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Digital Article / Employee Engagement

## 4 Fundamental Ways to Boost Employee Engagement

Help your employees feel seen, heard, valued, and encouraged. *by Dorie Clark and Alexis Redding*

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**We all know engaged employees perform better**, and one key ingredient is employees' connection with their company's purpose. But while purpose is crucial, it can't carry the full weight of engagement on its own. In addition to feeling energized by the company's mission, employees also need to know that the company (in the form of leadership) reciprocally values them and their unique perspective.

In our work as a researcher (Alexis) and consultant (Dorie), we've found that boosting engagement really boils down to four fundamental elements: helping your employees feel seen, heard, valued, and encouraged.

### **Help your employees feel seen.**

Just about every manager and business thinker recognizes that employees don't respond well to being treated like interchangeable cogs in a machine. Instead, employees need to feel that they matter — that they make a unique contribution and that their absence would be noticed. And yet, with the rise of hybrid and remote work, there's a real danger — unless companies think deeply about what kind of a culture they're developing — that workers may come to feel like "just another face on the zoom screen."

In the pre-pandemic era, leaders could sometimes get away with thinking about culture as a "nice to have" that would largely take care of itself organically. Leaders today have to be far more deliberate about creating a culture of belonging. One way to do this is to help your employees develop workplace friendships (no one makes us feel as seen like having genuine friendships at work). The development and transmission of culture needs to be a business priority, because employees who like where they work don't want to leave — and they're thrilled to recruit their most talented friends to join them.

### **Help your employees feel heard.**

Let's face it: employees are often discouraged from speaking up at work, and when they do try share ideas, they're often shut down. But perhaps the most frustrating scenario is when employees are specifically asked for their opinion and they're still ignored, creating a cycle of disillusionment. And it happens far more than we might think — nearly one third of workers report feeling invisible at work.

Sometimes, the problem is managers' egos or entrenched ways of thinking. But [research](#) also shows that organizations sometimes create systemic challenges for leaders, because they may not have full authority to act on employees' suggestions and they don't have leeway to make changes that, while important in the [long-term](#), would sacrifice short-term productivity. It's not easy to solve structural problems in organizations — but it's not impossible. Especially given the liminal, post-pandemic moment we're in, it's important to grapple with this basic truth: if employees feel that their ideas and [suggestions don't matter](#), it's very hard for them to feel engaged.

### **Help your employees feel valued.**

Everyone likes to feel that their contributions are appreciated, especially when they make a significant effort, such as working late to finish an important report, or nailing a pitch to a prospect. [Research shows](#) managers (captive to the “illusion of transparency”) systematically overestimate how much appreciation they're conveying to their employees. The upshot is that whatever praise you think you're sharing, do a lot more of it. Even [small gestures](#) like greeting employees by name, asking about their weekends, and routinely checking in helps show that you recognize and value them as individuals. And one of the best ways you can show employees they're valued for who they are is to create a culture in which [“covering” isn't necessary](#) — often by modeling, as the boss, that it's safe to talk about identity at work, such as mentioning things like (where relevant) going to a Pride celebration or attending a relative's quinceañera or dealing with caregiving issues.

### **Help your employees feel encouraged.**

Many leaders are good at encouraging their employees on a day-to-day basis: *Good job on that report! Thanks for locating that data we needed!* But “encouragement” on a broader scale — in the form of aiding and guiding an employee's career arc — can be harder to come by. After all,

most companies these days have flattened their hierarchy and no longer have a clear career path to offer employees. Some bosses try to help their employees figure out their career goals, but others flounder and, unsure of what to say or how to help, simply absolve themselves of the task. While it's true that employees ultimately are responsible for taking control of their professional lives, it's also an embarrassing abdication for leaders to ignore the long-term interests of those in their charge.

Given that career "lattices" have now replaced "ladders," we have to be more creative in the help and advice we give employees to help them develop their skills. But we still have to do it. When Dorie worked in politics, she supervised the press staff on a presidential campaign. Feeling especially responsible for creating learning opportunities for a raft of poorly paid young workers, she'd interview them about their interests and goals, and attempt to match them with tasks that could be helpful (for instance, one staff member wanted to become a writer, so they were given several speechwriting opportunities). It's far more effort to "personalize" the work experience for our employees in order to aid their professional growth — but leaders in the post-pandemic era now need to make that a standard part of how we operate.

Employees who feel a genuine sense of belonging at work are a powerful force. At a minimum, they're less likely to quit, saving companies huge amounts of time and money in training and replacement costs. But their loyalty can also unleash massive gains in productivity and innovation, as they bring their best ideas and sustained effort to bear in supporting a company that they feel supports them.

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