

Blytheco

Focal Employee Engagement



What Causes Employee Disengagement?



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Statistical analysis reveals that the drivers of employee disengagement are not all the same as the drivers of employee engagement.

A lot of focus is placed on employee engagement these days - what is employee engagement, what can be done to increase employee engagement, etc. Numerous research studies, based on statistical analysis of employee engagement data, have all reached more or less the same broad conclusions about employee engagement.

Most of these research studies also find that between 20% and 30% of employees are disengaged, but employee engagement models, as well as activities to increase employee engagement, are usually based on the entire spectrum of employees - both engaged, disengaged, and those "in between" - in a sort of one-size-fits-all approach.

In our latest employee engagement research study*, we decided to take a closer look at the differences between engaged and disengaged employees, and we discovered some clear and striking results. Our statistical analysis shows that there are some common drivers of engagement across the entire spectrum of employees - things that drive engagement as well as disengagement, but there are some important differences as well.

The two lists below show the survey questions that are most highly correlated with overall engagement for the bottom 10% (most disengaged) employees compared to all employees.

See if you can spot the key difference between the most disengaged employees and everybody else.

Most Disengaged Employees Top 10 Drivers of (Dis)engagement

- **Respect for Employees** - This organization respects its employees.
- **Respect for Management** - The senior leaders in this organization are highly ethical.
- **Respect for Employees** - My manager values my talents and the contribution I make.
- **Personal Expression** - My ideas and opinions count at work.
- **Purpose and Direction** - My manager clearly defines goals and expectations.
- **Values** - The actions of our senior leaders support this organization's mission and values.
- **Teamwork and Cooperation** - My manager emphasizes cooperation and teamwork among members of my workgroup.
- **Personal Expression** - People with different ideas are valued in this organization.
- **Empowerment/ Autonomy** - My manager gives me the freedom I need to do my job effectively.
- **Feedback** - I receive useful and constructive feedback from my manager.

All Employees Top 10 Drivers of Engagement

- **Respect for Employees** - This organization respects its employees.
- **Fairness** - Everybody is treated fairly in this organization.
- **Trust** - There is an atmosphere of trust in this organization.
- **Respect for Management** - The leaders of this organization really know what they are doing.
- **Values** - The actions of our senior leaders support this organization's mission and values.
- **Teamwork and Cooperation** - It really feels like everybody is on the same team in this organization.
- **Respect for Management** - Our senior leaders demonstrate strong leadership skills.
- **Respect for Management** - The senior leaders in this organization are highly ethical.
- **Personal Expression** - People with different ideas are valued in this organization.
- **Personal Expression** - Our senior leaders are genuinely interested in the opinions of all employees.



That's right... Five of the top ten drivers of disengagement relate to "my manager", compared to zero of the top ten when we look across the entire spectrum of all employees!

In other words, poor relationships between employees and their managers are a leading cause, if not the leading cause, of employee disengagement.

The remaining survey questions and associated themes are consistent for both groups - mutual respect, fairness, personal expression, values, and trust are issues that influence engagement levels for all employees, but the most disengaged employees have this additional, dominating theme that we do not see when we look at all employees.

(Research Note: We also looked at engagement drivers for the bottom 20%, the top 20%, and the top 10% of all employees. The statistics were very consistent. The bottom 20% showed the same "my manager" pattern, with three out of the top ten correlates relating to "my manager". For the top 10% and the top 20%, "my manager" items did not even make it into the top twenty correlates.)

Thinking about employee disengagement - A shift in mindset

If you are used to thinking about employee engagement, your mind probably naturally thinks of things that motivate employees and cause them to be more engaged. When we look specifically at disengaged employees, we need to think a bit differently. We are not looking for what is needed to engage these employees. Rather, we need to think in terms of what is causing these employees to be disengaged.

To put it another way - we are not looking for ways to make people happy, but rather, we are looking for ways to stop them from being unhappy. Addressing the things that cause disengagement won't immediately lead to "engaged" employees, but it will make those disengaged employees less disengaged and get them pointed in a more positive and productive direction.

Employee disengagement and "my manager" - What to do?

You've probably heard the saying, "People don't quit their jobs; they quit their bosses." Our statistical research on employee engagement supports this. The employees who were surveyed had not yet quit their jobs or their bosses, but no doubt many have done so since the surveys were conducted. Those who remain are unhappy, and they are probably adding little if any value to the organizations they work for.

Not every disengaged employee is unhappy with his or her manager, but many are, and those employees have the potential to be more engaged and productive. Each employee-manager relationship will have its own unique problems, but there are some concrete steps that can be taken in order to address disengagement issues related to "my manager".





Primary Causes of Employee Disengagement

The drivers of employee disengagement that we highlighted previously pointed to managers as a leading cause of disengagement, but there are other causes as well. To get a better understanding of employee disengagement, we conducted a more detailed cluster analysis* of the most disengaged employees. This analysis revealed three primary causes of employee disengagement.

Breakdown - Types of Manager Disengagement

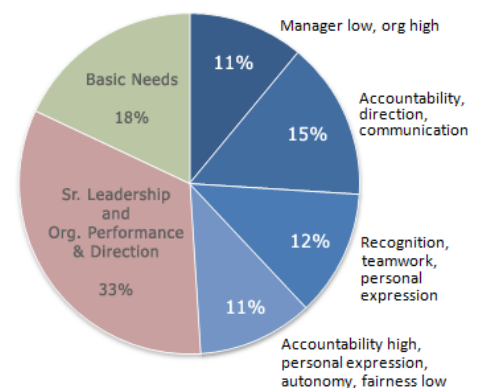
Among the 49% of employees whose disengagement is related to their managers, we identified four distinct clusters – i.e. the most common scenarios.

11% of disengaged employees rated their managers low, but still gave (relatively) high marks to senior leadership and the organization as a whole. In other words, these employees are specifically disengaged with their managers, but they distinguish this from how they feel about the organization overall. The problems employees in this group have with their managers are broad-based, indicating employee-manager relationships that are generally dysfunctional or toxic.

15% are disengaged with their managers due to poor accountability, communication, direction, and feedback. These are managers who are not communicating expectations and direction, helping employees set goals, or holding people accountable.

12% are disengaged with their managers due to a lack of recognition, teamwork, and personal expression. These are managers who are not building relationships and supporting the emotional or interpersonal needs of their employees.

11% are disengaged with their managers due to a lack of autonomy, fairness, and personal expression. These employees gave their managers (relatively) high marks for accountability, meaning these managers are doing a good job of driving and enforcing, but they are failing to give their employees enough respect and freedom.



How to fix "my manager" employee engagement problems

Understanding the typical causes of disengagement is interesting, but what company leaders and HR managers really care about is identifying and fixing the specific disengagement problems in their organizations.



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The advantage to manager disengagement problems is that many of them will be localized, and can be addressed one by one in manageable bites. They won't necessarily be easy to fix, but they can be easier to tackle than other problem areas that might require org-wide changes.

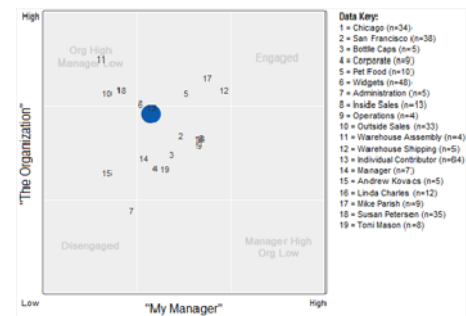
Step One: Diagnosis

The first step is to understand whether and where disengagement problems exist, and what is causing the disengagement. Your goal here is to answer the following questions:

- Are there company-wide issues related to manager disengagement?
- Are there specific managers who are struggling to engage their employees?
- What are the specific engagement issues that need to be addressed?

The most acute engagement problems are usually localized to specific managers or departments. The "group comparison" section of the employee engagement dashboard makes it easy to identify these problem areas and drill down to find out what the specific problems are.

The four "my manager" disengagement clusters outlined above might help to categorize and understand the various problems you find, but it is often more relevant to focus on the specific survey questions that are identified as problem areas.



Step Two: Identify Potential Solutions

Solutions to "my manager" engagement problems depend on whether those problems are company-wide or isolated to specific managers or areas within the organization.

Company-wide problems often suggest that some sort of formal training, system, or process is lacking. For example, if employees are generally not getting enough feedback or direction from their managers, perhaps the organization needs to formalize a goal setting and feedback process.

Other company-wide problems can point to a need for more substantive culture change. These types of problems will often also be reflected in other parts of the engagement survey, with low scores in areas that measure overall engagement with the organization. For example, if the company-wide results show that managers get high marks for accountability, but low marks for autonomy and personal expression, the employee survey results might also indicate that the organization's culture is focused on the bottom line at the expense of employees' needs.



For engagement problems that are specific to individual managers, drill down to see what the specific issues are for each manager. See if there is a theme or connection between any items that stand out. For each manager, consider which of the following options is most suitable:

- Establish or formalize a process that is lacking – this could be all that is needed for some managers who are struggling in areas such as defining goals and expectations, communicating, or providing feedback.
- For a manager who is generally doing OK, but who is struggling in just one or two specific areas, sharing the survey results with that manager and discussing suggestions for how to fix those problems might be enough. This can work well for managers who have the basic skills and motivation to do a good job, but who simply lack awareness that there are things that they need to do better or differently.
- For managers who have broader problems, or where the problems can't be solved with a formalized process, some sort of ongoing manager training and development is probably needed. This should start with 360 degree feedback, which will provide the necessary level of detail for developmental purposes. (See boxed text to the right regarding 360 degree feedback)
- Lastly, in some cases, where problems are broad and severe, replacing or reassigning the manager can be the best or only viable option. This is obviously an option to use cautiously. Look closely at the number of respondents ("n") and the frequency distributions. If there is a high level of disagreement in the frequency distributions, results could be skewed by just one or two disgruntled employees. Regardless of what the results indicate, additional information should be gathered before taking this type of action – e.g. performance review, 360 degree feedback, etc.

Before terminating a manager, be sure to find out if he or she is incompetent, a jerk, or simply in over his or her head - or perhaps just assigned to a role that is a bad fit. The classic example of these last two possibilities is the technical or functional superstar who is rewarded with a promotion to manager, but who lacks the skills and understanding of what is needed in this new role.

