

Achievers

Empowerment and Trust: The Keys to Employee Engagement

*Understanding HR and Engagement Leaders'
Challenges and Opportunities*



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STATE OF THE EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP WITH WORK: WEIGHING THE GOOD AND THE BAD

The employee-work relationship is changing. The change is not just generational — all employee expectations about work are shifting considerably. Organizations are trying to better understand this new set of expectations around the experience of work.

To understand the scope of these changes, Achievers surveyed HR and engagement leaders' views of the changing work environment. These are people on the front lines of this shift, who understand the challenges and opportunities that it presents.

Our goal was to find out what today's organizations are doing well and where their challenges lie. Understanding the shift in employee expectations within the context of where organizations are today is critical to make the right changes to ensure business success.

Overall, we found that organizations are doing a fairly good job with the following:

- Offering collaborative work environments to their employees
- Supporting healthier work-life balance
- Helping employees understand the mission of the organization

Unfortunately, some significant challenges and gaps surfaced as well:

- Employees are perceived to have low trust in leadership.
- There's lack of clarity around how work should be done.
- It's incredible difficulty creating a culture of mutual feedback.
- There are significant gaps between the ideal employee feedback process and reality.

As the nature of work changes, we expect employee engagement to be an ongoing challenge for organizations. Employee expectations are always going to be a moving target. Companies need to communicate with and gather feedback from employees in real time if they ever hope to do more than be reactive.

How can organizations understand the gaps in employee expectations, anticipate the most pressing issues, and adopt the processes and technology that make it scalable? **In this report, we answer how you can address:**

- 1 The most pressing engagement challenges for organizations today
- 2 The role of employee empowerment and trust in engagement success
- 3 Technology and culture changes that can ensure success





1. PRESSING ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES: WHERE DO ORGANIZATIONS STAND?

How do organizations fare on empowering employees and promoting engagement in the workplace? HR and engagement leaders are in unique positions to answer this question. They know, often at a very deep level, what parts of the organization’s vision, processes, and technology are succeeding and what the deficiencies are.

Do HR and engagement leader perceptions map perfectly back to broader employee perceptions? Not always. But from our experience with people leaders, their perceptions are often closely tied to the true reality. Given the diversity of rankings, the candidness of our respondents didn’t disappoint.

So, let’s start with the good news. HR and engagement leaders see progress in some parts of the work experience. In the last few years, this has included collaboration, work-life balance, and thinking more holistically about support systems for employees. About 3 out of 5 HR and engagement leaders thought their organizations were effective at these tasks.

WHERE ORGANIZATIONS ARE MAKING PROGRESS

58% believe they are effectively defining expectations for employees

58%

64% believe they are offering employees effective support systems

64%

63% believe they are effectively creating a collaborative work environment

63%

62% believe they are effectively supporting a healthy work-life balance

62%

That still leaves **nearly 40 percent of organizations** with significant work to do; however, these are the areas where the majority of our respondents felt they had made the most progress.

Conversely, companies identified some challenges they are struggling with. At the core of these challenges seem to be missed opportunities for communication.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONS ARE STRUGGLING WITH

39% believe employees know how their work connects to organizational goals

39%

34% believe that their employees actively provide feedback to the organization and leaders

34%

So, if the core challenges organizations face in empowering and engaging their employees center on communication, how are organizations communicating?

Many companies have thought about the way they communicate to employees. They implement tools to help spread the word, from bulletin boards to employee communication portals. Most have not yet implemented effective ways to solicit feedback or listen to employees, though. In fact, we found that 1 out of 7 organizations have no formal way they listen to employees at all.



While 64% of HR and engagement leaders say an always-on feedback tool is essential to an engagement listening program, only 20% have this kind of tool in place.

Listening to employees is a critical function of employee engagement inside organizations. Given the lack of full adoption of effective feedback mechanisms in most organizations, it should be no surprise that HR and engagement leaders see significant room for improvement.

IDEAL VS. REALITY

WHAT EMPLOYEES WANT

What frequencies are essential for an effective employee engagement listening program?
(Respondents could select multiple answers.)

Always-on feedback tool for employees to access

64%

Monthly request for feedback

29%

Quarterly request for feedback

26%

Weekly request for feedback

22%

Annual request for feedback

10%

Daily request for feedback

7%

WHAT EMPLOYEES GET

What listening frequencies do organizations use today? (Respondents could select multiple answers.)

Always-on feedback tool for employees to access

20%

Monthly request for feedback

14%

Quarterly request for feedback

19%

Weekly request for feedback

10%

Annual request for feedback

38%

Daily request for feedback

5%

None of the above

14%

Here's the big problem: Although 64 percent of HR and engagement leaders say an always-on feedback tool is essential to an engagement listening program, just 20 percent have such a tool in place. And while only 10 percent think an annual request for feedback is essential for listening, it is the most-used listening frequency today by far, at 38 percent.

HR and engagement leaders see always-on tools for employee feedback as new but already a must-have for organizations to make listening most effective. Yet, most are still relying on annual asks for feedback, probably during an annual survey.

Let's dive into some of the key drivers of the biggest engagement challenges.

2. THE BIGGEST ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES: TRUST IN LEADERSHIP, BUILDING CULTURE, AND EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES

When we looked deeper into the data, we found four areas that hit at the crux of engagement challenges organizations are facing today.

1 A LACK OF TRUST IN LEADERSHIP

21%

21% of HR and engagement leaders agree or strongly agree that their employees deeply trust company leaders.

Just 1 in 5 HR and engagement leaders agreed that their employees deeply trust their company leaders.

2 DIFFICULTY FOSTERING A CULTURE OF CLEAR FEEDBACK

22%

22% of organizations are effective or extremely effective at fostering a culture of feedback.

Only 22 percent say their organization is effective or very effective at fostering a culture that supports clear feedback, with 23 percent saying they are ineffective or extremely ineffective at this.

3 GAPS IN FORMAL EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK

14%

14% of organizations have no formal feedback mechanism for employees.

There are significant gaps between what HR and engagement leaders identified as best practices for employee feedback vs. what these leaders actually use in their organizations. The top three gaps include an always-on feedback tool (44-point difference between ideal state and reality), monthly request for feedback (15-point difference), and having no formal feedback mechanism at all (14-point difference).

4 EXISTING ENGAGEMENT LEVELS CHALLENGE REAL-TIME

45%

45% believe that employee feedback should be reviewed by a more senior manager or HR before being shared with an employee's direct manager.

While real-time feedback is important to our respondents, they were split on whether it should be reviewed before it is sent to the direct manager. Why would senior managers or HR leaders want to slow down or filter employee responses? The reason for this response was not clear until we looked at the split between those who believed employee feedback needed to be reviewed vs. those who said it didn't (or that it didn't matter).

ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS RATING

Offering effective support systems



Creating a collaborative working environment



Providing professional development opportunities



HR OR SR. MGR. REVIEWS
FEEDBACK FIRST

FEEDBACK SHARED WITH
DIRECT MANAGER

Organizations that want to filter or review real-time feedback first are often grappling with other engagement issues relative to their peers who were comfortable sharing feedback with direct managers. They may see reviewing real-time feedback as a way to head off employee engagement challenges or to take care of specific management issues. Either way, it indicates a lack of trust and even a fear of open, candid conversation.

WHY THESE KEY CHALLENGES MATTER

There's wide consensus among HR and engagement leaders that giving and receiving feedback on a consistent basis can help organizations create a culture of feedback. A culture of feedback can also:

- Increase employee trust in organizational leaders
- Empower employees to elevate issues to managers and senior leadership early on

This cadence of listening to employees and actively communicating can also help managers be better prepared to handle conversations and feedback directly instead of relying on HR and senior leadership to intervene.

Open and honest conversations where employees are genuinely heard and leaders can respond in a timely matter are a key way organizations can improve engagement, empower employees, and increase trust.

3. TECHNOLOGY IS AN ANSWER — BUT NOT THE ONLY ONE

It can be tough to know exactly where to start improving employee communication, empowerment, and trust. It might be easy enough to implement a weekly or monthly ask for formal feedback. One tough issue to solve with a do-it-yourself solution is adopting an always-on feedback tool, which HR and engagement leaders rated as most important for gaining employee feedback.

While always-on feedback technology is something fairly new, the concept of having a way that employees can give feedback to their organization and manager isn't an unusual step. In the past, surveys, manager one-on-ones, and even old-fashioned suggestion boxes were the way companies could get feedback from employees in as close to real time as possible.

But surveys and suggestion boxes can only go so far. Too many surveys, especially longer ones, can become burdensome and create survey burnout. Suggestion boxes have been rightfully derided as a black hole for feedback. While manager one-on-ones are effective, they don't help leaders understand trends and broader challenges across the organization.

48%

48% say managers feel that technology has the potential to improve the day-to-day experience of their employees.

Always-on listening tools can help organizations listen to employees more effectively. In fact, 48 percent of HR and engagement leaders said that managers feel technology has the potential to improve the day-to-day experience of direct reports. The importance of always-on feedback is that it gives organizations a scalable communication channel between employees, managers, and their leaders. While these types of tools can help, it's not the only answer.

42%

42% agree or strongly agree that engagement programs are only effective when tailored to the values and preferences of employees.

Being open to always-on feedback is also an important change in behavior and attitude for organizations. Forty-two percent of HR and engagement leaders also said that engagement programs must reflect the values and preferences of their employees.

In short, your approach with technology and behavior change must meet your organization and people where they are today.

The best programs match the preferences and behaviors of your people. Improving the frequency, participation, and actionable results that can come when you implement employee-listening initiatives is about empowering your employees.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE ORGANIZATION

Are organizations empowering their employees and fostering trust the best they can? The answer for most organizations is that there is work to be done.

Where to start and focus seems clear from our research:

- Increase trust in leadership
- Change feedback practices to align with employee preferences
- Create a culture of feedback
- Help your direct managers have better real-time conversations with their employees

HR and engagement leaders strongly believe the opportunity lies in having an always-on feedback tool. Most organizations are just getting started on implementing this important solution.

Achievers' industry-leading technology empowers every employee to give honest feedback and recognize and celebrate great moments, and it helps managers get better at recognizing and coaching their teams, listening to the frontlines, and actively addressing the unique engagement needs of their employees.



**Learn more about the Achievers
Employee Success Platform today**



APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We surveyed more than 120 HR leaders and practitioners in 2018 from the Achievers email list, asking a series of quantitative and qualitative questions to explore engagement programs and perspectives. On average, the survey took participants less than 10 minutes to complete to ensure respondent engagement. The data was scrubbed for quality diligence and crosstabs were analyzed for trends.

Total sample size: n123

Target: HR and engagement leaders and practitioners