

Why Engagement Surveys Miss the Real Story

BY SUMMER ALEXANDER



Picture this: Your quarterly company-wide survey is completed, and the results look fairly stable. The scores you received from your team indicate that the members are confident in your leadership and would recommend you to others. You are feeling good. But before you celebrate, there may be a different story unfolding. One of your favorite direct reports is quietly interviewing for another role. Your most productive team member is on the verge of burnout. The survey may show everything is fine. In reality, your team is struggling.

That gap has a real cost. Global employee engagement dropped to 21% in 2024, with an estimated \$438 billion in lost productivity tied to it, according to Gallup's "State of the Global Workplace" report in April 2025. PwC's "2024 Trust Survey" found that while 86% of business executives believed employee trust was high, only 67% of employees agreed. For most organizations, the primary tool for understanding how employees are doing is a survey, which employees have learned to answer carefully.

This does not mean engagement surveys are not useful. They are helpful for spotting patterns across teams and seeing trends over time. The problem is that employees often hold back critical feedback when they are unsure of how it will be received or whether anything will actually change. The result is a version of reality that looks fine on paper and tells you almost nothing about what is actually happening. A 2024 Gallup study found that 42% of employees who voluntarily left their organization said their manager or organization could have done something to prevent it. If employees do not have an outlet to express their true concerns, leaders have no way to address them, leaving everyone in a state of artificial harmony.

Many leaders do not intentionally create this kind of dynamic. Most move into leadership because they were good at their jobs and genuinely want to see their organization succeed. What they rarely get is any real preparation for the messier, harder work of actually leading people. I recently facilitated a leadership development program in which one manager stated that this was the first formal training he had ever participated in during his 10 years as a leader. His experience is not unusual. The Center for Creative Leadership reported in October 2024 that nearly 60% of first-time managers never receive any training when they transition into their new leadership role. Without preparation, leaders tend to fall back on what feels most comfortable. That might mean avoiding difficult conversations, treating silence as agreement, or assuming the team is fine because the survey scores look stable.

What they need are practices grounded in human-centered leadership, a way of leading that operates on the simple premise that people need to feel safe enough to tell you the truth. This is less about collecting data and more about

everyday behavior. Leaders tell the truth, hear the truth, and act on it. Those habits take shape in routine moments that influence how teams communicate. One way to gauge this everyday truth-telling behavior is by observing what people are comfortable saying in routine moments such as project updates, team meetings, and weekly one-on-ones. Each of these leadership capabilities—telling the truth, hearing the truth, and acting on it—shows up in distinct but connected ways.

THE WILLINGNESS TO TELL THE TRUTH

During the early months of the global pandemic in 2020, I worked for an organization that went from in-person to fully remote overnight. I remember my manager telling our team that she had no idea how to keep us engaged or how we would be able to move our work forward under these new and unexpected circumstances. Leaders often carry the weight of feeling they have to have all the answers, and admitting they don't can feel too risky. But her honesty gave the rest of us permission to say what we were actually feeling. Once the truth was verbalized, everyone was able to share their concerns, and we worked together to develop a plan to move forward.

You don't have to expose all of your vulnerabilities to tell the truth. It is an opportunity to acknowledge when things are challenging rather than trying to figure out all the answers alone. Call out the problems and invite your team to help you develop a solution. If a decision didn't land the way you intended, say so. If the team is stretched too thin, acknowledge it directly.

People are usually already aware of what is happening. What they are watching for is whether you are willing to address the challenges. Even when the truth is uncomfortable, addressing it prevents teams from existing in a state of surface-level agreement. It also shows your team that honesty is valued and that having difficult conversations is a sign of a healthy team with a strong foundation of trust.



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THE COURAGE TO HEAR THE TRUTH

If a leader's willingness to tell the truth opens the door to honest dialogue, the way they receive feedback determines whether that door stays open. That is not to say receiving feedback is easy or even that you have to act on all of it. However, as a leader, you want to create a space where people feel comfortable sharing concerns, speaking up if they make a mistake, and asking questions that may challenge your decisions.

Early in my leadership journey, a leader told me that I often became defensive when I received difficult feedback. She said my initial response was to double down on my perspective and look for evidence that my thinking was right. It was hard to hear, but I knew that critical feedback usually contained at least some truth. When I made a conscious effort to listen more openly, I became a stronger leader and my team dynamics improved. People didn't feel pressured to agree with everything I said and felt comfortable asking tough questions and flagging risks.

Some common signs that you struggle to receive feedback are interrupting people, overexplaining, minimizing concerns, diminishing the person delivering the message, shifting blame, or appearing to accept feedback but never making any meaningful changes. When teams witness these behaviors, they begin to assess whether speaking up is worth the risk in the future. Employees can grow resentful when their feedback is heard and nothing happens afterward.

THE COMMITMENT TO ACT

Any trust built by being willing to tell and hear the truth can quickly erode if leaders choose not to act on what they heard. This does not mean leaders are required to implement every suggestion, but it does mean you need to acknowledge the feedback and show that it was considered. It is also okay to take time to reflect on what you heard and decide what actions make sense.

Acting on the feedback you receive is not about being nice for the sake of being liked. Acting on feedback does not mean overlooking poor performance or tolerating bad behavior. Implementing feedback can be as simple as making small adjustments, such as changing a meeting format, revisiting workload distribution, or publicly acknowledging team members' contributions.

When people see that feedback leads to change, they are more likely to keep speaking up. It's also okay to test a change, get more feedback, and decide to revert to a previous process if the change doesn't work. However, once you decide to implement a change, you want to make sure you close the loop. Let employees know their input helped to influence the decision, which signals to them that speaking up leads to action. You can also explain why a change is not possible or share the tradeoffs involved in a decision. This way, the team understands the thinking behind decisions, and they are less likely to assume their feedback wasn't valuable. The most important part of acting is showing that the input was considered and communicating what will happen next.

Telling the truth, hearing the truth, and acting on it are not isolated skills to be practiced once a quarter during a survey cycle. Creating opportunities in day-to-day moments helps ensure that you understand your team's needs and the challenges they may be facing. Leaders can intentionally build these habits into their regular interactions. Start by implementing intentional feedback loops, which can be as simple as ending a project by asking what worked well and what should be done differently next time. This approach makes feedback a team norm instead of a risky event with potentially unwanted consequences.

Using one-on-one meetings to do a pulse check also helps to create a safe space where real conversations can take place. Ask questions such as "What is getting in your way?" or "What is one thing I could do differently to better support you?" Team members may find it easier to surface concerns outside of a group setting. Add monthly brainstorming sessions where ideas are welcomed and debated without critique. This provides an outlet for ideas in a context where rejection is not a part of the process. Implementing these simple trust-building practices and offering multiple opportunities for feedback can help shift the team toward a culture where feedback is part of everyday work. **AC**

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