

*If only they knew what  
we're REALLY thinking...*

# THE “INSIDE VOICE” FRAMEWORK: A NEW LENS ON ENGAGEMENT

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# UNLOCK THE TRUE POTENTIAL OF YOUR WORKFORCE THROUGH THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

At Ascend, we believe that employee engagement begins with listening. Our “Use Your Inside Voice” (UYIV) Framework is designed to transform employee feedback into actionable insights. By prioritizing psychological safety and encouraging employees to share their unspoken ideas and concerns, leaders can uncover blind spots and unlock engagement potential. This innovative approach positions employee voices as the foundation for meaningful change, ensuring that organizations stay aligned with their workforce’s evolving needs.

## *What is the Employee Experience and Why Does It Matter?*

Organizations thrive when employees feel seen, heard, and valued. Employee engagement, defined as the emotional commitment employees have to their organization and its goals, is a cornerstone of organizational success. When organizations invest in employee engagement (also known as employee experience), the degree to which employees feel committed, motivated, and connected to their work, they guarantee that their staff is enthusiastic about their mission.

Engaged employees drive measurable results. According to Deloitte, organizations with more engaged workers are 57% more effective and have a three-year growth rate 2.3 times greater than average (Deloitte, 2016).

However, most organizations are failing to meet this standard. According to Gallup’s 2004 State of the Global Workplace report, only 33 % of American workers are engaged. Furthermore, about half of all workers are actively seeking new employment. Disengaged workers hurt the bottom line. Annually, low employee engagement costs the US nearly \$2 trillion (Harter, 2024).

As organizations compete for talent in an increasingly volatile labor market, fostering a strong culture of engagement has become crucial for long-term success.



## THE INFLUENCES BEHIND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: WHAT LEADERS MUST KNOW

Employee engagement is shaped by a variety of societal and organizational influences. External factors (such as evolving societal focus on work-life balance) and internal factors (such as the relationship between an organization's leadership team and employees) can both profoundly impact how employees view their roles and connect with their organizations. As we demonstrate below, organizations that successfully engage with employees can identify and address these factors:

**Societal Influence** – The Changing Expectations of Work-Life Balance: A renewed societal focus on mental health, personal fulfillment, and well-being has forced organizations to reevaluate their approaches to work-life balance. Workers are now more likely to seek out flexible working arrangements. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the push away from the office. A 2024 survey of American workers found that 68% of workers prefer hybrid or remote work models (American Staffing Association, 2024). A 2023 Gallup poll showed higher levels of employee engagement for remote and hybrid workers; meanwhile, employee engagement was lowest amongst on-site workers. Workers with a more flexible environment listed improved work-life balance, increased efficiency, higher productivity, more freedom in determining when or where to work, and less burnout as benefits of the model (Gallup, 2023). Conversely, organizations that fail to meet these expectations risk disengagement, burnout, and high turnover.

**Organizational Influence** – Leadership and Management Practices: Strong leaders who demonstrate trust, empathy, and empowerment are also vital to employee engagement. A 2021 survey by the nonprofit Calayst found that 76 percent of employees with emphatic leaders and 67 percent with emphatic managers were deeply engaged at work (Van Bommel, 2021). Leaders who provide clear direction, encourage employee development, and foster a supportive environment can significantly increase engagement.

In contrast, poor leadership practices—such as micromanaging, lack of transparency, or failure to recognize employee contributions—can lead to disengagement. Research demonstrates that employees were much more likely to disengage under poor leadership than with leaders who inspired them (Zenger and Folkman, 2022). Leaders who engage in these negative behaviors create a culture of distrust and disengagement, which can ultimately undermine the organization's performance.



## MAKING LASTING CHANGE: THE ROLE OF "INSIDE VOICE"

Organizations can best develop strategies to address societal and organizational influences by listening to employees. Organizations must build a culture where employees are comfortable using their “inside voice.” The concept of “inside voice” refers to the internal thoughts, opinions, and feelings employees may not always express publicly. Employees need open communication and active listening from their organizations’ leaders to feel engaged. Research shows that employees who work in a psychologically safe environment where they can speak up without fear of retribution are more likely to feel engaged in their work. Meanwhile, organizations that did not build a culture of psychological safety dealt with higher rates of staff attrition, burnout, and decreased productivity (Gallo, 2023).

### *What Can Organizations and Leaders Do to Engage Employees Effectively?*

Organizations and leaders can take several proactive steps to mitigate the risks of disengagement and cultivate a positive employee experience. The following strategies are backed by recent research and best practices:

**Foster Open Communication:** Create structured opportunities for feedback, such as regular one-on-one meetings, surveys, and town hall sessions. Jim Harter (2023), the chief workplace researcher at Gallup, notes that 80 percent of employees who receive meaningful feedback from supervisors are fully engaged at work – even in remote environments.

- **Prioritize Well-Being:** Programs that support employee mental health, physical health, and work-life balance are essential to sustaining engagement. Gallup’s 2024 State of the Global Workforce report shows workers in the United States and globally struggle with daily stress, anger, sadness, and loneliness while on the job. Offering flexible work schedules, mental health days, and wellness initiatives demonstrates a commitment to employee health, which enhances engagement.
- **Invest in Leadership Development:** Providing managers with training on emotional intelligence, communication, and performance coaching can create a more engaging and supportive work environment. Deloitte found that though 97 percent of workers want an empathic boss, only 45 percent of respondents said their manager was empathic (Deloitte, 2023). Managers must demonstrate to employees they can meet their emotional needs while on the job.



- **Recognize and Reward Contributions:** Regularly acknowledging employees' achievements is critical to maintaining engagement. Recognition, whether through formal programs or informal praise, helps employees feel valued and motivates them to continue performing at a high level. In fact, McKinsey discovered that the biggest factor in employee retention was nonfinancial recognition (Chodyniewska et al., 2022). Small, but personal gestures from leadership can go a long way into making employees feel valued and appreciated by their organizations.
- **Align Work with Purpose:** Employees are more likely to be engaged when they understand how their work contributes to the organization's mission. Leaders should regularly communicate the organization's vision and involve employees in decision-making processes to enhance their sense of purpose. Research has also suggested companies craft job descriptions to underscore their contribution to the overall organizational mission (Stein et al., 2021).

Employee engagement is a critical driver of organizational success. The benefits of fostering engagement are clear: **higher productivity, lower turnover, and improved business outcomes.** However, these outcomes require intentional effort from leadership. As the workplace continues to evolve, organizations must adapt to employees' changing expectations. Ignoring these factors—such as dismissing the “inside voice” or failing to meet the demands for flexibility—can lead to disengagement and undermine long-term success. **Leaders who prioritize open communication, employee well-being, and meaningful work will build a culture of engagement that drives sustained performance.**

**YOUR WORKFORCE IS YOUR GREATEST ASSET.**

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