



## Vision, visibility and involvement

**Jamil Rashid** of JARA explains why manufacturers should consider a radical shift in management approach, especially during testing times

**In tough** economic conditions, businesses have to maximise their resources. Invariably that means getting the same – and sometimes more – out of fewer people.

Managers and team leaders will be looking for higher productivity. But how do they achieve it? Most will assume that motivational programmes, extra training, financial incentives and so on are the answer. In reality, these methods just tinker at the edges and are unlikely to deliver results, simply because they are imposed on the workforce.

For example, the key problem with training is that it is not sustained and it doesn't take long for old habits to creep back in and for you to forget the vast majority of what you were told. Training is also impersonal, full of examples of other people, not you; so you have to adapt what you are told, to interpret it to suit your own situation and behaviour.



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The question is, will you interpret it correctly? Finally, training encourages a focus on tools and techniques and is unlikely to lead to a genuine change in behaviour.

### So, which methods will work?

It’s important to remember how anxious people feel when they know business is tough, sales are down and costs are going up. And if there have already been redundancies, they’re likely to be feeling insecure and vulnerable about their own financial prospects.

So now, more than ever, leaders must make sure that people understand where the business is heading, what its vision is. Vision isn’t the preserve of CEOs – leaders at all levels need to be able to express their vision clearly and in detail, from the macro vision of strategic direction, all the way down to micro vision statements for individual projects.

Employees should be confident in saying: “I can see a clear plan going forward”, “I can see how the management team intends to make it happen”, “I can see where I fit in to that plan” and “I can see everyone doing the same things, working hard towards achieving the goal”.

You’ll then start to inspire confidence because there’s a high degree of visibility. You’ll also promote stronger team working – people don’t normally want to let others down. And you’ll get them out of the heads-down-keep-a-low-profile mentality that will stifle any productivity.

This is a good place to start, but the only effective – and long-term – way to get more out of your team is to involve them, because people will never take true ownership of the change that is necessary unless they are genuinely involved.

Yet true involvement – enabling people to create their own solutions to the problems the business faces, as a result of their own analysis – is rarely found.

When asked, most leaders will naturally say that they involve the workforce. Unfortunately, these are the same leaders who are likely to complain that their staff are not taking ownership! Involvement is so much more than letting people know what’s going on and allowing them to act on their own initiative. It’s also more than asking them for their opinions about your ideas or plans: people must be given the freedom to formulate their own actions, based on their own analysis and, crucially, this has to happen in an environment that requires extremely close management control so that outcomes are not simply left to chance.

That’s why achieving real involvement is a difficult thing to do – it’s very hard to maintain control without instructing people. Leaders must therefore learn the skills that will enable them to lead without dictating, and that means not only changing fundamental behaviours but measuring them.

### So what do leaders need to learn?

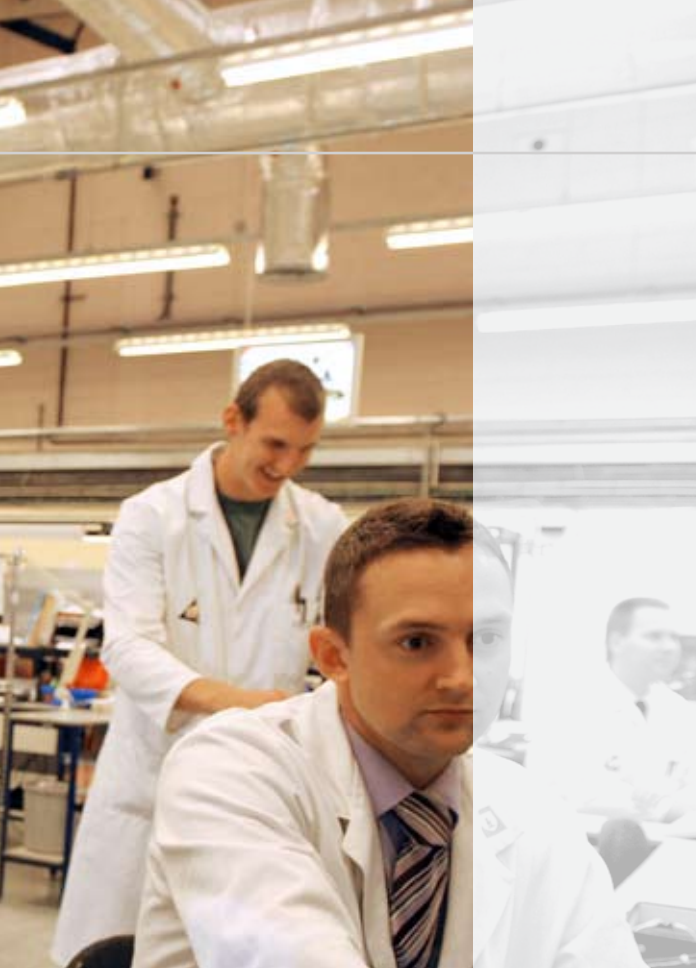
#### How to prepare for your team

You need to have a high degree of clarity about how to achieve the vision if you truly want to involve them. Really thinking through what you would do, and why, allows you to better judge whether the team is really suggesting something that you can’t live with. The irony is that you must approach team workshops with a solution in mind, but be prepared to accept that it is not necessarily the complete or correct solution. A good leader would rather the team owned the solution and do what they think is right, rather than what the leader wanted.

#### How to get your team to create your strategy and the measures that will determine its success or failure

To truly own the strategy, the team need to see and feel the pain of developing it for themselves; then they will appreciate their own and other’s work more and really want to make it happen. They need to analyse,





question and challenge the current strategy for themselves, and if they come up with a version that you can't clearly define to be wrong, you must be prepared to run with it. Then you need to learn how to get them to truly involve, in turn, their own people in creating and genuinely buying in to lower level strategies.

### **How to measure your own behavioural change**

For instance, if you know you need to stop 'running your team over' in meetings, you have to set a measure against which to assess your actual performance. You also need to try and understand why you do it, what situations make you do it and how to get some rules in place that will stop you doing it – you'll never truly involve your team if you don't.

### **How to create the 'rules' of involvement – and ensure both you and your team stick to them and are measured against them**

For example: all key activities must show clear links to strategy; all key decisions are based on hard data and analysis (not assumption and 'gut feel'); all key activity must be planned in detail (to answer why, what, how, output). Many companies have informal rules such as these, but do they really stick to them? Yes, it's tough, but try to create a culture that will always allow people to point out when a rule has been broken, and make sure you live by those rules yourself.

None of these skills are easy, they take a long time to truly learn and need sustained effort in real life situations. But the prize that genuine involvement offers is valuable indeed: a culture in which it's OK to challenge – even to be wrong, to fail – and in which nobody is threatened, because it's all within a defined structure with clear rules. What you have then is an organisation that has the capacity to change, whose people are used to their full potential and which is much better placed to weather whatever the economy has to throw at it.

## Increasing productivity through managed involvement

Fareham-based Meggitt Avionics (MAv) – part of Meggitt plc – designs and manufactures flight deck avionics, data acquisition systems, instrumentation and life support equipment

Following a previous downturn in sales, MAv needed to increase productivity across the whole operation. Bernie Stevens, general manager, focused on getting as many people as possible, across all departments, involved in finding solutions; reviewing existing processes and designing their own new ways of working better, rather than having new working practices imposed on them. He created a specific structure and set of rules within which his teams should formulate their ideas and solutions. Every senior manager was challenged to develop high levels of visibility about their sphere of control which clarified what everyone needed to do and how these activities linked together to improve productivity.

Across the business, teams worked on their own issues by operating within the defined framework. The supply chain department looked at their purchasing practices, operators in the manufacturing team looked at how they were building product, the sales team looked at how they were dealing with quotes, and so on.

For example, the engineering (product design and development) team challenged the commonly held assumption that the problem of increased costs was caused largely by customers requiring frequent design changes. Deeper analysis revealed that few of the engineering programmes actually followed the defined gate review process which had been developed at significant cost. Had they used this process, the team would have been able to focus on their internal processes, adapting them to cope better with design changes, and improve their planning capability.

The team embraced a more disciplined way of working and developed a system of high-frequency, low-level reviews to check against the fine detail of project plans and ensure that component actions were completed on time.

### **Results:**

- In the last 12 months alone, top level productivity within the business has improved by 15 per cent
- The engineering team now hits more than twice the customer milestones (25 to 65 per cent)
- Overspend has been halved and is continuing to fall

Stevens comments: "It was very hard for me during this process and time to facilitate the evolution of the teams and not fall back into the 'this is how you should do it'. At times I just wanted to jump in and move the activities on to a conclusion, but that would have been one of those 'that's what Bernie wants' moments and we would gain nothing in the long term."