

Teams.

Employee Disconnect Is at an All-Time High— Here's What to Do About It

By Rebecca Houghton



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Employers are out of touch with employee expectations. Well, stop the presses. I'm fairly sure that this has been going on since the Industrial Revolution. There's a natural disconnect between senior executive priorities and the priorities of the workforce. In fact, their roles, reporting lines, and rewards are so often opposed that you'd be forgiven for thinking we designed it to guarantee a disconnect.

However, unlike most periods since the Industrial Revolution, the balance of power between workers and their bosses is shifting, as shown in PwC's latest Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey. And as a result, the exchange of value has shifted from the transactional factors of fair pay for a day's work to a more nuanced set of relational factors, proving tricky for employers to grasp.



New Expectations of Leadership

Today's workers expect our managers to put in more discretionary effort, in return for which they may be treated favorably when a better offer comes along. This shouldn't be an unfamiliar scenario—it's just that the shoe is on the other foot, and it's uncomfortable.

This is why many leaders confuse historically motivating factors with what are now considered standard by employees. On-the-job training, access to coaching and mentoring, and a commitment to the environment are simply not motivating because they are baseline expectations.

Yet in the PwC report, leadership routinely undervalued factors like working with good co-workers, the ability to work from home, autonomy, and pensions and retirement funding by a significant margin. Other studies illustrate how consistently and significantly managers overrate how much they recognize, reward, and care for their staff compared to what the staff thinks.

Misalignments With Human Resources

And it's not just leaders versus the workforce—HR is also in the mix. Gartner found that only 29 percent of employees agreed with the statement, "HR really understands what people like me need and want." And why? Because HR priorities reflect the C-suite priorities, and when they can't influence a shift in those on behalf of the workforce, then they fail to provide a clear path for success.

So why does this matter? When the disconnect is this severe, it disconnects the entire organizational structure. Workforce and Executive become Us and Them. HR is untrusted and viewed as a mouthpiece of the Executive, and middle managers fade into the background or crumble entirely under the pressure of these conflicting expectations. No one is on the same page, and corporate cohesion becomes corporate conflict. Just look at your return-to-workplace discussions and you'll see exactly what I mean. What to do?

Reconnecting the Workforce

This disconnect is not insurmountable, and it really boils down to better communication flowing through your organizational structure—and by communication, I don't mean telling. I mean asking, listening, and then taking action. The change in communication is yet another symptom of the shift from transactional—top-down comms that tell people what's happening—to relational—two-way conversations with real intent and outcomes.

The fix? Your missing middle managers, who I call the B-suite. The problem is that only one in three managers is engaged at work, and manager-level burnout is the worst in the world. So if you're looking to retain these valuable assets, here are three considerations:

1. Engage them. Bring your middle managers into the tent and share this challenge to see what insights they have and what role they can play in reconnecting the disconnect. They are the only cohort that can connect at a personal level with their workforce and still have the enterprise maturity to understand the needs of both employer and employee. But they can't do it if you're not engaging with them all of the time. You'll be increasingly disappointed if you simply expect them to execute executive orders.

2. Redefine their roles. The role of the B-suite has changed astronomically over the last five years, and the range at which they are now expected to operate is vast. Yet expectations on the role of manager are also miles apart. HR expects the B-suite to facilitate transformation, improve team agility, and drive high performance when they are struggling just to keep the lights on, citing team burnout, monitoring team workload, and hiring new staff as their major challenges. Before you set out to resolve workforce expectations, you need to redress the expectations of the B-suite.

3. Equip and empower them. If your leaders aren't leading, it's not because they don't want to. It's because they've been neither equipped with the know-how nor empowered with the autonomy to do so. Equip them first. Train them to know when to escalate, delegate, and negotiate. Then let them lead.



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