

What Best-In-Class Executive Teams Do To Drive Employee Engagement

Common behaviors and viewpoints that lead to the most traction

 By Leanne Buehler

Asking employees to give their feedback on an employee engagement survey can be anxiety-provoking for executive teams. Leaders know that engagement is important and that they should be asking for feedback, but sometimes the survey results can be hard to take when they point to concerns around trust, communication, and organizational effectiveness. In my experience, executive teams either respond with openness and receptivity (the survey feedback may not be what executives were hoping for, but use it to focus and operate in the spirit of continuous improvement), or with defensiveness (punish others, ignore the results, explain them away, blame the timing of the survey, etc.).

Organizations that make the most significant progress in improving employee engagement demonstrate common themes from their executives. Here are the behaviors and viewpoints that lead to the most traction:

Use the Survey Feedback as Insight, not a Report Card. Feedback from an employee engagement survey should be used as organizational intelligence to help leaders understand the strengths and opportunities of their teams and give them targeted areas of focus. The feedback process can cause more harm than good when executives view the data as a 360 performance review and seek to “punish” leaders with lower engagement scores.

Understand the Context. Employee engagement can vary based on a variety of factors, including industry, the type of work being done, recent changes in business model or strategy, and new leadership. In interpreting survey results, being aware of the context of the organization or department is critical to understand key issues and how best to support managers and leaders. For example, an organization that is experiencing leadership changes will often receive feedback on an engagement survey that indicates there is an opportunity to build trust and confidence with employees. It’s not that employees don’t think the leadership team is talented, but rather they are waiting to see how the new group will lead. In this case, the leaders can choose to feel disappointed in the lack of confidence or they can see it as an opportunity for communication and relationship building.

Give More than Lip Service to the Importance of Employee Engagement. If you ask almost any executive, they will tell you that employee engagement is important. However, leaders that get the most traction in building engagement do more than just head nod to its importance. Effective leadership teams communicate with transparency and consistency about the survey results and then most importantly, hold leaders throughout the organization accountable for taking action.

Monitor Engagement like any Other Critical Metric. We often see executives display rigor in monitoring critical metrics such as sales, profit, customer feedback and turnover. Organizations that truly value and understand the impact of an engaged workforce monitor employee morale as well and many are doing so on an ongoing basis by

using frequent pulse surveys. Such surveys can be event-driven (check into understand the impact of a strategy change, new leadership etc.), time-driven (quarterly pulse checks) or to check in on progress on key engagement drivers. Incorporating such metrics into a balanced score card approach ensures that valuing people gets as much attention as results and outcomes.

Talk to People. The best CEOs know that they can only lead effectively if they are talking to the people doing the work. Relying solely on input from the executive team can lead to a skewed perception of reality and understanding of employee engagement. Talking to employees at all levels is the best way to truly understand engagement feedback in an unfiltered way. The CEO of one of our healthcare clients spends two hours a day rounding to talk to employees and listen to their perspectives. A new senior executive of another client went on a listening tour in which he talked to every employee in his division of a global organization. He knew his effectiveness depended on understanding the organization and getting ideas from the people closest to the work.

Understand that it is a Marathon, not a Sprint. Building a culture of engaged employees doesn’t happen overnight. The best executive teams have a long-term view that relies on focus and incremental progress. These teams select ONE thing to work on, do it really well, communicate the results, and then move on to the next thing. Expecting engagement levels to change overnight is like deciding to exercise for a month and then feeling frustrated that there has not been a significant impact on personal health. Beginning with exercise is a great first step, but impacting health overall takes a long-term systems approach. Incremental changes that support the organization’s values and monitored, evaluated, and built upon overtime is the best long-term strategy. [R&E](#)



With nearly 20 years of professional experience in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, **Leanne Buehler**, Vice President of Consulting Solutions at Newmeasures, is responsible for helping organizations achieve results through the use of innovative survey tools that align stakeholder experiences with business objectives. In her role she works with Senior Executives to build strong cultures that are aligned with the strategic direction of the organization. Visit www.newmeasures.com
Connect [Leanne Buehler](#)

Would you like to comment?

