Inspire

2026 Global Culture Report
O.C. Tanner Institute

HOW TO USE THE 2026 GLOBAL CULTURE REPORT

Understanding workplace cultures begins and ends with people—as employees and leaders, as teams and organizations. And even though the workplace is extremely dynamic, we return to one question every year: What are the best ways to support, nurture, and engage people? This is what drives us. We hope this report is helpful to you as you seek to better understand the same. To get the most out of it, here are a few suggestions.

First, the research contains insights you can act on. Some of our favorites this year include:

- Innovation requires inspiration. Successful companies provide space and opportunity for employees to connect with visions of the future that create aspirational thinking.
- A sense of community at work, cultivated by teams who practice interaction and inclusivity, improves work performance and the employee experience.
- Employee recognition is as important as ever. Growth and innovation are the direct results when people feel seen, heard, and valued.

Next, identify areas where the data intersect with the needs and aspirations of your organization. However, don't be tempted to tackle everything at once. Instead, focus on the principles you feel will make the greatest or most immediate impact on your people and business.

Finally, remember every workplace culture is fluid and evolving. Even the best ones are testing, learning, and adapting. Progress, not perfection, is the goal, and every step that elevates the employee experience is progress.

Thank you for joining us on the journey. As the architects and stewards of our cultures, let's use our influence to make them a place where everyone finds the inspiration, hope, and support to truly thrive.

Scott Sperry
President & CEO, O.C. Tanner

To say change in workplace cultures is constant does not mean it's predictable. The challenges employees and organizations face this year are new, in part, because the world outside of work is still rapidly changing—economically, politically, technologically—and has become less separated from work. The question at hand now is, how can organizations move their people toward a meaningful vision of the future when surrounded by uncertainty? The answers in this year's report provide a roadmap to help workers, leaders, and employers achieve greater personal and professional outcomes together. And it all starts with inspiration, a powerful spark that drives action, fosters inclusion, and cultivates success.

Most organizations embrace the fact that to remain competitive, they must continually evolve and grow. The problem is that the motivations of senior leadership don't always reach or move the workforce. This year, our report offers a path forward that reignites employee passion and illuminates strategies to achieve goals.

This year's report begins with inspiration, a powerful force that arises from meaningful interactions and stokes vision and engagement. Next, the active practice of hope capitalizes on inspiration while drawing on the support and guidance of teams and leaders. Taken together, inspiration and hope elevate the employee experience and positively impact both cultural and business metrics.

Our report continues by providing a new framework to help employees feel included in ways that are practical, sustainable, and scalable. It also explores the subject of healthy performance cultures, specifically highlighting what's possible when high expectations are matched by the same level of support. Then, we take a closer look at the topic of transparency in the workplace and how it can improve communication, empower leaders, and create space for feedback and dialogue that ensures employees are seen, valued, and inspired to contribute at a high level. And throughout, we examine how recognition amplifies outcomes for both productivity and wellbeing.

To gain these important insights, the O.C. Tanner Institute examined the perspectives of tens of thousands of employees, leaders, HR practitioners, and business executives around the globe.

According to our research, the challenges facing employees, both on and off the clock, are more demanding than ever. And we feel privileged to share our findings and a blueprint for organizations to spark inspiration, drive hope, and champion the power of inclusive teams to achieve powerful and lasting outcomes.

You could argue that employees are spinning more plates and have more on those plates than ever. From the myriad trials of employment to the daily economic and technological stressors of modern life to the personal health and family challenges every human endures, there's no shortage of tasks and disruptions. And they take a large toll on people's wellbeing. The simple truth is people don't naturally return to their jobs each day refreshed and ready to do their best work or move their organizations forward. We all need assistance and sustenance—to perform or just to recover. Fortunately, our research has found that the workplace is uniquely suited to meet these needs.

16%

ONLY 16% OF EMPLOYEES ARE THRIVING IN THEIR ROLE.
RESEARCH SHOWS INSPIRATION CAN HELP.

As we saw in last year's Global Culture Report, nearly one-third of employees are operating in survival mode. People can struggle both on and off the job, and without a reliable way to feel whole or recharged, they face higher risks of absenteeism, burnout, and mental health struggles. Conversely, those who report thriving show higher resilience, engagement, and performance. And in environments of relentless change, a high-performing workforce is a critical component of business success.

Of course, organizations and HR leaders can't remove every employee challenge—personal or professional. But what if work could be a place of renewal instead of a drain? A place that helps people feel and perform their best, where individuals see immediate obstacles as paths to greater opportunity?

What if the workplace were a place of intentional inspiration?

In our context, to inspire means to rally and energize; to align to a common goal with clarity and excitement. Beyond motivational books and speeches, or even charismatic leaders, what employees need is a workplace with vision, connection, and opportunity that inspires them, especially in difficult circumstances.

This year's report explores how organizations can foster cultures that help employees thrive despite the challenges of work and life. Specifically, it examines key drivers of these cultures, including inspiration, hope, inclusive teams, healthy performance, and the power of transparency and recognition.

If there's ever been a time when your people want to be as inspired as your organization needs them to be, it's now.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANIZATIONS IN 2026

Our research identifies several ways organizations can benefit their people. Each is the subject of a chapter in this year's report.

1. Connect employees with sources of inspiration

Whether it's outside resources, conversations with leaders or peers, or safe environments to take risks and learn quickly, connecting employees with the spark for inspirational, innovative thinking is the first step.

2. Practice hope

More than wishful thinking, the practice of hope helps employees use their inspiration to overcome obstacles and reach goals.

3. Build inclusive teams

Rethink what inclusion means and how all employees can contribute, feel they belong, and inspire one another.

4. Create a culture of healthy performance

Employees want to achieve their potential. High, sustainable performance involves a combination of big expectations and robust support.

5. Be transparent and help employees find their place

More than just open communication, true transparency gives employees a voice and helps them see where they fit in the bigger picture of your organization.

We hope these opportunities and the specific findings behind them help clarify the importance of inspiration in creating workplaces where every employee can find new strength, innovate, and thrive.

Gathering data, measuring trends, and identifying insights are easier and more accurate with the right instruments. The following pages contain a closer look at two of our proprietary frameworks, Talent Magnets™ and the Great Work Index. Together they help assess many of the most important factors in workplace cultures.
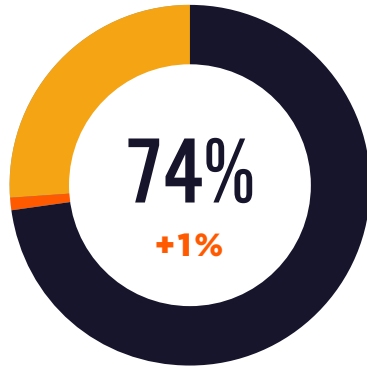
TALENT MAGNET AREAS

Each year, we measure changes in the six core elements of workplace culture that together determine employee decisions to join, engage with, and remain at any place of work. We call them Talent Magnets because of their power to attract and connect people to their teams and organizations.

This year, each of our Talent Magnet scores increased 1–2%. This indicates that while organizations are making improvements to their cultures, there's still significant opportunity for more gains, particularly in the areas of wellbeing, leadership, and appreciation.

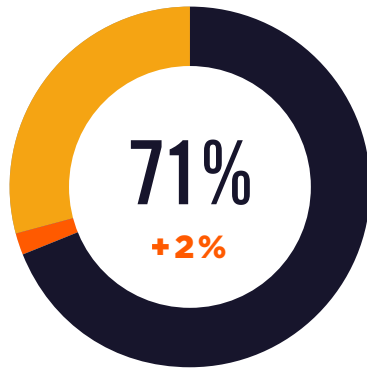# "The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

—MARCEL PROUST, FRENCH NOVELIST

74%
+1%

**EMPLOYEE SENSE OF
PURPOSE**

70%
+2%
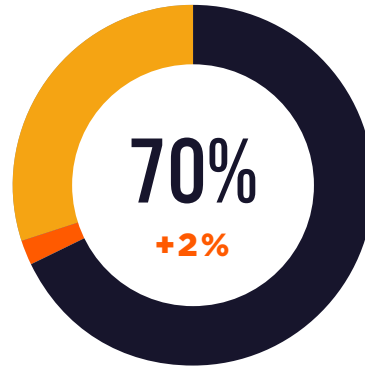
**EMPLOYEE SENSE OF
OPPORTUNITY**

71%
+2%

**EMPLOYEE SENSE OF
SUCCESS**

63%
+1%
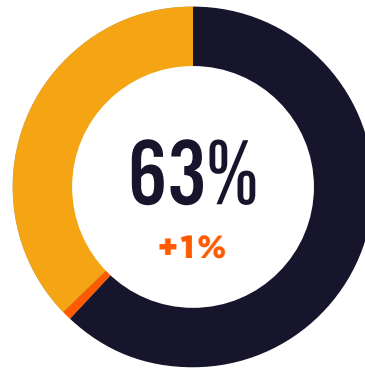
**EMPLOYEE SENSE OF
APPRECIATION**

58%
+2%
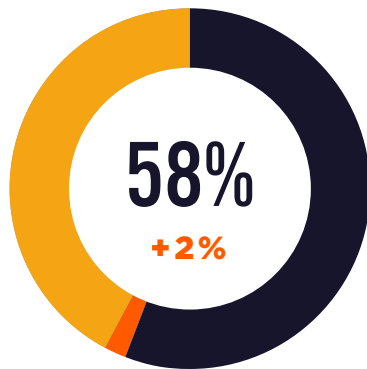
**EMPLOYEE SENSE OF
WELLBEING**

66%
+1%
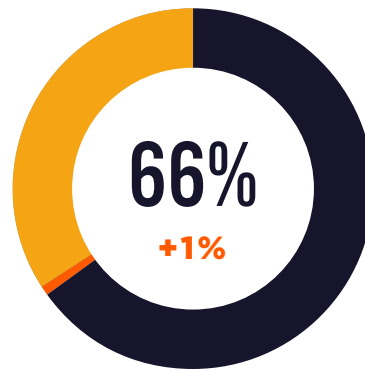
**EMPLOYEE SENSE OF
LEADERSHIP**

Figure 1. TALENT MAGNET SCORES IMPROVED SLIGHTLY YEAR OVER YEAR
Current state of the six essential elements that define thriving cultures.

YEAR-OVER-YEAR CHANGE

PURPOSE

An organization's reason for being besides profits. The difference it makes in the world, why the company exists. Employees need to feel connected to purpose and understand how their jobs contribute to it. Once they do, their work takes on meaning. Organizations should clearly articulate the connection between work and purpose.

LEADERSHIP

The mentoring, coaching, inspiring, and facilitating that allow individuals, teams, and, ultimately, organizations to thrive. Great leaders co-create a shared purpose for their teams and empower their employees to do great work. As the most influential of the six Talent Magnets, leadership cultivates the other five.

WELLBEING

Caring about the employee as a whole—their physical, emotional, social, and financial health. Wellbeing ensures employees can be their strongest, most capable, most authentic selves at work. A comprehensive approach to wellbeing requires leaders to create an environment of inclusivity, life balance, and connection.

PURPOSE

LEADERSHIP

WELLBEING

Figure 2. THE
Six essential elements that
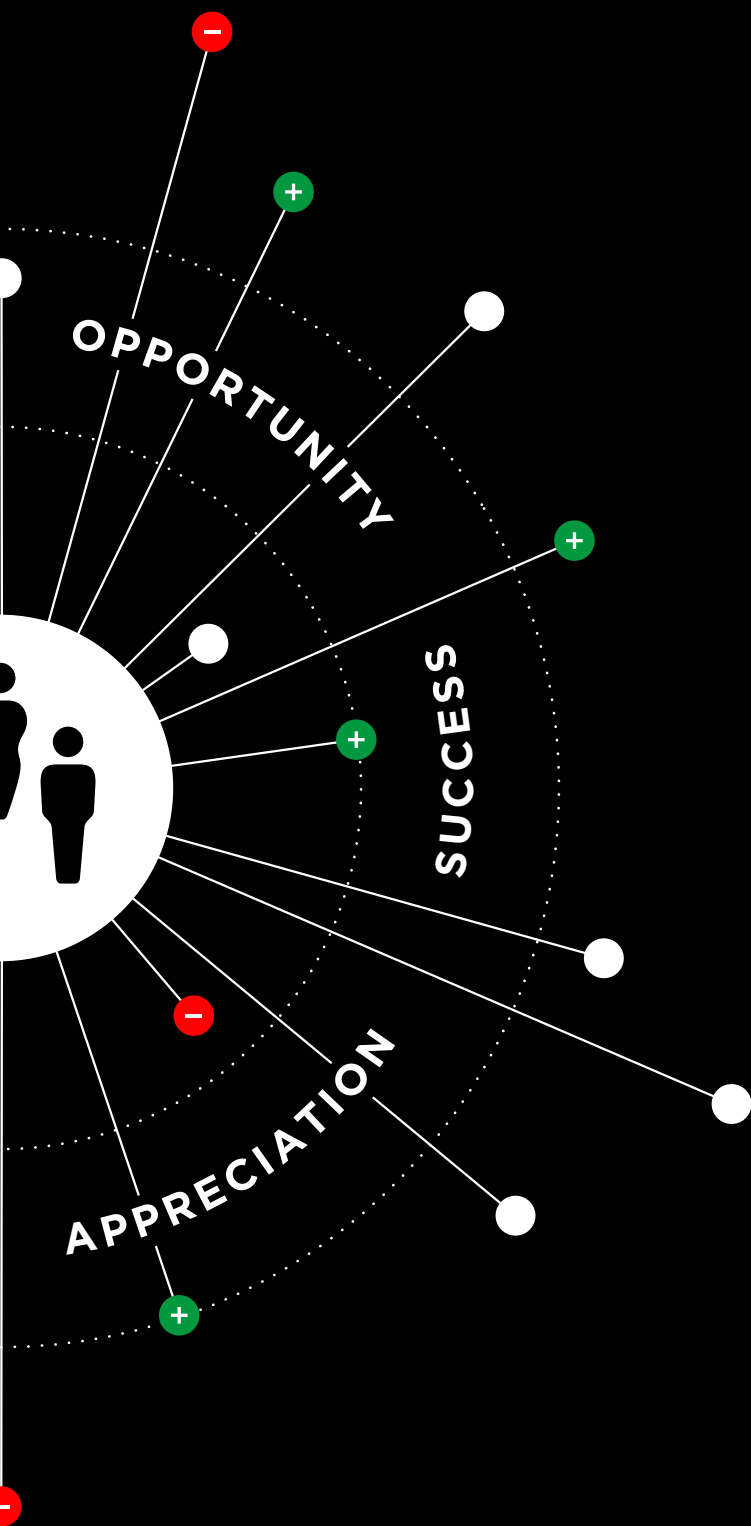
OPPORTUNITY

The chance to develop new skills, contribute to meaningful work, feel challenged, have a voice, and grow. Opportunity is more than the lure of promotions and pay increases. It's about preparing and empowering employees to make decisions, inviting them to participate, and offering them projects that will expand their skills and relationships.

SUCCESS

The thrill of accomplishment, innovation, breaking barriers, playing on a winning team, and experiencing victories. Employees must find success at the individual, team, and organizational levels, and it should be nurtured and celebrated publicly.

APPRECIATION

Feeling valued for one's contributions and being recognized for one's worth. Appreciation is essential to employees— they need to know their leaders and peers notice and are grateful for their efforts and contributions. Appreciation is most effective when it's delivered in timely, personal, and meaningful ways.

GREAT WORK EXPLAINED

O.C. Tanner knows forward-thinking organizations need measures that consider more than just employee commitment and motivation. They need practical metrics that capture the quality, efficiency, and innovation shaping the kind of work that amplifies business outcomes. It's called great work.

Based on our research, we've established an index for great work identifying five behaviors that directly correspond to employee performance, business results, and strategies for improvement. Employees who consistently do great work demonstrate the following:

1. Ask the right question

Great workers ask how they can make a difference and then focus on who their work serves—whether it's customers, clients, team members, or leaders.

2. Go and see

Next, they observe and examine what's being done and how people experience it to discover new possibilities.

3. Talk to an outer circle

They also talk to others they wouldn't normally interact with and generate ideas they wouldn't have otherwise. Inviting others to join them, they expand their network beyond those they know.

4. Improve the mix

Employees who do great work think, plan, and fine-tune the changes they make, often adding improvements and removing elements that don't work or add value.

5. Deliver the difference

Lastly, great workers are laser-focused on positive outcomes and persist until they get results. If their work isn't loved the first time, they learn why and try again.

1 ASK THE RIGHT QUESTION

2 GO AND SEE

3 TALK TO AN OUTER CIRCLE

4 IMPROVE THE MIX

5 DELIVER THE DIFFERENCE
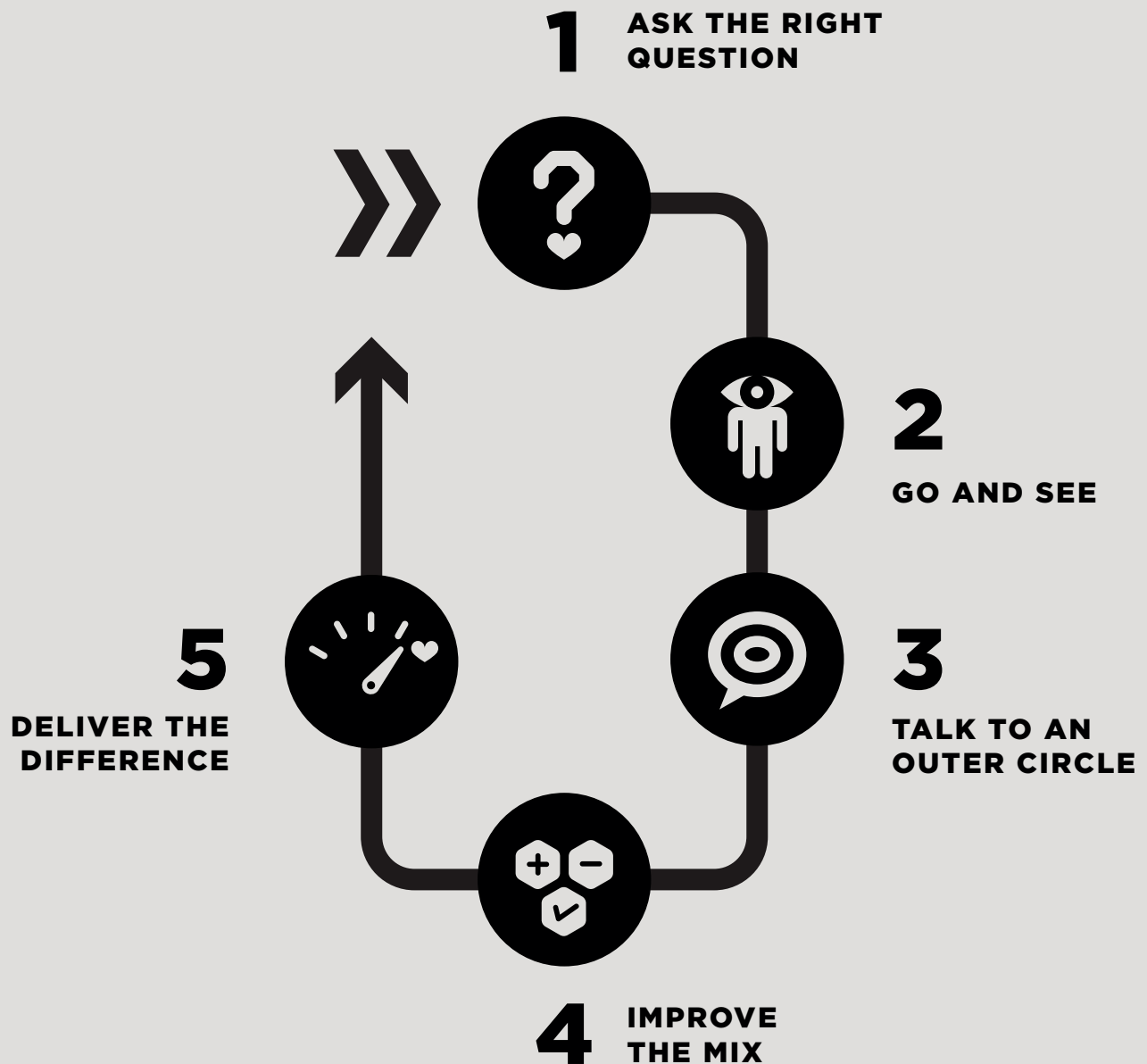
Figure 3. THE FIVE BEHAVIORS ASSOCIATED WITH GREAT WORK
Great work is both a measure of productivity and a proven indicator of success.
As you'll see throughout this report, organizations that score high in areas like inspiration,
hope, and inclusive teams also see strong performance in great work.

Sparking Inspiration

Employees crave the uplifting moments that connect, propel, and fulfill. But what ensures they routinely happen?

38X

INCREASED ODDS EMPLOYEES WILL FEEL INSPIRED WHEN LEADERS AND COWORKERS PRIORITIZE MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS, SHARE INSIGHTS, AND ENCOURAGE NEW IDEAS

Inspiration can take many shapes from just as many sources, but it's more than a flash of discovery or motivation that randomly comes and goes. In fact, it's a measurable force that reliably creates thriving workplaces. Our studies confirm that inspiration for employees often originates from meaningful interactions with leaders and colleagues. For example, managers who support open conversations, share insights, and promote experimentation subsequently foster cultures of innovation and growth. Likewise, connections between workers built on shared ideas and encouragement boost job satisfaction, creativity, and loyalty. By intentionally sparking inspiration with resources and recognition, organizations raise their potential and fuel lasting success.

INTRODUCTION

Many employees feel uninspired at work, and it's costing organizations an enormous amount of money. At last count, $9.6 trillion (roughly 9% of the world's GDP) was lost globally in 2024 due to low engagement.[1] Beyond being disengaged, people feel resigned and apathetic at work,[2] a contagious sentiment that can weaken workplace culture and destroy productivity.

Despite all the literature about how to inspire employees, organizations are still clearly missing the mark. We found that 33% of workers feel uninspired, 30% don't want to be working for their current employer a year from now, and only 16% are thriving in their roles.

All this said, inspiration in the workplace is a realistic goal that delivers significant returns. When employees feel inspired, the benefits go beyond individual innovation and productivity. Feeling inspired increases the odds that people will:

- **Promote the organization as a great place to work (20x)**
- **Want to stay with the organization (14x)**
- **Have a strong sense of fulfillment at work (6x)**
- **Produce great work (6x)**

For their part, employees seek inspiration to meet a challenge, find a new way of working, or envision a hopeful future. According to our studies, 74% of employees want their experience at work to feel inspiring, and 69% actively look for ways to gain new ideas or a new perspective from something they read or hear from others. These numbers present a huge opportunity for employers.

How can organizations best inspire employees? First, it's important to remember that inspiring people is different than motivating or engaging them. It's helping them find a "sudden insight or leap in understanding that produces new, creative ideas or approaches to a problem."[3] This reframes the goal and role of inspiration at work as innovation or adaptability rather than a sense of happiness or engagement.

Second, look beyond leaders. The ability to inspire isn't an exclusive gift or skill of those in management. Often, it arrives through external influences, such as something an employee reads, an idea or concept they discuss with a colleague, or something they observe. Our research shows people need access to these sources of inspiration, as well as job flexibility and support to leverage those resources and empowerment to implement new, inspired ideas in their work. But, to be clear, the role of leaders and organizations is that of an inspiration facilitator, not a sole supplier.

The good news is inspiration doesn't require major resources or investment. By refreshing their approach and making inspiration a priority, employers can inspire their people in a way that requires no additional finances and reinforces organizational resilience and agility.

"There are only two ways to influence human behavior: You can manipulate it, or you can inspire it."

—SIMON SINEK, AUTHOR AND SPEAKER

**LEADERS CAN CULTIVATE ENVIRONMENTS
THAT FOSTER INSPIRATION**

One of the most effective and influential ways employees find inspiration in their work is through interacting with leaders and colleagues. In these exchanges, the intentional sharing of ideas and discussion of work leads to motivation and excitement around a purpose or goal. Establishing a culture where this can happen begins with leadership.

Inspiration strikes more frequently when leaders create an environment that fosters creativity, collaboration, and flexibility, and when they empower employees to implement new ideas. They can introduce a structure more conducive to inspiration by:

• **Giving employees time and opportunities to experiment and learn**
• **Creating a team culture where employees feel safe to try new ideas and even fail**
• **Sharing ideas with employees and suggesting they share with each other**
• **Encouraging collaboration**
• **Being as open and transparent as possible**

When leaders are intentional about these actions, employees are 17x more likely to try new things at work. And the odds that employees will feel their leader is inspiring increase 12x. Inspiring leaders also increase the odds employees will feel a strong connection to them (17x), their team (9x), and the organization (12x).

For even more lift, leaders can combine these actions with proven modern leadership practices, such as sharing information, showing appreciation, helping employees grow and develop, and connecting people to purpose, accomplishment, and one another.[4] Modern leadership complements inspiring leadership practices, and together, their impact increases significantly. The following table compares the odds of several employee outcomes when leaders are simply inspiring versus when leaders are both inspiring and practicing modern leadership principles.

Increased Odds of Employee Outcomes Connected to Leadership

OUTCOME	INSPIRING LEADER	MODERN AND INSPIRING LEADER
eNPS	8x	12x
Satisfaction with employee experience	11x	17x
Fulfillment	8x	15x
Engagement	7x	15x
Inclusion	7x	18x
Satisfaction with culture	9x	14x
Desire to stay at least one more year	9x	12x

TEAM MEMBERS CAN INSPIRE ONE ANOTHER

Despite the proven impact of leaders, many employees interact more often with their colleagues than they do with their leaders. And these interactions can have a substantial effect on how they feel about their role, the work they do, their organization, and their likelihood to stay. Open communication, collaboration, and idea sharing can help colleagues develop inspiring relationships.

Common Sources of Employee Inspiration

SOURCE	PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES WHO REGULARLY LOOK TO SOURCE FOR INSPIRATION
Conversations with one or more coworkers	54%
Conversations with leader	47%
Team or group discussions at work	39%
A conversation or communication from one or more senior leaders	34%
A book	32%
Conferences related to my work	29%
A podcast	27%
Social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, or WeChat)	26%
Online or published magazine or newspaper articles	22%

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According to our research, 64% of employees often think of new ideas or ways to do their work during conversations with colleagues, and 68% have at least one coworker who inspires them in their work.

And as the following table details, when employees have frequent, meaningful conversations with coworkers who they find inspiring, the odds of several positive perceptions increase significantly.

**Increased Odds of Positive Employee Perceptions
Connected to Inspiring Conversations**

I feel inspired in my work	**7x**
My work is innovative	**9x**
My leader encourages innovation	**11x**
I have the tools I need to innovate	**11x**
My organization regularly innovates	**10x**
My organization produces quality products	**10x**
My team consistently meets goals	**12x**

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Inspiring teams foster frequent, meaningful opportunities to share new ideas, discuss new ways of accomplishing work, and celebrate the accomplishments of teammates and others.

Moreover, when people have both an inspiring team and an inspiring leader, the odds of several positive employee outcomes soar.

**Increased Odds of Employee Outcomes
with Inspiring Teams and Leaders**

OUTCOME	INSPIRING TEAM	INSPIRING TEAM AND LEADER
eNPS	5x	14x
Satisfaction with employee experience	6x	26X
Fulfillment	10x	31x
Engagement	9x	25x
Inclusion	6x	18x
Satisfaction with culture	5x	19x
Desire to stay at least one more year	6x	16x
Connection with team	7x	23x
Connection with organization	6x	29x

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And to punctuate these findings, when both leaders and team members follow inspiring practices, the odds are 38x greater that employees will feel inspired in their work, feel inspired to try new things, or innovate.

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION IS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

We've studied many positive effects of employee recognition over the better part of the last decade, and inspiration now occupies a prominent place on the list. When employees are appreciated for their contributions, they feel inspired to do more great work, go above and beyond, innovate, and solve challenging problems. Indeed, a large majority of employees say recognition inspires them, whether they receive it personally (73%) or hear about the accomplishments of others (65%).
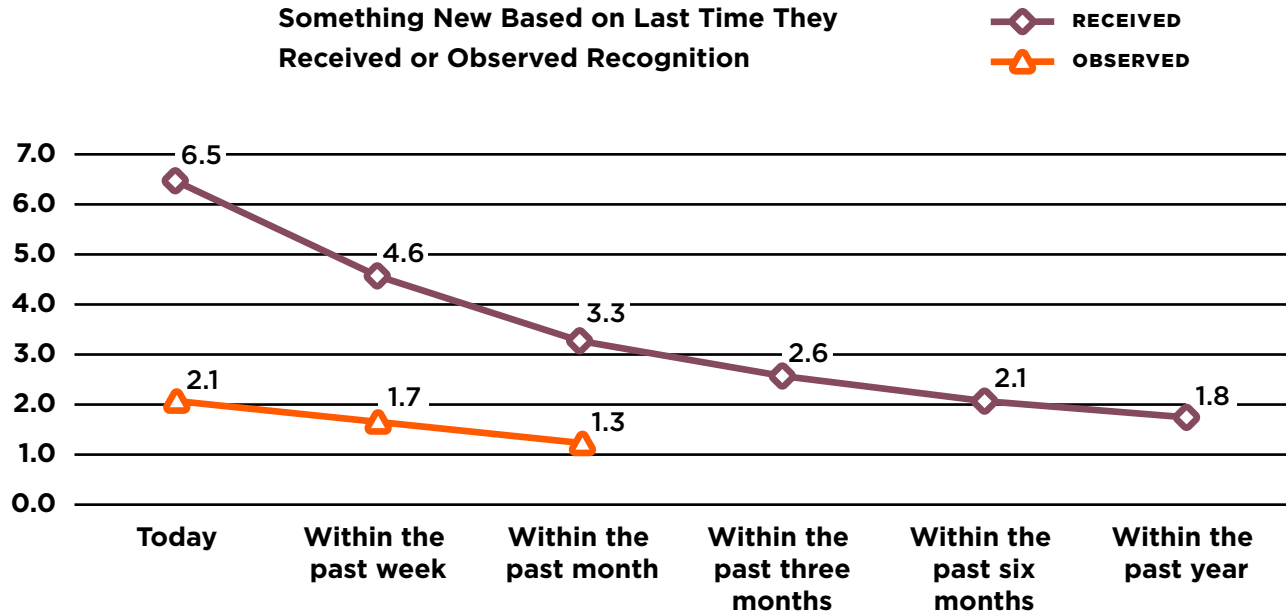
Currently, 64% of workers say recognition is a part of their workplace culture. And organizations with integrated recognition have a strong advantage: employees who are 7x more likely to feel inspired to try new things at work.

When we examine the relationship between appreciation and inspiration, we see the impact of recognition—whether received or observed—is greatest in the days and weeks immediately after the recognition event, as the following graph illustrates.

"When you feel appreciated in the workplace, you're inspired to go above and beyond. That's how I feel."
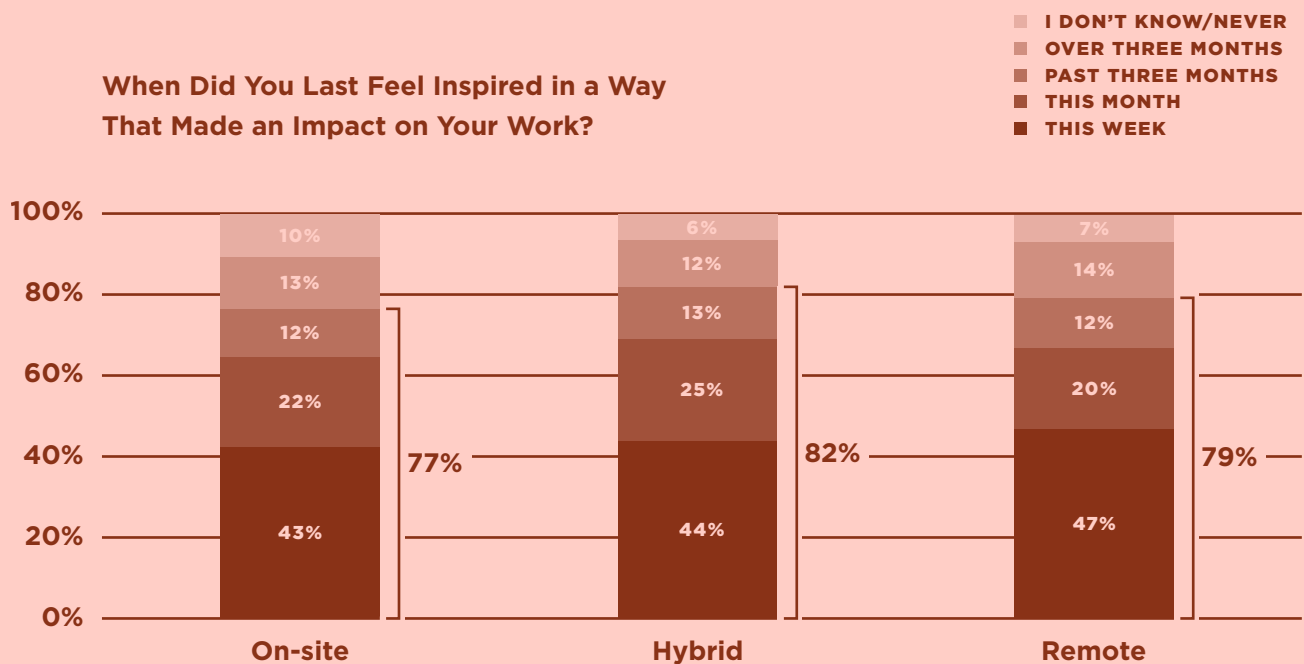
—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, LOS ANGELES

Odds an Employee Feels Inspired to Try Something New Based on Last Time They Received or Observed Recognition

◇ **RECEIVED**
△ **OBSERVED**

Chart values:

RECEIVED line:
- Today: 6.5
- Within the past week: 4.6
- Within the past month: 3.3
- Within the past three months: 2.6
- Within the past six months: 2.1
- Within the past year: 1.8

OBSERVED line:
- Today: 2.1
- Within the past week: 1.7
- Within the past month: 1.3

Y-axis: 0.0, 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0, 5.0, 6.0, 7.0

X-axis: Today | Within the past week | Within the past month | Within the past three months | Within the past six months | Within the past year

This also shows the importance of frequency. Regular recognition provides ongoing inspiration for employees. And, for organizations that struggle with innovation or productivity, it's a quick and cost-effective way to encourage new ideas, reinforce behaviors that inspire, or find new ways of working.

INSPIRATION CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE

According to our research, remote employees or those in a different location from their leader are no less likely to feel inspired. People experience moments of inspiration regardless of where they work. As the following graph shows, more than three-quarters of employees say they experienced meaningful moments of inspiration that made an impact on their work at least once in the past three months.

When Did You Last Feel Inspired in a Way That Made an Impact on Your Work?

Legend:
- I DON'T KNOW/NEVER
- OVER THREE MONTHS
- PAST THREE MONTHS
- THIS MONTH
- THIS WEEK

On-site:
- 10%
- 13%
- 12%
- 22%
- 43%
- 77%

Hybrid:
- 6%
- 12%
- 13%
- 25%
- 44%
- 82%

Remote:
- 7%
- 14%
- 12%
- 20%
- 47%
- 79%

As a final point, online productivity and collaboration tools provide employees with inspiring moments when they connect leaders and colleagues and serve inspiring content. Inspired work happens anywhere employees have access to the sources that inspire them most.

Organizations can help employees feel inspired at work through leaders, coworkers, and recognition.

(1)   **Connect employees to sources of inspiration**

Ensure employees can find inspiration across their employee experience. Encourage leaders to create regular opportunities and time for their people to connect, collaborate, and share ideas. This can take place during team huddles, one-to-ones, company meetings, or organization-wide events.

In addition, provide access to external resources that employees find inspiring, such as books, articles, podcasts, and conferences. Company emails and newsletters can highlight sources of inspiration, and group gatherings around specific interests or celebrations for achievements and career milestones can further connect and inspire. When employees have access to numerous resources and feel motivated to generate ideas or adopt a new perspective, the odds they'll feel inspired in their work increase 12x. (Conversely, limited access or exposure to these resources decrease the odds 59%.)

Outdoor retailer REI inspires its employees by tying its benefits and experiences back to the things that matter most to its people: time and resources to pursue an active, outdoor lifestyle. In addition to everyday inspiration through regular communication including interactive webinars that cultivate community between stores, leaders and coworkers inspire each other by utilizing product grants, sabbaticals, and two free days annually to enjoy the outdoor adventures that ultimately connect them more closely to their customers and each other.[5]

The culture of AWS (Amazon Web Services) champions thinking big, embracing challenges, and building communities that inspire employees to innovate. The company encourages its people to continuously learn, embrace new ideas, and experiment by providing regular training options, collaborative personal development, and robust mentorship experiences. In addition, teams gathered from diverse backgrounds approach problems with a mindset of "building" relationships, strategies, and solutions, and the company recognizes employees from around the world who make the biggest impact with the annual Legend Award. It's a culture that helps inspire AWS employees to continue innovating and delivering for customers.[6–8]

(2) **Provide flexibility, support, and autonomy**

Access to resources alone won't always create inspiring moments. Employees need time to use the resources, support from leaders to take risks, and the freedom to bring their inspiration to life. When they do, the odds they'll feel inspired to try new ideas increase 6x.

Leaders should take steps to create a culture where employees feel safe and empowered to put ideas into action. This can be a generative process where inspiration leads to innovation, which also inspires others to create great work. In such productive cultures, leaders advocate for their employees, encourage collaboration, solicit employee feedback, actively listen, and provide a psychologically safe work environment.

When employees feel supported by both their leader and their team, even if they fail, the odds they'll be inspired to try new things at work increase 7x. And when employees have access to multiple sources of inspiration and the flexibility and support to act on that inspiration, the odds increase 11x.

"**If you don't give people a chance to fail, you won't innovate. If you want to be an innovative company, allow people to make mistakes.**"

—INDRA NOOYI, FORMER CEO, PEPSICO

(3) **Give frequent, meaningful, and purposeful recognition**

Received or observed, recognition inspires employees. And sharing recognition—through a group celebration, the company intranet, a recognition platform social feed, or screens in common areas—ensures more people feel inspired by great work across the organization.

Recognition is most effective when it's frequent, personal, and genuine. Leaders should know how each employee prefers to be recognized and clearly state the person's contribution and impact on the team or organization. Involve peers and even family in recognition presentations.

When recognition is personalized, sincere, and given in a meaningful way that makes the employee feel truly appreciated, the odds the employee will find the recognition moment inspiring increase 14x. And when recognition is inspiring, as the following table shows, the odds of several important outcomes improve.

Probability of Employee Outcomes When Recognition Is Inspiring

OUTCOME	INCREASED ODDS
eNPS Promoter	**3x**
High satisfaction with employee experience	**3x**
Above-average fulfillment	**6x**
Above-average engagement	**6x**
Strong sense of inclusion	**4x**
Desire to stay at least one more year	**4x**

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To inspire employees to find new ways to improve their revenue cycle management, nonprofit healthcare system Wellstar turned to recognition. Their ShineWell platform, by O.C. Tanner, enables the company to recognize employees when they take steps to reduce their work queue age, fostering a sense of accomplishment and teamwork.

The results: In just one month, Wellstar improved its net collection ratio and reduced accounts receivable balances by $13 million.[9]

Leaders have a significant influence on creating inspiration for employees.

Team members can inspire one another through collaboration and sharing ideas.

Recognition is a valuable source of inspiration to employees.

Employees need access to sources that inspire them, as well as flexibility and autonomy to act on inspiration.

Sparking Inspiration Sources

1. State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report, Gallup.

2. "Workers are the unhappiest they've been in 3 years—and it can cost the global economy $8.8 trillion," Morgan Smith, CNBC, October 2, 2023.

3. "Inspiration," *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, American Psychological Association.

4. Leadership, 2021 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute.

5. REI, www.rei.jobs/careers-home, August 4, 2025.

6. "How Amazon Web Services is 'doubling down' to create a meaningful EX," Ian Wilson, *HR Executive*, January 31, 2023.

7. "15 ways employees experience belonging at AWS," AWS, June 27, 2023.

8. AWS, aws.amazon.com/careers/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-builder?

9. "Wellstar: Optimizing workplace performance with recognition," O.C. Tanner, 2025.

Hope in Practice
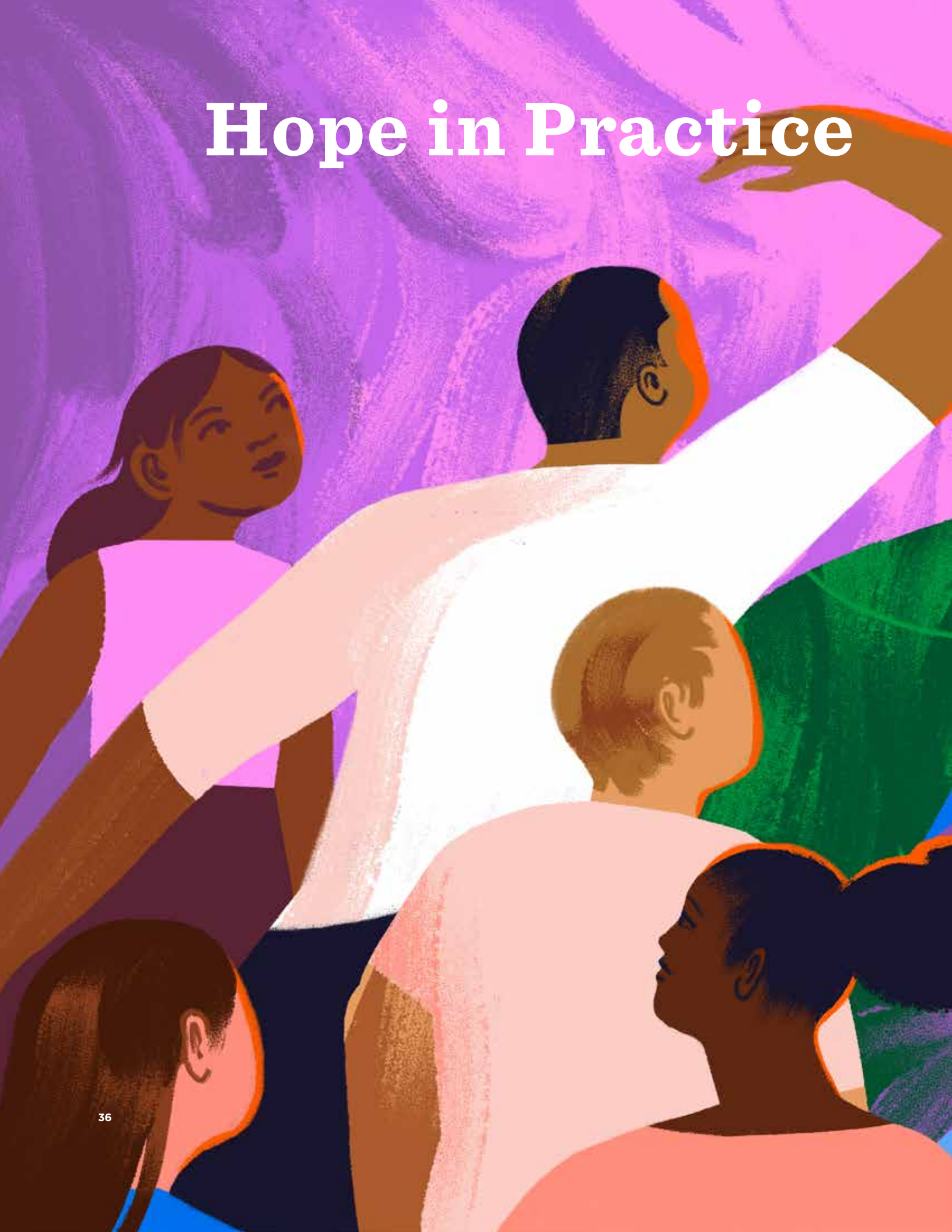
Individuals and organizations are more likely to thrive when passive expectations become renewable actions.

6^X

INCREASED ODDS OF INNOVATION
WHEN EMPLOYEES FEEL A STRONG
SENSE OF HOPE AT WORK

In most contexts, hope is a desire for something better. An aspiration that exists somewhere between a gentle wish and a bold dream, it's rich enough to produce infinite movies and love songs but will never qualify as an effective workplace strategy. Fortunately, our research this year establishes a model that transforms hope from a passive state into an active practice, fueling growth and change. Such functional, working hope capitalizes on individual agency while at the same time drawing on the strength and support of teams and leaders. Organizations that embrace this approach don't just help more employees reach their goals. They connect everyone to a more hopeful future.

INTRODUCTION

It's no exaggeration to say workplaces around the world are currently experiencing an epidemic of hopelessness.

A Harvard poll finds nearly half of Americans under 30 feel "down, depressed, or hopeless" at least several days a week.[1] Gallup's research shows wellbeing has declined, and 41% of employees globally are stressed "a lot of their day."[2] A study conducted in the U.K. and reported in *Forbes* reveals more than half (53%) of workers struggle with mental health conditions.[3]

According to our data, when thinking about their future at work, 35% of employees feel depressed and only 52% feel hopeful. In the face of economic uncertainty, changing market expectations, and rapidly advancing technologies, employees everywhere are struggling to feel good about the trajectory of their careers.

For many people, hope is a positive vision of the future that tends to rely on external factors such as fortune or the actions of others. In the workplace, this passive position and perceived lack of control can be a big problem. At a time when organizations are pushing to innovate in a changing business landscape, having a workforce that's inspired and empowered to meet challenges is more important than ever. Hopelessness and even passive hope aren't just inconvenient—they work against needed outcomes.

To be clear, the type of hope we're discussing focuses on the practical aspects of achieving goals and navigating everyday obstacles. As such, having effective hope in the workplace is more than being optimistic. It requires acting on that optimism, giving employees something to look forward to, and enabling them to avoid or overcome setbacks.

Rather than a feeling or emotion, hope must be a practice.
If inspiration is a spark of energy that gets employees moving toward an outcome, hope is the process for achieving it.

When employees have a strong sense of hope, the odds of several key outcomes improve:

- **Great work (8x)**
- **Engagement (7x)**
- **Innovation (5x)**
- **Connection to organization (5x)**
- **Belonging (5x)**
- **Retention (4x)**

As our understanding of hope in the workplace moves from a wish to a practice, it transforms hope from an inert state into a dynamic part of the employee experience.

A WORKING MODEL FOR HOPE

"I hope things work out." "I hope the weather stays nice." "I hope my team wins." Typically, the word hope reflects a positive picture of a future state, but one that lacks personal influence—we can't change the weather or influence a sporting event. Our desired outcome depends on factors outside our control.

When we asked employees what hope meant in the workplace, we heard them intuitively link it to more active elements like motivation, achieving goals, and overcoming obstacles:

"Hope is something you're moving toward and believing you can get there."

"Hope is overcoming obstacles because there's always going to be something in your way. But as long as there's something out there, that keeps you moving forward."

A practice of hope also recognizes that obstacles are part of the process. In the workplace, these take many forms, from a lack of support or resources to personal anxiety. Our research finds that five factors consistently present the biggest barriers to hope at work:

1. **Competing priorities**
2. **Worry about doing well on projects**
3. **Mental exhaustion**
4. **Fear of missing deadlines**
5. **Feeling anxious or on edge**

PATHWAY THINKING   AGENCY THINKING

For many employees, hope is already a way of thinking and acting that animates them toward a goal. The practice of hope centers on the interaction of two active modes of thinking: first, pathway thinking ("I can see a path to my goal"); and second, agency thinking ("I believe I'm capable of following that path").[4] In a practice of hope, this cycle of thinking repeats, motivating action and movement toward a desired outcome.

With the exception of competing priorities, employees' biggest obstacles are not operational but rather related to their mental wellbeing. And, as the following table shows, mental health challenges can significantly impact an individual's sense of hope.

Impact of Mental Health Conditions on Hope

Anxiety	**–63%**
Depression	**–62%**
Burnout	**–82%**

These challenges can derail progress and risk undermining agency thinking. Each one forces an employee to start the cycle again by identifying a new path forward and recommitting to the belief that they can successfully follow that path to completion. The most notable of the mental health challenges is burnout, a condition that results from chronic workplace stress that hasn't been successfully managed, and is characterized by feelings of exhaustion, avoidance, and futility.

Regardless, hope in practice propels employees forward. Organizations can help employees most by resolving competing priorities and offering resources and systems to help employees overcome the other common obstacles to hope.

"When we apply agentic and pathways thinking toward our goals, and thereafter meet these goals, we experience the full array of positive emotions. These emotions, as well as the negative ones that appear when we do not meet our goals, add an experiential richness to our lives."

—C. R. SNYDER, PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

THE ROLE OF ACHIEVABLE (AND INSPIRING) GOALS

Before the cycle of thinking, navigating obstacles, and acting toward an outcome, there's a goal that helps employees know where they are and connect to an aspirational future.

For goals to drive a practice of hope, they must connect with something bigger. When we asked employees to identify the most important qualities of a successful workplace goal, they listed several, ranked in the following table.

Top Qualities of Successful Goals

1.	**Achievable**
2.	**Inspiring**
3.	**Meaningful**
4.	**Relevant**
5.	**Supported by leader**

First, goals need to be achievable—specific, measurable, and realistic. Large initiatives will only succeed if they consist of smaller goals employees can reach along the way. Next, goals must be inspiring. As discussed in the previous chapter, a goal that's inspiring connects people to a larger vision or set of values. An inspired employee acts with energy and purpose and is open to new and innovative solutions. When goals are inspiring, the odds of workers having a strong sense of hope increase 85%.

Goals also have more impact when they're meaningful and relevant, connected to the needs and values of the individual. This could be something that helps them grow in their career, improves their financial security, or aligns with their personal values.

Finally, leader support is critical in developing employee goals. Employees need to know they have the buy-in and backing of their leaders. Leaders can show this support by checking in on employees and giving recognition as they make progress. Encouraging effort reinforces that a goal is achievable. And having this support not only increases employees' sense of hope but also impacts other aspects of the employee experience, as shown in the following table.

Odds of Key Outcomes When Employees Feel Their Direct Leader Supports Their Goals

OUTCOME	INCREASED ODDS
Sense of hope	6x
Sense of success	7x
Great work	5x
Engagement	7x
Fulfillment	8x

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A PRACTICE OF HOPE REQUIRES A COMMUNITY

Most current models of hope focus on the individual experience. However, as our research has shown for years, the employee experience doesn't happen in a vacuum. A thriving workplace culture requires the healthy interaction of coworkers, teams, and leaders. No one fully thrives on their own, and this is just as true for hope in practice.

While leader interaction remains a powerful influence on an employee's connection to a meaningful vision of the future, a supportive team brings communal encouragement and energy that has a powerful impact on their overall sense of hope.

As the following table shows, hope increases for employees when they interact positively with their teams and leaders.

Odds of Employee Hope by Type of Interaction with Team and Leader

INTERACTION	INCREASED ODDS OF HOPE WITH TEAM MEMBER INTERACTION	INCREASED ODDS OF HOPE WITH LEADER INTERACTION
Encouragement to achieve goals	8x	6x
Support for goals	6x	6x
Help in finding ways to overcome obstacles	8x	7x
Bringing positive energy to work	9x	7x

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These powerful interactions with coworkers and leaders should happen at every stage of a process that includes:

- **Guidance and support when establishing goals**
- **Help identifying alternative paths when confronted with obstacles**
- **Encouragement and recognition along the way**

As with leaders, recognition from team members validates the progress an employee makes toward their goals. Even on projects that don't go as planned, the odds of a strong sense of hope increase when leaders support employees (6x) and when team members support each other (7x). Peer-to-peer recognition is a powerful way for organizations to build and sustain this community.

A PRACTICE THAT PERPETUATES ITSELF

When employees achieve meaningful goals, it positively reinforces pathway and agency thinking and fuels a cycle of desire for new goals and greater achievement. Recognizing employees when they meet their goals amplifies this desire, creating even more momentum and empowering them to succeed. As one focus group participant put it, "It's like hurdles. Once you get over the first one, you could do the next one and the next one and the next one after that."

A practice of hope transforms how individuals perceive their capabilities and their future. Among employees who achieve their goals, 73% feel more confident about setting new goals, 71% find it easier to see pathways to those goals, and 75% feel more positive about their future. Hope enables employees to thrive.

"Being able to find meaning in the day to day, be it through good quality connections, working together and feeling supported, having ways to express our full potential, or making a difference to the community or planet, can help to move employees forward and facilitate higher engagement and performance."

—AMY BRADLEY, PHD, PROFESSOR OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, HULT ASHRIDGE

For hope to become a practice, organizations must set achievable goals that inspire employees, build community, and leverage recognition.

(1) **Lay the groundwork for hope with goals that inspire**

Leaders can help employees identify goals and link them to sources of inspiration that are personally relevant. These can be passion for the work, belief in company values or mission, or simply opportunities to collaborate with respected peers and leaders. Goals can be made more relevant by connecting them to individual needs and aspirations like growth, development, and security.

Goal setting also provides an opportunity to evaluate pathways to success and identify potential obstacles that may arise along the way. One-to-ones and team meetings are ideal settings to think through possible roadblocks and identify both necessary resources and alternate routes to avoid potential setbacks. This experience not only reinforces agency and pathway thinking but also strengthens connections to teams and leaders. When teams and leaders help find ways to work around obstacles, the odds of the employee having a strong connection to both their team and leader increase 5x.

CASE STUDY—IMPROVING CONNECTION AND CARE

During the global pandemic, Lenox Hill Hospital implemented "hope huddles" in their front-line workers' daily meetings. They focused on successes like patients who came off ventilators, as well as stories of accomplishment, challenges to meet, and the positive impact of their work. Today, hope huddles provide camaraderie and ongoing communication that connect employees to their purpose and reinforce the message of hope—seeing a path forward and believing they can get there together.[5]

(2) **Build a supportive workplace community**

Hope needs a supportive community to thrive. Leaders, teams, and individual peers all play a critical role in employees achieving their goals and should be involved early and often. From goal setting to managing obstacles to recognizing accomplishments, a strong workplace community supports the practice of hope by providing inspiration, guidance, encouragement, and validation.

Regular team and leader check-ins are opportunities for positive interactions that can help drive hope forward. As the following table shows, such support reinforces the practice of hope and enhances the employee experience across several metrics.

Odds of Key Outcomes When Leaders and Team Members Support Goals

OUTCOME	LEADERS	TEAM MEMBERS
Great work	+188%	+201%
Engagement	+291%	+256%
Innovation	+137%	+123%
Sense of belonging	+135%	+126%
Anxiety	−37%	−37%
Burnout	−34%	−32%

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(3) **Use recognition to celebrate feats of hope**

Hope in practice thrives when it includes regular encouragement and validation. Just as obstacles can disrupt the cycle of pathway and agency thinking, recognition can restore employee confidence, validate effort, and nurture progress.

That said, recognition should start before a project ends. Appreciation for effort along the way provides employees support and encouragement to overcome obstacles and continue doing great work. Similar to how cheering throughout a sporting event (not just when the game is won) helps build momentum, energy, and endurance, recognizing employees for achievements and meeting goals along the way helps them keep going.

"Recognition has evolved beyond a simple tool for engagement; it is now essential emotional currency, one of the last remaining forces that keeps people connected to their work, their colleagues, and their organizations."

—JACKIE MCCARTHY, AVP, EXPERIENCE STRATEGY, NORTHWELL HEALTH

Impact of Recognition on Odds of a Strong Sense of Hope

My peers and I regularly recognize each other for the work we do

6x

Recognition is a part of my everyday culture

5x

I regularly see someone receiving recognition

4x

My leader makes others aware of my accomplishments

3x

The recognition I receive is meaningful

2x

According to our research, when recognition is an integrated part of workplace culture and the employee experience, the odds employees will feel hope increase significantly.

It's also important that recognition be given in ways that are intentional. As the following table shows, by creating recognition moments that encourage and validate an individual's hard work and effort toward goals, leaders and peers can amplify hope.

Impact of Intentional Recognition on Odds of a Strong Sense of Hope

7.4x Leader recognition encourages me to keep working toward my goal	**7.2x** Leader recognition validates my hard work
8.6x Team recognition encourages me to keep working toward my goal	**7.8x** Team recognition validates my hard work

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Recognition at Navy Federal Credit Union (NFCU) acknowledges employees' work and progress toward their goals with awards for daily great work, strategic projects, goals met, team success, and completed career programs (when military members transition back to civilian life).

The institution also recognizes more personal goals, like career anniversaries, volunteerism, social responsibility, and belonging. These efforts help all employees work with a sense of hope and may partly explain NFCU's inclusion on *Fortune* and *Forbes* magazines' annual lists of best employers.[6]

Hope in the workplace is an active practice rather than a passive emotional state.

A practice of hope involves setting achievable, inspiring goals with a supportive community.

Hope is self-perpetuating, reinforcing pathway and agency thinking that fuels the desire for new goals and greater achievements.

Recognition strengthens hope by validating effort and encouraging progress.
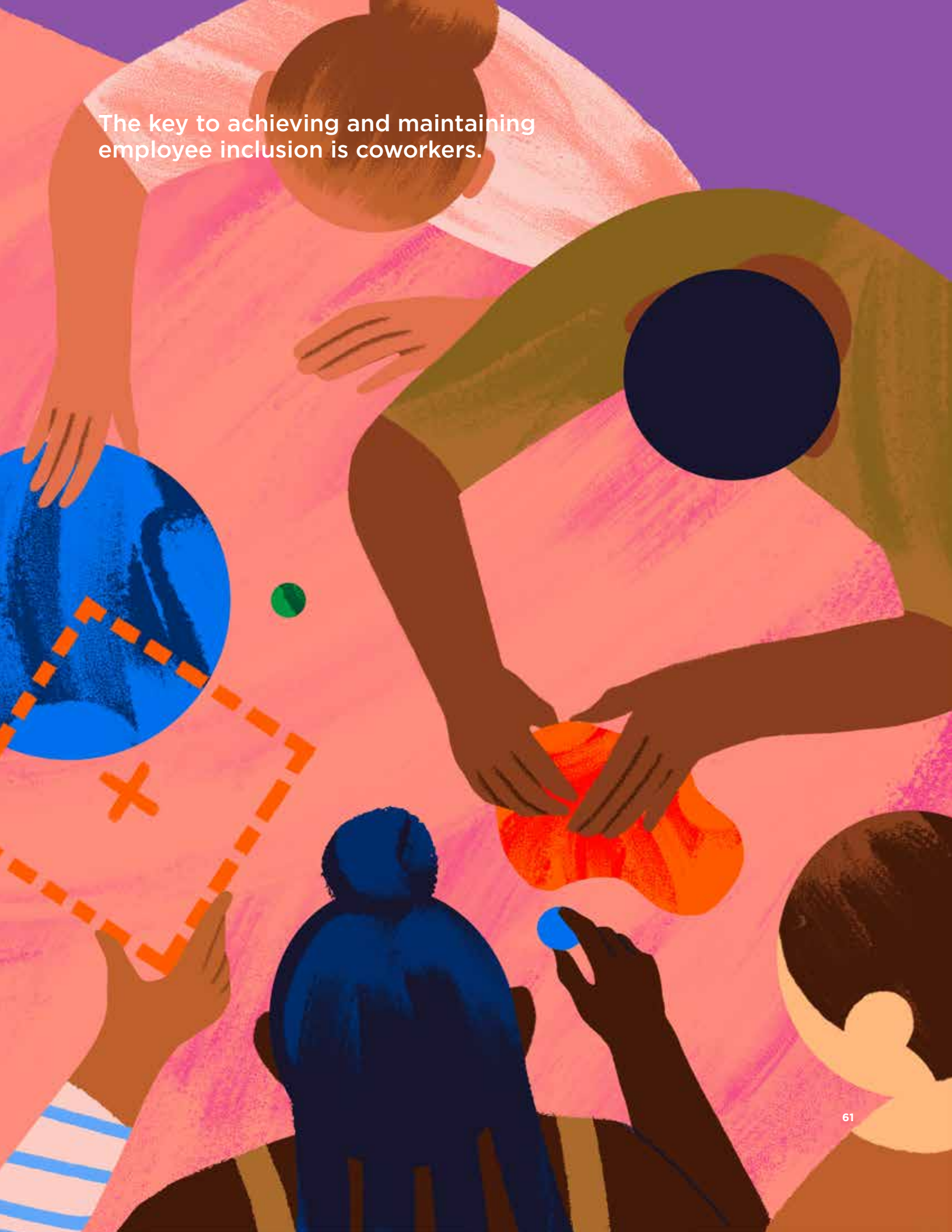
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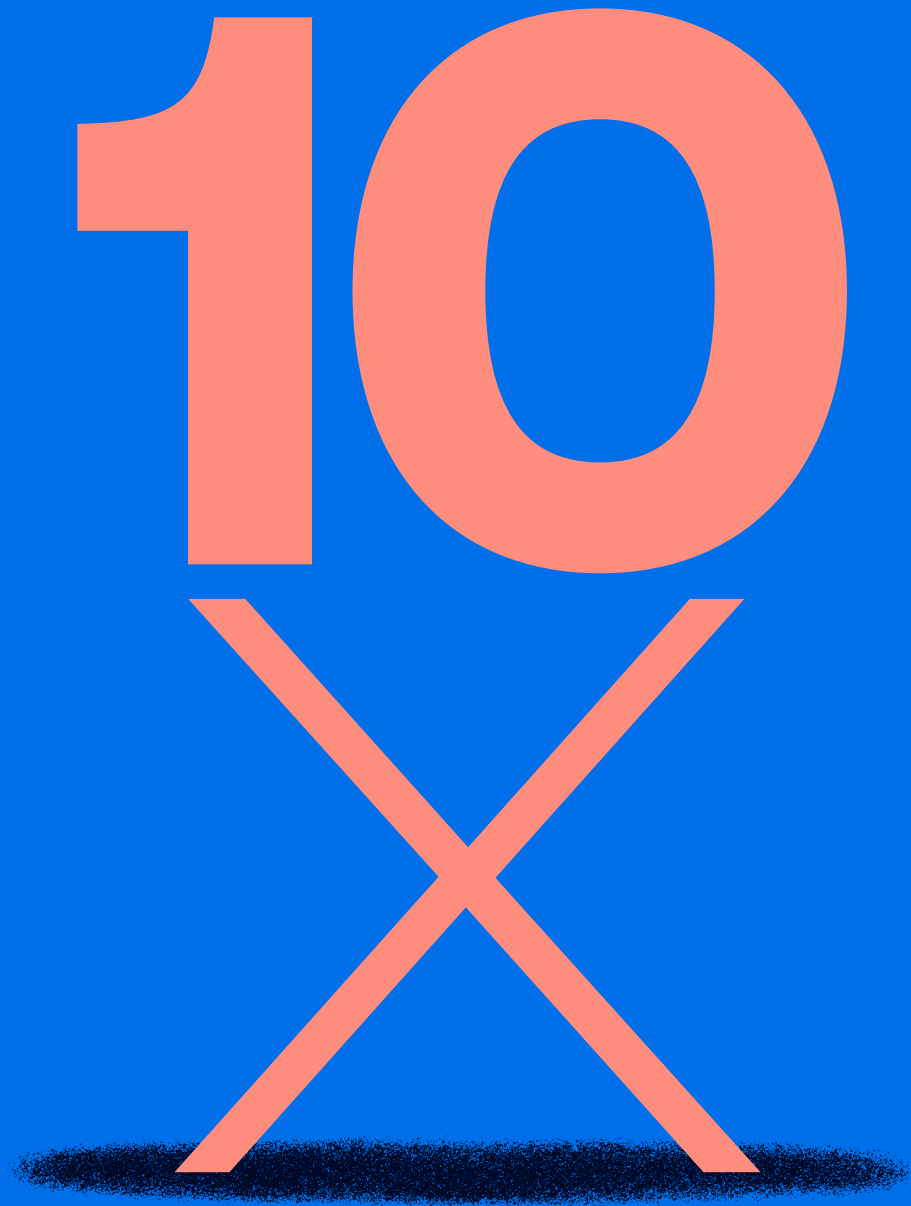6. "Navy Federal Credit Union: Transforming Mission to Passion," O.C. Tanner, 2024.

Inclusive Teams

The key to achieving and maintaining
employee inclusion is coworkers.

10X

GREATER SENSE OF THRIVING
WHEN EMPLOYEES BELIEVE THEIR
TEAMS ARE INCLUSIVE

When DEI initiatives first gained mainstream attention, many people thought that focusing on diversity and equity would naturally lead to inclusion. Some well-intentioned employers tried to capture the benefits of inclusion by tying it to recruitment targets or treating it as part of risk management efforts. However, these approaches rarely made employees feel truly included. The good news is our research this year reveals a different path to success: Inclusion flourishes when purposefully practiced and supported at the team level—as a skill coworkers build together day by day. And as teams foster trust and belonging, these inclusive micro-cultures collectively become a stronger, higher-performing organization.

INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, research in multiple countries has routinely shown that organizations with inclusive cultures deliver dramatically better results. However, none of it has ever suggested that inclusion is easy.

Although 85% of global companies say diversity and inclusion is a priority, and 485 of the Fortune 500 actively promote their inclusion initiatives, most have found limited success.[1] A hyper-focus on risk mitigation and compliance, limited or erratic support, and an incomplete understanding of the principle itself have made achieving and sustaining inclusion extremely difficult for many organizations.

As we discussed in our 2021 Global Culture Report, true inclusion is a "synthesis, a coming together, of unique individuals with their own combination of experiences, skills, perspectives, and personalities to enhance culture and business performance."[2]

Some organizations have rallied around creating diverse teams, often lumping inclusion initiatives with DEI programs, but they lack a strategy for helping employees feel like they're included or belong. A team with different backgrounds and perspectives won't automatically feel inclusive. Far from a policy or program, inclusion is a regular, everyday practice that works best at the team level and leads to feelings of belonging (not just tolerance). Inclusion happens when team members, leaders, and the organization demonstrate an ongoing commitment to helping everyone feel seen and heard. Having a proactive, rather than reactive, approach not only appears more genuine to employees; it makes inclusion achievable and scalable.

This is critical because recent studies show 30% of employees feel invisible at work, 65% feel unappreciated, and 82% feel lonely.[3] Employees are showing up, but they don't believe they belong or that they matter.

"Mattering," according to Zach Mercurio, a leadership development researcher and professor, "is the experience of feeling significant to those around us because we feel valued and know that we add value. It is a primal need. When people know that they matter at work, they thrive. Employees who believe they matter report greater satisfaction, are more likely to be promoted, and are less likely to leave." Helping all employees feel they matter deepens the definition of inclusion.

This presents an extraordinary opportunity for organizations. Our research shows that when employees feel their teams are inclusive, they are:

- **4x more likely to be promoters**
- **7x more likely to believe senior leaders can achieve the organization's goals**
- **10x more likely to be thriving**

With two-thirds of employees choosing to work for companies that champion inclusion,[4] organizations need new strategies to harness the strengths of all team members. The ability to solve problems creatively and innovate consistently hangs in the balance.

"Diversity is a fact, but inclusion is a choice we make every day."

—NELLIE BORRERO, MANAGING DIRECTOR AND SENIOR STRATEGIC ADVISOR, GLOBAL INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY, ACCENTURE

ANATOMY OF INCLUSION AS A PRACTICE

Ideally, inclusion is a daily habit built into the normal flow of work. We found that when employees have peers at work who understand them, they're 5x more likely to feel included. Based on focus groups and surveys, five key categories of behavior support inclusivity on teams.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

VOICE

RESPECT

LEARNING

GOALS AND PURPOSE
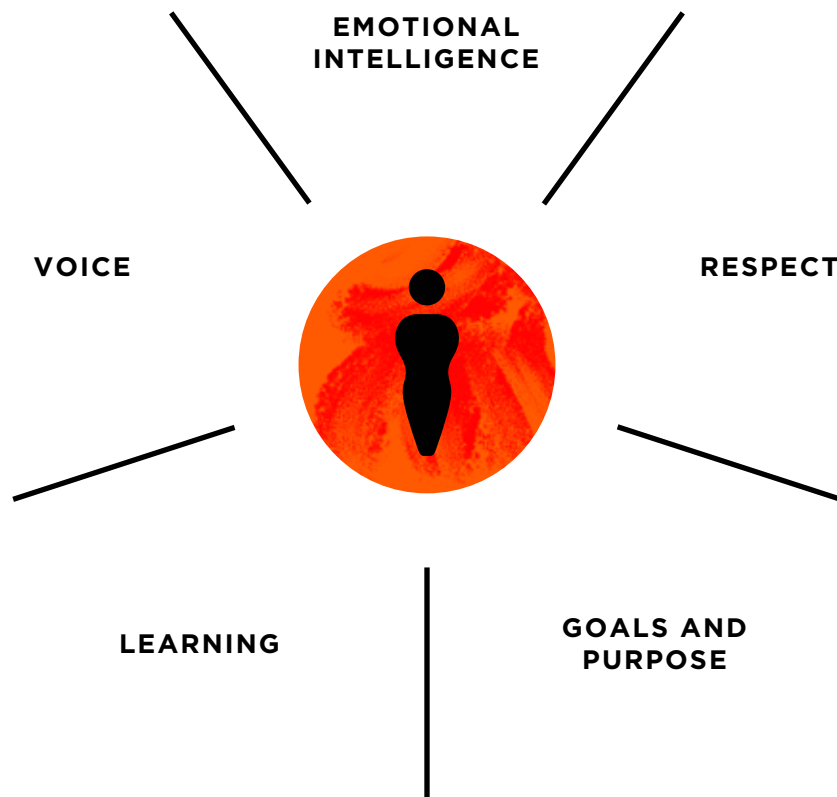
Figure 4. INCLUSION INDEX
The five types of behaviors that support inclusivity on teams.

Emotional Intelligence: Team members understand one another, have open discussions, celebrate each other's successes, and manage emotions

Respect: Coworkers honor each other's time, boundaries, and perspectives equally

Goals and Purpose: Team members work together to accomplish shared goals that advance the organization's purpose

Learning: Employees exercise freedom to experiment, collaborate, and make mistakes

Voice: All team members feel comfortable expressing opinions and giving feedback

When leaders practice these behaviors, the odds employees feel included increase 6x. And when teams practice them, members are 7x more likely to feel they belong and 9x more likely to feel a sense of community.

Furthermore, as the following table shows, inclusive team practices lead to equally significant outcomes for organizations.

**Increased Odds of Organizational Outcomes
Linked to Inclusive Team Practices**

	HIGH ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION	HIGH ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST	ORGANIZATION IS RESPECTED IN THE INDUSTRY	EMPLOYEES DO GREAT WORK[5]
Emotional Intelligence	5x	6x	7x	7x
Respect	5x	6x	7x	7x
Goals and Purpose	5x	6x	7x	7x
Learning	6x	7x	8x	8x
Voice	6x	7x	7x	8x
All practices combined	7x	9x	11x	10x

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Employers don't need a formal program to reap the benefits of inclusion. Teams that learn and model inclusive behaviors by any means available can be more impactful. When employees feel they're part of an inclusive team, the odds that they perceive their organization as inclusive increase 12x.

THE CORROBORATING ROLE OF RECOGNITION

Employee recognition can help foster inclusive teams by emphasizing and celebrating behaviors in each of the five key areas (Emotional Intelligence, Respect, Goals and Purpose, Learning, and Voice). And, as the following table demonstrates, at organizations where recognition is a familiar, frequent, integrated part of the culture, people are significantly more likely to practice the behaviors.

Increased Odds of Inclusive Team Behaviors with Integrated Recognition

Emotional Intelligence	**10x**
Respect	**10x**
Goals and Purpose	**10x**
Learning	**11x**
Voice	**11x**
All practices combined	**15x**

Recognition also inherently demonstrates that employees and their work matter, that they make a difference and belong. Remember, inclusion is really about feeling seen and valued—exactly what recognition does best.

"When we listen and celebrate what is both common and different, we become wiser, more inclusive, and better as an organization."

—PAT WADORS, FORMER CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, PROCORE TECHNOLOGIES

TEAMS MAY BUILD INCLUSION, BUT INCLUSIVE TEAMS DON'T BUILD THEMSELVES

It should come as no surprise that the modeling and nurturing of inclusive practices start with emotionally intelligent, modern leaders.

When leaders practice inclusive behaviors, employees are 34x more likely to do the same. Other specific positive outcomes appear in the following table.

Key Outcomes When Leader Practices Inclusive Behaviors

OUTCOME	INCREASED ODDS
Team culture encourages sharing ideas	27x
Team morale is good	23x
Team members understand each other	22x
Team members are honest with each other	22x
The team has a good reputation within the organization	21x
The team is innovative	20x
Team members know how to solve conflicts	20x

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Of course, most leaders have leaders, too. And those leaders, together with the organization, can provide critical support. When they do, middle managers are 9x more likely to practice behaviors in the five areas of inclusion. Likewise, the odds of inclusive leadership improve 10x when a leader has the tools they need to innovate.

Organizations should give leaders the time and resources to learn and practice emotional intelligence, purposeful goal setting, active listening, and respect. Recognizing leaders who demonstrate these behaviors reinforces the behaviors' importance and encourages leaders to practice them regularly.

WHAT DOES INCLUSION (OR ITS ABSENCE) MEAN FOR ORGANIZATIONS?

While inclusion benefits individuals in many ways, inclusive teams also directly improve the business. When teams are inclusive, employees are not only more engaged and have a sense of belonging; they're also more likely to perceive themselves as part of the organization, have a sense of ownership, and feel invested in the organization's success. Additional benefits appear in the following table.

Organizational Benefits When Teams Are Inclusive

BENEFIT	INCREASED ODDS
Employee engagement	15x
Team consistently meets its goals	13x
Employees value the organization's safety rules	12x
Employees value the organization's policies and procedures	10x
Organization makes smart decisions about the future	9x
Organization is financially healthy	8x
Organization produces quality products	8x
Employees feel a sense of belonging	7x

Conversely, as the next table shows, when teams don't feel inclusive, we see elevated levels of anxiety and burnout and more negative perceptions of the organization. Regrettably, only 32% of employees report having an inclusive team.

Employee Outcomes and Perceptions When Teams Are Not Inclusive

OUTCOME/PERCEPTION	ODDS
Anxiety	+218%
Burnout	+513%
Organization is financially healthy	−87%
There is a culture of trust at work	−90%
Organization produces quality products	−87%

"I work for a retail company, and we sell to everyone, doesn't matter what you look like. So, I think having a diverse group of people running it, and group meetings where everyone has different ideas, and everyone is trying to sell to the different type of customers…it benefits the bottom line."

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, LOS ANGELES

To build true inclusion in the workplace, encourage leaders and teams to adopt inclusive behaviors.

(1) **Empower leaders to practice inclusion**

The most effective way to practice inclusion at the team level starts with leaders setting an example for their teams. And when leaders have the support of their organizations, they're 8x more likely to engage in inclusive behaviors themselves.

This support can take many forms:

- Training leaders to solicit and understand the perspectives and opinions of all team members
- Encouraging leaders to have open, transparent discussions
- Creating a safe space for employees to express their opinions and give feedback
- Providing leaders best practices for respecting employees' time and boundaries equally
- Helping leaders connect employees and their work to shared goals and purpose
- Promoting a culture where employees feel safe to take risks and fail
- Giving leaders the resources to learn about building inclusive teams, plus the autonomy, flexibility, and time to practice inclusive behaviors

(2) Ensure teams and leaders practice inclusion regularly

One-and-done training is not enough. Consistency is key. When employees feel their teams are inclusive all the time, rather than some of the time, odds of anxiety and burnout decrease (–60% and –80%, respectively), and the odds of great work and thriving at work increase (447% and 724%, respectively).

Examples of inclusive behaviors include:

- Scheduling routine meetings at times that alternate so international team members don't have to always meet outside of business hours
- Providing avenues to gather every employee's perspective and feedback on an issue or project
- Connecting employees' contributions and accomplishments back to the team and organization in frequent recognition moments

Building inclusive behaviors into the everyday employee experience through leader modeling, communication, and recognition, eventually makes them an embedded part of your culture.

St. Elizabeth Healthcare, a trusted regional medical system in the U.S., partnered with O.C. Tanner to create a formal recognition strategy that helps facilitate its inclusive culture. The program automatically notifies leaders when recognition is given so they can call out employees in daily team huddles. Senior leaders also see who's been recognized recently and hand out spot awards. And the HR team deploys ongoing recognition goals for encouragement.

The results of this regular recognition are equally impressive. Belonging is now the highest scoring metric on the employee survey, engagement and patient satisfaction receive high scores as well, and employee turnover has steadily declined.[6]

(3) **Use recognition to further encourage inclusive practices**

Employee recognition plays an important role in fostering inclusive teams. However, if the goal is to build inclusion as an outcome, how you recognize people is important.

Recognition that's most effective is accessible to all, meaning every employee has the opportunity to give and receive it. Employees should feel empowered and comfortable joining in recognition moments for others, whether as an observer, presenter, or someone who simply shares remarks. Integrate recognition into the everyday employee experience, where it's frequent and open, and connects employees to the organization and its purpose.

When employees receive and witness recognition in these ways, they're more likely to perceive their teams as inclusive. The following table shows how positive perceptions improve the odds of creating an inclusive team.

Best Practices and the Impact of Employee Perceptions on Team Inclusion

PERCEPTION	INCREASED ODDS OF INCLUSIVE TEAM
I'm often invited to share in recognition moments	11x
Recognition is fair at my organization	12x
I feel empowered to give recognition	13x
I feel my contributions are valued fairly	15x
Recognition is an integrated part of my workplace culture	15x
Members of my team are comfortable recognizing each other	21x

Finally, the relationship between recognition and inclusion is a cycle that perpetuates itself. Recognition supports the development of inclusive team practices, which, in turn, encourages more recognition— as well as greater feelings of belonging, community, and engagement.

"When you recognize people for the great work they're doing and the impact they have, they feel good about being part of the organization. And when people feel good and feel connected to the organization, they stay. You can have lofty goals around belonging, but it's the people you work with day to day that make you feel like you belong."

—PEGGY ESSERT, MANAGER OF HUMAN RESOURCES, ST. ELIZABETH HEALTHCARE

CASE STUDY—HUMAN ENERGY AND INCLUSION

Employee recognition has been part of Chevron's culture for over 100 years. And to ensure recognition is fair, equitable, and inclusive, the company recently refined its recognition programs, processes, and policies. It created one centralized recognition solution to standardize eligibility and recognize anyone across the world in an equitable way. Plus, new, robust offline tools, built in partnership with O.C. Tanner, ensure all 40,000 employees in 50 countries—even those in oil fields or on a platform in the middle of the ocean—feel appreciated, valued, and part of Chevron.[7]

More than a program or policy, inclusion is a practice that occurs at the team level.

Inclusion has a demonstrated ROI for individuals, teams, and organizations.

Five key practice areas build inclusive teams: Emotional Intelligence, Respect, Voice, Learning, and Goals and Purpose.

Recognition encourages and rewards inclusive behaviors, helping to build inclusive teams.

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Healthy Performance Cultures

When high expectations meet the right support, employees and business thrive.

+2Y
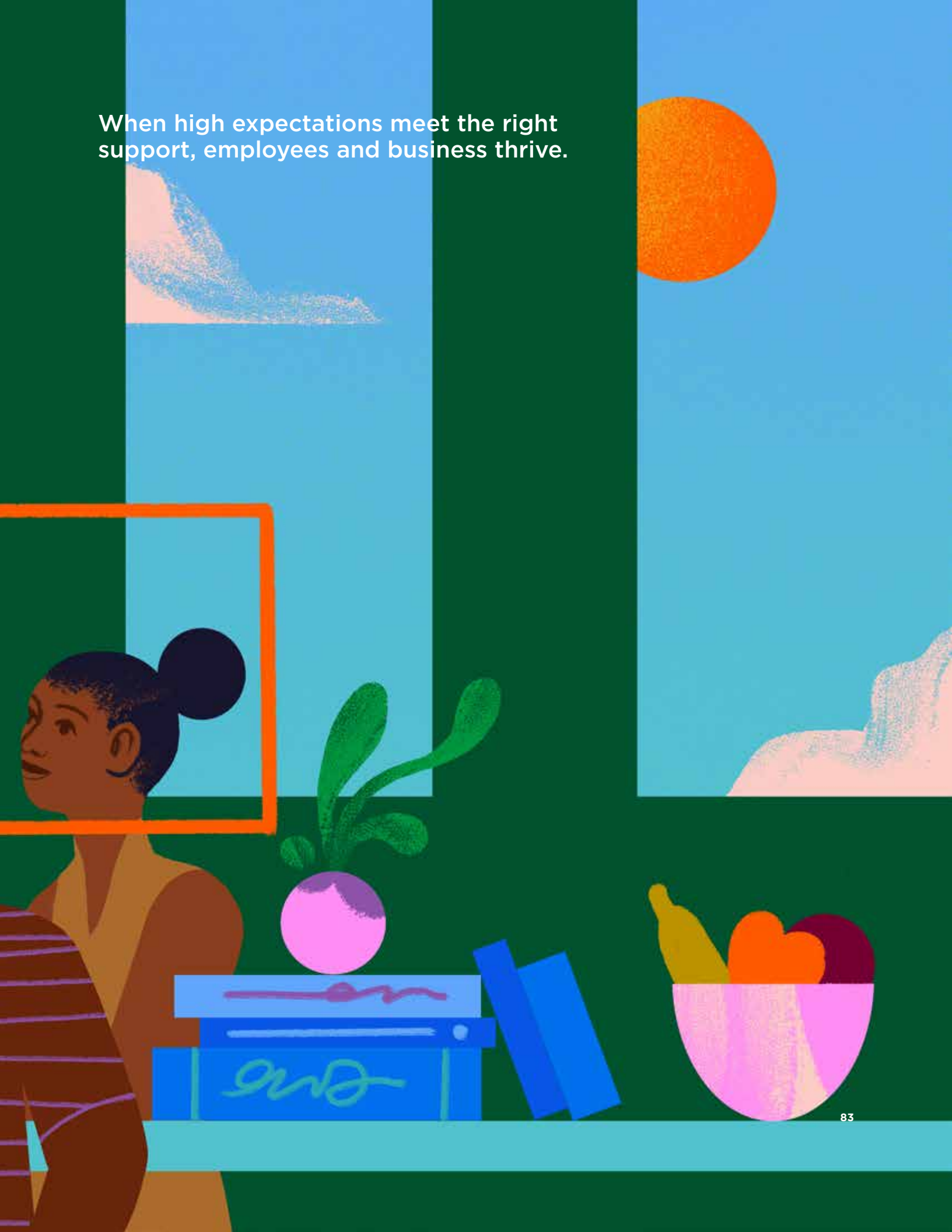
EMPLOYEES ARE LIKELY TO STAY 2 YEARS
LONGER WHEN THEIR ORGANIZATION PROVIDES HIGH
EXPECTATIONS AND HIGH SUPPORT

We all know that very few things in this world function well in isolation. A sailboat, for example, doesn't go anywhere without water and some wind. The same idea applies to people in the workplace. Employees perform at their best when given healthy expectations and a variety of support. This usually means goals with high standards, realistic deadlines, a culture of continuous improvement, and the active assistance of leaders, coworkers, and the organization. Recently, we explored this concept in more depth and discovered something else: Employees, perhaps now more than ever, also require a sense of connection to excel— and they're turning to their community at work to find it.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations and leaders have long assumed that high performance and employee wellbeing are mutually exclusive. That "getting ahead" and greater productivity required longer hours at work, less personal time, and more mental and emotional stress. This belief has led to 79% of employees reporting symptoms of burnout.[1] And a clearer picture of how inaccurate the assumption is—especially over time—has taken shape.

Employee burnout was expanding across industries before the Covid pandemic, costing organizations billions of dollars in healthcare,[2] as well as higher employee turnover. However, it wasn't until the pandemic hit and statistical measures of employee wellbeing fell 15 points in just a few months[3] that organizations pulled back on performance expectations to take care of their people.

Interestingly, the priority placed on employee wellbeing during the pandemic (including remote and flexible work arrangements) didn't hurt productivity. In the second and third quarters of 2020, individuals and teams were more productive compared to the same time frame the year before.[4] This combination of factors demonstrated that companies in most industries could support employee wellbeing and still see high performance.

Of course, some philosophies are stubborn. With the pandemic behind us, many employers have returned to focusing on productivity and performance at the expense of focusing on employee wellbeing. Some, prioritizing measures they believe will lead to greater performance, have called people back to the office five days a week, increased the use of software to monitor their behavior, and set up stricter performance metrics.

However, this is not a zero-sum game. Employee wellbeing is not at odds with high performance and business success. On the contrary, our research shows that the right employee support has the potential to maximize profitability.

Unfortunately, our studies also find only 34% of employees have levels of support high enough to match the expectations of their workplace. The good news is there are concrete ways organizations can achieve an ideal mix of expectations and support that leads to more great work and better outcomes for all.

"Being the 'best you can be' is really only possible when you are deeply connected to another. Splendid isolation is for planets, not people."

—DR. SUE JOHNSON, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

A MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

Robert Karasek's Job-Demand-Control-Support model argues that high and stressful job demands can be present as long as an employee has control over their job and has strong workplace relationships that help the employee to cope.[5] This model is influenced by, and shares similarities with, Diana Baumrind's popular behavioral model illustrating the importance of healthy expectations and high levels of support.[6]

In our current work, we found that employees also crave high expectations if they receive high levels of support from their employer. The adjacent diagram illustrates four different types of workplace cultures, each with varying levels of support and healthy expectations.

Uninvolved: Low expectations and low support; the least healthy and least productive culture

Permissive: Low expectations with high support; the lack of challenge compromises productivity and can eventually lead to employee frustration

Authoritarian: High expectations but low support; the lack of feedback, resources, or help compromises both employee wellbeing and productivity

Authoritative: High expectations with high support; the healthiest and most productive culture

This approach to understanding performance corresponds well with our findings from 2023: Workplaces with a strong sense of community and support (Authoritative) see an estimated 62% increase in employee tenure (4.4 years), a 58% decrease in employees seeking a new job, and a 38% reduction in employee burnout.[7]

HIGH SUPPORT

PERMISSIVE

AUTHORITATIVE

LOW EXPECTATIONS

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

UNINVOLVED

AUTHORITARIAN

LOW SUPPORT
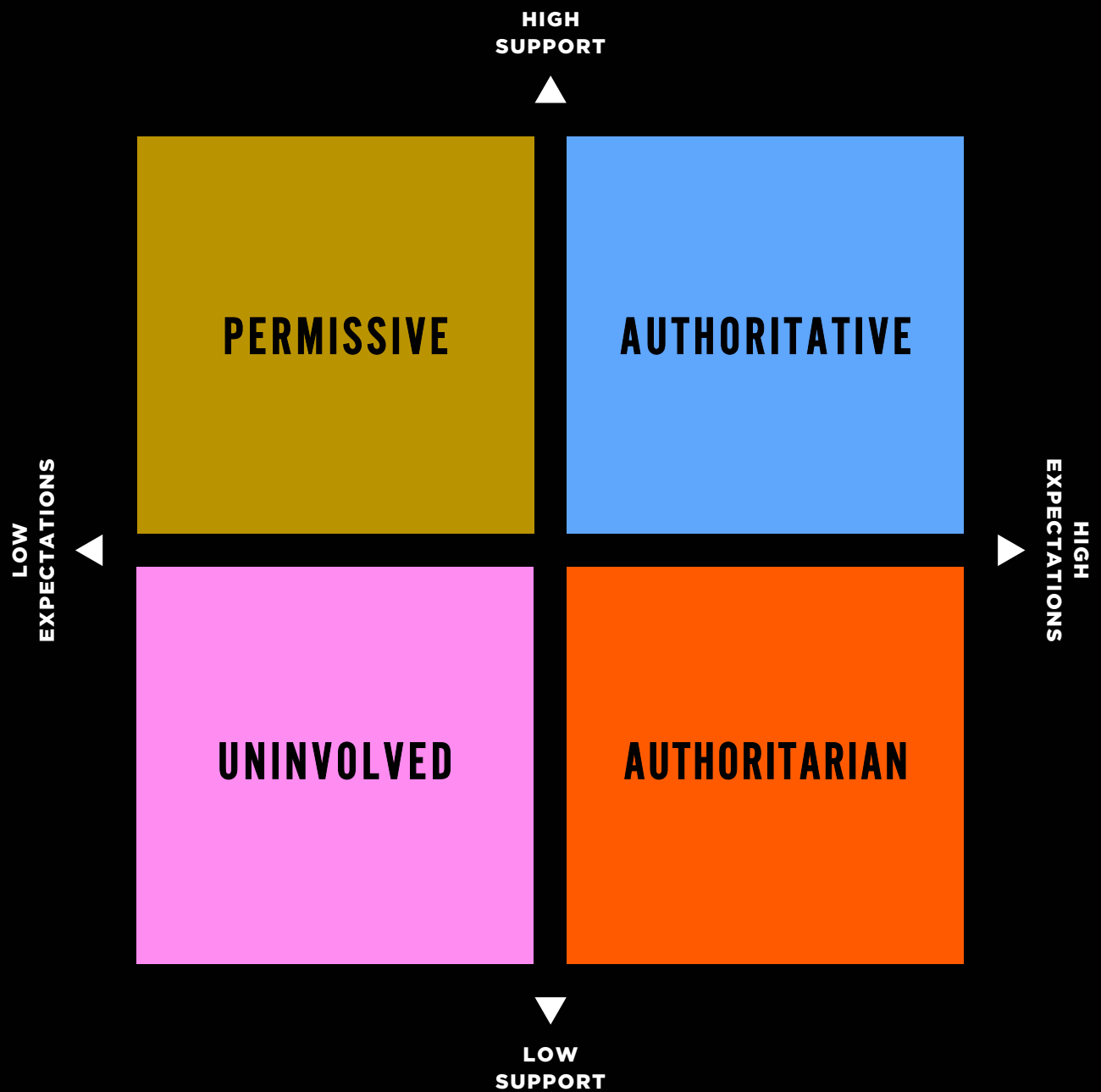
Figure 5. THE FACTORS OF PERFORMANCE
The four combinations of support and expectations that affect performance at work.

Testing the Two Dimensions

To better understand the impact of expectations and support on employee wellbeing and workplace satisfaction, we conducted an experiment by randomly assigning more than 13,000 employees to the four different scenarios on the adjacent page.

We then asked the employees to rate their satisfaction with the workplace and how much their situation would impact their mental health. All comparisons were made to the Uninvolved condition.

Results

The experiment, which allows us to infer cause, yielded two important findings:

1. There were no differences between the Uninvolved and the Authoritarian condition across all dimensions. This means workplace cultures that lack support have similar negative impacts on their employees' workplace satisfaction and mental health, regardless of whether expectations were high or low.

2. Those in the Authoritative scenario (high support and high expectations), scored highest on all outcomes. We found 76% of employees were satisfied with their workplace (much higher than the other conditions; d=0.91), and 69% of employees said an Authoritative workplace would positively impact their mental health (d=0.73). Additionally, 72% of employees reported belonging to an Authoritative workplace would help prevent their mental health problems (d=0.76).

PERMISSIVE

You're part of a team working on a new initiative. Your manager is friendly and always willing to listen to your concerns. However, they don't set clear goals or deadlines, and there's little accountability for your work. While you appreciate the supportive environment, you often feel the lack of structure and challenging tasks prevent you from achieving your full potential. The relaxed atmosphere sometimes leads to procrastination and less progress.

AUTHORITATIVE

You're working on a challenging project with ambitious goals. Your manager sets clear expectations and provides regular feedback and support to help you succeed. They're approachable and encourage open communication, addressing any concerns you may have. Your manager also offers resources and training to help you improve your skills. The combination of high expectations and strong support motivates you to excel and fosters a positive and productive work environment.

UNINVOLVED

You're working on a critical project with a tight deadline. Your manager rarely checks in with you or your team. When you seek guidance or feedback, your manager is either unavailable or gives vague, unhelpful direction. You feel left to figure things out on your own, and no one recognizes your efforts. The lack of direction and support leaves you feeling frustrated and disconnected from the project's goals.

AUTHORITARIAN

You're assigned to a high-stakes project with strict deadlines and high expectations. Your manager demands perfection and frequently criticizes your work without offering constructive feedback. When you ask for additional resources or support, your manager dismisses your requests and insists that you meet the high standards with what you have. The constant pressure and a lack of support create a stressful and demotivating environment, making it difficult for you to do your best work.

**HIGH EXPECTATIONS WITH STRONG SUPPORT CAN LEAD TO
GREATER WORKPLACE SATISFACTION AND BETTER MENTAL HEALTH**

As demonstrated in our experiment, employees given high support
and high expectations (Authoritative) scored the highest in workplace
satisfaction and positive mental health outcomes. Workplaces with
less support (Uninvolved and Authoritarian) or lower expectations
(Permissive) were least satisfied and felt their mental health was
negatively impacted. Organizational support includes providing
employees with growth and development opportunities, a voice in
decisions, transparent communication, and resources to do their jobs.

In looking at burnout and mental health, those employees with less
supportive workplaces reported the highest levels of depression
and anxiety, and mental health outcomes appear to improve when
organizations provide support. Highly supported employees see lower
odds of probable depression (–47%), probable anxiety (–44%), and
burnout (–88%).

These results underscore the importance of fostering a supportive
and ambitious work environment to enhance employee wellbeing
and performance. Organizations don't need to choose between
mental health and productivity—both are equally and simultaneously
achievable. Employees want to be challenged and treated well.

**ORGANIZATIONS WITH HEALTHY PERFORMANCE CULTURES
HAVE THE BEST BUSINESS OUTCOMES**

High expectations and support also impact culture and, ultimately,
business success. Employees in healthy performance workplaces
report higher levels of culture metrics like purpose, opportunity, and
appreciation, as the following table shows. Plus, they're more likely
to have leaders practicing modern leadership,[8] which leads to more
engagement and great work.

Percentage of Employees Above the Median in Each Workplace Type

TALENT MAGNETS AND CULTURE METRICS	UNINVOLVED	AUTHORITARIAN	PERMISSIVE	AUTHORITATIVE
Purpose	25%	43%	70%	81%
Opportunity	16%	39%	59%	85%
Success	15%	39%	57%	86%
Appreciation	25%	43%	70%	81%
Modern leadership	33%	47%	53%	74%
Great work	24%	51%	56%	86%
Engagement	18%	46%	69%	90%

Note: All comparisons are made to the Uninvolved workplace.

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When we looked at employee retention, those in Authoritative and Permissive workplaces have the longest expected retention, staying two years longer on average than those in Uninvolved or Authoritarian cultures. Interestingly, people in Authoritative cultures have the longest expected retention—indicating that high support and expectations produce the highest level of loyalty.

EXPECTATIONS AND SUPPORT LEAD TO MORE GREAT WORK AND INNOVATION

A culture of healthy performance allows every employee to do great work and innovate. This means they meet goals, collaborate, and are always learning, which helps them find inspiration and practice hope on a regular basis, leading to more innovation.

Percentage of Employees Above the Median in Each Workplace Type

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	UNINVOLVED	AUTHORITARIAN	PERMISSIVE	AUTHORITATIVE
Meets goals	11%	33%	48%	68%
Participates in active learning	55%	76%	87%	96%
Influences decisions	51%	69%	76%	91%
Gives recognition	63%	83%	85%	95%
Is highly motivated	54%	76%	88%	97%
Has a desire to stay	51%	65%	85%	93%
Collaborates	44%	56%	54%	71%
Innovates	45%	64%	70%	89%

Note: All comparisons are made to the Uninvolved workplace.

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One effective way for organizations to foster healthy performance is with employee recognition. Recognition acknowledges, identifies, and honors people when they achieve goals and meet high expectations. It also inspires them to set higher goals. By regularly recognizing employees, organizations can reward effort, celebrate project milestones, and help workers see their progress and understand that the company values and cares about them. Recognition helps people take ownership of their work and feel sustained along the way.

To create a healthy performance culture that has high expectations and high support for employees, remember the basics:

(1) **Communicate well and provide opportunities for growth**

Employees believe their workplace has high but healthy expectations when they have regular, open communication and see potential to progress in their careers. The following table shows the increased likelihood of this positive perception when the most impactful factors are present.

TOP 5 PREDICTORS OF HEALTHY WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS	INCREASED ODDS EMPLOYEES FEEL THEIR ORGANIZATION HAS HEALTHY EXPECTATIONS
Regular team meetings with open communication	**+58%**
Training sessions for professional development	**+46%**
Opportunities for project leadership	**+36%**
Employees involved in the decision-making process	**+32%**
Regular check-ins to discuss wellbeing	**+28%**

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When setting expectations, use clear goals tied to the organization's purpose and vision, and ensure employees not only understand these goals but know how their individual work contributes to them. Reinforce the connection in regular team meetings.

Ideally, leaders and employees co-create inspiring, hopeful goals with opportunities to ask questions and give feedback. Follow up with the resources, training, and time to improve skills, and provide a detailed plan for leadership development that includes mentorship and growth projects. Employees who are encouraged to meet expectations and given chances to grow and lead see the targets as personal challenges they want to accomplish.

"The key to unlocking better results is an abundant approach. The best and fiercest leaders find a way to look for the 'and' in small and big moments. They are both resolute and exacting on standards and caring with the people involved."

—DOUG CONANT, AUTHOR, *THE BLUEPRINT: 6 PRACTICAL STEPS TO LIFT YOUR LEADERSHIP TO NEW HEIGHTS*

(2) **Provide high support with regular connection**

Supporting employees requires regular communication and development, which have even more impact when leaders inquire about their wellbeing. Demonstrating empathy can strengthen the sense of connection by acknowledging and addressing mental health concerns. The following table shows how employees are most likely to feel supported.

TOP 5 PREDICTORS OF WORKPLACE SUPPORT	INCREASED ODDS EMPLOYEES FEEL THEIR ORGANIZATION IS SUPPORTIVE
Regular team meetings with open communication	**+66%**
Regular check-ins to discuss wellbeing	**+50%**
Training sessions for professional development	**+47%**
Employees involved in the decision-making process	**+44%**
Clear practices for recognizing and addressing burnout	**+41%**

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Provide feedback through ongoing, open interactions. Use one-to-ones or team meetings to monitor progress on goals and recognize efforts and accomplishments along the way. These moments of connection can also help revisit expectations and address obstacles to the work.

Regardless of how leaders connect with employees, it's critical they know and address the concerns and struggles their people have—in or out of the workplace. This starts with asking about employees' wellbeing and providing resources to address burnout and improve mental health.[9] Openly discussing mental health, allowing time off when necessary, and providing access to mental healthcare help employees feel supported.

Of course, leaders need support, too.[10] Check in, ask how they're feeling, and help them sustain their teams by removing roadblocks, addressing challenges, providing resources, and showing appreciation.

(3)   **Leverage employee recognition**

Recognition can support employees by validating, encouraging, and celebrating their efforts, accomplishments, and great work. Employees at organizations with integrated recognition are 18x more likely to say their workplace has a healthy performance culture with high expectations and high support.

Recognize employees frequently and for a variety of reasons: meeting individual or team goals, doing above-and-beyond work, innovating, and sharing in company milestones and achievements. Be specific in the recognition and describe what the individual uniquely did. Connecting employee accomplishments to the company's purpose, goals, or vision can help show how they met expectations, while recognition that's genuine and personal demonstrates support.

Organizations don't need to choose between mental health and productivity—both are equally and simultaneously achievable. Employees want to be challenged and treated well.

ICF, a global advisory and technology service provider, uses recognition to ensure its 9,000 employees feel supported. The company's recognition platform, by O.C. Tanner, combines frequent recognition with wellness resources to support employees. Recognition data integrated into ICF's Workday HRIS help leaders draw the connection between expectations and achievements in performance reviews. It also allows ICF to celebrate team efforts in a way that ties back to its core values.

The result: significantly higher retention and both leaders and employees feel more supported and connected to insights that help them perform at higher levels.[11]

"Someone's overall contentment with their job isn't just about the dollars; it's about their overall experience. Do they feel connected to the organization, do they have good relationships, do they feel fulfilled from the work they are doing? Feeling recognized and appreciated makes a huge impact."

—LINDSAY LANDRY, EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE LEAD, ICF

A healthy performance culture provides high expectations and high support for employees.

Organizations with a healthy performance culture have the best employee mental health and business outcomes.

Providing open communication and growth opportunities helps set high but healthy expectations.

Regular check-ins and an active focus on wellbeing help employees feel supported at work.

Healthy Performance Cultures Sources

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3. Crisis, 2021 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute.

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7. Workplace Community, 2023 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute.

8. Leadership, 2020 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute.

9. The Mental Health Link, 2025 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute.

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Transparency Revisited

What employees want to see most
is how they make a difference.

3^X

3^X

INCREASED ODDS AN ORGANIZATION WILL BE
A GREAT PLACE TO WORK WHEN IT PRACTICES THE
FOUR TYPES OF TRANSPARENCY

Transparency at work and in business is a relatively recent principle. For longer than not, organizations intentionally withheld information from employees, leading to a sense of secrecy. Today, leaders know concealment risks disengaged workers, less-accountable leaders, and diminished trust and decision-making. Of course, as with many principles, the more we learn about transparency, the more it has to teach us. When organizations are open and honest in the four areas that matter most to employees, our research finds some profound and even unexpected benefits. To be sure, confidentiality and privacy still have their place, but it's increasingly clear that open and frequent communications produce better outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of transparency in the workplace often runs into problems between what organizations and leaders think they should communicate and what most employees want to know.

Employees typically prefer more than their employers can share, given a complex environment of rules, regulations, and social norms. And many organizations convey news to leaders (who then decide what to pass on to their people), while others rely heavily on HR to act as gatekeepers. Regardless, when employees believe information is withheld or filtered, it can take a toll on feelings of trust and respect.

During the pandemic, employers increased transparency as they changed how they worked, nearly overnight. Many shifted to regular, even daily, communication with employees about company changes, performance, or needs. And employees valued both the information and the honest approach. It helped them feel more engaged and connected to their employers, as well as better equipped to make decisions. Both employees and organizations benefited.

As organizations navigate new cultural, technological, and economic changes, employees' appetite for transparency remains high. They want to know about their roles, but also the organization's direction, the rationale behind important decisions or changes, and how leaders are held accountable. Regrettably, only about half of workers say their organization, senior leaders, HR teams, or direct leaders are transparent. The same number report transparency for promotion and compensation processes. And worse, a majority of employees in 28 countries think their leaders deliberately mislead them.[1]
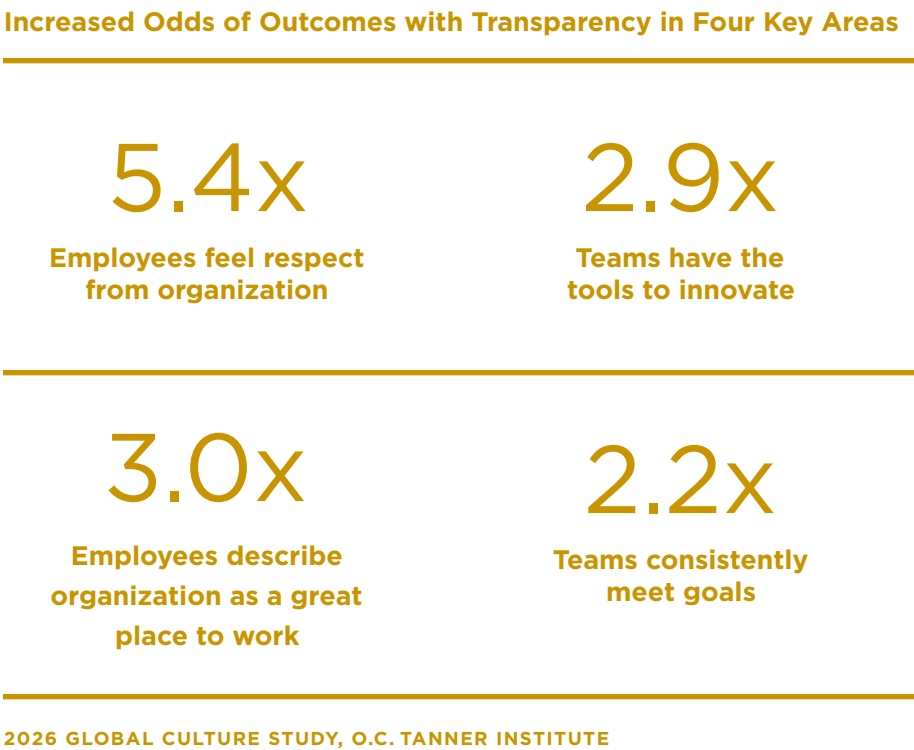
A few years ago, our research revealed how imperative organizational transparency was to building trust, wellbeing, and engagement, especially during challenging times.[2] Now, our studies reveal employees expect transparency in four key areas:

- **Personal work**
- **Connections with others and their workplace community**
- **Decision-making (both senior leadership and immediate leaders)**
- **Accountability**
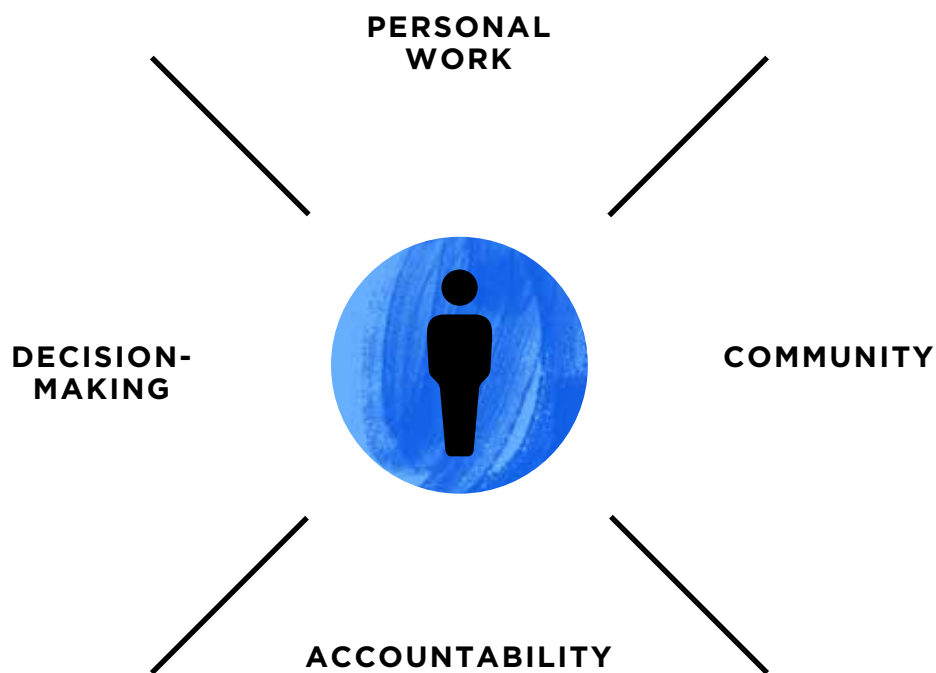
Figure 6. NEW PARADIGM OF TRANSPARENCY
The four areas where organizational transparency has the most impact.

As the following table shows, when organizations make transparency in these four areas part of the daily employee experience, the odds of several positive outcomes improve:

Increased Odds of Outcomes with Transparency in Four Key Areas

5.4x
Employees feel respect from organization

2.9x
Teams have the tools to innovate

3.0x
Employees describe organization as a great place to work

2.2x
Teams consistently meet goals

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The effect on employee wellbeing is also notable: The odds of probable anxiety decrease 40%.

The importance of transparency isn't new to organizations, but they'd be well served to look at it in a new light. Rather than an overarching policy or an ethereal cultural element, transparency can be a practice that permeates daily operations, leadership approaches, and core values to build trust, respect, engagement, and belonging.

"Encouraging transparency and open communication in the workplace can be uncomfortable but can have big rewards: true organizational alignment, fewer distractions, increased speed, shared understanding, and higher levels of leadership trust, credibility, and confidence. These benefits help your company operate with less friction and foster a culture that attracts and retains talented people who want to have their voice heard at work."

—AMANDA ATKINS, HEAD OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS, SLACK

THE WINDOW INTO PERSONAL WORK

The first area of transparency involves employees' individual workload, performance, and evaluation. In our focus groups, we found employees are the most curious about their personal work. Specifically, they want:

- **Clear, high, healthy expectations**
- **Guidance and support to meet those expectations**
- **Clarity around their responsibilities**
- **The performance metrics for evaluating their work**
- **Real-time feedback on their performance**
- **A connection between their work, overall company goals, and compensation**

Remarkably, 60% of employees don't fully understand their company's strategies and objectives, much less how their work supports them.[3]

In addition, people need access to information and tools to do their jobs—as well as visibility into other teams that affect their work—and they want to see their possible future at the organization with well-defined career paths.

The person who communicates also makes a big difference that can change depending on circumstances. For example, during the Covid pandemic, transparent communication from senior leadership was crucial. Employees needed regular reassurance—sometimes daily—that they were safe, supported, and valued. Today, that emphasis has shifted and transparency about work and performance is 7x more powerful from immediate managers than from senior leaders or HR teams. This communication can take place in formal one-to-ones, everyday emails, or casual conversations.

As the following table shows, when leaders communicate transparently about work, the odds of several positive perceptions improve.

Employee Perceptions
When Work Communication
Is Transparent

PERCEPTION	INCREASED ODDS
I have a sense of fulfillment at work	9x
My leader supports my growth and development	7x
I want to do great work	5x
I feel positive about my organization's leadership	5x
I trust my direct leader	4x
My organization has a culture of honesty	4x

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EMPLOYEES WANT TRANSPARENCY FROM COWORKERS, TOO

The second area of transparency, Community, applies to employee dialogue with their coworkers, leaders, and cross-functional team members. This includes collaboration with supportive teams, where employees can share ideas, try, fail, and win together.

High transparency in this area promotes a sense of belonging, cultural cohesion, and trust. Employees are informed about news and events at the organization. They also give, receive, and witness recognition regularly.

One important note: A transparent workplace community requires intentional effort. Leaders must spend as much time cultivating relationships as they spend on accomplishing tasks and projects. Effective leaders create a transparent environment where everyone can address issues to build trust, share information equitably to foster inclusion, and recognize individual contributors often. They create teams where employees know they belong and where they stand. Transparent communication in workplace communities improves the odds of several other positive perceptions, as the following table shows.

Increased Odds of Employee Perceptions with Transparent Community Communication

5.8x

**I have a sense
of opportunity
and growth**

3.9x

**I feel
appreciated**

3.6x

**I understand how my
work impacts other teams
and departments**

2.8x

**Overall, I'm satisfied
with my company
culture**

3.1x

**My team regularly
meets goals**

1.8x

**I have a positive
sense of wellbeing**

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THE TIME FOR TRANSPARENCY IN DECISION-MAKING IS BEFORE THE DECISION

Transparency in decision-making has traditionally meant openly sharing the thinking behind certain choices or actions. Communicating the process and criteria, along with easy-to-access information about changes and updates, can help employees feel connected to decisions as well as an organizational vision.

However, our new lens for this area goes further to ensure employees' voices are heard even before decisions are made. It includes providing opportunities for feedback, encouraging open dialogue, and making space for input without fear of negative consequences. This approach shows people their insights are valued and considered, and it increases their trust in leadership and sense of inclusion.

As has always been evident, a lack of transparent decision-making leads to employee frustration, mistrust, and a decline in morale, which can ripple across workplace culture. When communication is unclear or inconsistent and employees don't believe they have a say in decisions, they can feel disconnected from leaders and organizations, which undermines confidence and decreases engagement.

As the following table shows, when decision-making is transparent and employees are actively involved, the odds of several positive perceptions improve.

**Employee Perceptions When
Decision-making Is Transparent**

PERCEPTION	INCREASED ODDS
Employees are respected and valued	5x
I'm satisfied with communication from senior leadership	5x
I'm satisfied with communication from my direct leader	4x
Employees value organizational policies	3x
I trust senior leadership	2x

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Additionally, employees are 30% less likely to feel powerless over their situation at work.

"Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior."

—BRENÉ BROWN, RESEARCHER, PROFESSOR, AND AUTHOR

ACCOUNTABILITY AND OWNERSHIP FOR LEADERS, RECOGNITION FOR EMPLOYEES

Finally, employees need to see how leaders are accountable and own their work. This area of transparency involves communicating the responsibilities and expectations set for leaders, which builds trust and respect.

Accountability, in our research, refers to how leaders hold themselves to communicated standards and share how their actions align with organizational goals. This includes the standard of ownership, which applies to how leaders acknowledge their role in decisions and take responsibility for the results—positive or negative.

This might include admitting when a decision creates problems for employees or when a strategy simply fails. Leaders who proactively communicate the reasoning, anticipated outcomes, and any unintended consequences of their choices demonstrate a commitment to both transparency and integrity.

Such practices position leaders as partners with their direct reports rather than distant authority figures. A recent study published in *Forbes* found that when leaders consistently shared organizational challenges and invited open dialogue, 63% of employees became strong advocates for the company (as opposed to 6% in companies that didn't).[4] Offering candid reflections on a policy shift or sharing lessons learned from a mistake humanizes leadership and strengthens organizational bonds.

Remarkably, transparent accountability is even more powerful when leaders recognize employees for their good work. Just as transparency reveals the leader's role in achievements, recognition highlights employees' contributions. Leaders who openly share challenges facing the organization, admit mistakes, take responsibility, and then recognize employees when things go well can dramatically improve the odds of several positive outcomes.

Cultural Outcomes When Accountability Is Transparent

PERCEPTION	INCREASED ODDS
Engagement	5x
Trust in organization	5x
High satisfaction with communications from senior leadership	5x
High satisfaction with communications from direct leader	4x
Strong sense of leadership	4x
Great work	3x

By focusing on four areas of transparency, organizations can build a workplace culture where employees are informed, feel valued, and understand how they contribute to success.

(1)   **Communicate with employees openly and often**

Employees want leaders to not only share information but also explain how it will affect their jobs. This is especially true for organizational challenges, policy changes, and new directives. Leaders should speak with employees regularly and concentrate on the following areas:

Personal work
Have frequent one-to-ones to discuss employee work and personal performance. This should include:

- **Workload expectations**
- **How their performance is evaluated**
- **How their role contributes to organizational goals**
- **Conversations about compensation**
- **Their future at the organization**
- **Regular, personalized recognition for good work**

Community

Provide opportunities for formal and informal dialogue between employees and leaders. This can involve:

- **Collaboration between individuals, teams, and departments**
- **Team assignments that foster inclusion and safety to innovate and fail**
- **Equitably sharing information with all team members**
- **Occasions to give, receive, and witness recognition**

Decision-making

Do more than share a plan; solicit employee input for decisions through town halls, forums, and feedback tools. Some possible strategies:

- **Explain the reasons behind changes and decisions**
- **Communicate the process for making decisions that affect employees**
- **Include everyone in the decision-making process early**
- **Encourage people to respond to leadership with the assurance that feedback is appreciated, never punished**

Accountability

Take ownership and accountability for mistakes, but also recognize employees when they contribute to successes. Organizations and leaders should:

- **Be open about challenges**
- **Acknowledge problems and errors**
- **Accept responsibility for the impact of decisions on employees**
- **Admit when information is incomplete**
- **Recognize people for great work**

(2) **Build transparency into workplace processes**

Organizations should work to integrate transparent practices into leadership training, formal decision-making procedures, team-building activities, and culture initiatives.

Managers may need specific guidelines from HR and senior leadership on what they can or should share and how, as well as best practices for talking with employees transparently about their work. Provide leaders with the necessary information, support, flexibility, and autonomy to be transparent and show them how to take accountability and use practical empathy to handle tough questions from employees.

Organizations should also create clear pathways for information to flow freely from employees to leaders—and above—so there can be ample communication, feedback, and acknowledgement. Make it easy for employees to give input through surveys, suggestion tools, team meetings, and town halls.

"The greatest gift you can give your team: clarity, communication, and pulling people together around a shared mission."

—ANNE SWEENEY, PRESIDENT, DISNEY-ABC TELEVISION GROUP

Zions Bancorporation is heavily invested in employee recognition and ensuring transparency is an integrated part of its processes. Leaders receive direct reminders to recognize and send out regular communication to their teams about the importance of recognition. Encouraging leaders to recognize people through the bank's Value You platform, by O.C. Tanner, makes recognition more transparent, and live stats on dashboards and reports help keep managers accountable for recognition.

In addition to posting employees' upcoming anniversaries internally, Zions also sends regular emails to leaders to remind them to celebrate and write messages of congratulations in employees' keepsake Yearbooks™. Building this level of transparency into the recognition process has resulted in a 30% increase in the number of messages celebrating employee anniversaries, and recognition has strengthened connection and inclusion at the bank.[5]

(3)   Use employee recognition to amplify the effects of transparency

Recognition from leaders is an excellent way to provide transparent feedback on employees' work and personal performance, especially when it highlights the unique ways they're contributing, growing, and making a difference. So be specific when recognizing people and align the recognition to the organization's purpose, goals, and values.

Likewise, peer-to-peer recognition builds transparency in the area of community when it emphasizes collaboration and helps employees feel included. Ensure there are tools and opportunities for people to recognize one another across teams and departments. And involve team members in recognition moments to comment on the work being recognized and observe the praise firsthand.

Furthermore, empower all employees to give recognition, even to their leaders, and provide a variety of tools so they can recognize frequently.

While focusing on transparency in the four key areas improves culture measures—including Talent Magnets like purpose, opportunity, and success—our research shows that adding integrated recognition[6] (recognition that's an embedded, daily part of the employee experience) can double or triple the impact.

**Impact of Transparency and
Integrated Recognition on Talent Magnets**

TALENT MAGNET	WITH TRANSPARENCY IN FOUR KEY AREAS	WITH TRANSPARENCY IN FOUR KEY AREAS + INTEGRATED RECOGNITION
Purpose	**2x**	**5x**
Opportunity	**3x**	**9x**
Success	**3x**	**10x**
Appreciation	**2x**	**5x**
Leadership	**3x**	**8x**

2026 GLOBAL CULTURE STUDY, O.C. TANNER INSTITUTE

Deloitte India puts people at the center of everything it does, so when the professional services firm rolled out its new recognition platform, Dot of Fame, by O.C. Tanner, it made transparency a priority.

First, the HR team met with individual business leaders and all managers to explain the new program and the reasons for change. Next, they spent several months socializing the platform, conducting training sessions so people understood how to use it. Then, to hold leaders accountable, they included recognition metrics in their KPIs, and both their CEO and Chief People and Experience Officer now regularly mention the importance of recognition in town hall meetings. And finally, the firm began conducting regular pulse surveys to track the results.

Key result: Employee retention increased by 10 points.[7]

Employees need transparency in four key areas: Personal Work, Community, Decision-making, and Accountability.

Employees desire transparency from both leaders and peers.

Transparency requires clear, honest communication, as well as including the voice of employees when making decisions.

Greater transparency helps employees feel informed and valued and gives them a greater sense of belonging.

Transparency Revisited Sources

1. 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, Edelman Trust Institute.

2. Crisis, 2021 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute.

3. "The Case For Transparency In The Workplace, And Its Impact On Organizational Performance," Andrew Rahaman, *Forbes*, June 16, 2023.

4. "Why Leadership Transparency Will Define Organizational Success In 2025," Kara Dennison, *Forbes*, January 15, 2025.

5. "Zions Bancorporation: Strengthening Community with Recognition," O.C. Tanner.

6. Integrated Recognition, 2023 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute.

7. "Deloitte India: Recognition that Pushes Boundaries and Delivers Excellence," O.C. Tanner.

One Last Word
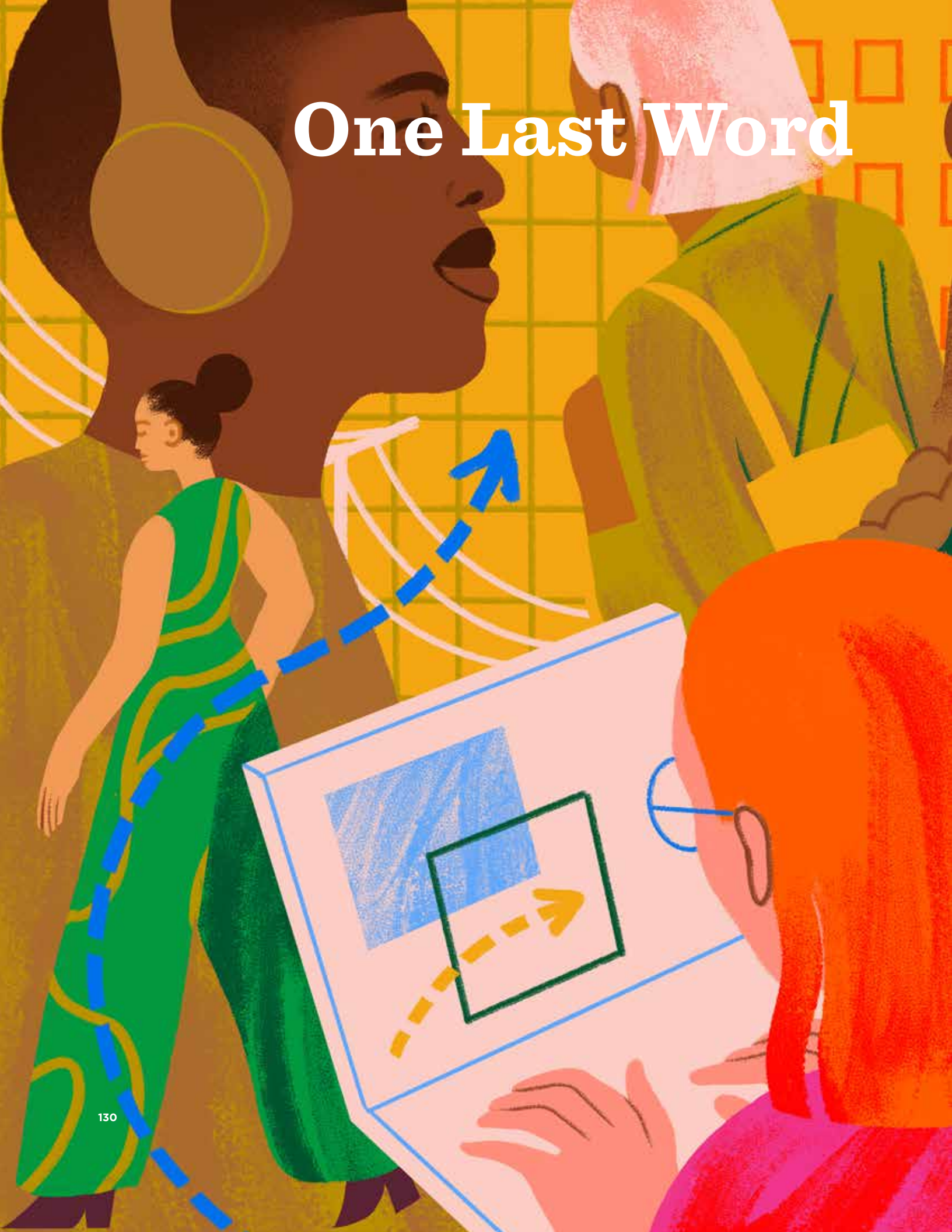
Inspiration, hope, inclusion, and transparency are more than noble ideas—they're entirely realistic goals.

Our latest research shows a shift in what inspires and motivates employees. In addition to best practices such as modern leadership, growth opportunities, and meaningful recognition, the support of a workplace community is increasingly important. So, how can organizations now help employees harness inspiration and use it in the most productive ways?

As you draw conclusions about this year's Global Culture Report and identify actions to take in your organization, here are a few points to keep in mind:

1. **Inspiration and support require more than great leaders**

Our studies demonstrate that the workplace community also inspires employees, encourages feelings of belonging, provides valuable transparency, and helps employees overcome obstacles to reach their goals. While leaders certainly play a crucial role in inspiring, connecting, and supporting employees, they can't do it alone. And in many cases, support is more meaningful when it comes from the entire team. It's also worth remembering strong teams create strong workplace cultures.

2. **It's time to move beyond engagement**

Regardless of how you define it, employee engagement isn't an end goal. Rather, it's a means to better business outcomes, and a better means to those same outcomes is great work. In high-performance cultures, great work can power innovation and help organizations compete in fluid, dynamic industries. The practices of inspiration, hope, and recognition all support great work by helping employees succeed—and feel validated and appreciated when they do. Organizations can confidently move forward, setting high expectations and providing high support to encourage innovation toward a common goal together. (See Engagement Revisited in the 2022 Global Culture Report for a comprehensive examination of engagement and great work.)

3. Organizations need to act

Inspiration, hope, inclusion, and transparency aren't just noble ideas. They're entirely realistic goals when organizations put the right principles and steps into practice. The conversion from concept to action applies equally to everyone, from senior leaders to interns. Each person has a role. And when practices become the foundation of policies, processes, training, expectations, and rewards, they come to life daily. Employees understand their role in the organization, what they need to do to succeed, and what they can do to help one another.

Small moments of inspiration—when combined with practices like hope, inclusion, transparency, and support—can drive meaningful change that gains momentum. We hope this year's findings inspire you to take action, and we wish you every success as your inspired actions create a workplace culture where people thrive.

"People do not decide to become extraordinary. They decide to accomplish extraordinary things."

—EDMUND HILLARY, MOUNTAINEER AND EXPLORER

METHODOLOGY

The O.C. Tanner Institute uses multiple research methods to support the Global Culture Report, including interviews, focus groups, cross-sectional surveys, and a longitudinal survey.

Qualitative findings came from 18 focus groups among employees, leaders, and HR practitioners of larger organizations. The focus groups and additional interviews were held throughout 2024 and 2025, each representing various types of employers and industries, including both private and public entities.

Quantitative findings came from online survey interviews administered to employees across Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The total sample size was 38,929 workers, drawn from companies with more than 500 employees. The O.C. Tanner Institute collected and analyzed all survey data. This sample is sufficient to generate meaningful conclusions about the cultures of organizations in the included countries. However, because the study does not include population data, the results are subject to statistical errors customarily associated with sample-based information.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from the O.C. Tanner Institute.

Global Appendix

THE AMERICAS

EUROPE

IMEA

Talent Magnet index scores and workplace
culture outcomes across the world.

APAC (ASIA PACIFIC)

(INDIA, MIDDLE EAST, AFRICA)

THE AMERICAS

The ongoing focus on innovation continues to push new policies and practices across the Americas. Rooted in a shared climate of economic uncertainty and instability, organizations are responding to both challenges and opportunities with distinct regional strategies. In Mexico, the struggle to retain top talent in scientific fields and disciplines has led to increased investment in regional tech centers. Across the U.S., organizations are broadcasting a message that employees must upskill to compete in an AI-driven future. And many organizations are re-evaluating investments in the employee experience with an eye toward strengthening their market position in the short term. Likewise, employers in Canada have responded to issues of talent mobility and employee satisfaction with renewed support for flexible work programs. Our research shows that transformative change in regions across both North and South America emerges when leaders, teams, and meaningful goals inspire employees and motivate action. By embracing regional nuances, empowered leaders can tap into sources of inspiration that speak to individual and company values, unify teams, and unlock the kind of innovation needed to thrive amid uncertainty.
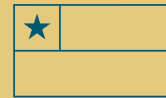
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MINDI COX
CHIEF MARKETING & PEOPLE OFFICER
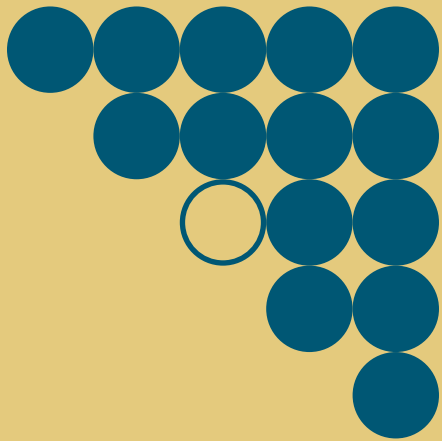**SALT LAKE CITY, UNITED STATES**

BRA

CAN

CHL

MEX

USA

-60%

DECREASED ODDS OF A PROBABLE DIAGNOSIS OF DEPRESSION WHEN EMPLOYEES IN THE AMERICAS BELIEVE THEIR ORGANIZATION PROVIDES ADEQUATE RESOURCES TO HELP THEM SUCCEED

EMPLOYEES IN THE AMERICAS WHO BELIEVE THEIR TEAMS ARE INCLUSIVE ARE 15X MORE LIKELY TO FIND SUCCESS AT WORK

9x

EMPLOYEES IN THE AMERICAS WHO FEEL INSPIRED AT WORK ARE 9X MORE LIKELY TO FEEL FULFILLED

THE AMERICAS	OVERALL	AGE 18–28	AGE 29–44	AGE 45–60	AGE 61–79
Purpose	75	72	76	74	74
Opportunity	70	72	72	67	64
Success	72	72	73	70	67
Appreciation	63	63	64	67	59
Wellbeing	58	56	58	57	63
Leadership	67	68	69	65	62
Engagement	74	73	75	73	74
Burnout	41	41	40	42	36
Great work	71	70	72	69	66
Fulfillment	76	75	77	75	77
Inspiration	61	59	64	57	53
Hope	46	40	48	45	45
Inclusive teams	34	25	36	34	26

In THE AMERICAS, we see generally higher Talent Magnet scores in the United States and Brazil, while wellbeing, hope, and a sense of inclusive teams are low in every country. Overall, the region sees slight improvements in engagement and great work, but burnout remains unchanged. Additionally, while Gen Z employees (age 22–28) are performing well overall, they are struggling more than their older peers to hold a positive vision of the future. Ensuring culture and performance measures stay on an upward trajectory will require leaders to champion practices that inspire employees and connect them to each other and their organizations.

BRAZIL	CANADA	CHILE	MEXICO	UNITED STATES
79	71	71	73	78
74	65	64	71	74
76	67	66	72	76
68	60	58	62	66
62	56	56	59	58
71	62	61	66	71
77	70	69	74	77
33	44	41	36	41
74	66	68	73	73
81	71	74	78	79
69	48	61	76	64
55	32	47	54	51
43	23	28	32	40

EUROPE

The diversity of challenges, expectations, and opportunities across Europe makes it one of the most nuanced regions when it comes to creating innovative and inspiring workplaces. Economic strain, an aging workforce, and ongoing regional volatility factor heavily in organisational decision-making, particularly when it comes to both short- and long-term investment in growth and development. As innovation accelerates across Europe, its application often remains localised and unique to country-specific objectives. For some, the need to establish a technological position in an increasingly competitive global market is driving growth. For others, innovation takes the form of reimagining work models in ways that better meet employees' evolving needs. Despite these efforts, Europe generally scores lower than other international regions in key areas like inspiration, hope, and inclusive teams. This suggests that while organisations may be executing initiatives and decisions, the people behind them may feel disconnected from the values, teams, and practices that make the employee experience meaningful. We find thriving organisations embrace their regional strengths and objectives while aligning their employee recognition strategy and technology to generate inspiration and hope.
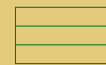
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ROBERT ORDEVER
MANAGING DIRECTOR, EUROPE
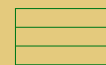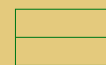**LONDON, ENGLAND**

BEL

FRA

DEU

ITA

NLD

POL
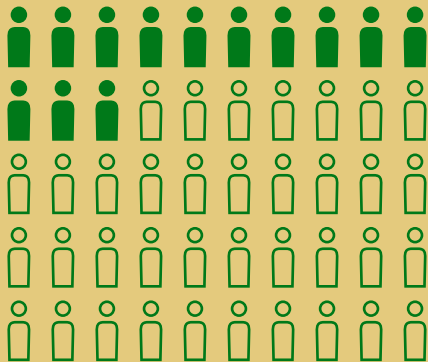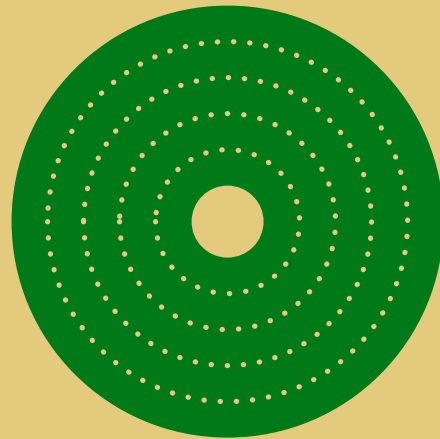
ESP

SWE

GBR

ONLY 26% OF EMPLOYEES
IN EUROPE SAY THEY HAVE
AN INCLUSIVE TEAM

TRANSPARENCY INCREASES
THE ODDS THAT EUROPEAN
EMPLOYEES WILL VALUE THEIR
ORGANIZATION'S POLICIES
AND PROCEDURES BY 6X

–82%

DECREASED ODDS OF
BURNOUT AMONG
EUROPEAN EMPLOYEES
WHO REPORT HAVING HOPE

11x

EUROPEAN EMPLOYEES HAVE
11X GREATER ODDS OF FEELING
ENGAGED WHEN THEY HAVE
LEADERS WHO INSPIRE THEM

EUROPE	OVERALL	AGE 18–28	AGE 29–44	AGE 45–60	AGE 61–79
Purpose	70	70	72	69	71
Opportunity	64	67	68	60	59
Success	65	68	68	62	60
Appreciation	60	62	62	56	55
Wellbeing	58	56	58	58	61
Leadership	62	65	64	58	55
Engagement	69	71	71	67	66
Burnout	42	43	42	42	40
Great work	64	68	68	61	58
Fulfillment	70	72	73	69	69
Inspiration	50	54	55	46	33
Hope	47	48	50	45	48
Inclusive teams	26	23	29	23	20

A moderate increase in EUROPE's overall Talent Magnet scores includes notable upticks in opportunity and engagement, as well as a small decline in burnout. Similarly, both Gen Z (age 22–28) and Millennial employees (age 29–44) see high scores in great work. However, scores for hope, inspiration, and inclusive teams are low across all ages and countries, indicating that organizations should recommit to balancing performance initiatives with practices and programs that foster connection and inclusion.

BELGIUM	FRANCE	GERMANY	ITALY	NETHER-LANDS	POLAND	SPAIN	SWEDEN	UNITED KINGDOM
69	67	70	67	69	66	69	70	74
63	61	65	59	67	61	62	64	67
64	60	64	63	65	61	64	63	69
57	58	59	57	59	58	58	60	62
58	57	57	57	60	51	56	59	59
60	59	61	58	61	57	59	61	65
69	67	69	66	69	62	65	68	73
42	42	41	39	41	45	42	42	44
62	61	63	63	62	61	62	63	68
69	69	69	68	70	67	71	70	73
48	47	45	50	46	49	50	45	54
43	39	42	40	38	39	50	40	56
19	18	25	21	17	15	23	20	35

IMEA

Inspiration, innovation, and growth are accelerating in companies across the IMEA region. Powered by a young, fast-growing workforce, organisations here continue to reshape workplace expectations with robust upskilling programs and increased schedule flexibility. Both India and Saudi Arabia have seen substantial job creation and falling unemployment rates—positive trends that contribute to the region's elevated employee sentiment. The normalisation of hybrid work and the expansion of tech and innovation hubs across all regions reinforce strong employee engagement and the production of great work. Yet, while IMEA overall seems to be thriving, opportunities for improvement remain. In spite of a slight increase in wellbeing from last year, burnout is unchanged. And scores for both hope and inclusive teams are relatively low. These findings suggest that efficiency and high performance may be coming at the expense of meaningful employee connections and comprehensive mental healthcare. Our research underscores that even in high-performing regions, modern leadership helps sustain employee success by strengthening team dynamics that foster belonging, wellbeing, and a shared sense of hope.

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ZUBIN ZACK
MANAGING DIRECTOR, INDIA,
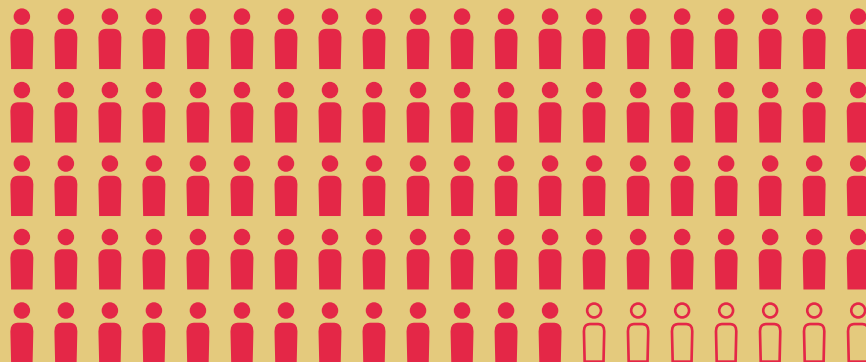**MIDDLE EAST, AND AFRICA**
MUMBAI, INDIA
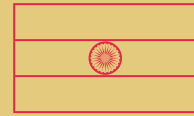
IND

SAU

ZAF

ARE

24x

EMPLOYEES IN IMEA ARE 24X MORE LIKELY TO MEET TEAM GOALS WHEN THEY BELIEVE THEIR TEAM IS INCLUSIVE

THE ODDS OF BURNOUT DECREASE 93% WHEN IMEA EMPLOYEES FEEL THEIR SUPERVISOR IS APPROACHABLE AND WILLING TO HELP

IMEA	OVERALL	AGE 18–28	AGE 29–44	AGE 45–60	AGE 61–79
Purpose	81	80	82	78	77
Opportunity	79	79	79	76	75
Success	80	68	69	67	68
Appreciation	69	80	80	77	76
Wellbeing	59	58	58	59	61
Leadership	75	75	75	71	66
Engagement	82	80	82	81	78
Burnout	40	39	39	37	38
Great work	79	77	79	79	76
Fulfillment	83	81	83	82	81
Inspiration	78	77	79	73	77
Hope	49	44	50	49	38
Inclusive teams	33	28	33	36	42

IMEA shows high scores across culture and performance metrics, with India continuing to lead the region. Most scores, however, remain generally unchanged from the previous year, with only a slight increase in wellbeing and fulfillment. Engagement and great work scores are high for Gen Z (age 22–28) and Millennial (age 29–44) employees, yet inclusive team scores are lower than their older colleagues. Scores for inspiration are high for both age and region, but there's still room to improve in hope and inclusive teams.

INDIA	SAUDI ARABIA	SOUTH AFRICA	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
83	80	79	79
83	77	73	77
83	78	76	78
69	67	70	67
58	57	65	57
77	73	69	73
83	80	81	79
44	35	35	38
81	77	79	76
84	83	81	81
83	79	62	78
51	48	50	44
35	31	32	26

APAC

The APAC region continues to reflect a dynamic and often polarised landscape where some markets show encouraging momentum in innovation and growth while others grapple with employee experience challenges shaped by long-held traditions or beliefs. In Singapore, a larger investment in creating more inclusive workspaces persists. Organisations here are also expanding workforce planning and upskilling programs (particularly for mid- and late-career employees) in response to the disruption of rapidly advancing technology. Australia and the Philippines are promoting upskilling and flexible work design models, too, even as they navigate skilled labor shortages that put pressure on both talent pipelines and business innovation. And in Japan, employers are still struggling to modernize rigid work hierarchies where heightened stress and commitment are taking a toll on employee wellbeing. Organisational ambitions remain high across APAC as companies explore the promise of AI, albeit with some uncertainty of how it may impact entry-level roles. In the final analysis, future-focused employers can attract, retain, and grow their talent by fostering an inspiring workplace that prioritises belonging, inclusivity, and a holistic view of wellbeing.

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ALAN HEYWARD
MANAGING DIRECTOR, ASIA PACIFIC
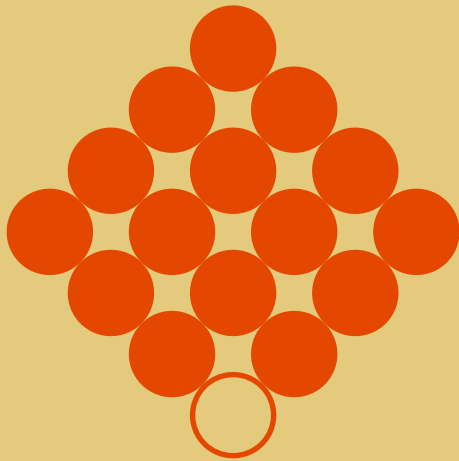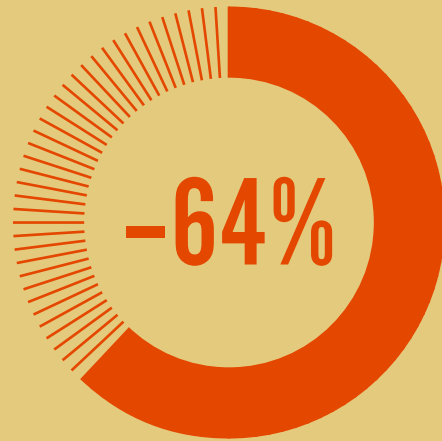**MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA**

AUS

CHN

JPN

PHL

SGP

EMPLOYEES IN APAC ARE 16X MORE LIKELY TO DO GREAT WORK WHEN THEY FEEL THEY HAVE HOPE

–64%

APAC EMPLOYEES ARE 64% LESS LIKELY TO HAVE A PROBABLE DIAGNOSIS OF ANXIETY WHEN THEY RECEIVE LEADER SUPPORT TO MEET THEIR GOALS

–84%

EMPLOYEE BURNOUT IN APAC IS 84% LESS LIKELY WHEN PEOPLE BELIEVE THEIR ORGANIZATION IS TRANSPARENT

APAC	OVERALL	AGE 18–28	AGE 29–44	AGE 45–60	AGE 61–79
Purpose	72	73	75	69	68
Opportunity	68	69	72	63	62
Success	67	71	71	63	61
Appreciation	63	64	65	59	60
Wellbeing	56	60	57	55	58
Leadership	64	66	68	61	57
Engagement	70	71	74	67	64
Burnout	41	40	40	43	42
Great work	69	71	73	66	61
Fulfillment	72	73	75	68	64
Inspiration	59	59	67	49	45
Hope	51	51	57	42	37
Inclusive teams	29	26	38	19	09

While APAC again sees great contrasts across the region, most Talent Magnet scores have slightly improved. We see upward movement in areas like success and great work, yet burnout has also increased. Purpose and opportunity scores for mid- and late-career workers are lower than their younger counterparts, suggesting that more effort is needed to upskill people and connect them to vision and meaning. Modest increases in wellbeing and fulfillment are promising, but more work can be done overall to ensure performance is balanced with connection, inclusion, and hope.

AUSTRALIA	CHINA	JAPAN	PHILIPPINES	SINGAPORE
70	79	59	76	70
65	75	52	74	67
66	74	50	75	66
60	69	54	67	59
54	59	52	60	52
63	72	48	70	63
69	76	53	79	67
47	32	49	36	49
67	75	56	76	68
70	78	57	79	69
47	81	22	77	56
51	65	16	63	47
25	39	11	34	28

The O.C. Tanner Institute is a widely respected research and education team focused on delivering valuable insights that help people thrive at work. Our award-winning and peer-reviewed research on corporate culture, employee recognition, leadership, and wellbeing opens hearts and minds, inspires change, and empowers organizations everywhere to intentionally create healthy, productive workplace cultures by design. Such cultures drive innovation, engage talent, and deliver on corporate goals.

O.C. Tanner is the global leader in software and services that improve workplace culture through a wide variety of meaningful employee experiences. Our Culture Cloud® platform includes a suite of apps and integrations for recognition, team initiatives, and wellbeing that help shape thriving cultures everywhere. We proudly connect people to purpose, accomplishment, and one another at thousands of the world's most respected companies.

O.C.TANNER