



What to do about employee engagement:

A step-by-step guide

A high level of employee engagement is now well-established as a strategic imperative for any competitive organization. Most organizations have taken action to address engagement, but the success of those actions can vary widely. Many leaders are at a loss for what to do next, or are operating without enough information to make good decisions.

Whether you've never taken action on employee engagement, already have a sophisticated engagement program, or are anywhere in between, this guide presents evidence-based best practices for supporting engagement. The steps below provide a roadmap for maximizing your engagement efforts.

Here are the steps:

- 1 Commit.** Get buy-in from leaders – from front-line managers to top executives – that engagement is a strategic imperative.
- 2 Get expert guidance.** Ensure that your engagement efforts are informed by multiple perspectives and proven engagement science.
- 3 Measure it.** Learn about the current state of your organization and how to pull the most important levers.
- 4 Model the actions you want.** Get top executives involved in a concrete action plan to enhance engagement.
- 5 Carry out interventions.** Plan and execute real changes, and use tests to learn what works.

Before carrying out each step, it's important to understand the concept of employee engagement.

What is employee engagement?

Truist Leadership Institute defines employee engagement as follows:

“Enthusiasm for, and dedication to, work that leads employees to enjoy performing at their very best.”

Employees performing at their best leads to better organizational achievement. But there's something in it for employees, too – being engaged at work brings a positive feeling of motivation that improves the quality of employees' lives.

In our model (see Fig. 1), engagement is made up of **satisfaction** and **energy**. Satisfaction is a positive attitude toward one's organization and job. Energy is a motivational, emotional enthusiasm for the work one does. Maximizing both satisfaction and energy results in the most highly engaged employees.

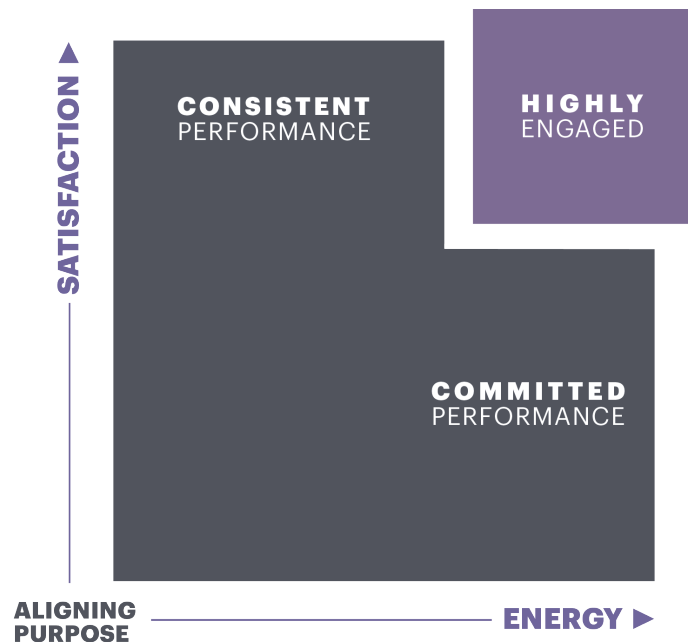


Fig 1. Truist Leadership Institute Engagement Model

Together, satisfaction and energy produce the psychological state of engagement. It is how individual employees feel and think about their organization, their job, and the work they do each day. It is not comprised of just a few potluck lunches or casual Fridays. It takes real dedication and effort from leadership to craft the right environment.

Why is employee engagement important?

From the perspective of organizational performance and the bottom line, high employee engagement is a wise investment. Decades of empirical research have shown that higher employee engagement is associated with better retention, more innovation, better health, and better performance. This has been shown at the level of individual employees, as well as at the level of teams and the entire organization^{1,2,3,4}.

Enhancing engagement isn't just good for the company, it's also great for employees. Supporting employee engagement can meaningfully improve peoples' lives. Leaders have a powerful opportunity to do more good in the world beyond just maximizing their organization's performance. Supporting employee engagement can improve the quality of employees' lives and their families' lives⁵. Engaging, fulfilling work can make people happier and healthier, as well as help them to achieve their goals.

Step 1: Commit.

You probably won't make much progress in increasing engagement if engagement initiatives are routinely pushed to the bottom of your priority list. High employee engagement requires time and effort, especially for organizations that are initially low in it. Engagement initiatives need to have equal footing with other strategic objectives. Executive meetings should set aside time to discuss and execute engagement-related projects. It cannot be seen as an add-on or a "nice-to-have."

This commitment cannot be merely at surface level. Leaders in the organization should agree that engagement is important and worthy of its own dedicated time. Simply requiring a leader to prove that their team is taking action might result in superficial compliance. In contrast, leaders who are personally committed to employee engagement could signal to other executives and front-line managers that the organization wants leaders to spend time creating an engaging workplace.

Step 2: Get expert guidance.

When making an organizational change, leaders may not have the best perspective from which to assess the state of things. This is because they have contributed to the current culture, and might have even deliberately shaped it a certain way. They are also highly invested in the organization's outcomes, as well as in how they themselves are perceived by employees and other stakeholders. These factors can (understandably) color how leaders might interpret survey findings and the current culture.

An outside expert is able to augment the leader's existing institutional knowledge by objectively identifying some of the unseen dynamics affecting engagement. Then, they collaborate

with the organization to blend those dynamics with strategic objectives, which enables them to recommend effective interventions.

Designing interventions is important. Equally important is how they are implemented. For example, encouraging more frequent one-on-one meetings between employees and their managers will likely improve perceived managerial connectedness. However, if a manager is perceived as controlling or directive in those meetings or shows no interest in employees' growth, then they could do more harm than good. This might damage connectedness or other factors that drive employees to be engaged. An expert can help the organization avoid these consequences by providing critical guidance on subtle factors that could make or break engagement efforts.

Finally, an expert in employee engagement will be up-to-date on scientific research on employee engagement. There are several decades of research into engagement, and scientists and practitioners regularly produce new findings. Your organization might employ a dedicated engagement specialist; if not, an external expert will be the best source for these helpful insights.

Step 3: Measure it.

Measuring the current state of engagement at your organization requires a validated, empirically-supported instrument. Without this instrument, your results may not be interpretable or actionable. Validation establishes that (1) you know what the instrument is actually measuring, and (2) actions to improve engagement have the best chance of working.

Using a valid, precise survey to measure engagement will reveal your employees' overall level of engagement, as well as which areas of the organization have higher or lower levels. But an engagement study should do much more than that – it should also reveal which conditions in the organization are affecting engagement levels most, and thereby identify the interventions that could have the biggest impact on improving them. These conditions are different for each organization, and they can even be different among teams within an organization. Conducting a thorough study of engagement levels and the factors that drive engagement gives you the best information to act upon.

Conducting an engagement study with an outside provider can also avoid some common pitfalls of homegrown strategies. For example, employees might accidentally lead you astray if you ask them how to enhance engagement. Humans are generally not good at predicting what will make them happy⁶, so employees may indicate, for example, that getting paid more will make them more engaged, when in fact pay is often not related to engagement levels⁷.

Step 4: Model the actions you want.

Our research indicates that executives – the top people in charge of the company – have a big impact on employee engagement. The degree to which employees feel connected to their executives is a top driver in most teams and companies that we have measured. In fact, it tends to be even more important than employees' connectedness with their own managers. It is key that executives believe in engaging their employees and in modeling behaviors that support engagement.

Many of the behaviors that leaders can model are centered on relationships with others. Appreciation, information sharing, and compassion for each employee's experience can go a long way in building the conditions that support high engagement. These people-centered skills can enable engagement efforts to take root, so leaders should prioritize them. Leaders' actions often shape the organization's culture, whether they know it or not. Consequently, being deliberate about what is modeled by your leaders can be an effective way to increase engagement.

Step 5: Carry out interventions.

As mentioned above, each group -- teams, divisions, or entire organizations -- has a unique mixture of conditions that can affect engagement levels. Any actions taken by leadership to improve engagement should be designed with the organization's conditions in mind. It is also important to focus on how those interventions are implemented (as mentioned above) – a well-intentioned action could backfire because of how it is executed. Carefully-planned interventions aimed at top drivers can help ensure that a company's investment in engagement has the largest possible return.

Another way to maximize that return is to measure the effects of your interventions and revise them based on results. Your organization may already use pilot tests or test-and-iterate processes in other areas (think agile development). Those same testing processes can be applied to engagement interventions. Be careful to measure outcomes that can reasonably be expected to change, and keep in mind that a psychologist or program evaluation expert likely will be the most qualified to design these measurements.

You probably know that employee engagement is important. You may have already conducted a survey or started talking about it at your organization. But engagement might not yet be fully optimized at your organization. Working through the steps above could be the way to help your organization to start realizing that value.

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During the past half-century, Truist Leadership Institute, and its predecessor firm Farr Associates, have developed and refined approaches to business leadership through collaborative work with clients throughout the United States. The Truist Leadership Institute provides organizations with a leadership development partner who helps create dynamic and effective leaders, increase employee retention, and improve the bottom line.