally trained or given adequate tools to deal with all of this. It might have been the pandemic, for instance, that managers were trained for the first time, if at all, as their businesses saw changed conditions were like, 'Oh, we might need to give them the ability to manage a remote or hybrid team or to deal with increased requests around wellbeing'. So I think to draw this all together, and back to the employee expectations and how changing expectations are adding to managerial stress, I'd say that maybe if managers really were just managing people, and were given adequate tools, they could absorb and adequately deal with changed employee expectations and the demands this creates, and they could work with the business and their people under the bodies to fix them. But too often we see managerial responsibilities added on to a full-time senior role, often in an untrained way, as far as I see it, something will break if this doesn't change.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 09:29
The sticky middle of line management is something our director of consultancy Lu McKay often speaks about. In her work as a leadership coach, as well as a consultant focused on strategy, vision and values, she's often looking at two ends of the spectrum: the desired response of an organisation's people, and the leaders who need to help them get there. As she sees time and time again, it's not always a straightforward path. I caught up with Lu to explore how to make the route clearer, and get everyone moving in the same direction.

Lu McKay, welcome to World Changers!

Lu McKay – 10:06
Thank you. Lovely to be here.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 10:07
So let's get straight into it. Have you seen a disconnect between lower level employees and the executive team? Do you think there's a widening gap between the workforce and people leaders?

Lu McKay – 10:19
So I think polarisation is often a by-product, when you have a large amount of change, or there's a perception of unfairness or a significant difference in terms of objectives or aspirations. I think there's a really noisy rhetoric at the moment that place the themes that individuals and workforces are lazy and their work-shy, and especially, kind of, millennials and Gen Zers. And the opposite side of that is that execs are just focused on kind of commercials and the old ways of working. And that means things like presenteeism, and they don't care enough about people's health and their wellbeing.

And so it's almost sort of success at all cost. Now, if I'm honest, I don't think that's really where we're at. I think it like I said, it's a noisy rhetoric. I think, of course, there will be examples of that, there'll be instances where that's happening. But I don't believe that's actually where we are in terms of across-the-board. So I think if we can actually get into individual cases and kind of look at specific businesses, there's a noise about the gap, but I'm not sure, if you can get the right interventions, actually, that it's a communication gap versus an actual gap.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 11:35
Yes, ageism both ways.

Lu McKay – 11:39
Yeah, ageism, and I think that mixture of sort of senior/junior, in terms of looking at the organisation, and trying to unpick some of those things that, you know, genuinely do make a difference in terms of where you are in an organisation.

But actually, there's so many things that we have in common, you know, we're all sort of, we're all CEOs of our own lives, right? So we've all got our own priorities. We've got our own kind of aspirations. We've got a name, you know, both personal and business-wise, but we've all got a shared want to do well, and a shared want to feel secure and feel, kind of, a good level of self-esteem. So if you can harness that, the gap should be made at least smaller, if not to disappear.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 12:28
Yeah, I suppose the difference between that is where that sort of brings in, like, a mutual distrust in with things like, you know, we just talked about the ageism, and maybe the gap. So how do we build mutual trust? Is it just about finding things we connect over?

Lu McKay – 12:45
Yeah, I think I think you're absolutely right. There's an element of building connection. And that can be done through something as simple as being very, very clear about what we are all here to do. So being clear about the objectives of the organisation. So essentially, we're getting into sort of EVP territory there, an employee value proposition.

So the organisation being very clear, in terms of this is what we expect of our colleagues. This is what we expect of you as an employee, you know. We're clear about your objectives, how we will measure your success, and how will also reward your success.
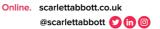
So not only from a remuneration point of view, but also from a: this is the experience that you should expect. This is the culture. This is the way that life will be working within this organisation. So I think if we can be very clear on that, and then deliver on it and stick to it, you do build trust.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 13:42
Yeah, that's nice. Actually, it's the sort of give/get contract.

Lu McKay – 13:46
Absolutely. And as long as you're upfront, because if you don't, if you manage expectations, that's often where distrust can sort of sneak in where I promise I'm going to do something for you. And then I don't. Which, you know, it's basic, it's simple.

But again, if we're very, I want to say cautious, but intentional about what we're promising, we can then deliver on it and also very intentional about asking for whatever the expectation is from our colleagues. We can hold them accountable, and rightly so, and have conversations if they're not doing well, then I'd be there to support them. If then without support, they're still not doing well, then let's have that conversation.

Because, you know, we want to set up our people to be successful. And, if potentially they aren't in the right place, and that's okay as long as we manage it well. Let's make sure that they're set up for success in either a different role or potentially different organisation.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 14:43
Yeah, that's such an interesting point actually thinking about when people aren't succeeding, they aren't doing well. It might not actually be, you know, that they don't want to. I wonder actually what you think about wellbeing, because we've seen such a shift towards wellbeing by by companies and corporations, and I suppose attitudes to wellbeing. How does that greater emphasis on it change that dynamic? Do you think leaders embrace wellbeing? Or do you think they're frustrated by pleasers? Do you know what I mean? Pleas of wellbeing like, I can't do this today, because I'm not not feeling it, you know?

Lu McKay – 15:28
Yeah, I think there's a mixture of both. And again, you know, we need to be very conscious of people's wellbeing because it has become a real talking point. It is a bit of a buzzword if we're being really honest.

But it's deep set in really, really important factors. And, actually, we're all driving for productivity, or at least we should be, and wellbeing is such a key deliverer of productivity, that there's a real commercial, you know, view to take. They're both you know, there's the commercial and the kind of the human side as well. But I think, again, you always get that noisy rhetoric around wellbeing and people saying 'I just don't feel like it today'. Actually, if you can get people bought into what it is as an organisation we're trying to achieve so that our objectives become my objectives, actually, you're setting people up to be as productive as possible, as long as you then support them through the wellbeing side as well.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 16:27
Yeah, there's absolutely no way that you will have one single objective. So you might not be feeling that objective today, but a different one.

Lu McKay – 16:35
Absolutely. That's where autonomy comes in. And it's why it's so important in terms of, you know, being able to manage your own day to an extent. Now, obviously, that varies in terms of how much autonomy you can have.
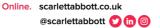
So between probably white collar workers and kind of most of production-based workers. But even to that point, let's think about how can we build in some of that flexibility so that, you know, we are enabling our colleagues to be sort of set up for success, and find a way that works for their day.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 17:06
Yeah. So you go down that path. You've had all these conversations about your organisation's goals. You've had conversations and considerations about wellbeing and flexibility. But things just aren't happening. What are you doing in those tough conversations?

Lu McKay – 17:21
I guess, you've got to revisit, you know, revisit the expectation, the objectives, you know, and they should be things that, you know, both parties have signed up to, with varying degrees of autonomy, but you need to revisit that, and then you need to figure out what's getting in the way, because quite often, there will be some quite practical factors that could be getting in the way. There might be

some small shifts or changes that you can make that enables that particular colleague to, you know, by removing a particular barrier, suddenly, they're off and running again. But you need to have that conversation, need to take that time to find out what's getting in the way.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 17:58
No matter how uncomfortable it might feel, going into that, actually, if you shy away from it, you've had it.

Lu McKay – 18:06
Yeah, exactly. You know that if you're shying away from the challenge, you know, 95 per cent of the time, the problem was not going to go away. It's just going to kind of just sit there and fester and probably get bigger. So in terms of going into those tough conversations, you do need to face into it.

But if you can contract upfront, in terms of you know, your own objectives, the purpose of the conversation, why you need to have it, acknowledging this might feel a little bit uncomfortable at points, but the reason we need to have this conversation is that so that we can get to point X or Y. And by doing that you're actually setting the conversation up for the best success possible.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 18:45
I think that's a really good bit of advice for HR teams who aren't already doing that, you know, it's leaning into it and not pretending that we're in a perfect world where everybody behaves the way that we want them to.

Lu McKay – 18:55
Yeah, absolutely. And often, it's not about intentionally not wanting to do the right thing. Sometimes it can be a misunderstanding. It can be you know, lack of clarity, and sometimes there are barriers in the way. So if you can unpick that and create a safe space to do that, then you're going to be setting yourself up to be able to move forward.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 19:20
Lu, thank you so much for your time. Honest, interesting reflections as always, really appreciate you.

Lu McKay – 19:26
Pleasure. Thank you so much.

Elle Bradley-Cox – 19:31
Want to continue the conversation in the meantime? Do come and chat to us over on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter @scarlettabbott, or drop us an email at hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk. And we'll see you next time for another dive into World Changers 2023.

World Changers is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott, hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at scarlettabbott.co.uk.