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White paper

The employee engagement strategy playbook

From survey results to two actions with owners, in 90 days



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The engagement results arrive in March. By April there is a plan with fourteen initiatives, a launch event and a logo. By the next survey the score has not moved, and nobody can say which of the fourteen was supposed to move it.

This playbook is the opposite of that plan. It takes one People and Culture team from a set of results to two actions with owners, in 90 days. It is a method, and where it leans on published research the study is named and listed at the end.

The short version

- **Diagnose before you choose.** Three kinds of evidence, read by group. Act only where two of them agree.
- **Name the fault in one sentence.** If you cannot, you are not ready to pick a strategy.
- **Change the work before you add a programme.** The evidence favours changing what people have to work with over adding activities.
- **Keep two actions.** Each with an owner, a group, a first move and a measure agreed in advance.
- **Run it through managers,** thirty minutes a month.
- **Check at day 90, on the driver you aimed at.** Then keep, change or stop.

What can an engagement strategy change, and what can it not?

Start with honest expectations. They decide what you promise your chief executive.

- **Engagement can be raised, modestly.** A meta-analysis of controlled engagement interventions found an overall effect that was small but positive (Hedges g = 0.29, from 14 studies), with a medium to large effect for interventions run with groups (Knight, Patterson and Dawson, 2017).
- **About half of attempts show nothing.** A later review of 40 intervention studies found that 20 had a significant positive effect, 18 had no effect and two had a negative one. Employee participation and manager support made a difference, and the bottom-up kind did best (Knight, Patterson and Dawson, 2019).
- **Engagement is tied to results, with limits.** A meta-analysis of 7,939 business units in 36 companies found relationships between employee satisfaction and engagement in a unit and its customer satisfaction, productivity, profit, turnover and accidents (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, 2002). A synthesis of 214 studies found the evidence most robust for task performance, and warned that most studies cannot prove cause (Bailey and colleagues, 2017).

So promise direction and method. Do not promise points on an index by a date.



A facilitator opens a session with colleagues seated at round tables.

Step 1: what does the evidence say, group by group?

Weeks one to three. Collect three kinds of evidence for each group you can report safely: a site, a function, a grade band, a length of service.

Evidence	What to pull	What it tells you
What people say in numbers	The lowest three drivers in the survey, for each group	Where it hurts, and for whom
What people do	Leavers in the first year, unplanned absence, internal moves, the survey response rate	Whether the score shows up in behaviour
What people say in words	Open comments, two focus groups, five stay interviews	Why

The rule: act where two of the three agree. A low recognition score with no echo in behaviour or comments may be the mood of the survey month. A low score at one site, rising early turnover at that site and comments about favouritism are one problem seen three times.

If you have no survey, the free employee survey templates and the turnover calculator are enough to start. If scores fell everywhere in a hard year, read why engagement scores drop in a hard year before you diagnose anything.

Step 2: can you name the fault in one sentence?

Write it in this form, once for each problem you found:

In [group], [driver] is weak. We see it in [behaviour]. People say: "[their words]".

For example: *In the night shift at the distribution centre, role clarity is weak. We see it in handover errors and first-year leavers. People say: "Every supervisor wants it done a different way."*

A sentence like this limits the problem to a group you can reach, gives you the measure in advance, and stops the meeting from jumping to solutions. The next question becomes obvious: what would have to change for every supervisor to give the same instruction?

Step 3: which kind of action fits the fault?

Most menus of engagement ideas mix four different things. They do not have the same evidence behind them.

Kind of action	What it changes	What the research found	Use it when the fault is about
Change what people have to work with	Clarity, feedback, say, support, tools, the manager's time	Engagement was predicted only by job resources in four samples (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Training workers to improve their own jobs, or training with job redesign, may improve wellbeing and performance (Daniels and colleagues, 2017)	Roles, handovers, decisions, recognition, growth
Act on what people told you	Whether feedback leads to visible change	Groups that made action plans from survey feedback improved more on leadership and commitment than groups that only received feedback (Björklund and colleagues, 2007)	"Nothing changes here", falling response rates
Build managers' skill	How managers brief, listen and follow up	Only three of the 40 studies in the 2019 review tested leadership training: too few to rank it	One team far below the rest
Build people's own resources	Confidence, coping, job crafting	Bottom-up actions, job crafting among them, did best in the 2019 review	Capable people stuck in rigid jobs

Events, gifts and campaigns are not in the table. They carry a message and mark a moment, and they are worth doing for that. They do not repair a fault in how work is organised.

Step 4: how do you get from many ideas to two?

List every action the team proposes. Score each from 0 to 3 on four questions.

Question	0	3
Does it fit the fault we named?	It is a nice thing to do	It changes the condition in the sentence
Is it ours to change?	Needs a budget or a decision we do not have	Managers can start on Monday
Does one person own it?	A committee	A named person with time
Will people see it within 90 days?	A policy in a folder	Something that happens in their week

Keep the two highest. Write the rest on a "not now" list and show that list to leaders, so that nobody adds a third in week five. With twelve actions running, nobody can tell which one worked.

The plan, on one page

Line	What you write
The fault	The sentence from step 2
The group	Who, where, how many
The action	What will be different in their week
The first move	What happens in the first ten working days
The owner	One name
What managers do	Thirty minutes a month: see below
The measure	The driver item, in this group, asked the same way as the baseline
The behaviour we expect	One figure that should follow: early leavers, absence, response rate
The check	Dates for day 45 and day 90
Not now	What we chose not to do

The 90 days, week by week

When	What happens
Weeks 1 to 3	Read the three kinds of evidence by group. Hold the focus groups
Week 4	Write the fault sentences. Score the options. Leaders approve two actions and the "not now" list
Week 5	Brief managers before anyone else: what we heard, what we will change, what we ask of you
Week 6	Tell employees: what you said, the two things we will do, who owns each, when we report back
Weeks 6 to 12	Run the actions. The owner reports on one page every two weeks
Week 9	A short note to everyone: what has happened so far, with one example
Week 13	Ask the targeted groups five questions on the drivers. Decide for each action: keep, change or stop

The note in week nine matters. In Gallup's 2024 research only 8% of employees strongly agreed that their organisation takes action on surveys, and 38% did not know whether it takes any. Much of a strategy is making action visible.

What do managers do, in thirty minutes a month?

Strategies die between the head office and the team. Give every manager one card.

1. **Say what we heard,** in the team's own results, in two minutes.
2. **Say the one thing that changes for this team,** and when.
3. **Ask one question:** "What is getting in the way of doing your best work this month?"
4. **Take one thing away with you,** and report back on it next time.

A manager who does these four things each month is carrying the strategy. A manager who forwards the slides is not.

How do you tell whether it worked?

Check three things together at day 90, each in the group you aimed at:

- **The driver:** the same question, the same wording, the same group as the baseline. It should move before the overall index does.
- **The behaviour:** the figure you named in the plan.
- **The words:** what people say unprompted in a focus group or a stay interview.

Two of three moving in the right direction is a result. If nothing has moved after two checks, change the action instead of defending it. Then test the plan against the four enablers that David MacLeod and Nita Clarke's research found behind successful engagement: a strong story of where the organisation is going, managers who engage their people, a voice for employees throughout the organisation, and values that are reflected in daily behaviour.

What should you not promise?

- **A number.** The index also moves with pay rounds, restructures and the news.
- **A return on investment in advance.** The link between engagement and results is real across business units. It gives no figure for your company.
- **One programme for everyone.** The fault at the night shift is not the fault at head office.
- **That activity is progress.** Attendance at a launch is not engagement.

A checklist to keep

- Three kinds of evidence, read by group, and action only where two agree
- One sentence for each fault
- The work changed before a programme is added
- Two actions, one owner each, and a "not now" list
- Managers briefed before employees, and a note to everyone in week nine
- The same question at day 90 as at the start
- Keep, change or stop, decided on evidence

For the reasoning behind each strategy, see our article on employee engagement strategies. To find the weakest driver in each group, the GK Engagement Survey asks people to choose between the things they want.

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Working on an engagement plan?

Tell us what your results show and where the plan is stuck. We reply within one business day with where we would start.

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