



UP YOUR CULTURE

ENGAGE

2026

THE COMPANY
CULTURE REPORT



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BUILDING BY DEFAULT, NOT DESIGN

Most leaders don't wake up thinking, "We have a culture problem."

They wake up thinking:



WHY DOES EVERYTHING FEEL HARDER THAN IT SHOULD?

WHY AREN'T PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER?

WHY AM I LOSING STRONG, TENURED TALENT THAT I STRUGGLE TO REPLACE?

WHY DO I KEEP EXPLAINING THE SAME THINGS, BUT NOTHING CHANGES?

Too often, the root of these issues is labeled as a process or execution problem. Leaders assume they need tighter workflows, clearer KPIs, new systems, or more meetings. But in reality, these symptoms tie directly to company culture. Culture is the blueprint for how organizations actually work, how people behave, and how outcomes are delivered.

ENGAGE 2026 confirms what many leaders feel but cannot quite diagnose: culture is shaping performance, retention, trust, and speed. It determines how decisions get made, how conflict gets handled, and whether people bring discretionary effort or quiet resignation. **Like a building, culture can either support everything above it or undermine the structure entirely.**

Every organization has a culture.

The real risk is not culture itself. It is allowing it to develop by default, rather than using an intentional blueprint to guide the build.

Leaders who pause to examine the signals, align behaviors with standards, and act with intention stop reacting to symptoms and start shaping outcomes.

ENGAGE 2026 offers that clarity, revealing which parts of the blueprint are strong, where the structure is under stress, and what needs reinforcement to build a resilient, high-performing organization.

YOUR LEADERS ARE ENGAGED. YOUR MANAGERS AREN'T.

Executives see a building taking shape. Middle managers see a job site without enough support to get it done.

At the top of organizations, leaders are crafting a cultural blueprint, complete with vision, purpose, and core values.

But on the ground?

The middle managers are standing in steel-toed boots, holding a rolled-up set of plans, staring at an empty lot. They've been handed the blueprint, but:



No one gave them lumber.



No one clarified the load-bearing beams.



No one defined who inspects the work.

And when the walls don't go up, everyone looks at them.

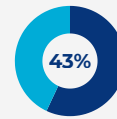


EXECUTIVE & MIDDLE MANAGER SNAPSHOTS

I feel motivated by the long-term vision of the company

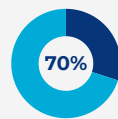


C-suite Executives

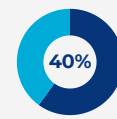


Middle Managers

I can share my company's core values

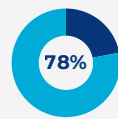


C-suite Executives

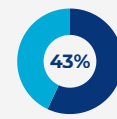


Middle Managers

I feel my opinions always matter

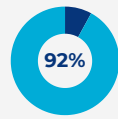


C-suite Executives

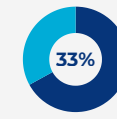


Middle Managers

I trust company leadership

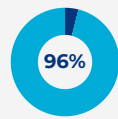


C-suite Executives

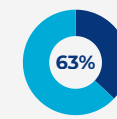


Middle Managers

I like my company's current culture

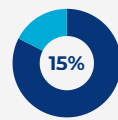


C-suite Executives



Middle Managers

I feel like our workplace culture is worse than last year

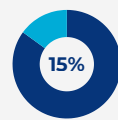


C-suite Executives

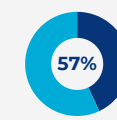


Middle Managers

I have actively considered looking for another job in the last 12 months

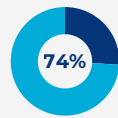


C-suite Executives

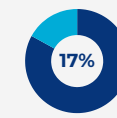


Middle Managers

I would highly recommend my company as a great place to work



C-suite Executives



Middle Managers

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

Every organization has a structure. The question is whether that structure is being reinforced or slowly compromised.

Picture your company as an active job site:



The **engaged** are actively laying bricks with precision and urgency.



The **not engaged** are standing nearby, watching progress, but not lifting materials and supporting the build.



The **actively disengaged** are weakening the structure by cutting corners or ignoring standards.

Every organization has all three, and the integrity of the structure depends on who shows up consistently with tools in hand. Your culture determines whether your organization can support growth, withstand pressure, and sustain performance over time.

THE ENGAGEMENT CRISIS

Over the past several years, workforce energy and commitment have softened. Organizations across the country have reported declining levels of engagement since their post-pandemic peak, and many leaders have felt that erosion firsthand.

Heading into 2026, the question was urgent: Would that erosion continue?

This year, we see stabilization. The downward slide has slowed. The structure is no longer losing visible ground. *However, stabilization at a lower level should not be confused with strength.*

When diminished engagement becomes the new normal, organizations quietly reset their standards. The immediate cracking may stop, but underlying vulnerabilities remain. Stability is better than decline, yet stability alone does not create resilience or growth.

The next move belongs to leadership.

ENGAGEMENT ISN'T TRICKLING DOWN

At first glance, overall sentiment suggests resilience. But averages often conceal structural gaps. As in previous years, energy and commitment look very different depending on where someone sits in the organization.

While executive leaders report strong personal commitment to their work, frontline employees experience culture very differently.



Senior leaders consistently describe themselves as energized and aligned. Employees further from the executive table are far less likely to describe their experience that way.

When leaders feel aligned but employees do not, there is an execution problem. Strategy may be clear at the top, yet inconsistently experienced throughout the organization. Culture can't just be declared from the top. It must be reinforced at every level. Engagement does not automatically flow downward. It is strengthened or weakened in daily conversations, expectations, clarity, and follow-through.

And much of that work happens in the middle of the org chart, not at the top.

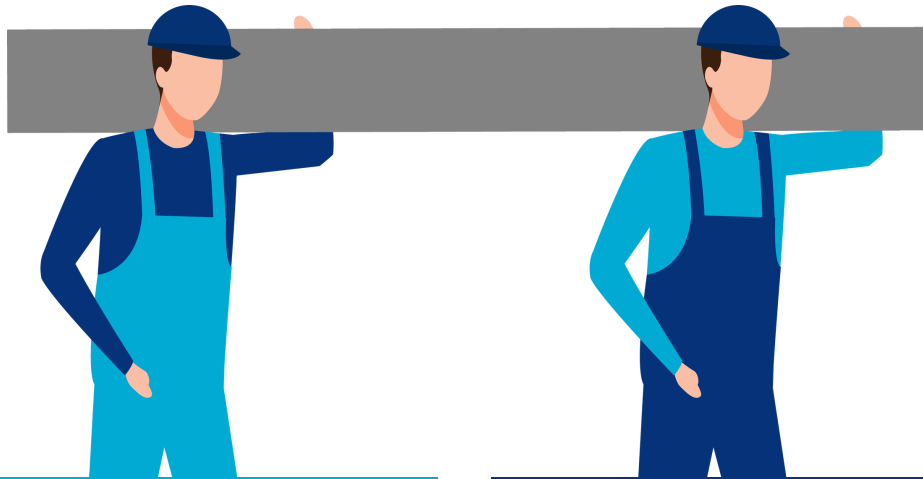
THE MIDDLE MANAGER LOAD-BEARING LAYER

THE KNOWING-DOING GAP

If culture were a building, middle managers would be its load-bearing beams.

They translate vision into daily behavior. They absorb pressure from above and emotion from below. They are expected to drive performance, engagement, accountability, and change at the same time.

This year's data shows they are strained.



27%

are unsure of their company's long-term vision.

40%

say change has not felt manageable.

ONLY 33%

trust their company leaders.

57%

have actively considered leaving in the past 12 months.

Don't mistake this as a motivation issue; middle managers lack much more than inspiration. They lack time to coach and develop, clear authority to make decisions, resources to meet expectations, stability amid constant change, and support as they absorb organizational pressure.

Middle managers are held accountable for engagement, even though they are not always equipped to create it.

When they disengage, organizations rarely feel it immediately. The effects surface gradually in stalled development, inconsistent accountability, and rising turnover. By the time performance metrics shift, structural stress has often been building for months.

When middle managers disengage, organizations rarely feel it immediately.



THE KNOWING-DOING GAP

Because this layer shapes the daily employee experience, strain here weakens the entire culture, even if executive leadership remains energized. The impact does not stay contained. It influences how work feels, how performance unfolds, and ultimately whether people choose to stay.

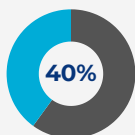
This is where the knowing and doing gap becomes visible. Leaders define direction. Managers are expected to translate that direction into daily practice. When execution falters at this level, even strong designs lose integrity.

CULTURE ATTRACTS, BUT DOES IT SUSTAIN?

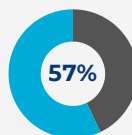
Culture continues to matter deeply in the talent market.

In 2026, 68% say culture influenced their decision to join their organization. People are paying attention before they walk through the door, *but joining and staying are two different decisions.*

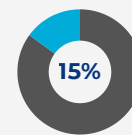
I HAVE ACTIVELY CONSIDERED LEAVING IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



Frontline Employees



Middle Managers



C-suite Executives

While 40% of employees actively considered leaving their jobs in the past 12 months, managers are even more at risk. Only 43% of managers have NOT considered leaving in that time. That means 57% of managers have actively considered leaving. This is not passive dissatisfaction. It is active reconsideration.

Culture has become a powerful recruiting strategy. The question is whether it is consistently experienced once employees are inside the organization.



At the same time, 100% of respondents agree that culture is essential to organizational success, and 88% say some or most of their company's operational challenges are tied directly to culture.

The alignment in belief is striking. **Nearly everyone agrees culture is critical and is closely tied to operational success.** The issue is not awareness. It's execution.

People join because of what culture promises. They leave because of what culture consistently delivers, or fails to deliver.

WHY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Strong cultures create structural strength. Engagement is not simply a morale metric. It is a performance driver.

Engagement is a competitive advantage.

In a tight labor market, strained economy, and high-change environment, organizations that mobilize their people outperform those that merely manage them.

Organizations with strong levels of employee engagement consistently experience:

IMPROVED FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

Higher revenue growth, stronger profitability, and better long-term returns.

STRONGER RECRUITMENT

Top talent is drawn to organizations where people are energized and aligned. A reputation for engagement strengthens the employer brand.

LOWER EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

Engaged employees are more likely to stay, reducing the cost of recruiting, selecting, and onboarding replacements.

BETTER CUSTOMER OUTCOMES

Employees who care about their work deliver better service, leading to stronger customer loyalty and higher sales.

INCREASED INNOVATION

When people feel connected and valued, they contribute ideas, solutions, and improvements that create competitive advantage.

When you engage your team, you grow your business.



THE CURRENT CULTURE PICTURE: PROGRESS AND PERSISTENT GAPS

60% of respondents say their workplace culture is better than it was last year, and 68% say they like their company's current culture. Those numbers reflect effort and investment.



And yet, **40%** believe their company's culture is heading in the wrong direction.

The story of 2026 is not one of collapse. It is one of contrast. There is strong commitment at the top. Visible strain in the middle. An inconsistent experience at the front line. **This is a workforce that overwhelmingly believes culture matters, yet does not consistently experience it as a performance advantage.**

Culture is the framework that sustains engagement. When that framework is uneven, engagement becomes fragile. Improvement in isolated areas cannot compensate for inconsistency across multiple levels. The path forward requires disciplined execution.

In the sections that follow, we examine the four foundational elements that determine whether engagement merely stabilizes or meaningfully strengthens:



These are the Engagement Elevators.

When they function well, they lift performance, retention, and commitment. When they stall, the entire structure feels the strain.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

STABILIZATION IS NOT RECOVERY.

The decline in workforce energy has slowed, but it has leveled off well below prior highs. A significant portion of employees remain cautious, fatigued, or psychologically distant from their work. **When lower commitment becomes normalized, organizations risk adjusting their standards instead of raising them.** Stabilization without strategy turns into stagnation.

ENERGY SPREADS IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.

Commitment builds momentum. So does disengagement. **When inconsistency, low accountability, or visible strain become routine, they shape behavior.** Culture is not neutral. It reinforces what it repeatedly tolerates.

CULTURE IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED AS ESSENTIAL, BUT NOT CONSISTENTLY OPERATIONALIZED.

100% agree that culture is critical to success, but 88% connect operational challenges directly to culture. And 40% believe things are heading in the wrong direction. This is not a belief gap. It is an execution gap.

Most organizations understand what matters. Fewer consistently practice it.

MIDDLE MANAGERS ARE THE PRESSURE POINT.

More than half have considered leaving. Many report low trust in leadership, unclear long-term vision, and change that feels unmanageable. They are expected to drive performance and engagement while absorbing pressure from both directions. **When the layer responsible for daily reinforcement is strained, culture does not break loudly. It erodes quietly.**

Organizations often hold managers accountable for engagement outcomes without fully equipping them to create those outcomes. Authority, time, coaching skills, and clarity are not optional tools. They are prerequisites.

RETENTION RISK IS REAL AND ACTIVE.

40% of employees have actively considered leaving in the past year. That is not disengaged indifference. It is active reconsideration. **When a large portion of the workforce is evaluating alternatives, culture becomes a daily competitive factor, not a long-term aspiration.**

Compensation may influence departure decisions. But experience drives them.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

THE NEXT PHASE REQUIRES MORE THAN MESSAGING.

Vision statements do not create engagement. Daily management practices do. Values posters do not build trust. Consistent behavior does.

If leaders want engagement to strengthen rather than plateau, they must move from defining culture to operationalizing it. That means equipping managers, clarifying expectations, reinforcing accountability, and aligning daily decisions with stated priorities.

ENGAGEMENT IS UNEVEN ACROSS LEVELS OF THE ORGANIZATION.

Energy at the top does not automatically translate to commitment at the front line. Senior leaders often feel aligned and confident in the direction of the organization. Employees closer to day-to-day execution are far less consistent in that experience. When leaders feel aligned, but employees do not, the issue is not inspiration. It is translation.



HOW CAN COMPANIES IMPROVE THIS?

Stabilization is not the goal. Strengthening engagement requires disciplined, visible execution. The organizations that move forward intentionally will widen the gap between themselves and those that simply maintain the status quo.

Here is where to focus:



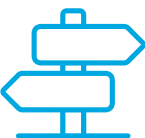
MOVE FROM AGREEMENT TO ACTION

Nearly everyone agrees that culture matters. The differentiator is follow-through. Identify one or two engagement priorities and commit to visible action. **Do not attempt to fix everything at once.** Momentum builds when employees see tangible progress, not when they hear broad promises.



REINFORCE THE MIDDLE LAYER

The middle layer requires focused attention. Middle managers are often the pressure point in an organization's structure. If they are unclear, unsupported, or disengaged, culture weakens across teams. **They need clear expectations, decision authority, training in coaching and accountability, time to develop their people, and consistent communication from senior leadership.** Functioning does not always mean thriving. Many are absorbing strain quietly.



CLARIFY DIRECTION AND REINFORCE IT CONSISTENTLY

Clarity must travel beyond leadership meetings. Vision only becomes powerful when it is consistently reinforced at every level. **Managers should be able to clearly articulate where the organization is headed, why it matters, and how each team contributes to that direction.** Repetition is not redundancy. It is reinforcement. Alignment strengthens when direction is consistent and understandable.



INVEST IN THE FOUR ENGAGEMENT ELEVATORS

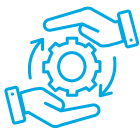
The data continues to point to four foundational drivers of engagement: Shared Mission, People Development, Valued Voice, and Earned Trust. These are the structural supports of culture. Use them as a framework to assess where strain exists and focus improvement efforts accordingly. Strengthening the weakest support often creates the greatest lift.

HOW CAN COMPANIES IMPROVE THIS?



SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT AT THE START

Engagement patterns form early. **New employees need clarity about expectations and a clear understanding of how their role contributes to the broader mission.** When managers provide feedback and visible support from the start, early momentum builds confidence and commitment.



CLOSE THE KNOWING AND DOING GAP

Many leaders understand what matters, yet execution is where momentum stalls. Organizations benefit from asking honest questions. Where have expectations been defined but not reinforced? Where has feedback been gathered but not visibly addressed? Where have priorities been communicated without equipping managers to act? **Engagement strengthens when behavior consistently matches intention.**



MAKE ENGAGEMENT A LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Engagement must be treated as a leadership practice, not a campaign. It does not improve through a single initiative or announcement. It improves through daily management habits. Coaching consistently. Recognizing contributions visibly. Communicating clearly. Holding people accountable fairly. Culture is shaped in everyday moments. When those moments align with stated values and expectations, the structure strengthens over time.



THE BLUEPRINT: SHARED MISSION (WHY, WHERE, AND HOW)

People want to know three things when they show up to work each day:



These three elements - purpose (why), vision (where), and core values (how) - form the blueprint of a Shared Mission. When they are clear and consistently demonstrated, engagement rises and employees operate at higher levels of focus and contribution.

But a blueprint alone doesn't produce alignment. With a blueprint in hand, something must be built.

When the elements of the build are unclear, inconsistently reinforced, or unevenly executed, culture begins to fracture. Teams interpret expectations differently, accountability softens, and momentum slows.



This year's data reveals a defining tension: the blueprint largely exists, but transitioning to the build phase is where things begin to crumble.

WHY: YOUR PURPOSE



92%

of respondents report feeling a sense of purpose in their work.

Your purpose, often called a Reason for Being, defines why your organization exists and why the work matters. It should guide, inspire, and rally employees around something larger than themselves. Across years of data, purpose remains the most positive piece of the Shared Mission blueprint.

This year, 92% of respondents report feeling a sense of purpose in their work. That is a positive signal! Purpose is a foundational element of a thriving culture. **But here's the catch: although 92% of people feel a sense of purpose in their work, engagement levels are still low.**

While most people feel a sense of purpose in their work, **only 34% would highly recommend their organization as a great place to work.**



When asked what most influences their level of engagement, only 29% said their sense of purpose has the largest impact. And of those who feel a sense of purpose in their role, only 34% would highly recommend their organization as a great place to work.

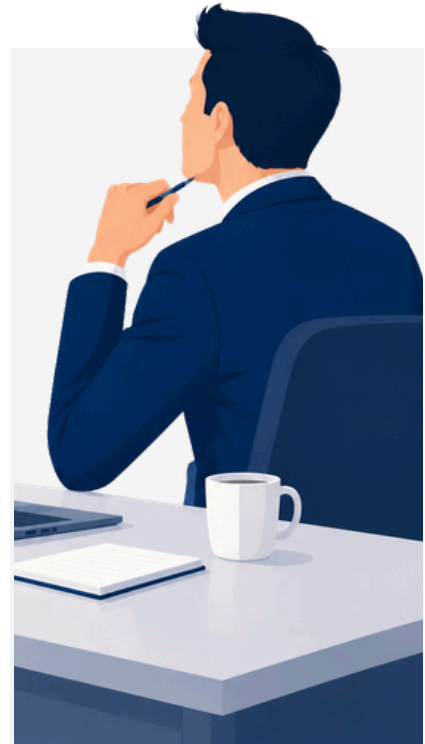


PURPOSE MAY BE INHERENT, NOT ENGINEERED

Many roles naturally carry meaning. Teachers shape futures. Healthcare workers improve lives. Journalists inform communities. Customer service representatives solve real problems for real people. Even operational and administrative roles often provide a tangible sense of contribution.

People frequently derive purpose from:

- Helping others
- Mastering a craft
- Supporting teammates
- Serving customers
- Providing stability for their families



That sense of meaning can exist independent of a company-wide purpose statement. Employees may simply feel a sense of purpose because of what they do, not necessarily because of how leadership articulates why the organization exists.

When purpose is inherently tied to role identity, it can remain high even if broader cultural elements struggle.



When purpose is inherently tied to role identity, it can remain high even if broader cultural elements struggle. People can care deeply about their work while simultaneously feeling unclear about direction, frustrated by inconsistency, or disengaged from leadership. Personal purpose may not be enough.

There's a big difference between "my work matters" and "I know how I'm making a difference within our organization because our leaders consistently reinforce what matters most."


Purpose fuels intrinsic motivation. Engagement requires environmental reinforcement.

WHERE: YOUR VISION

Your vision is a clear, inspiring picture of where you're going. A compelling vision narrows interpretation and creates forward momentum. It answers where the organization is headed and why the future is worth investing in. Without it, daily work becomes transactional and directionless.

THE BLUEPRINT VS. THE FINISHED MODEL

A blueprint is always paired with a finished rendering of the building. **Think of a company's vision as the sign at the edge of the graded lot that says, "Coming Soon." It's the promise of what will stand when the work is done.**



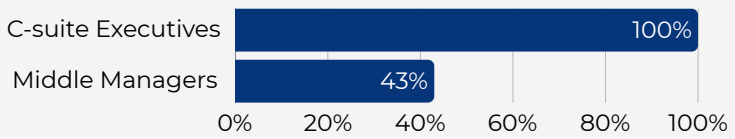
ONLY 65%
of respondents say they are motivated by their company's long-term vision.

This year, only 65% of respondents say they are motivated by their company's long-term vision. That leaves more than 1 in 3 people who aren't. They have the blueprint in their hands, but they're not fully convinced of what the finished structure is supposed to become.


For some, the rendering feels distant. For others, it feels abstract. And for too many, it feels disconnected from the work happening on the ground.

When we look at the senior leadership level, alignment is universal. 100% of C-suite Executives surveyed feel inspired by the organization's future direction. But vision loses power when it remains conceptual. It strengthens when people can see how today's decisions move the organization one step closer to tomorrow's outcome.

INSPIRATION FROM LONG-TERM VISION



Role	Inspiration (%)
C-suite Executives	100%
Middle Managers	43%



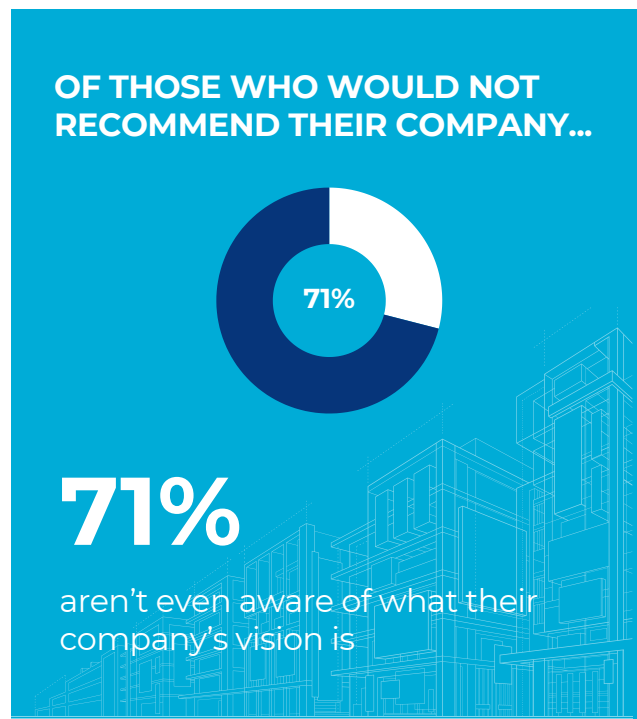
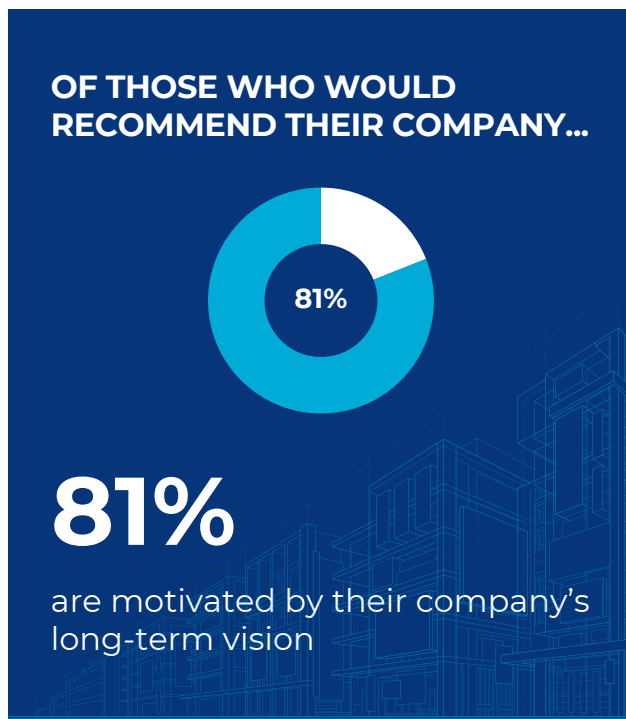
Without a compelling vision, daily work becomes transactional and directionless.

The gap becomes significant when we examine the middle layer of the organization. **Only 43% of middle managers report being motivated by the company's long-term direction.** These are your site supervisors who are in the trenches. They are the leaders responsible for turning drawings into deadlines, strategy into staffing decisions, and aspiration into accountability. When the finished rendering is unclear to them, it causes a domino effect. Translation suffers, teams receive mixed signals, priorities shift, and momentum stalls.

A blueprint without a compelling picture of the end result makes it difficult to build with urgency. **And a vision that is not consistently reinforced at the managerial level remains a sign on the lot rather than a structure taking shape.**

INSPIRED BY THE FUTURE, PROUD OF THE PRESENT

When we look at those who would recommend their company as a great place to work, 81% are motivated by their company's long-term vision. And of those who would not recommend their company as a great place to work, an overwhelming 71% aren't even aware of what their company's vision is. This data makes it crystal clear: vision ties directly to engagement and satisfaction in the workplace.



It is impossible to mobilize people toward a future they don't understand through a framework they don't know. **If organizations want sustained engagement, the vision must be illustrated, revisited, and connected to daily execution in ways that equip middle managers to build with clarity and confidence.**

HOW: CORE VALUES

If vision is the sign that says “coming soon,” and purpose is the reason you decided to build in the first place, then core values are the structural specifications inside the blueprint.

They are the load-bearing details. They define:

- ✓ What materials are permitted
- ✓ What weight the beams must carry
- ✓ What code must be followed
- ✓ What will and will not pass inspection

They are not suggestive, they are prescriptive. Without those specifications, contractors improvise. And improvisation is where inconsistency creeps in.

Core values function the same way. They clarify:

- ✓ What behaviors are acceptable
- ✓ What decisions align with the organization’s standards
- ✓ What will be rewarded
- ✓ What will be corrected
- ✓ What will not be tolerated

Without that level of specificity, teams begin building according to preference rather than principle.

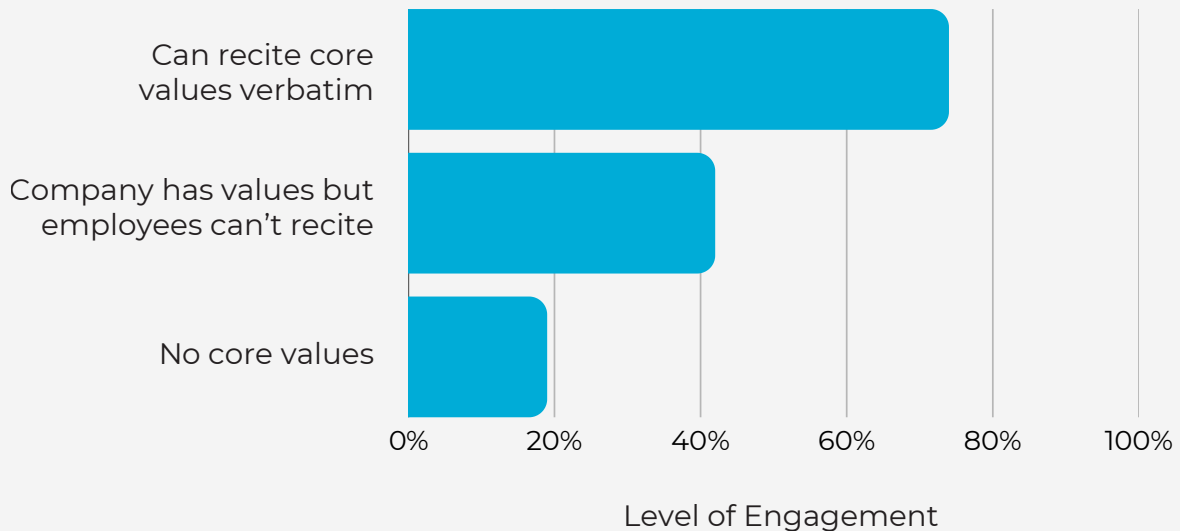
89% say their company has defined core values;
however, only half can share exactly what they are.



WHAT'S WRITTEN IN THE BLUEPRINT?

The 2026 data shows that 89% of respondents say their company has core values (nearly identical to what we've seen in prior years). At the top level of organizations, it's clear that leaders are aware of the importance of values.

VALUES CLARITY IS ONE OF THE STRONGEST PREDICTORS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



The problem isn't awareness, it's execution. **Only half of the workforce can name the very principles they are expected to live by.**



HOW MANY REALLY KNOW THEIR COMPANY'S VALUES?

70% of C-suite executives know their company's core values.

VS

JUST 40% of middle managers know their company's core values.

This disconnect becomes sharper when we examine leadership layers:

- 70% of C-suite executives know their company's core values.
- Just 40% of middle managers know their company's core values.

If core values are the structural code, the people responsible for supervising the build are often operating without full clarity. When middle managers lack fluency in core values, enforcement becomes inconsistent, expectations drift, and cultural integrity is at risk. **How can we expect employees to know how to behave when oftentimes their managers are in the dark?**

WHERE ADVOCACY FALTERS

This disconnect doesn't remain theoretical. It also shows in how people talk about their workplace.

Among those who would not recommend their company as a great place to work, **an astounding 69% are unaware of their company's core values.**



One of the clearest indicators of cultural strength is whether employees would recommend their company as a great place to work.

Recommendation is a confidence metric. It reflects whether the lived experience aligns with the stated standards.

Among those who would not recommend their company as a great place to work, a notable 69% are unaware of their company's core values.

When the structural code is unclear, belief erodes, and when belief erodes, advocacy disappears.

LIVING THE CODE

The implication is significant: getting people to truly know and internalize your core values isn't a nice-to-have communication task; it's one of the highest-leverage actions a leader can take.

Only about 1 in 6 (15%) believe their leaders actively hold the line against behaviors that contradict company values.



THE DATA SHOWS SEVERAL GAPS IN HOW VALUES ARE REINFORCED:

73%

say leaders **fail to model** the behaviors

76%

say leaders **hire people who do not align** with their core values

77%

say leaders **do not reward or recognize** core value behaviors

85%

say leaders **tolerate behaviors that don't align**

11% On top of that, 11% say their leaders don't demonstrate their company's core values at all.

When you tie these numbers to overall awareness of core values, it sadly makes sense. Middle managers are the ones who feel the pressure the most. They are expected to uphold standards, yet often lack clarity, authority, or reinforcement from above when they attempt to enforce them. When accountability is inconsistent at the top, it becomes nearly impossible to maintain consistency in the middle.

The message for leaders is straightforward: defining values is blueprint work. Reinforcing them is build work.

Middle managers are the ones who feel the pressure the most. They are expected to uphold standards, yet often lack clarity, authority, or reinforcement from above when they attempt to enforce them.



Values must be:

- Modeled consistently
- Reinforced publicly
- Rewarded intentionally
- Corrected when violated

When leaders hold the line, the structure stabilizes. When they do not, cracks form long before they are visible from the executive floor. **Values need to be demonstrated, reinforced, rewarded, and enforced consistently. When leaders model them authentically and hold others accountable to them, the culture follows.**



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

THE BLUEPRINT EXISTS, BUT THE BUILD IS INCONSISTENT

Most organizations have defined their purpose, vision, and core values. Awareness at the top is high. But when only half of employees can name their values and middle managers lack clarity on vision, it signals a breakdown in execution.

Culture is not struggling because of missing language. It's struggling because of uneven reinforcement.

PURPOSE ALONE DOESN'T DRIVE ENGAGEMENT

While 92% feel a sense of purpose in their work, this doesn't directly translate into someone's emotional commitment and willingness to give their best. Many employees derive meaning from the work itself, not necessarily from the organization's Shared Mission. **Without consistent reinforcement from leadership, purpose remains personal rather than organizational, limiting its ability to drive sustained engagement.**

VISION LOSES MOMENTUM IN THE MIDDLE

Senior leaders overwhelmingly feel inspired by the organization's future direction, yet fewer than half of middle managers say the same. **When those responsible for translating strategy into daily execution lack motivation or clarity, alignment weakens and priorities drift.** Vision must be more than inspirational at the top. It must be operational in the middle.

CORE VALUES ARE NOT BEING ENFORCED CONSISTENTLY

Defining values is only the first step. When leaders fail to model them, hire by them, reward them, or hold people accountable to them, credibility erodes. Employees notice inconsistency quickly. Tolerating behaviors that contradict stated values undermines trust and weakens cultural integrity.

ADVOCACY REFLECTS ALIGNMENT

Employees who would recommend their company as a great place to work are significantly more likely to feel motivated by the vision and aware of core values. Those who would not recommend their company often lack awareness of both.

Engagement and advocacy are directly tied to how clearly and consistently the Shared Mission is demonstrated.



HOW CAN COMPANIES IMPROVE THIS?

START WITH YOUR ALIGNMENT

Before addressing company-wide gaps, leaders should assess their own connection to the Shared Mission. Ask yourself:



- **Your why:** Do I feel a strong sense of purpose in my role?
- **Your where:** Am I motivated by and able to clearly articulate our long-term vision?
- **Your how:** Do I consistently model, reinforce, and hold others accountable to our core values?

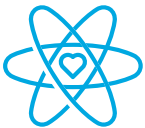
If the answer to any of these is no, begin there. Alignment must be authentic before it can be contagious.

EQUIP AND EMPOWER MIDDLE MANAGERS



Middle managers are the translators of strategy and the enforcers of standards. **Provide them with clear language, practical examples, and visible executive backing when they uphold values.** Without reinforcement from above, accountability at the middle level becomes unsustainable.

MOVE VALUES FROM STATEMENTS TO SYSTEMS



Ensure core values are embedded in hiring decisions, performance reviews, promotions, and recognition programs. Publicly acknowledge behaviors that reflect the values and address behaviors that contradict them. Consistency builds credibility.

CONNECT DAILY WORK TO LONG-TERM VISION



Regularly communicate how current priorities, projects, and milestones move the organization closer to its future state. **Help managers draw clear lines between today's tasks and tomorrow's outcomes.** Vision becomes motivating when progress is visible.

INCREASE CLARITY THROUGH REPETITION AND SIMPLIFICATION



If only half of employees can name the core values, refine how they are communicated. Simplify language where necessary. Revisit them often. Ask managers to define what each value looks like in action. It's important for fluency to precede accountability.

THE BUILDERS: PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT

A blueprint clarifies intention. People Development determines whether the build holds up under pressure.

When organizations invest in the skill development and growth of their people, they send a powerful message: you matter here, and you have a future here. Development is how strategy becomes reality. It is how intention turns into execution.

This year's data reveals something important. Development conversations, feedback, and recognition are happening. They are simply not happening consistently enough to sustain strong engagement.

Development conversations, feedback, and recognition are happening. **They are simply not happening consistently enough to sustain strong engagement.**



CLARITY OF GROWTH

Growth does not happen by accident. It requires clarity, coaching, feedback, and reinforcement. When employees understand where they are headed and how they can grow, they are more likely to invest their energy, effort, and future in the organization.



ONLY 26%

say their career development path is very clear.

Only 26% of respondents say their career development path is very clear, and more than one in four say it is not clear at all.

This is not confusion about where the company is headed. It's uncertainty about where the individual fits within that future. **And when growth feels unclear, people stop planning long-term. Instead, they focus on getting through the week.**

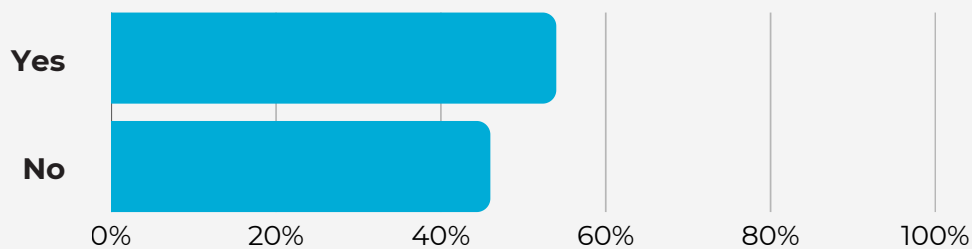
8 out of 10 middle managers are navigating their own careers without defined direction.



The data shows that middle managers feel this tension most acutely. Only 20% report having a very clear development path. These are the individuals responsible for translating vision into daily performance, yet 8 out of 10 are navigating their own careers without defined direction.

When clarity is missing, builders improvise. Momentum slows, and engagement becomes harder to sustain.

MY MANAGER HELPS ME GROW



The strain is especially visible in the middle layer. **The very group expected to coach and elevate others does not consistently feel developed themselves.**

This is another example of the knowing-doing gap at work. Leaders agree that development matters. But agreement does not automatically translate into consistent coaching.

We cannot expect managers to develop others effectively if they are not being developed themselves.

FEEDBACK AS A DEVELOPMENT ENGINE

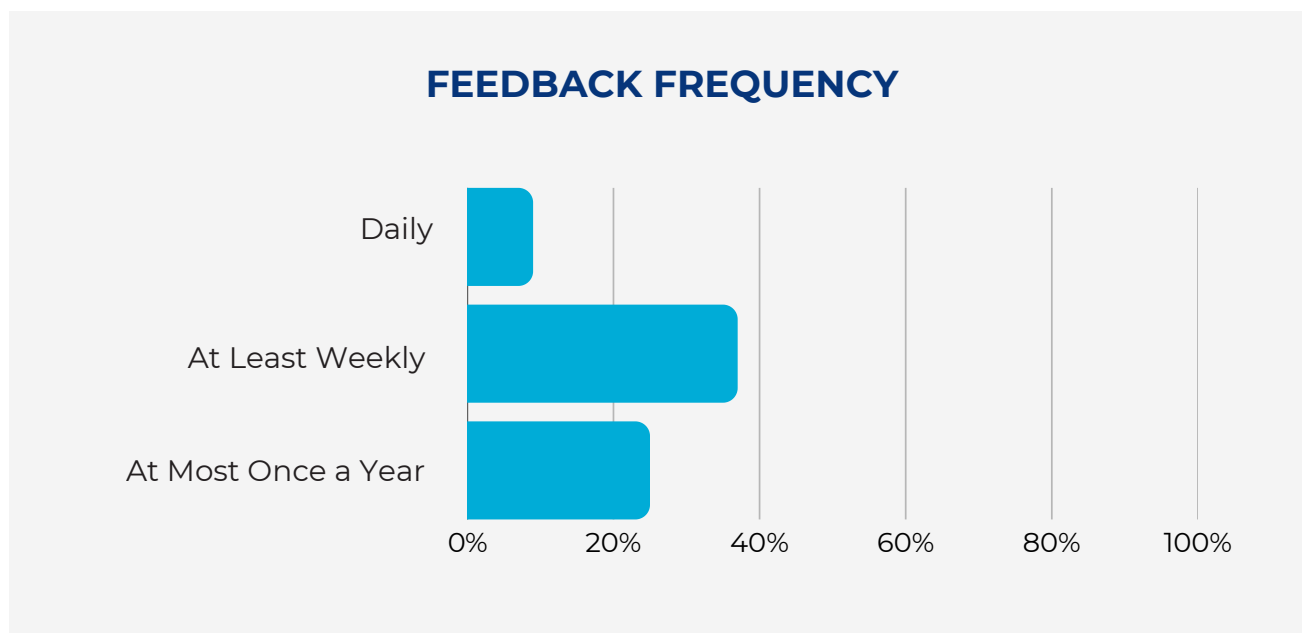
The question is not whether development matters. It is whether managers are equipped to bring it to life. One of the most immediate and measurable ways they do that is through feedback.

Growth does not happen in an annual review; it is the result of ongoing conversations in which effective feedback is consistently given. Feedback provides calibration. It reinforces strengths, corrects misalignment early, builds confidence, and sharpens skills. Without it, performance becomes guesswork.

39% of respondents do not receive enough feedback from their manager.



The 2026 data shows that 39% of respondents do not receive enough feedback from their manager, and 25% report receiving specific, meaningful feedback at most once a year. **That means one in four employees is operating without regular course correction or reinforcement.**



Only 37% receive meaningful feedback at least once a week, and just 9% receive it daily. **Consistent, high-frequency feedback is not yet the norm. It is clearly the exception.**

Leaders who provide regular feedback are doing more than offering commentary. They are accelerating growth, reducing uncertainty, and strengthening accountability.



This has a measurable impact on growth and achievement. Leaders who provide regular feedback are doing more than offering commentary. They are accelerating growth, reducing uncertainty, and strengthening accountability.

When feedback is infrequent, growth slows. Employees may still work hard, but they are operating without clear markers of success.

RECOGNITION AS REINFORCEMENT

If feedback provides correction and calibration, recognition provides reinforcement and momentum.

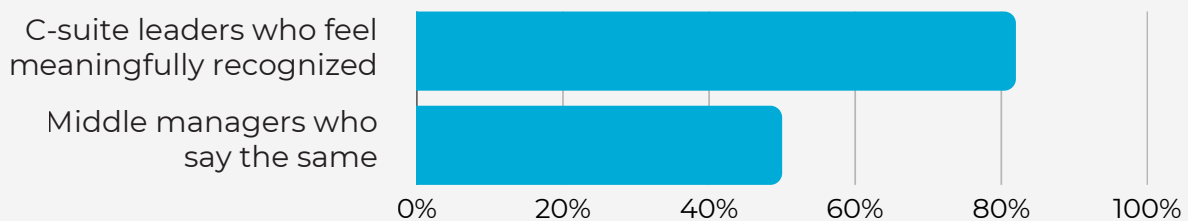
Yet 37% of respondents say they do not receive meaningful recognition for a job well done.

That is more than one in three employees working without consistent reinforcement that their contributions matter. The disparity is most visible in the middle.



More than 1 in 3 employees do not receive meaningful recognition for a job well done.

RECOGNITION AT THE TOP ISN'T THE SAME IN THE MIDDLE



While 82% of C-suite leaders feel meaningfully recognized, only half of middle managers say the same. **The layer responsible for execution and accountability is the least likely to feel acknowledged.**

Employees who receive meaningful recognition are far more likely to say they would recommend their company as a great place to work.



Recognition does more than reinforce performance. It shapes reputation.

People advocate for environments where they feel seen. When contributions are acknowledged, belonging strengthens. When belonging strengthens, commitment deepens. When commitment deepens, retention stabilizes.

Recognition is one of the simplest levers leaders control. When it is inconsistent, engagement declines, and commitment becomes fragile. When it is consistent and intentional, loyalty deepens, and employees speak positively about where they work.

COMPOUNDING IMPACT

Growth and recognition do not operate independently. They reinforce one another.

When employees lack a clear path forward and do not feel recognized in the present, performance may continue for a time, but energy shifts. Innovation slows. Initiative narrows. Long-term commitment begins to waver.

Growth and recognition do not operate independently. **They reinforce one another.**



Over time, this does not just affect morale. It affects performance and results. **If Shared Mission defines the blueprint, People Development equips the builders, and recognition reinforces the standards of the build.**

Managers shape the daily environment in which performance takes root. When clarity, coaching, and reinforcement are inconsistent, execution becomes uneven, and culture becomes unreliable.

In the next section, we examine another critical element of sustained engagement: Valued Voice. A clear blueprint without capable, supported builders leads to delay. Capable builders without a voice lead to disengagement.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

GROWTH IS EXPECTED BUT NOT CLEARLY DEFINED

Only 26% say their career development path is very clear. **When employees cannot see where they are headed, they shift into short-term survival mode.** Engagement weakens not because people lack ambition, but because direction feels uncertain.

FEEDBACK IS NOT HAPPENING OFTEN ENOUGH TO FUEL GROWTH

One in four employees receives meaningful feedback at most once a year. Nearly 4 in 10 say they do not receive enough feedback at all. **Without regular calibration, performance becomes guesswork and momentum slows.**

RECOGNITION IS DIRECTLY TIED TO ADVOCACY AND RETENTION

More than one-third do not receive meaningful recognition. Those who do are far more likely to recommend their company as a great place to work. **Recognition is not cosmetic. It influences commitment.**

MIDDLE MANAGERS ARE DEVELOPING OTHERS WHILE LACKING DEVELOPMENT THEMSELVES.

Only half feel their own manager helps them grow. **When the very group responsible for coaching and feedback does not feel supported, development becomes uneven across the organization.**

AGREEMENT DOES NOT EQUAL EXECUTION

Leaders believe development matters. Yet 46% of employees do not believe their manager helps them grow. The knowing-doing gap is visible here. Development is valued in principle, but not consistently experienced in practice.

DEVELOPMENT MUST BE BUILT INTO DAILY MANAGEMENT

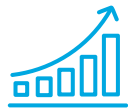
Development cannot depend on occasional reviews of informal conversations. It must be part of how managers lead every week through coaching, feedback, recognition, and clear expectations.

DEVELOPMENT GAPS COMPOUND

When employees lack clarity about their future and do not feel reinforced in the present, engagement becomes fragile. Over time, this affects not only morale, but performance and retention.



HOW CAN COMPANIES IMPROVE THIS?



CLARIFY GROWTH PATHS

Do not assume employees understand what advancement looks like.

Define what success looks like in each role, outline potential next steps, discuss career aspirations openly, and revisit development conversations regularly. When people can see where they are headed, effort becomes intentional. Clarity builds momentum. Ambiguity stalls it.



EQUIP MANAGERS TO DEVELOP OTHERS

Managers are the multiplier. If they are unclear, unsupported, or stretched too thin, development will not scale. **Provide training surrounding coaching strategies, clear expectations, protected time for one-on-ones, and feedback on how effectively they are developing others.** We cannot expect managers to coach consistently if they are not coached themselves. When managers grow, growth spreads.



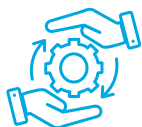
MAKE FEEDBACK FREQUENT AND PRACTICAL

The most effective feedback is frequent and practical. Do not reserve it for formal reviews. Delivered close to the moment, feedback reinforces strengths, corrects misalignment early, and reduces uncertainty. High-performing teams treat feedback as routine, not reactive.



MAKE RECOGNITION SPECIFIC AND PERSONAL

Recognition loses power when it becomes generic. Be clear about what was done well. Tie it to values and outcomes. Match the approach to the individual. Consistency matters more than grandeur. **What leaders recognize becomes the standard others follow.**



CLOSE THE DEVELOPMENT GAP IN THE MIDDLE

Middle managers are often the most strained and least recognized.

Invest in their clarity, their feedback, and their growth paths. When managers feel supported, development scales more naturally across teams.



MEASURE WHAT EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCE

Offering development opportunities is not the same as employees feeling developed. Regularly ask whether employees feel clear about their future, coached in their role, and recognized for their contributions, and whether managers themselves feel supported. Development strengthens when it is practiced consistently, not just promised.

THE BEAMS: VALUED VOICE

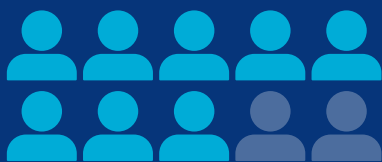
If Shared Mission defines the blueprint and People Development equips the builders, Valued Voice forms the beams that hold the structure together. Beams and trusses are rarely visible, but they determine whether a building feels stable under pressure. Without them, even the strongest walls begin to crack.

Communication and collaboration operate the same way. They determine whether expectations are clear, whether teams feel connected, and whether employees believe their voice carries weight. When they function well, alignment strengthens. When they don't, strain builds beneath the surface.

What determines stability is not the presence of communication, but its authenticity, strength, clarity, and consistency under pressure.

SAFE TO SPEAK BUT NOT ALWAYS HEARD

The 2026 data shows a meaningful base to build on. Nearly eight in ten respondents say they feel safe speaking up with ideas or concerns. Psychological safety reflects intentional effort and should not be overlooked.



**NEARLY 8 IN 10
RESPONDENTS**

say they feel safe speaking up with ideas or concerns.

While many have the permission to speak, **their opinions are often not valued.**



*But safety alone does not guarantee influence. **Fewer than half say their opinions always matter.*** Nearly half report that their input matters only sometimes, and 8% say it never matters at all.

For many employees, voice feels conditional. It may be welcomed in one meeting and dismissed in another. The experience is inconsistent, and inconsistency erodes confidence.

For frontline employees, the gap is sharper. Nearly one in five do not feel safe speaking up at all. That is not a marginal number. It represents silence embedded in the culture.

Nearly 1 in 5 employees do not feel safe speaking up at all.



Organizations often assume they listen well because they run surveys or host town halls. **But employees quickly learn the difference between being allowed to speak and seeing their input shape decisions.** When follow-through is inconsistent, participation declines and candor disappears.

This is another example of the knowing-and-doing gap in action. Leaders understand that communication matters. Executing it consistently in meetings, decision-making, and visible follow-through requires discipline.

INFORMATION: THE MISSING LINK

Meaningful input can't just travel up the org chart; it needs to move down and across too. Feeling heard matters, but so does feeling informed. When information is inconsistent, even a strong culture begins to strain.

Only about half of respondents feel fully informed in their role. The other half does not.



Nearly half of employees do not feel fully informed.

That gap has consequences. **When communication leaves significant gaps, employees begin reinforcing the structure with assumptions. Those assumptions replace clarity, and then alignment weakens and friction increases.**

A similar pattern appears in work model preferences. More than half of respondents say a hybrid model is their ideal arrangement, yet fewer than four in ten are actually working that way.

Many cite productivity and flexibility as their primary reasons for their preference. This is not simply a debate about location. Instead, it reflects something deeper. **Employees are articulating the conditions that help them perform at their best. When those preferences are acknowledged but not addressed, credibility erodes.** Over time, the distance between what supports performance and what is experienced begins to influence commitment.

More than half of respondents say a hybrid model is their ideal arrangement, yet fewer than 4 in 10 are actually working that way. ”

Shared Mission explains where the organization is going, and Valued Voice determines whether people understand how their work connects to that direction. **When only half of employees feel fully informed, even the clearest vision can lose traction in daily execution.**

Managers feel this tension most acutely. They are expected to translate strategy, communicate change, answer questions, and sustain momentum. When they lack clarity, confusion multiplies quickly.

Structural failure is rarely sudden. It begins with small stress fractures.

STRONG TEAMS, STRAINED DEPARTMENTS

At the team level, there is strength. More than 9 out of 10 say their teams collaborate well or very well, and conflict resolution within teams is similarly positive. Employees are building strong bonds with those they work alongside most closely.

TEAM COLLABORATION

92%
say their team collaborates well or very well



DEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

ONLY 50%
say departments collaborate well or very well



Widen the lens, and the picture changes. Only 17% say departments collaborate very well with each other, and more than 1 in 4 say departments do not communicate well at all.

That gap slows execution, fuels frustration, and makes coordination harder than it needs to be. Most meaningful work crosses team boundaries.

When departments operate in silos, projects stall, misunderstandings increase, and employees lose sight of how their efforts contribute to the broader mission.

An organization can have healthy teams and still struggle as a system. Strong rooms do not compensate for weak crossbeams.

VOICE REQUIRES FOLLOW-THROUGH

Communication is not simply about speaking. It is about consistency between words and behavior. Only 46% of respondents believe leaders do a good job holding employees accountable, which means more than half do not.

54% do not believe leaders consistently hold employees accountable.



When standards are unevenly enforced, structural integrity weakens. When employees speak up but see little change, trust erodes. When accountability feels optional, values begin to feel optional as well.



When employees speak up but see little change, **trust erodes.**

Valued Voice depends on visible follow-through. Without it, communication begins to feel performative. Participation shrinks. Disengagement becomes quiet but cumulative.

Most organizations do not suffer from a lack of communication. They struggle with inconsistent execution.



WHY THIS MATTERS

Nearly half of employees report that they do not feel fully informed in their roles. That single data point carries weight. When information is unclear, alignment weakens. When expectations are unevenly communicated, accountability feels inconsistent. Strategy may be sound, but without clarity, execution fractures.

Valued Voice is not about openness for its own sake. It is about whether communication actually moves work forward. When employees offer input and see no visible response, participation narrows. When departments operate in isolation, friction increases. Over time, effort becomes cautious rather than committed.

Communication breakdowns rarely create a dramatic collapse. They create gradual erosion. Follow-through softens. Confidence dips. Credibility becomes conditional. Employees begin conserving energy instead of expanding their contribution.

Many organizations have laid a strong foundation. The opportunity now is disciplined reinforcement: clearer information flow, visible action on feedback, consistent accountability, and stronger cross-functional coordination. **When voice is reinforced through action, alignment strengthens, trust deepens, and commitment becomes more resilient.**

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS PRESENT, BUT INFLUENCE IS INCONSISTENT

Most employees feel safe speaking up. Far fewer believe their opinions consistently shape decisions. **When voice feels conditional, participation declines and candor narrows.**

ACCOUNTABILITY INFLUENCES CREDIBILITY

More than half of employees do not believe leaders consistently hold people accountable. **When expectations are unevenly enforced, trust weakens and communication begins to feel performative rather than purposeful.**

BEING HEARD IS NOT THE SAME AS BEING INFORMED

Nearly half of employees do not feel fully informed in their roles. **When information is inconsistent, alignment weakens, and assumptions fill the gaps.** Even a strong strategy loses traction when clarity does not travel.

MISALIGNMENT ERODES ENGAGEMENT QUIETLY

Whether in work model preferences or strategic communication, employees are signaling what helps them perform at their best. **When input is acknowledged but not acted upon, credibility declines and commitment begins to shift.**

MANAGERS SIT AT THE CENTER OF THE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

They are expected to translate strategy, manage change, and maintain momentum. When they lack clarity, confusion does not stay contained. It multiplies across teams.

VOICE WITHOUT FOLLOW-THROUGH CREATES CYNICISM

When employees are invited to share ideas but do not see action, explanation, or acknowledgement, trust erodes. **Closing the loop is what turns communication into credibility.**

TEAM COLLABORATION IS STRONG. CROSS-DEPARTMENT COLLABORATION IS STRAINED

Most teams function well internally. Far fewer departments collaborate effectively across boundaries. **This gap slows execution, increases friction, and makes coordinated progress harder than it should be.**



HOW CAN COMPANIES IMPROVE THIS?

Strengthening Valued Voice requires more than open-door policies. It requires consistent follow-through that employees can see and experience.



CLOSE THE LOOP

Employees do not expect every idea to be adopted, but they do expect acknowledgement. Silence creates frustration faster than disagreement. **When you ask for input, make sure to respond, explain what will change, and be clear about why certain things may not change.**



MAKE INFORMATION FLOW CLEARLY AND CONSISTENTLY

Do not assume communication is landing the way you intended. Reinforce priorities regularly. Translate the big-picture strategy into what it means for each team. Make sure managers have the information they need before they are asked to pass it along. Alignment improves when clarity is repeated, not assumed.



STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION ACROSS DEPARTMENTS

Strong individual teams are not enough if departments operate in silos. Create opportunities for cross-functional problem-solving. Clarify ownership and decision rights. Reduce friction where possible. **Work moves faster when information flows across the organization, not just up and down.**



REINFORCE ACCOUNTABILITY CLEARLY AND CONSISTENTLY

Define expectations clearly. Address issues early and apply standards across all levels of the organization. When accountability feels predictable rather than selective, trust grows.



SUPPORT MANAGERS AS COMMUNICATION MULTIPLIERS

Managers are the translators of strategy and culture. Provide them with communication training, change management support, clear escalation paths, and feedback on how effectively they are informing and listening. **When managers feel supported, their teams feel more informed.**



TREAT COMMUNICATION AS AN ONGOING PRACTICE

Communication cannot be reserved for announcements, surveys, or moments of change. It must be part of how leaders manage every day. **Valued Voice becomes real when employees consistently experience clarity, influence, and accountability together.**

THE FOUNDATION: EARNED TRUST

Are managers and company leaders living up to their word?

You can have clear plans, you can have defined specifications, you can even have skilled builders, but if the foundation shifts, the entire structure becomes unstable.

Accountability is being enforced without the relational trust to support it.



Earned Trust gives people confidence in company decisions and faith in the integrity of their managers and leaders. It is the invisible architecture of a functioning culture. When it cracks, everything built on top of it is compromised.

This year, the data tells a complicated story. On the surface, some numbers have held steady. But underneath, a troubling pattern has taken shape: accountability is being enforced without the relational trust to support it. And that combination (high expectations, low trust) is one of the most corrosive forces a company culture can face.

THE FOUNDATION TEST: FOLLOW THROUGH

Earned Trust is not inspirational language. It is credibility under pressure. It answers a simple question: When leaders say something will happen, do people believe them?



Less than half (44%) say their manager always follows through.

This year's data suggests belief is weakening. In 2026, only 44% say their manager always follows through. That means the majority are experiencing inconsistency. Inconsistency doesn't always ring alarm bells, but it should.

TRUST IN LEADERSHIP: A GRADUAL EROSION



86%

of those who would not recommend their company as a great place to work report their manager doesn't always follow through.

The connection to advocacy is also clear: 86% of those who would not recommend their company as a great place to work report that their manager does not always follow through. Inconsistency is uniquely corrosive.

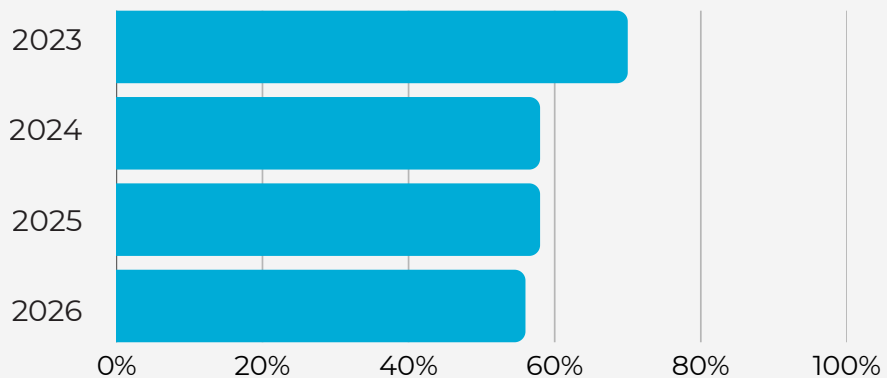
When commitments are inconsistently kept, employees never know what to rely on. Over time, inconsistency leads directly to disengagement.

Trust rarely collapses in one dramatic moment.

Back in 2023, when respondents were asked whether they trust their company leaders overall, 70% said yes.

That was a record high for our annual ENGAGE survey. In 2024 and 2025, that number fell to 58%. This year, it dipped once more to 56%.

I TRUST MY COMPANY LEADERS



Just 56% trust their company leaders



That's a 14-percentage-point decline across three years. The cumulative erosion is significant. Trust, once lost, does not return easily, and these numbers suggest it is still moving in the wrong direction.

Nearly half lack confidence in the people guiding their organization.

When trust declines, performance does not immediately collapse. Projects continue. Meetings happen. Deadlines are met. From a distance, the building still appears intact. But internally, something shifts.

Employees begin to conserve effort rather than invest it. They hesitate before committing fully to initiatives because they are unsure whether priorities will change again. They listen to leadership announcements with caution instead of conviction. **Energy that could be directed toward innovation and collaboration is quietly redirected toward self-protection.**

That shift is subtle, but costly.



Executives may be fostering a culture of trust among themselves, but their experience, predictably, is not the experience of most of their workforce.

THE MIDDLE LAYER: STRUCTURAL STRESS

The divide we've seen across the org chart appears here as well: leadership at the C-suite level continues to report far higher levels of trust in company leadership than employees. **Executives may be fostering a culture of trust among themselves, but their experience is not the experience of most of their workforce.**

Middle managers hold the dimmest view when it comes to leadership trust. Only 1 in 3 fully trust their company's leaders. That's nearly a 2:1 difference compared to overall respondents.



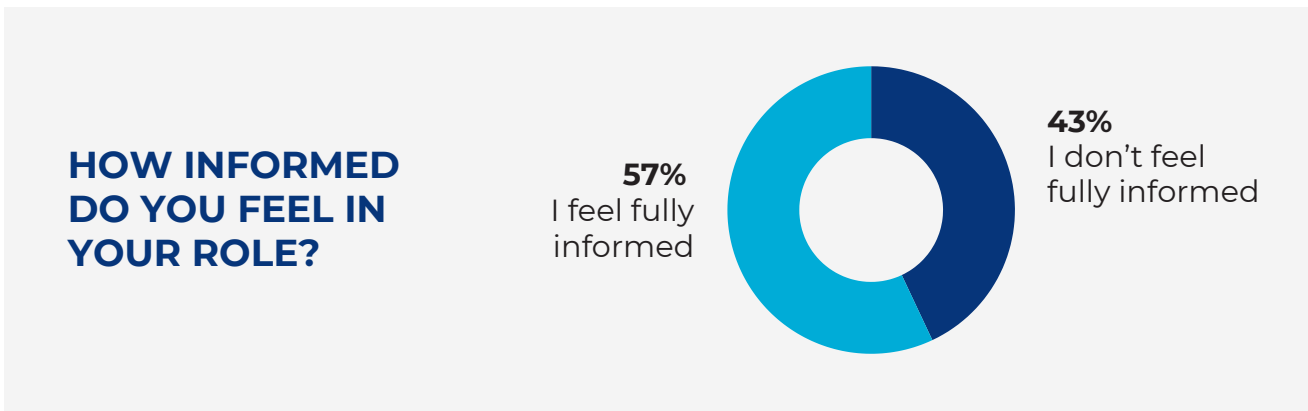
Only 1 in 3 middle managers fully trust their company's leaders.

Middle managers are the linchpins of execution: they translate strategy into action, enforce core values in day-to-day interactions, and shepherd their teams through change initiatives. When trust upward is low, their ability to translate the blueprint into a stable build falters. Instructions are questioned, priorities are debated, and alignment weakens both upward and downward.

WHEN INFORMATION GAPS CREATE STRUCTURAL VOIDS

It is difficult to overstate the downstream consequences of the information gap. **When people feel uninformed, they fill in the blanks, often with the most pessimistic interpretation available.**

When asked how informed they feel in their role, only 57% said they feel fully informed. That means nearly half of the workforce feels they are operating with incomplete information on a regular basis. When we break that down by job role, that's 53% of middle managers and 46% of frontline employees who say they don't feel fully informed in their role.



Information gaps are rarely neutral. **In the absence of clarity, people construct their own explanations. Speculation fills the void, motives are questioned, and decisions feel opaque.**



This effect is significantly magnified during periods of change. This year, 48% of overall respondents report that change did not feel manageable. Change acts like a structural shift in the building. When the foundation is shaky, even small adjustments can cause cracks to widen.


When trust is high, change feels purposeful.
When trust is low, change feels imposed.

That distinction is critical.

ACCOUNTABILITY WITHOUT TRUST

One of the most striking findings is what happens when accountability increases but trust does not move with it. 59% of respondents say their company leaders do a good job of holding employees accountable, a modest uptick compared to prior years. That sounds like progress.

59% say their company leaders do a good job of holding employees accountable.



But accountability and trust are not the same thing. **When accountability rises without relational credibility, it shifts the tone. Accountability begins to feel like surveillance.** Employees comply, but they don't commit. They meet expectations without internalizing standards.

This is where core values and trust intersect most sharply.

Earlier, the data showed:



Leaders **are not** consistently modeling values.



Leaders **tolerate** behaviors that contradict values.



Leaders hire and reward inconsistently **against** stated standards.

When leaders fail to enforce core values consistently, trust fractures at every level. If high performers violate values without consequence, credibility weakens. If accountability applies selectively, belief disappears. If leaders promote standards they do not practice, trust collapses quietly.

Core values are the structural code. Trust determines whether people believe inspections are real.

When trust is fractured at the middle manager level, the entire cultural framework is compromised. **Without reliable leadership at every layer, the blueprint for success cannot be effectively executed, and the organization risks building a structure that looks complete from the outside but is unstable at its core.**

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

TRUST IS THE FOUNDATION OF ENGAGEMENT

Even with a clear purpose, vision, and core values, when employees don't trust leadership, the blueprint can't be executed effectively. Follow-through and consistency matter more than words. **When less than half of employees feel their manager always keeps commitments, the workforce operates in a state of uncertainty, conserving effort and questioning direction rather than contributing fully.**

MIDDLE MANAGERS ARE STRUCTURAL LINCHPINS

Middle managers translate strategy into action, enforce core values, and lead teams through change. **When only 1 in 3 fully trusts leadership, alignment falters, priorities drift, and execution slows.** The structural stress at this level has a ripple effect: decisions, communication, and team morale all suffer.

INFORMATION GAPS DESTABILIZE THE BUILD

When 43% of employees feel they are operating without full information, speculation fills the void. Change initiatives, already challenging, become even more destabilizing. Nearly half of employees report that change did not feel manageable this year. **Poorly communicated or unclear changes act like sudden structural shifts on a weak foundation, revealing cracks in trust and weakening cultural integrity.**

ACCOUNTABILITY WITHOUT TRUST FEELS LIKE SURVEILLANCE

Enforcement without credibility feels coercive rather than supportive. When accountability is inconsistently modeled or applied, employees comply without commitment. Trust determines whether inspections are real or symbolic, and credibility at every layer is essential to maintain the structural integrity of the culture.

CORE VALUES AND TRUST ARE INSEPARABLE.

The data confirms a critical link: when core values are not consistently lived or enforced, trust erodes rapidly. They should not simply be decorative. When decisions align with stated values, trust compounds. When they contradict them, trust fractures. Without credible leadership, the blueprint may look complete from the outside but be unstable at its core.



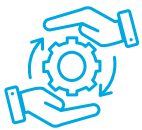
HOW CAN COMPANIES IMPROVE THIS?

Strengthening Earned Trust requires consistency employees can see and experience. Trust grows when leaders communicate clearly, follow through reliably, and apply accountability fairly.



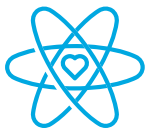
START WITH MIDDLE MANAGERS

They are the linchpins between strategy and execution. Evaluate their alignment and confidence in leadership. **Provide clarity, guidance, and authority so they can model, enforce, and communicate both core values and organizational priorities.** When middle managers trust the leaders above them, they are better equipped to build a stable culture and execute the blueprint effectively.



CLOSE THE INFORMATION GAP

Ensure employees are fully informed about organizational decisions, priorities, and changes. Transparency reduces speculation, prevents disengagement, and strengthens trust. **During periods of change, clearly explain the rationale, the impact on teams, and what success looks like.** Employees are more likely to follow and commit when change feels purposeful.



TIE CORE VALUES TO EVERY DECISION

Core values are the structural specifications of the cultural blueprint. Integrate them into goal-setting, performance reviews, hiring, promotions, and recognition. When employees see core values guiding every layer of decision-making, trust strengthens, and alignment becomes natural, rather than aspirational.



REINFORCE FOLLOW-THROUGH AT EVERY LEVEL

Consistency is critical. **Leaders must keep commitments, follow through on promises, and ensure that accountability applies at every level.** Inconsistent application is corrosive; consistent reliability builds credibility. Small acts of follow-through ripple through the organization, stabilizing the cultural foundation.



MONITOR AND MEASURE TRUST REGULARLY

Include trust and follow-through in pulse surveys, check-ins, and engagement surveys. Track change management effectiveness and alignment with core values. Identify where gaps exist and intervene proactively before cracks widen.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Every organization is a structure in progress.

The blueprint, or **Shared Mission**, lays out where you are going and why it matters. **People Development** equips the builders to translate that blueprint into reality. **Valued Voice** ensures that communication and collaboration keep the structure aligned, and **Earned Trust** holds the foundation steady. When any of these elements falter, the entire build becomes fragile.

ENGAGE 2026 shows that while the materials are in place, the build and integrity of the structure depend on consistent execution at every level.

STRENGTHEN THE BLUEPRINT: SHARED MISSION

Purpose, vision, and core values define the design. They guide decisions, behaviors, and priorities. Yet even the most compelling blueprint is ineffective if people don't understand it, see it reinforced in action, or believe it will be consistently followed. **Employees need to know their "why," "how," and "where."** Shared Mission must be visible in actions, reinforced in accountability, and modeled consistently by leadership.

EQUIP THE BUILDERS: PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT

A blueprint is only as strong as the builders executing it. Many employees, especially middle managers, lack clarity about their paths for growth. When the builders are uncertain, underdeveloped, or unrecognized, even the clearest plans cannot be executed effectively. **Supporting managers in their growth amplifies performance across the organization, reinforcing engagement and building resilience into the structure.**

KEEP THE STRUCTURE ALIGNED: VALUED VOICE

Communication and collaboration are the beams connecting teams, departments, and leaders. **When information gaps persist and voice is unheeded, the structure experiences stress points.** Without clear communication and collaboration, even necessary adjustments feel imposed rather than purposeful.

SOLIDIFY THE FOUNDATION: EARNED TRUST

Trust is the foundation that keeps the culture from cracking under pressure. Yet the data tells a concerning story: follow-through is weak, and accountability is often perceived as uneven or selective. **Without a solid foundation of credibility, the best plans, the most capable teams, and the clearest communication cannot fully sustain engagement or performance.**

A STRUCTURE CAN ONLY BE BUILT TO THRIVE IF LEADERS ACT DELIBERATELY.

Culture is built brick by brick, not in a single overhaul. Start with areas that will have the most visible impact. Over time, these incremental steps solidify the structure, making the organization more resilient, aligned, and high-performing.

BLUEPRINT ACTIONS (SHARED MISSION)

- Revisit your mission, vision, and values through collaborative sessions.
- Make the “why, how, and where” clear in every meeting and decision.
- Highlight visible examples of values in action.

BUILD ACTIONS (PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT)

- Clarify career paths and provide tools for growth.
- Coach managers to coach their teams.
- Build recognition and feedback routines into daily workflow.

BEAM ACTIONS (VALUED VOICE)

- Strengthen cross-departmental communication through structured forums.
- Close the loop on employee input by showing how ideas shape decisions.
- Ensure managers are fully informed so they can cascade clarity reliably.

FOUNDATION ACTIONS (EARNED TRUST)

- Model follow-through at all levels.
- Apply accountability consistently across roles and functions.
- Address gaps between core values and actual behaviors immediately.

The blueprint is in your hands. Now the work is execution: equip the managers, reinforce the standards, close the communication gaps, and rebuild trust where it has weakened.

ABOUT UP YOUR CULTURE

Up Your Culture is a division of The Center for Sales Strategy (CSS). CSS has over 40 years of experience improving revenue performance to drive lasting results.

As a company, we always had a “good” culture, but we wanted it to be great. We began paying a lot of attention to employee engagement by measuring it and implementing concrete strategies based on the information we received. Over the years, we learned which engagement levers to pull and how to pull them. We boosted our own culture and increased our employee engagement.

Now, our clients turn to us for help.

Up Your Culture specializes in meeting companies where they are to increase productivity by elevating employee engagement.

If you engage your team, you grow your business!

METHODOLOGY

Up Your Culture, a company culture and employee engagement firm, conducted an online survey in January of 2026.

Surveys were shared with the public. Results were produced by 198 respondents from across the United States. Company size ranged from 1-25 to over 1000 employees, with reported job functions falling into the following categories: Owner/Partner, Manager, C-suite, and Employee

Numbers have been rounded for readability.