

The Dual Deficit for Defence Family Engagement

The challenge

There are broadly acknowledged challenges in the communication to and from families of current serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members by service providers in the Defence support sector.

There are two key deficits in the engagement with Defence and veteran families in Australia (families): an information deficit, and a trust deficit.

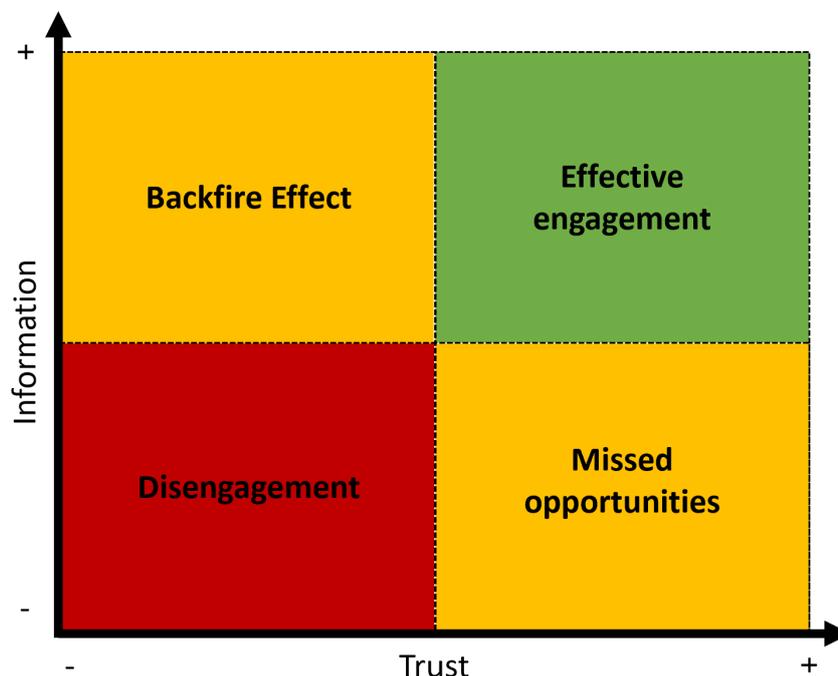
This thought paper proposes a model that can be used to begin to understand the feedback loops, positions and experiences of families. This model may be used to drive ongoing improvement in the Defence support sector to maximise effective engagement with families.

A model for engagement

The proposed model features a graph in quadrants, with axes showing the level of information sharing between the prospective beneficiaries and the service provider (Y-axis), and the level of trust of the prospective beneficiaries with these providers (X-axis). In this case, the beneficiary group is Defence families. The service provider may be considered as government, representative bodies, ex-service organisations or these groups overall.

The quadrant where *effective engagement* occurs involves high information flow and high trust. Inefficiencies occur when either axes input is reduced. Firstly, this results in *missed opportunities* where information flow is low despite high trust. Second, this results in a potential *backfire effect* when trust is low despite high information flow – that is, digging in one’s heels to their viewpoint that service providers are untrustworthy.

The quadrant of highest risk for both beneficiaries and service providers is that of low information flow and low trust, resulting in *disengagement* and/or proactive influencing of others to also disengage with service providers.



The negative feedback loops

While no model covers all scenarios, two key feedback loops were identified and demonstrated through this model for engagement. The experiences, perceptions and positioning of beneficiaries in the *missed opportunities* or *backfire effect* quadrants may drive them in time to a state of *disengagement* from the service provider.

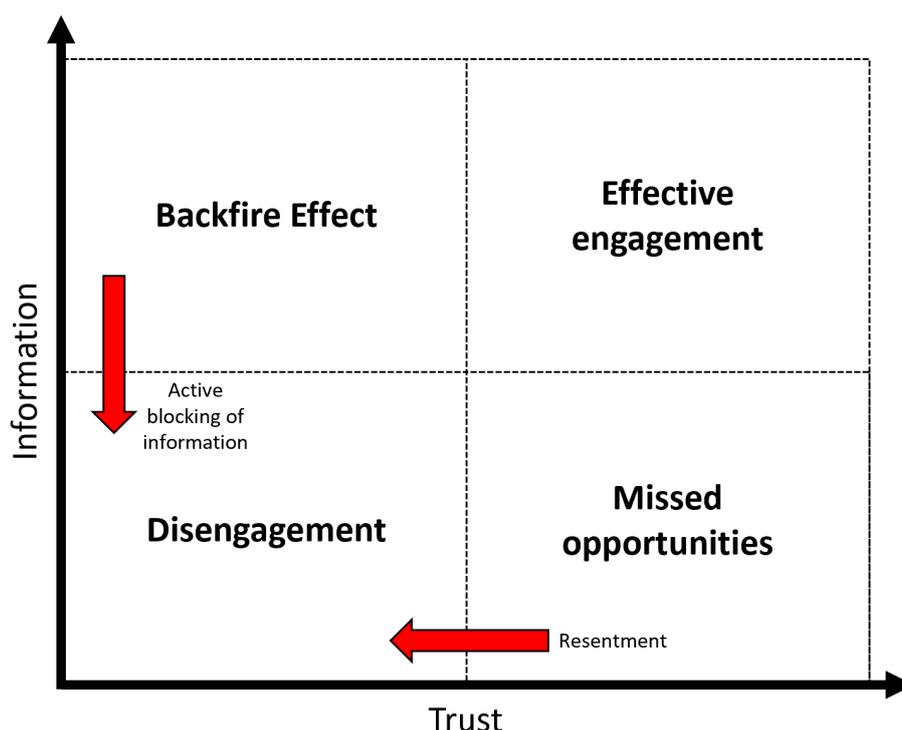
When low trust is held for a service provider, an influx of information from the provider may conflict with the experience or perceptions of the beneficiary. Our experiences and views can strongly shape and be tied to our personal identity. When faced with information from the provider which then contradicts or misaligns to those views, beneficiaries may feel personally attacked or devalued. To support these people, providers must build a relationship with them, not isolate or demonise them.

Where trust is high but information flow is low, there is a high likelihood of the beneficiary not being aware of relevant support services and missing opportunities for necessary support. These *missed opportunities* can lead to resentment, an erosion of trust and in time *disengagement* from the provider.

Negative experiences (either directly or indirectly) with a provider drive low levels of trust in them. This may be where one or more instances of direct personal engagement with the provider did not meet the beneficiary's needs or expectations, or where indirect perceptions of the provider derived from media, stories or assumptions degrade trust without direct contact.

In the age of social media, where consumers have a concern or unmet need, they often turn to other prospective beneficiaries for feedback before or after engaging with a service provider. This is more likely to generate negative rhetoric than positive, regardless of the true ratios of these experiences. Where trust is not high, beneficiaries are more susceptible to confirmation bias and further eroding of trust. This leads them to actively block information from the provider themselves, and to *disengage* and potentially feed back into proactively influencing others to harbour low trust.

Overall, in a highly emotive social impact sector such as the Defence support sector, there is consistent pressure from a number of factors to drive *disengagement* with service providers.



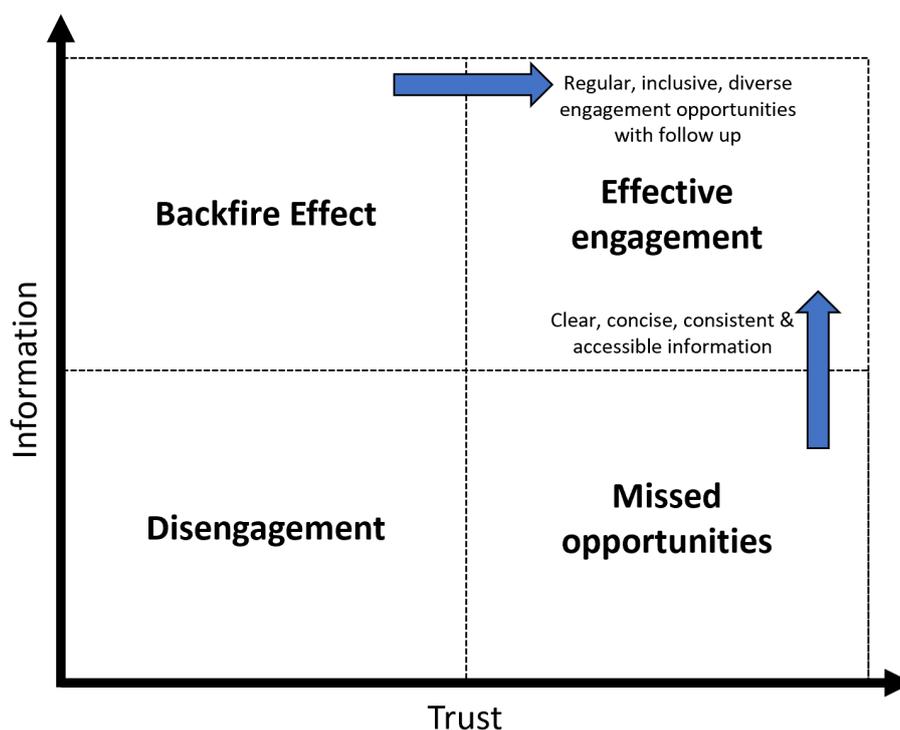
The opportunities for improvement

There were also two key positive feedback loops identified in this model. These may be used to inform ongoing improvement in service and support awareness and engagement for the Defence families community.

Service providers can maximise trust among prospective beneficiaries by providing regular opportunities for them to engage with the provider across a range of avenues. Diverse options will ensure broad reach with the community, and will enable two-way feedback so that views and experiences are representative of the spectrum of beneficiaries, rather than what is traditionally encountered with few, extreme views considered and having outsized influence. The engagement opportunities must be conducted in a way that shows respect and listens without judgement to beneficiaries to ensure they feel welcome, heard and included. Critically, these engagements must be followed by a touchpoint afterwards and the meeting of any commitments made to beneficiaries. This practice builds connection, reliability and positive relationships with the community.

Service providers can improve their information flow by ensuring outgoing communication is easy to understand, consistent and readily available for the community. The expectation that beneficiaries will seek out information in the depths of a website or in essay format is outdated and ineffective. Providers must supply information in multiple formats and platforms to ensure that it is visible and quickly conveyed for the diverse range of beneficiaries.

These positive feedback loops are not guaranteed or once-off. Unlike the preponderance of forces which can drive negative feedback loops, providers must make ongoing investment into maximising both trust and information for effective engagement with the Defence families community.



Recommendations

DFA recommends that the engagement model proposed by considered and tested through service providers in the Defence support sector.

In order to reduce the two key deficits in Defence family engagement – information and trust – it is recommended that:

- Providers develop a clear strategy underpinned with the guiding principles that the service will include or be informed by:
 - Regular, inclusive, diverse engagement opportunities for beneficiaries, including appropriate follow up; and
 - Clear, concise, consistent and easily accessible information is circulated across a range of platforms to reach the broad spectrum of the Defence families community.
- Investment be made into activities to directly support information flow and connection opportunities with the community, including avenues for timely and confidential feedback from beneficiaries to the provider on their services.
- Engagement must be based on mutual respect, with providers respectfully listening to beneficiaries. This includes with those families in varying degrees of disengagement or proactively negatively influencing other prospective beneficiaries about the provider and their services.
- Make ongoing commitment for the above recommended activities, not limited to short timeframes or intermittent reviews.

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