

Humanity at work

Build a human-centric
employee experience to create
a better world of work.

FIG 1. HUMANITY AT WORK



Organizations and individuals around the world are facing ongoing change and disruption. It's becoming impossible to separate work life from personal life, and many companies are ill-equipped to navigate the increasing overlap. Employees feel burnt out, managers are struggling to keep their teams motivated, and organization leaders are rethinking their people practices. This all combines to create an unstable and tumultuous environment as we look forward.

With that in mind, Culture Amp has optimized our solutions and resources to support and normalize a more human approach to work. But what does that look like?

Below, we share our human-centric approach to optimizing the employee experience.

It's time to create a *better* world of work

Culture is a competitive advantage. In the simplest terms, company culture is defined as the overall practice, behaviors, and priorities that unite and motivate employees to achieve company goals. Culture has become table-stakes for your people, which in turn impacts your bottom line. It's the DNA of your organization, and can set you apart in the eyes of employees, candidates, and customers.

What is the link between company culture and the employee experience?

Your culture comes to life in a person's day-to-day work – what we call the employee experience. It informs how your workforce approaches their work, difficult conversations, or even engagement with customers.

The employee experience encapsulates what people encounter and observe throughout their tenure at an organization. This spans from recruitment to onboarding and every day an individual spends at your company. Done right, it sparks engagement, fosters innovation, boosts productivity, and reinforces inclusivity and safety. In a word, employee experience is everything.

Culture first organizations use modern HR technology and people science to create high performing cultures. This powerful combination sets companies up with the know-how to drive positive change. With insight into how people think, feel, behave, and learn, people leaders can untangle the many touchpoints throughout the employee experience and identify opportunities for meaningful change.

Through driving this change, we strive to enable companies to create a better world of work. In our work with more than 3,500 companies, we've seen how the best organizations create high performing teams by deeply understanding the experience of people at work.

Humanize your workplace

To help build a better world of work, we approach the employee experience through three key lenses: employee engagement, performance management, and employee development. We've created three toolkits to help you get started. In these toolkits, you'll find real-life examples, templates and tips, resources for leadership-buy-in, and so much more.

Explore the toolkits:

1. [Understand your employees](#)
A toolkit for listening to your employees and taking meaningful action.
2. [Build high performing teams](#)
A toolkit for humanizing your performance management process.
3. [Develop your people](#)
A toolkit for amplifying employee performance through growth and development.

Understand your employees

The employee experience is made up of a collection of touchpoints that can be hard to measure. But employee engagement can provide a clear picture of how employees navigate that experience and surface areas for improvement.

This toolkit is designed to help people leaders at all stages put an employee engagement plan in place.

From understanding what it is, to why it matters, to getting started, you'll find everything you need to know in the sections below.

What is employee engagement?

Employee engagement has become a buzzword amongst professionals but often means different things to different individuals and organizations. In the simplest terms, employee engagement represents the level of enthusiasm and connection employees feel toward their organization. It's a key indicator of the motivation employees feel about going above and beyond in their roles and their level of trust and loyalty within the company.

More specifically, employee engagement can measure organizational health and reveal actionable steps to improve the overall employee experience.

FIG 2. DEFINING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



Why employee engagement *matters*

Employee engagement has proven effects on things like performance, retention, and innovation. People who are highly engaged at work not only provide greater value to the organization but they experience a better quality of life at work.

According to Culture Amp People Scientist, Fresia Jackson, people who are engaged feel energized by their work, maintain positive mental health, take initiative without being asked, have a workflow where time passes easily, and are absorbed in their work. As a result, high levels of engagement contribute to increased employee retention.

When organizations take the time to understand the drivers of employee engagement at their organization, they can take more effective action on what's important. With an accurate measure of employee engagement, HR teams can take meaningful action on what matters to people at work. If you don't measure employee engagement, you have no way to make informed decisions towards improving company culture or employee experiences at work.

The ROI

While there is a clear qualitative connection to the benefits of investing in employee engagement, this is often not enough to obtain leadership buy-in. 65% of CEOs do feel that strong company culture has a direct financial impact on their business, but it's critical to have the numbers to back it up.

Leverage our library of resources to build a business case for your employee engagement initiatives. Our ROI Calculator will turn five basic inputs into the clear ROI value for the following HR and employee experience initiatives: impact of turnover, productivity, onboarding, absenteeism, and diversity & inclusion.

Looking for more? Get the companion report for detailed steps to start establishing the value of your company's culture.

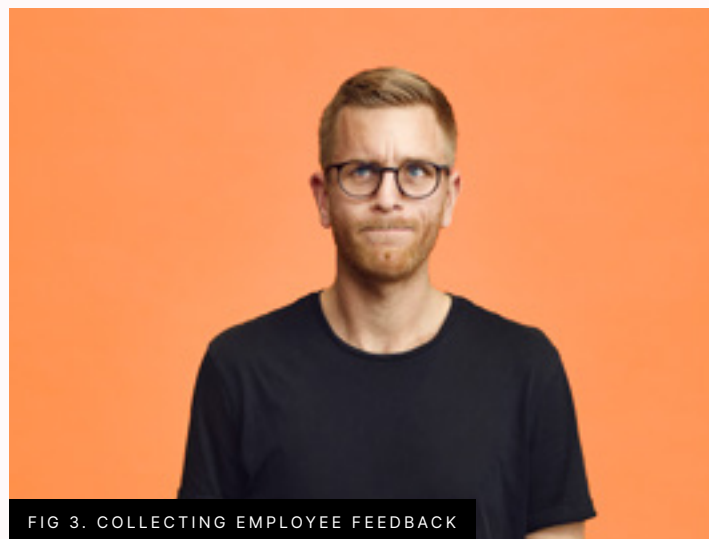
Getting Started

While the employee experience encompasses a wide range of factors, employee engagement is a key measure of organizational health. When organizations get employee experience right, they can achieve twice the customer satisfaction and innovation and generate 25% higher profits than those who don't.

But how do you do that? Many organizations seek out higher levels of engagement to improve things like performance, retention, and innovation. Using an employee engagement survey is a great way to understand what impacts the engagement of your employees and helps drive action over time. With this information, you can then use this data to inform your map of the employee experience journey.

To make lasting improvements to employee engagement, you can't approach it as a one-time project. We recommend using an employee feedback loop comprised of three parts:

1. **Collect:** Design a survey, give it to your people, and collect the data. It's vitally important this survey asks the questions that uncover the information you need.
2. **Understand:** Analyze the data you receive and deduce the drivers of the employee experience (these are the forces that will drive the biggest changes).
3. **Act:** Share the data, make a plan of action, and make changes. Ensure you show employees that their feedback is being recognized. If they see the organization is listening and taking action, they'll respond with more and better feedback.



Ask the right questions

You can't take any valuable action without a clear understanding of how your employees are feeling. This means asking the right questions. If you're not providing a way for people to provide feedback internally, you're missing out on the opportunity to improve your employee experience and your company's performance.

Employee feedback collected through engagement surveys will help flag problem areas before they become detrimental to productivity and overall company culture. With a regular cadence of surveys, you'll be able to spot workplace issues before they get out of control.

You don't have to reinvent the wheel. Use these [20 simple employee engagement questions](#) as a starting point to take stock of your organization. These questions will set you up to take meaningful action. Ideally, your surveys will include a [space for comments](#) to allow employees to make suggestions and clarify their responses – this ensures you're getting a healthy mix of both qualitative and quantitative data.

In any employee engagement survey we encourage you to use a balance of validated questions and unique questions relevant to the context of your organization. The more you survey your employees over time, the more you'll be able to see what questions provide you with the best insights for action.

[Get the right tools in place to collect, understand, and act on employee feedback.](#)

Measuring your results

Employee engagement surveys represent the collective voices of your employee base, rather than the loudest voices of a few, and empower teams with the right data to drive informed decisions. Because employee engagement is an outcome, you can use a survey to ask questions about different factors that affect it to see what's most impactful.

While there is no single way to measure engagement, consider the following approaches to help you get the most value out of your survey results.

1. Don't get tunnel vision

Because of its complexity, engagement is best understood through a series of questions in a survey rather than as a single question. Culture Amp's Chief Scientist, Dr. Jason McPherson, says, "In general, statisticians agree that well-constructed, multiple-item indicators are more reliable and tend to provide better external validity than single-question metrics."

The Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) was long regarded as the go-to metric for measuring employee engagement. The eNPS essentially asks whether someone would recommend their company as a great place to work. While this is valuable information, a holistic view of the different factors influencing engagement ensures action planning is based on the whole picture and not one data point. Since engagement encompasses connection, motivation, and commitment, survey questions should provide data on these factors.

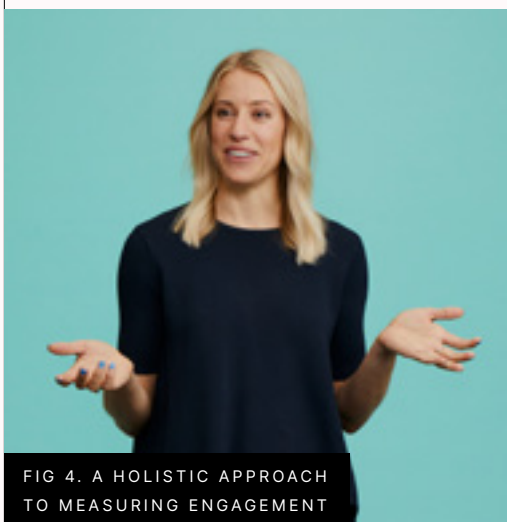


FIG 4. A HOLISTIC APPROACH
TO MEASURING ENGAGEMENT



FIG 5. UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

2. Identify key drivers of engagement

Surveys can reveal what's influencing engagement through a technique called driver analysis. It shows you which factors are most related to employee engagement. According to McPherson, "if the top driver of engagement is a learning and development question, this means that people who respond most positively to that question are also likely to be the most engaged. If you act to improve responses to that question, then you have an improved chance of making your employees more engaged overall."

3. Leverage benchmark data

The drivers of engagement can vary from company to company, and even within the same company, they can vary over time. To get accurate information, it's important to look at employee engagement benchmark data. When measuring employee engagement, look at both internal year-over-year comparisons as well as external benchmarks. Benchmarks are great at giving you context, but simply hitting the benchmark shouldn't be your ultimate goal. It's more important to look at the relationships in the data so that you can focus on what matters most to your people.

Take action, repeat

When it comes to improving employee engagement, less is more. Choose one driver to focus on to ensure that the actions you take have maximum impact. Finding a focus area takes discipline, but these three steps can help guide leaders at all levels of the organization:

1. **Make use of advanced analytics:** It's easier to identify a shortlist of focus areas with advanced survey tools, such as Culture Amp's embedded focus agent. These help you determine which actions will help make the biggest changes.
2. **Align:** Encourage leaders to evaluate feedback with organizational objectives in mind. Then, prioritize a focus area that is closely aligned to these. This way, your focus will benefit employees and business success.
3. **Vote:** If you don't get there with the first two steps, take a simple vote with the team to let them decide.

Once you have your focus area for improving employee engagement, you can start action planning. You would start by framing your focus area as a forward-focused question. The "How might we..." formula can help you get started. At this point, it can also be useful to dig a little deeper with your employees to find the root cause of the issue. You could set up a quick follow-up survey about your focus area or run an in-person workshop.

Then, brainstorm creative ideas to address the focus area to improve engagement. Involving employees in this process will also help gain buy-in across the organization.

Unfortunately, many organizations get stuck at the planning stage, so it's critical to commit to the process and see it through. Don't be afraid to test ideas, communicate progress, gather feedback from employees, and make any necessary adjustments.

Don't reinvent the wheel

Rest assured that you're not the first (nor the last) one to tackle employee engagement. Luckily, many open-source examples of initiatives and strategies have worked for organizations just like yours. To start, check our [inspiration engine](#) for a curated list of micro-learnings and ideas for action. This includes easy-to-digest ideas and actual initiatives that our customers and others in our community have used with their employees and are written to allow for simple replication and customization.

We've also compiled [7 actionable tips from real-life data](#) to help you improve employee engagement. Here's a sneak peek of one company's proven approach:

Digital Ocean has a regular cadence of larger biannual surveys, smaller check-ins, and new hire surveys. But what really makes a difference is the company's action cadence. After each survey, changes and trends regarding key engagement indicators are shared with senior leadership, HR business partners, and employees. The People Operations team then works with key stakeholders to choose a focus, commit to at least one initiative, and define success.

For DigitalOcean, that success means that over 40% of new hires begin as referrals from engaged employees. Giving, receiving, and acting on feedback has become a key part of company culture.

"One of the most important parts of the process is understanding why you really care about engagement," says Matt Hoffman, VP of People. "For us, it drives people's experience of working here, it drives retention, our ability to hire, attract, and refer candidates."

[Learn more about Digital Ocean's commitment to driving engagement.](#)

The *big* picture

The world of work is constantly changing, and without the right people practices, it can negatively impact your bottom line. The reality is, we're all human and exist outside of the workplace, so to engage employees, you have to recognize their holistic humanity and listen to their needs. When we spend 40+ hours a week working, every second counts. Refining your focus on employee engagement is the first step toward building a more human and ultimately more productive and resilient workplace.

Get the right tools to drive employee engagement.

LEARN MORE

Build high performing teams

Just the phrase “performance review” tends to elicit a sense of dread in employees, managers, and HR teams. It has the potential to make or break promotions, raises, and even morale. People leaders have long been experimenting with new approaches to performance management – from separating measurement and development discussions to 360° feedback.

The truth is, there’s no one size fits all solution, so it’s critical to understand your organization’s unique needs.

In this guide, we’ll help you understand the importance of performance management and outline the steps to find the best approach for your organization.

What is performance management?

Let's face it, performance reviews can be scary. Will I be reprimanded? Praised? Promoted? Or even recognized at all? At its best, performance management is much more than a formalized process for measuring employees. It's actually a powerful opportunity to identify areas for development, which can increase both organizational and individual performance and engagement over time.

Fortunately, many organizations are already moving away from the daunting annual review towards a more ongoing developmental and feedback-driven approach. The most successful performance management processes are those customized to align with your company culture.

FIG 6. UNDERSTANDING PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT



Why performance management *matters*

The traditional performance review was built in response to rigid organizational structures, and as the workforce continues to evolve, this approach has proven to be outdated for most modern organizations. According to a review of employee polls, only 2 in 10 employees strongly agree that their performance is managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work.

Employees expect performance reviews to be fair, accurate, and clear. But surveys reveal that less than half of employees consider the way they're evaluated to be fair or transparent. There are also a number of unconscious biases that, if left unaddressed, can lead to inaccurate reviews. As a result, employees are not being set up for success since they're not receiving the actionable feedback they need to improve.

What's more, most employees and managers find performance reviews to be time-consuming and stressful. Outdated approaches to performance management contribute to feelings of disenchantment that can lower employee engagement and, ironically, lower performance. According to a study by Deloitte, performance management systems have a negative sixty net promoter score (-60 NPS). That means that according to benchmarks, performance management systems are, on average, more despised than cable companies, internet service providers, and health insurance plans within a company.

With this fraught history, it's easy to see why so many organizations are evaluating and rethinking their strategy. Fortunately, there are several easy and actionable ways to make process improvements and drive real results.

The ROI

Poor performance management can be demotivating, uninspiring, and make people want to give up. This ultimately has a negative impact on performance. On the other hand, a thoughtful approach to performance can drive measurable results.

Research shows that organizations with employees who are more satisfied with their company's approach to performance management are:

- 1.3x more likely to meet their financial targets
- 3x more likely to effectively manage change
- 3.2x more likely to encourage risk-taking
- More than twice as likely to innovate

Further, employees are 3.6x more engaged when they have a voice in setting their own goals and aligning them to company initiatives. Employee productivity increases by 56%, on average, when managers are involved in helping employees align their goals with the needs of the organization.

One study found that organizations that scored high on culture were 32% more likely to experience high employee engagement and 97% more likely to experience high organizational performance. This indicates that the culture around performance reviews can have a huge, positive impact on critical business KPIs.



FIG 7. DEMONSTRATING BUSINESS IMPACT

Getting Started

Rather than focusing on past performance, the best performance processes incorporate continuous feedback.

Before diving into the logistics of your process, consider the following three [core principles](#) of development-focused performance management:

1. Growth and development

The performance process should strive for the overall goal of helping employees identify areas for improvement and providing resources to help them actually get better.

Developmental coaching and feedback should be a core aspect of conversations – not just between managers and direct reports but also between peers and other leaders. When people see others asking for and providing feedback, learning and growth become the norms rather than the exceptions.

2. Fair and objective

Many organizations make decisions about promotions and compensation based on their performance management process. However, organizational justice theory contends that by making the process fair, transparent, and clear, individuals will be more motivated and engaged by the process.

Researchers have consistently found that the two most important factors include the process itself and how employees are treated. Outcomes are important, but bonuses, raises, and promotions aren't necessarily the only key to a successful performance system.

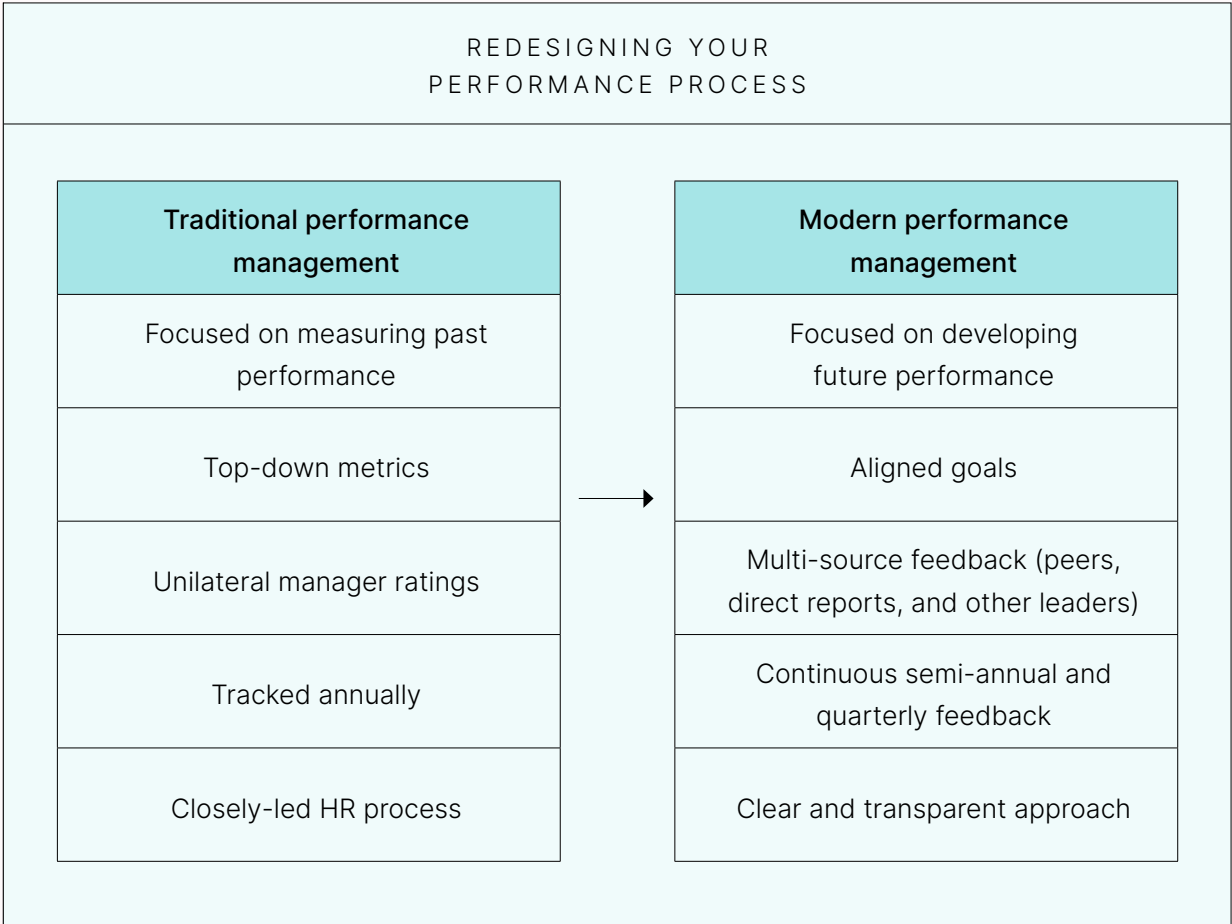
3. Clear and transparent

Performance management should be easy to use for HR, managers, and individuals alike. Understanding how your organization's goals line up with the day-to-day work of individuals and teams is a key component of creating a motivating approach to performance.

With a straightforward process, Culture Amp customers report performance review completion rates as high as 93% and goal creation increase by nearly 3x the previous year.

Dig deeper into these approaches with our guide to [The 4 fundamentals of successful performance management](#).

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Understand your employees
- 3 **Build high performing teams**
- 4 Develop your people
- 5 Why Culture Amp



Laying the foundation

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to performance management, the following 8 tips will help lay the foundation for a successful process. Use these as guidelines to shape your unique approach:

- 1. Create a culture of ongoing feedback**

There are two different types of employee performance evaluations: one that looks backward and tries to understand a person’s performance over time. Another is more forward-looking and focuses on using feedback to improve an employee’s performance in the future. These are two unique processes that have different goals.

Creating a culture of continuous feedback simply means establishing an environment where you have more frequent check-ins around performance, goals, and development. Regular [1-on-1 conversations](#) between managers and their direct reports is a great start. With this approach, annual performance review feedback won’t come as a surprise.

2. Use the right phrases

Words matter, especially when it comes to employee performance conversations. It's important to use the right [performance review phrases](#) during an evaluation to ensure that the feedback is clear, empathetic, and actionable. The last thing you want to do is share comments with your employees that are misinterpreted or don't give them a clear path forward.

3. Be aware of biases

Knowing that employees rarely consider evaluations to be fair or transparent, it's important to be extremely cognizant of [common biases](#) that can come up during the employee performance review. Biases can lead to inflation or deflation of employee ratings, which can have serious implications in performance reviews.

A common example of this is [using gendered language](#). A study found that women's evaluations contain nearly twice as much language about their communal or nurturing style, such as "helpful" or "dedicated." It's critical to educate your workforce about potential biases and incorporate bias blockers into each step of the process.

4. Train your managers

Performance reviews require vulnerability from both employees and managers, so the relationship should be built on trust and transparency. While this may seem obvious, research has found that [manager capability is one of the biggest stumbling blocks](#) for organizations. That's why companies should invest in leadership training, particularly around coaching, candor, and clearing barriers.

Managers need to learn how to enable performance, have difficult conversations, and pave the path for their employees to do their best work. When companies support managers in these ways, studies show that they're 12% more likely to experience high individual performance.

5. Select the best-fit rating scale

[Rating scales](#) are often a necessary component of the employee performance review. They can help companies understand how their employees perform to maximize growth and make it clear to employees what's expected of them to get a raise, promotion, or move forward in their careers through objective measurements.

When designed properly, performance rating scales can help differentiate high performers from low performers, identify areas for improvement, and offer transparency in decision-making. [Research even shows](#) that top performers can outperform the rest by over 400% – something you wouldn't be able to identify without rating performance.

However, they're not one-size-fits-all, so it's important to understand exactly what you're looking for in your rating scale and customize it to your needs.

6. Learn the art of giving feedback

Giving [effective feedback](#) doesn't always come naturally, but there are many ways to improve. Providing feedback about the things you want people to continue and do more is known as reinforcing feedback. Suggesting things you think someone should do less of or stop doing altogether is corrective feedback.

Both forms of feedback can benefit from a few general guidelines, such as preparing your comments in advance. Providing specific and actionable feedback makes it easier for your employees to digest. Giving feedback gets easier with practice, so building a culture of continuous feedback will help strengthen that muscle.

7. Link performance and recognition

Many organizations tie performance to recognition, compensation, and promotions. Given that an employee's livelihood depends on the performance review, it's important to make sure your [top-performing employees](#) get the recognition they deserve.

For low-performing employees, it's important to provide actionable feedback and coaching so they can improve. [Alignment between performance and recognition](#) will not only help employees contribute to the company's success, but it will also keep [employee morale](#) high.

8. Choose the right tool

Finally, choosing the right performance tool can make a big difference to the employee performance review. Consider the most common pain points of employees and managers. Then look for a [performance platform](#) that is built for the modern workforce and addresses these problems. While the tool alone won't fix all of your performance-related problems, it can be an excellent catalyst for progress.

[Unlock insights to create a culture of high performance with performance reviews, goal tracking, 1-on-1s, continuous development, and 360's.](#)

Don't reinvent the wheel

When it comes to optimizing your performance management process, you're not alone. Companies around the world are all striving for a more meaningful and impactful performance approach. Not to mention a wide variety of resources to help you wherever you are in your journey – from [goal-setting frameworks](#) to [step-by-step guides](#).

Upon recognizing that their existing approach to performance management wasn't working, the team at [Bombas decided to rebuild their process](#). The Bombas team knew that their employees didn't understand how their contributions aligned with overall business goals. So one priority was to make sure every person at the company understood what defined success – specific to their roles.

After introducing an improved performance management process, Bombas saw a ripple effect that improved various aspects of their company culture. They shied away from the traditional approach of an annual performance review. Instead, Bombas encouraged a culture of continuous feedback so that there are no surprises when it is time for their two formal performance reviews, which include feedback from managers, peers, and self-reflection by the employee. As a result, Bombas has seen 100% completion of all evaluation cycles thus far.

[Learn how Bombas built a more human performance management process.](#)

The *big* picture

Like any complex people operations, performance management is not a one-and-done process. It's an ongoing commitment to coaching and developing your employees that should evolve and grow as your company grows. The frameworks provided in this toolkit will remain as guiding principles each time you revisit the effectiveness of your process. People are not numbers, and a more human approach to performance management will not only benefit performance but engagement and the overall employee experience.

LEARN MORE

Develop your people

As companies evolve to adopt more progressive people practices, the employee experience becomes so much more than numbers. While it is important to report on the value of core HR metrics, research has consistently proven that it's a more human approach that truly improves these numbers. In other words, a work environment that promotes employee growth and development will not only retain employees longer but see measurable improvements in performance.

This guide will explore what a culture of employee development looks like and how empowering managers helps put it into practice.

What is employee development?

Organizations know the importance of performance management, but to drive actual improvements in employee performance, an annual review is not enough. Instead, companies should adopt a mindset of ongoing employee growth and development through coaching, 1-on-1s, and skill development.

Unlike traditional learning and development (L&D) programs, we see development as a core aspect of the employee experience. Instead of occasional trainings that pull you out of work, learnings should be embedded into everyday life. With manager training, consistent coaching, meaningful conversations, and access to growth opportunities, organizations will experience better engagement and performance, as well as build trust and loyalty with their employees.

While a development mindset starts from the top, the fastest and most effective way to build this into your culture is through managers. Empowering managers with the tools to develop themselves as leaders and better support their teams is critical for organizational success.

Why a developmental approach *matters*

The success of managers is the primary indicator of success within an organization. Research from [Gartner](#) found that employees who report to managers who are good coaches are 40% more engaged and demonstrate 38% more discretionary effort at work.

Yet managers are often ill-equipped to face the wide range of tasks that fall under a manager's scope of work – mitigating bias, relationship management, and taking responsibility for team morale as much as performance so often simply don't make it into first-time manager orientation (if that exists at all).

With a direct impact on employee engagement and performance, manager development isn't just a nice-to-have. Managers directly impact employee engagement and satisfaction levels within a company, but 90% report they need better support and coaching from their HR teams for proper manager training.

Without setting managers up for success, managers can't drive success to their teams and their direct reports. Fortunately, it doesn't have to take extensive time or resources to start supporting a culture of employee development through manager training. With [Skills Coach](#), employees are prompted to spend two minutes per day on micro-learning exercises. So far, 86% of managers who used Skills Coach reported a positive learning experience, and 81% observed a change in their behavior. Science-backed concepts like conversational micro-learning are one of many ways to integrate development into your daily workflow and make development a part of the day-to-day.

Getting Started

Overhauling your entire approach to employee development is likely not realistic for most organizations. Not to mention, one-off training programs are quickly forgotten after the fact. Instead, a little change can go a long way. Consider the following resources to help consistently develop your people at every level.

Manager development

Managers are the best place to start because they have the widest range of contact with employees. However, they need help. 37% of leaders report being uncomfortable with giving direct feedback about their employee's performance.

Before we dive into tactical coaching and feedback opportunities, these four principles can help guide your organization's management practices:

1. **Create a safe space:** Empower managers to create safe spaces to talk through personal challenges with their teams.
2. **Lead by example:** Leading with vulnerability requires humanity and empathy. When leaders share their own vulnerability, it opens the door for the entire team.
3. **Prioritize transparency:** Stay attuned to the fears and uncertainties of different individuals – don't shy away from difficult conversations.
4. **Let empathy be your guide:** Empathizing with your team's struggles and showing your support goes a long way in building trust between managers and their direct reports.

Coaching

For managers to help their teams, they first have to help themselves. People scientists have found that short, daily, engaging, actionable, and [conversational micro-learning](#) exercises can effectively drive behavior change and help managers strengthen the skills they need most to be successful. These highly actionable exercises take less than two minutes to complete and help busy managers put their new [coaching strategies](#) into practice.

For example, the [power of spaced repetition](#), which is the act of distributing learning over time to improve the effectiveness of learning, has been shown to soften the “forgetting” curve, help learners retain more information, and apply them in new ways.

Below, we outline four key coaching strategies that managers can implement immediately:

1. Avoid “solution mode”

When a problem arises, asking questions of your team allows employees to arrive at their own solutions – instead of being told what to do – and can create more investment in outcomes. Avoid going into “solution mode” and instead get into the habit of asking questions. Try the following practices:

- *Wait two seconds before you give a response.* Many managers view breaks in conversations as awkward or uncomfortable and try to fill the silence. Instead of this, encourage your managers to pause and reflect before responding.

FIG 8. COACHING FOR DEVELOPMENT



- *Have some questions ready to go.* If coming up with questions on the fly is challenging, prepare a few in advance. Some ideas include: “What are your thoughts so far?,” “What have you already tried?,” and “What are your options?”

2. Ask open-ended questions

Transactional questions typically leave employees feeling disconnected. Instead, encourage managers to take advantage of more open-ended questions to create space for conversations and input. It’s important to actively listen to the response for more productive conversations. Try it out:

- *Choose the right phrasing.* Open-ended questions are questions that can’t be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Open-ended questions tend to start with words like ‘how,’ ‘what,’ ‘where,’ ‘when,’ and ‘who.’ This can be something as simple as, “What’s on your mind this week with work?”

3. Adopt a growth mindset

Be careful not to look at employee behavior and ability as “set” or “fixed.” Rather, it’s important to encourage a growth mindset, viewing ability as something that can be developed and grown. With this mindset, employees are more likely to view challenges as opportunities, prioritize learning over seeking approval, and focus on the process instead of the result. Try this:

- *Ask growth-focused questions.* Questions are a powerful way to drive behaviors. Managers can practice coaching with a growth mindset by asking the right types of questions, such as “What could you learn from this situation?,” “What might you try differently next time?,” or “What do you think is the next best step?”

4. Use playbacks

You don’t always need guidance to solve a problem. Sometimes all you need is the opportunity to organize your thoughts and feelings. Playbacks allow employees to “hear” their own thoughts, which can help focus and clarify their thinking, increasing self-awareness. Try the following:

- *Tap into emotions.* Reflecting on the impact of what an employee is saying demonstrates that the manager understands how they’re feeling, as well as what they’re saying. This builds empathy and encourages openness.
- *Call out the playback.* For managers who are newer to using playbacks, it may be helpful to call out that they’re going to restate what an employee has said to make sure they understood it correctly.

Employee development

It's impossible to separate manager development from employee development, as they are inextricably linked. However, the tips above were specifically designed to help managers improve their own practices, while the following tips are designed to help bring out the best in their employees.

The most effective way to drive employee growth is through regular 1-on-1 conversations. Encourage managers to use the following checklist to help guide more meaningful development conversations.

1. The making of a good 1-on-1

- ☐ Encourage direct reports to co-create and own the purpose of the meetings. Ask them to consider how both parties could work together to get the most [value out of the meeting](#).
- ☐ Agree on duration and frequency. We suggest a cadence between weekly and monthly, for 30-60 minutes. The important thing is to maintain a regular frequency.
- ☐ Agree on an overall structure that still allows room to deviate if something unexpected comes up.
- ☐ Establish where, when, and how you'll meet. Ensure that space allows for privacy and confidential conversations.
- ☐ Agree on a shared agenda beforehand (ideally the day before).
- ☐ Be willing to adjust all of the above as you learn what works best.

2. Create the right environment

- ☐ Set a tone of openness and safety. Be punctual and warm and remind them that this is their time.
- ☐ Stay present. Remove any distractions and make your direct report feel like a priority.
- ☐ Ask open-ended questions. Stay focused on the direct report, and try to avoid shifting the conversation to yourself or others.
- ☐ Take shared notes of the key points and actions that you can refer back to later.
- ☐ Avoid rescheduling the meeting at the last minute and give your direct report full attention and focus.

3. What to cover in the meeting

- ☐ Ask how they're doing, and do an overall work check-in.
- ☐ Confirm the agenda is still as planned.
- ☐ Ask for a follow-up on previous meeting actions and learnings.
- ☐ Ask about key successes or highlights from the week. Acknowledge any achievements or instances where they contributed value.
- ☐ Check-in on key areas like their wellbeing, growth and learning, work relationships, productivity, and impact.
- ☐ Ask follow-up questions if further clarity or understanding is needed on a particular point.
- ☐ Ask for feedback on your role as manager, using questions like "What is working well?," "What is one thing I can do differently?," or, "What could I do more or less of?"

4. The final five minutes: wrapping up the 1-on-1

- ☐ Recap the meeting and close with agreed-upon actions for each person to follow up on.
- ☐ Reflect on how the meeting went, and capture any insights to apply in the next 1-on-1.

Explore our full [Manager's Guide to 1-on-1s](#) for templates, sample questions, and more.

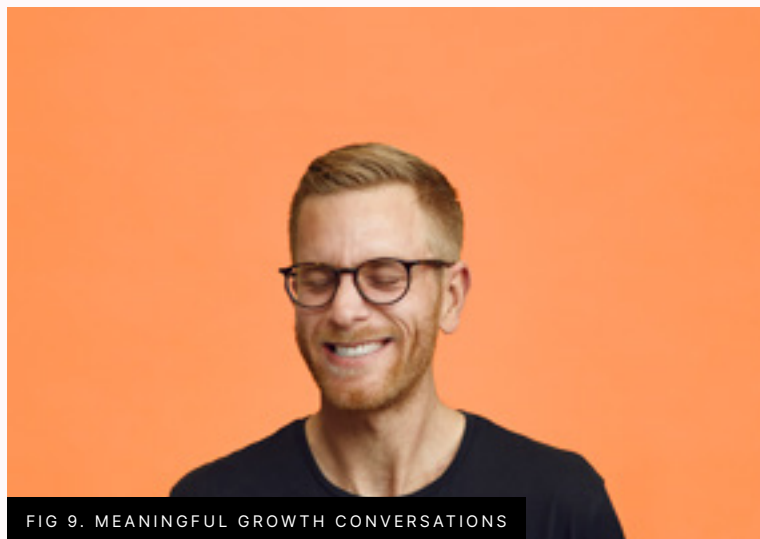


FIG 9. MEANINGFUL GROWTH CONVERSATIONS

Don't reinvent the wheel

Culture first organizations are recognizing this need for better manager support, and have started trying out new approaches. Using a combination of training programs and daily conversational microlearning exercises, Ellucian – a suite of integrated higher education solutions – serves as an exemplary model for incorporating leadership development into their culture.

Ellucian's people team sees managers as the key to supporting the employee experience. Managers help employees feel more connected to the work that they do and feel a sense of purpose in it. "We need to help managers prioritize because it can be overwhelming," says Kristin Swanson, Senior Talent Development Manager. "Many don't know where to focus their time, so part of HR's role is to help narrow the focus."

Ellucian had recently shifted their performance management strategy – eliminating rankings and focusing on more frequent high-quality conversations. This meant managers would have to show up differently and be more coachlike. However, lengthy cohort-based training sessions in a 3,300 person company was not scalable.

To support manager development at scale, Ellucian piloted Skills Coach, Culture Amp's conversational micro-learning tool that delivers bite-sized activities directly to managers. These exercises were developed by Culture Amp's team of People Scientists and LifeLabs Learning around principles from behavioral science and spaced repetition. Managers found value in the short, bite-sized content, which didn't require extensive time from their day, and could be applied immediately in their role.

[Learn how Ellucian leverages scalable manager development to drive engagement.](#)

The *big* picture

As you strive to develop and support your people holistically, you will see notable improvements across the employee experience. You'll also build a stronger connection with your employees and build trust in the fact that you care about their individual growth and development. Spending time developing your people doesn't have to be costly or disruptive. Something as simple as asking the right questions can help employees tap into their full potential and find joy in their accomplishments.

LEARN MORE

Why Culture Amp

Culture Amp's mission is to create a better world of work. With a human-centric approach to improving the employee experience, we're amplifying the experience and the impact of over 100 million people at work.

What sets us apart?

- **People Science:** Culture Amp is a science-backed solution. With a team of organizational psychologists, a network of top research firms, and recognition as one of [Fast Company's most innovative companies](#), we're well equipped to support organizational agility in a changing world.
- **Behavior Change:** Culture Amp's performance, engagement, and development solutions are delivered to employees right in their flow of work. The easy-to-use interface and contextual, pervasive delivery support meaningful behavior change. With a G2Crowd rating of 4.6 stars and Capterra score of 4.8 stars, Culture Amp experiences best-in-class adoption and drives meaningful impact.
- **Community:** With Culture Amp, you'll never have to go it alone. Our community consists of over 12,000+ members in our [Slack community](#), local chapters, [weekly newsletters](#), [topical events](#), [industry benchmarks](#), and more.

Learn more about how Culture Amp can help you optimize your employee experience.

LEARN MORE

Humanity at work:
let's build a better workplace,
together.

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