




The Executive's Guide to Engaging Staff

HR Advancement Center
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Across more than a decade of research on employee engagement, we've worked with hundreds of organizations using Advisory Board's engagement survey. We've uncovered three ways executives from top-performing organizations **differentiate themselves in driving engagement** across the organization...



They give as much executive attention and energy to employee engagement as they do to other business imperatives such as operating margin and clinical quality.

Nearly every executive argues engagement is important. But executives from organizations outperforming on engagement afford as much energy and respect to it as they do the organization's other critical metrics—not just in word, but in practice.

Executives from organizations outperforming on engagement start by ensuring that engagement is every executive's responsibility—not just the HR team's.

There are three ways you can formalize executives' accountability for employee engagement.



Embed a people-related metric in executives' incentive plans.

Give employee engagement (or another people-related metric such as staff retention) equal weight with other organizational goals in executives' incentive plans to ensure it remains a top priority.



Identify system-wide engagement initiatives for executives to sponsor.

Outperforming organizations don't hesitate to identify which aspects of engagement executives should drive themselves (rather than delegating them to frontline managers). Some engagement drivers—such as “I have job security” or “My organization does a good job of selecting and implementing new technologies to support my work”—are particularly well suited to being addressed with house-wide solutions owned at the executive level. At these organizations, frontline managers and directors focus their limited time and energy on remaining drivers well within their ability to inflect.



Draw attention to engagement year-round, not just during an annual survey.

Executives often lend support each year when it's time to increase engagement survey participation rates or take action based on survey results. But executives at outperforming organizations elevate employee engagement to a year-round discipline, in the same way they focus on core priorities such as patient experience and financial performance. These executives ensure employee engagement is an agenda item at every leadership meeting and a regular feature of their communication with frontline staff.



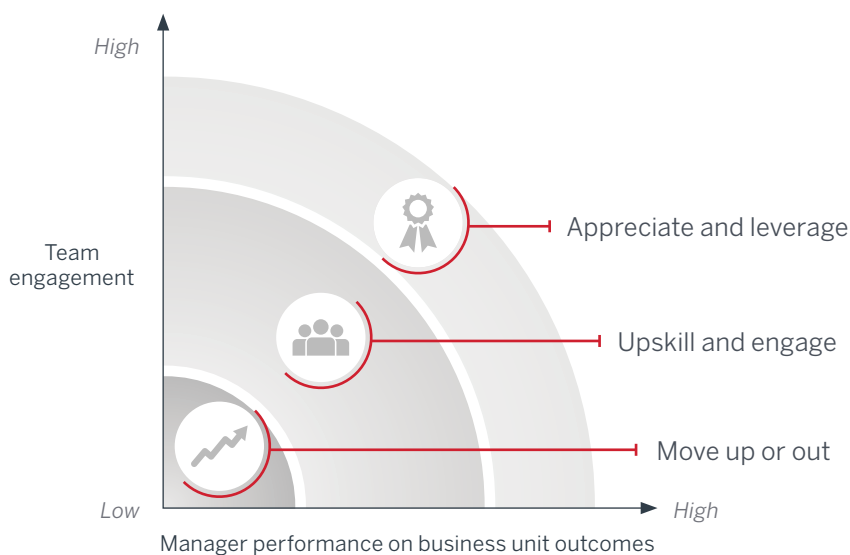
They intentionally invest in targeted support to **help frontline managers** better engage their teams.

Direct managers have an outsized impact on engagement. That's why the most common strategy organizations use to improve staff engagement is manager-led action planning.

Executives who differentiate themselves in driving engagement recognize that action planning is useful, but it's not a one-size-fits-all solution. Not all managers need the same type of support. Outperforming executives lead the charge in triaging frontline manager needs and investing in targeted support.

These executives encourage their organizations to prioritize investment in three different groups of frontline managers, shown below. These groups are determined based on their performance along two axes: team engagement and overall business unit outcomes.

Three groups of frontline managers and how executives should support them



Each group of frontline managers requires a different type of support to drive (or sustain) engagement on their teams.



Move up or out

These frontline managers have both low team engagement and poor overall outcomes. Top-performing organizations take one of two steps with these managers:

- Invest heavily to get the frontline manager up to speed quickly
- Evaluate whether the manager is in the right role

Bringing this group of frontline managers up to speed quickly requires significant investment, which could include HR meeting on a regular basis with a cohort of low-performing managers or an HR business partner or senior leader providing one-on-one coaching.

Frontline managers who consistently fall in the low-performing group after intensive interventions may not be suited for a leadership position. Executives at top-performing organizations help instill a culture of accountability where consistently low-performing frontline managers don't stay in seat.





Upskill and engage

Most frontline managers fall in this group—they have room to improve either their overall performance or their team’s engagement. For these managers, top-performing organizations pursue one (or both) of the following options depending on the individual frontline manager’s needs:

- Upskill and equip frontline managers with new ideas
- Focus expressly on improving managers’ own engagement

Scores on specific engagement survey questions related to frontline manager effectiveness can help diagnose skill gaps. For example, a struggling manager may need to improve their ability to give difficult feedback, provide regular recognition, or discuss career paths with staff. Targeted support for these managers could include skill-specific training with a cohort of similar managers.

Executives who succeed in driving engagement also focus expressly on engaging frontline managers themselves. The executives know that low manager engagement can have a negative ripple effect on business outcomes as well as team engagement. To support frontline manager engagement, these executives improve the flow of communication to managers, recognize managers individually and through their teams, and set guardrails around work-life balance.



Learn more in our study *The Data-Driven Prescription for Leader Engagement*, available at [advisory.com](https://www.advisory.com).



Appreciate and leverage

Executives at top-performing organizations pay special attention to frontline managers with strong overall performance on business unit outcomes and high team engagement scores—the managers the organization most wants to retain.

One of the most effective ways executives recognize these frontline managers is by asking them to share what they’ve been doing to achieve such strong outcomes. This approach not only provides high-performing managers with deserved recognition, but also yields organization-specific best practices to share with managers in the “Upskill and Engage” group. As an additional means for engaging this group, some organizations host a special training session for these high-performing managers to develop next-level leadership skills.



They don't just make themselves visible across the organization—they **deliberately put themselves in staff's shoes** when communicating with the front line.

Almost all organizations recognize the pivotal role that executives can play in driving engagement. That's why many organizations are turning to tactics like executive leader rounding or technology-enabled communication channels to help increase executives' ability to reach more staff across their growing, complex organizations.

Yet what differentiates executives from organizations outperforming on engagement is that they know being highly visible isn't enough. They deliberately put themselves in staff's shoes when communicating with the front line.

These executives have authentic interactions and meaningful dialogue with staff. They center their communication around commonly asked staff questions, speak to staff in terms they understand, create an environment where staff feel comfortable raising questions and concerns, and stay consistently aware that even an indirect interaction with a staff member (such as riding an elevator together) can have an outsized impact on that person's engagement.

To learn more, visit advisory.com/hrac/staffengagement



Executive tools to engage staff

Access ready-to-use tools for executives to engage staff, including:

- Key Moments When Your Actions Can Make an Impact in 5 Minutes
- Executive Tips to Maximize the Impact of Conversations with Staff

More on engagement from Advisory Board



The Manager's Guide to Engaging Staff

Get more than 20 ready-to-use tools to improve your team's engagement, including tools to recognize staff, support their professional development, collect their input, and more.



The Data-Driven Prescription for Leader Engagement

This report offers strategies to solve the top five challenges of manager and director engagement.



The National Prescription for Nurse Engagement

Learn 15 best practices to help nurse leaders build a highly engaged workforce in today's rapidly transforming health care environment.



Your Data-Driven Road Map for Physician Engagement

Learn 14 best practices to maximize the return on your physician engagement efforts.

To access these resources, enter their titles into the search function on **[advisory.com](https://www.advisory.com)**.

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