

8 STEPS FOR IMPROVING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR



INTRODUCTION

What's the secret to high performing employees who are dedicated to the mission? It's all about engagement.

Out of sight, out of mind? That's likely how many remote workers feel these days. In fact, before the Covid-19 pandemic, an alarming 84% of employees said they weren't fully engaged at work, according to ADP Research. The economic consequences of such poor engagement levels meant approximately \$7 trillion in lost productivity globally, Gallup reported.

What, then, did the mass exodus from office buildings and workspaces do to employee engagement levels? It likely made them plummet even further.

And yet, employee engagement is critical to fostering public trust in government agencies and institutions—at all levels. Employees who are engaged and interested in their work are higher performers and more fulfilled; they also make better teammates and colleagues and provide better service to constituents.

Consider a case study published by Deloitte of the contact center at the Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV), which faced a dual crisis: rising caller dissatisfaction and a nearly 200% attrition rate among its contact center employees. The bureau was alarmed that some disengaged employees frequently used negative language with callers, such as “I can't do that,” rather than positive language, such as “Let me look into that.” Worse, some provided wrong information to rush callers off the phone.

Engaged employees on the other hand, have the power to transform seemingly insignificant situations like this. As the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement notes, engaged employees take pride in their organization and its mission and are deeply committed to its success. They provide “discretionary effort,” going above basic job requirements to help the organization achieve its mission. Engaged employees find their work meaningful and rewarding and, in turn, they deliver for the organization, its leaders, their coworkers, and the public.¹

In this ebook, we present eight steps for improving employee engagement at public sector agencies.

¹ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/trust-in-government-employee-engagement.html>

1. Take the pulse of employees

Bob Lavigna writes in the PA Times, an online publication of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), “Improving engagement begins with understanding how engaged the workforce is, and what influences (drives) employees’ engagement. This means measuring and analyzing engagement.”

Unfortunately, many government organizations are hesitant to conduct such queries because they fear they will learn employees are not engaged and highly dissatisfied with their work—findings that may become public knowledge.

It takes courage, Mr. Lavigna says. But agencies can’t manage what they can’t measure. So, it makes sense to take a bold step and determine a baseline.

“Research shows that the most effective way to measure engagement is to survey employees on how they feel about their work environment and the organization’s culture,” he advises.

2. Start with engaged leaders

Another big challenge for many agencies is leadership engagement. That’s because leaders often focus on decisions at the highest levels and forget about the folks in the ranks doing the work. Yet, organizations that establish leaders and managers who are effective communicators can expect to have more highly engaged employees, higher job retention rates, and an easier time attracting new employees.

According to an article in the Harvard Business Review (HBR), “Engaging leaders step up, opting to proactively own solutions where others cannot or do not. They energize others, keeping people focused on purpose and vision with contagious positivity. They connect and stabilize groups by listening, staying calm, and unifying people. They serve and grow, by empowering, enabling, and developing others. And they stay grounded, remaining humble, open, candid, and authentic in their communication and behavior.”²

² <https://hbr.org/2014/11/what-makes-someone-an-engaging-leader>



HBR Says Engaged Leaders:

- Step up to own solutions.
- Energize others with purpose, vision and positivity.
- Connect and stabilize groups.
- Serve and grow others.
- Stay grounded.

3. Strengthen communications channels

Particularly in a remote work environment, leaders need to be visible and use a range of communications strategies. Sharyn Nerenberg, senior director at Hughes Network Systems, says it can be helpful to create an internal infrastructure to guide how communications are disseminated and by whom.

“One approach is the Pyramid strategy. At the bottom of the pyramid is the ‘one-to-many’ mass communications. It’s all the channels we utilize to reach employees, like emails, digital signage, and the intranet,” she says.

In the middle of the pyramid is the “manager as messenger” strategy, where mid-level managers are provided guidance and support materials for disseminating information to their respective teams.



Communication in the middle layer that involves managers and supervisors is often the greatest hurdle. It’s where messages get stuck. That’s why leaders may require special training or coaching, so that good communication becomes routine.

And enhanced skills make a tangible difference; McKinsey reports that when employees are connected and engaged, organizations see a 20%-25% increase in productivity.

At the top of the pyramid are executive communications designed to cultivate a sense of trust in the workplace and in leadership—making leaders far more relatable and accessible. Messaging should be intended to keep employees engaged; focused and moving in the right direction. Video broadcasts, town halls and internal podcasts are ideal. With video conferencing now a part of the everyday, town halls are also easier to coordinate and host than ever before. Plus, they offer both live and on-demand viewing options to accommodate staff schedules. In essence, video brings leadership to life.

4. Let two-way communications flow

Equally important is to establish a fluid flow of communications that will consistently carry information from the top levels of leadership to the bottom ranks, and then back again. To do this effectively, however, there must be no fear of repercussions. Managers must establish a safe place where employees can provide input and voice their opinions without being afraid that their job or position will be at risk. At the same time, organizations must be honest and transparent with employees by sharing good news and bad.

Two-way communications do not need to occur only in formal settings. They can utilize all options, from in-person and virtual meetings to texting, digital signage and video-on-demand. Collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams and Yammer (the MS Office 365 messaging platform), or Slack and Zoom are also effective. Gallup Research shows that while 72% percent of organizations use social technologies in some way, very few are anywhere near to achieving their full potential benefit. By taking stock of existing tools, agencies can buck this trend and maximize their use.

And of course, organizations must listen to the feedback employees provide. Nothing will stall engagement faster than having employees realize their input isn't taken seriously.

What did you say?

90% of workers say they are more likely to stay at an organization that takes and acts on feedback.

Source: 2020 Engagement & Retention Report, Achievers.



5. Learn what matters to employees

According to one expert, “Employee engagement fosters trust, loyalty, and motivation. It forms the emotional connection between the team member and the organization.”

To establish that emotional connection, leaders must work hard to understand their employees’ strengths, skills, values, and aspirations. In other words, what’s important to them—not just when it comes to work but in terms of the broader world. They might care about social responsibility, community health standards, the security and stability of families, diversity and inclusion, or animal rights. There are no wrong answers. But supervisors will be at a distinct disadvantage if they don’t listen to and understand what drives members of their team.

6. Match employee skills—and goals—with the agency’s mission

With greater insight into employee skills, goals and priorities, leaders can express how the agency’s values and mission align with what matters most to its people. Employees who see the connection between their work and how their talents are being used, contribute to a positive organizational culture, which can be a powerful force that affects the well-being and success of an organization, say authors of *Public Sector Organizational Culture: Experience from Frontline Bureaucracies*.³ Whenever possible, they add, show employees how their specific tasks help to accomplish mission-critical goals. This deepens the emotional ties between an organization and employees.⁴



7. Transform employees into advocates

One of the greatest advantages of a strong organizational culture marked by high engagement levels is its power to turn employees into advocates. Employees want more than a steady paycheck and good benefits; they want to feel like what they do makes a difference. When they feel like they matter, they’re more likely to become culture advocates—that is, people who not only influence organizational culture, but also champion it internally and externally.

One way to create advocates is to recognize good work—the types of efforts and achievements others can emulate. A culture that celebrates individual and team successes, that gives credit when credit is due, is a culture that offers a sense of accomplishment. That drives greater engagement and helps to build an entire network of advocates.

³ <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/71088>

⁴ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/trust-in-government-employee-engagement.html>

8. Measure, measure, measure

It bears repeating, improving engagement requires a starting point: a baseline measurement of where engagement levels stand. Regular evaluations can be deployed to see what's working and what's not. For example, are employees receiving communications too frequently or not often enough? Do they feel as if leadership hears and values their opinions? Are teams achieving desired outcomes?

Engagement surveys can be conducted annually to gauge how employees feel about everything from compensation to management to perks to performance. Then, compare results to prior years and benchmarks, and against other agencies of similar size and structure.

“When it comes to engagement, people look at whether the employee is happy or not, but that's not always what it's about. It might be about their overall morale and how they're performing on the job, and that means something too,” one expert stresses.

In fact, these are the very qualities that lead to discretionary effort.

By establishing a structure to support strong engagement, employees can be inspired in their efforts to do the important work of serving the public and achieving their agency's mission.

For additional information, visit government.hughes.com.



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