

How to Build Employee Engagement Strategies That Actually Move the Needle



Employee engagement aspects of human resources today. While it wasn't always so emphasized, now we have stacks of research that support just how important having engaged employees really is to an organization.

From decreased employee turnover and lower absenteeism in the workplace, to increased morale and higher productivity, engaged employees are the key to a successful, resilient company.

The issue, however, isn't with understanding its importance. The issue is finding the right strategies to engage employees in the first place. It's being able to look past the ping pong tables and pizza parties and figure out how to build employee engagement that actually moves the needle.

Here, we'll discuss strategies that every manager or leader can use to start building a truly engaged workforce.

What is Employee Engagement?

First let's establish what employee engagement is.

Employee engagement refers to the commitment, involvement, and enthusiasm employees have toward their workplace and work culture. It's more than just numbers, and bottom lines. It's about the personal connection employees feel with their job, colleagues, and the organization as a whole.

While employees may be satisfied with their work, employee engagement asks how involved are they? How open are they to potential outside opportunities? How do they feel when they begin work each morning?

By implementing employee engagement strategies, organizations can begin to spot trends, correct issues, and increase employee engagement overall.

The Current Environment

As mentioned, today most leaders are aware of the benefits of having a team of engaged employees. In fact, research from Dale Carnegie found that 85% of leaders say employee engagement is a priority.

Yet employee engagement in 2022 declined to a mere 32% – down from 36% in 2020 and 34% in 2021. Furthermore, employee *disengagement* is on the rise, with 18% of employees now reporting being actively disengaged.

So, employee engagement has become a top priority in recent years, yet employee engagement has still decreased - what's going on?

Priority Mismatch

There are likely several factors at play that underpin this discrepancy. However, there's one factor at the root of it all – a misalignment of priorities.

Harvard Business Review conducted a study in an attempt to find an employee “engagement checklist.” The idea was that leaders could then use this list as a guide to improve engagement at their companies.

During their research though, they found an interesting trend. They noticed that leaders are often not aware of what it is that's most important for driving employee engagement. That is, the factors leaders *think* are most important do not correspond to what is *actually* important to their employees.

This mismatch between leaders' priorities and their employees' priorities makes it virtually impossible to set up an effective engagement strategy. It's no surprise engagement is on the decline – employees aren't getting what they need.

How to Set Up an Effective Employee Engagement Strategy

Of course, knowing there's a mismatch between leaders' and employees' priorities is only part of the solution. The next step is learning what does matter to employees and giving it to them.

While it's always a good idea to survey your employees to learn what's most important to the people at your organization, there are three common priorities employees tend to have. And the best part? Every manager has access to them.

They are:

- Connecting what employees do to what they care about
- Making the work itself less stressful and more enjoyable
- And rewarding employees.

Let's dive in deeper into how managers can leverage these areas to improve employee engagement.

1. Connecting What Employees do to What They Care About

We live in a time where people are no longer satisfied having just any job. Some experts blame the pandemic for changing our collective perspectives and the Great Resignation that followed.

Regardless of why it happened, the fact is that somewhere along the way, our values did shift. And today, most people want to feel that their work has meaning. We want to believe we're not wasting our lives at work.

In fact, a study from McKinsey & Company found that **82% of employees believe it's important their company has a purpose**; ideally, one that contributes to society and creates meaningful work.

And when a company has purpose, its people do, too. Another study from McKinsey found that **70% of employees say their personal sense of purpose is defined by their work**, and when that work feels meaningful, they perform better, are much more committed, and are about half as likely to go looking for a new job.

So, ask yourself - when was the last time you had a conversation with your team about their passions and goals, both professional and personal?

While you likely won't be able to adapt each employee's role to fit all of their passions, you might discover some helpful interests. For example, one of your accountants might have a passion for fitness and would love to start a walking club at your company.

You also can reiterate how each employee's role matters to the company's mission. But don't speak in broad terms, get specific. Tell customer service that their patience and empathy is what keeps your clients happy. Remind sales that their ability to connect with people is what generates revenue.

Everyone plays an important role, so be sure to tell them.

2. Make Work Less Stressful and More Enjoyable

Making work less stressful for your employees doesn't just benefit them, it improves your bottom line too. Studies have found that stress makes people nearly three times as likely to leave their jobs, temporarily impairs strategic thinking, and dulls creative abilities.

Most managers, however, don't intend to create a stressful environment. Burnout cultures tend to develop indirectly if there aren't conscious efforts in place to prevent it. Luckily, there are plenty of ways to build an environment resistant to stress. Here are just a few:

- **Build a Mistakes Culture:**

A study in Psychological Bulletin found that perfectionism is on the rise. And while

maintaining high standards can push individuals to achieve a higher level of performance, studies show it comes at a cost. Research from [York St. John University](#) found that perfectionism is linked to burnout, depression, anxiety, and even mortality. If your company fosters perfectionism, combat it with a mistakes culture instead. A mistakes culture is one that encourages employees to take chances and doesn't punish people for failure. The idea is to put more emphasis on creativity and innovation rather than success. Fortunately, when people aren't afraid to fail, they tend to succeed at a much higher rate.

- **Define Working Hours:**

It's crucial for employees to know they're not expected to be "always on." In today's digital world, it's all too easy for people to be always available. This has ended up blurring the lines between work time and time off. So, make it a point to not contact employees after hours, encourage your team to use their PTO, and be sure your employees are taking regular breaks. And if you think an employee *is* always on,

check in with them and make sure they're workload is manageable. This is one where leading by example can go a long way.

- **Empower with Autonomy:**

No one likes to be micromanaged and nothing instills a sense of distrust faster. Conversely, allowing your team to work autonomously fosters trust, independence, and growth. In fact, a study by Gallup found that employees are 43% less likely to experience high levels of burnout when they have a choice in deciding what tasks to do, when to do them, and how much time to spend on each.

- **Develop a Wellness Program:**

As much as we may want work to be stress-free, it's not a realistic goal. Life is full of stress - the key is finding healthy ways to process it. Wellness programs can be a great tool for teaching strategies for dealing with stress.

While beneficial, a corporate wellness program won't be a solution for a toxic work culture. should support employees in all areas of their lives, from physical fitness to mental wellness to financial stability.



3. Create a Culture of Recognition

Employee recognition programs have been gaining popularity in recent years due to their ties to increased employee retention, engagement, and productivity. It may seem hard to believe that simply recognizing employees can generate all these returns, but it's true.

In fact, research shows that when employees believe they'll be recognized for their work, they're nearly 3 times more likely to be highly engaged. Employee engagement, productivity, and customer service are about 14% higher where recognition occurs. And companies with effective recognition programs have 31% lower voluntary turnover.

So, how can leaders create a culture of recognition at their organization? Here are a few common ways.

- **Giving employees extra time:**

Research shows that working hours for college graduates have been steadily increasing over the past 30 years. This has left many employees feeling as though they have little to no free time. So, being able to offer employees extra time will typically be appreciated.

Whether it's awarding extra PTO, non-work-related outings, or providing time-saving perks (like discounts for housecleaners or food delivery services), when people have time to invest in their own interests, they become better employees.

- **Publicly recognize employees:**

Consider adding in a moment to team and/or company meetings to give individuals public recognition or a shout out for a job well done. It's a simple gesture that carries significant weight.

That's because when an employee's hard work is acknowledged and appreciated, it creates a dopamine surge in the brain. Dopamine is powerful and motivating, and, most importantly for managers, reinforces the behavior.

One study even found that receiving a compliment, like genuine recognition, is just as thrilling to the brain as receiving cash— both are perceived by the striatum as "social rewards."

That dopamine hit cements the knowledge that more of that behavior will create more praise, resulting in another dopamine surge, and so on. This is why positive reinforcement (recognition) benefits both employees and managers.

- **Giving employees a monetary bonus:**

While monetary recognition can be very effective, it's impersonal. So, it's important to remember that it's not the only way to show appreciation. In fact, money should never be the only form of recognition you give your employees.

Too much focus on monetary rewards can also create a toxic environment, which is often counter-productive. It's important to find a balance that works for your company culture.

- **Implementing a social recognition platform:**

If you have an employee recognition budget in place, consider investing in a recognition program. There are all kinds of programs available to help build recognition into your company's culture.

Such platform even allows for analytics that show in real-time key performance indicators so you can be sure your program is effective. This is a great way to help in creating a culture of recognition by empowering employees (as well as leaders) to recognize each other.