

Are you measuring or listening?

From transactional to transformational engagement

We've witnessed significant fluctuation in employee engagement over the last two years. Following a dramatic uptick during the first few months of COVID, engagement dropped in Q2 2021 to its lowest annual level since 2017, driven by significantly decreasing perceptions in talent attraction and retention, career opportunities and care and well-being. Our most recent data shows that engagement has stabilized, returning to pre-COVID levels (68%). Although this news is promising, **organizations are now dealing with an employee population who demand and expect a new employee experience.** And many employers are struggling to hire and/or retain the talent necessary to sustain their business.



Leaders are forced to re-evaluate their talent strategies to ensure they strike the right balance between meeting the needs of the business and the needs of an employee population that is more vocal and demanding about what they want—with many unwilling to return to pre-pandemic ways of working. This shift in power we call the “[Talent Uprising](#)” means that **listening to employees is more important than ever.** We believe this is a catalyst for organizations to think about how they use engagement surveys, data and insights in a different, more strategic way.

A wake-up call for listening differently

The onset of the pandemic was a major catalyst for using engagement surveys differently. With dramatic changes occurring almost overnight, leaders had a responsibility to ensure they understood how their employees were coping. To get greater insight, many organizations accelerated the frequency of measurement and used shorter, more targeted surveys. Now, as employees are more vocal about their needs, desires and expectations, organizations have an opportunity to embrace the Talent Uprising, using employee feedback to help define and shape the future of work. This next phase is another important wake-up call to think about how organizations can utilize engagement survey mechanisms not just more often, but more effectively. With so many changes and opportunities to make positive change stick, it's time to stop and ask the question: Why are we measuring engagement? Are we measuring with intention and for the right reasons?

Common reasons many organizations measure engagement

- To check if engagement levels are going up or down
- To communicate to employees that leaders take engagement seriously
- To find out why people are leaving
- It is one of the main people metrics on the corporate dashboard and stopping measurement would send negative signals to the workforce.

These are not bad reasons for measuring engagement. Understanding how engagement levels are changing is important, and so are insights into where risks might be in terms of talent turnover. But measuring engagement for these reasons alone or simply to get an engagement score undervalues the positive potential impact an engagement survey can have on an organization. It could and should be an integral part of an effective employee listening and activation strategy.

Better reasons to measure engagement:

It's time to stop and think more strategically about how we can move from transactional to more transformational engagement approaches. Some additional reasons for measuring engagement that are truly about listening to employees include:



- To get the feedback and depth of insight needed to create a culture that aligns with the business strategy (e.g., innovative, customer-centric, value/purpose driven, diverse & inclusive.)



- To build trust between the workforce and employees. Listening to feedback and acting on this proves that leaders want to create a positive employee experience.



- To identify and prioritize the issues, challenges, opportunities and areas for improvement at a local and organization-wide level so that employees can be engaged, inspired and connected every day.



- To give leaders and managers the ongoing insights they need to effectively engage their teams day-to-day as well as through any type of business transformation, big or small.

How can organizations shift to a more transformational engagement approach?

Be clear on why you are doing it

Be clear and aligned from the start around why you are doing it, what you want to understand and how you will use the insights. Frequent pulsing without concrete action plans is frustrating for leaders and employees alike. Check out our list of critical design questions organizations should ask themselves in the article [“When too much of a good thing does no good.”](#) Whether it's your organization-wide survey or a pulse for a specific employee segment, a conscious and deliberate engagement activation plan will help avoid missed opportunities to make real business impact.



Better equip your stakeholder groups

Ensure you are supporting and equipping all the various stakeholder groups throughout the process. One of the biggest challenges is shifting the perception of engagement measurement to make

leaders and managers want to run these surveys. It needs to be seen as a useful exercise that supports the achievement of business goals, rather than something that is on a “to-do list.”

- Help your leaders and managers understand how the data is beneficial and impactful for them (a support mechanism rather than a measurement of how they are doing as a manager).
- Prepare your HR functions on how they can support leaders and managers as well as using the data to focus their people strategies in the right way.



— Prioritize key topics

Prioritizing and focusing on key themes/topics in your survey results is more important than ever, as every employee needs something *slightly* different—with variations across employee demographic groups as well as the different working arrangements that now exist due to hybrid working models. Once organizations learn what the major people challenges and concerns are, they can develop key messages and targeted action plans to help effectively manage expectations and drive change going forward.

— Don't be afraid to act, listen some more and then adjust

When you receive a set of survey results and try to figure out what to focus on, there can be added pressure around whether your next actions will fix the issue. Is this going to improve things, and what if it doesn't? All too often leaders then become immobilized, as they want to be completely sure that their next move is going to make a big difference. A better approach is to simply act first, based on the key themes that you know exist—start doing something, communicate it and then check in to see how it is going and then make any needed adjustments.

Measurement is valuable but it can only go so far. Measurement provides valuable pointers on where to focus ongoing listening and dialogue with employees as well as helpful mechanisms for tracking progress. But it's not going to tell you how to get to your destination, what you need to do, how long it will take and what capacity and capabilities you need to get there. With so much time, effort and money being invested into employee engagement surveys, it's time for organizations to look at the bigger picture and be more strategic about how they are utilizing their engagement insights to achieve their desired employee experience. Employee engagement really needs to have a bigger impact on vitalizing organizations and driving positive organizational change. *This* is ultimately the right reason to measure engagement.

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