

# Employee Engagement

## Why It Matters (Part 1)

By Bob Lavigna and Phil Basso





*“The workforce sits at the core of how human services agencies deliver on their missions. Absent a talented, well-equipped workforce, it’s nearly impossible to drive the outcomes we desire for communities.”*

This quote, from the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) [“The Health and Human Services Workforce: Igniting the Potential Part 1”]), highlights the human services talent challenge. That is, attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining talented professionals who can continue to deliver critically important services in their states and communities. Human services organizations must also adapt these services as we continuously learn about what works best for families who seek services.

We often hear leaders say that their employees are their most important resource. Nowhere is this truer than in human services, where talent is the primary resource. But just having talent is not enough—employees must also be committed and engaged.

Decades of research, including in the public sector, have shown that a high level of employee engagement drives superior organizational performance and outcomes. Too often in human services, however, the focus has not been on engagement. Instead, the mindset has been just the opposite—“burning out on the job is noble and heroic.”

For example, in APHSA’s field consulting projects—more than 140 projects within 30 states—it has become painfully apparent that burnout is the norm. In a recent APHSA webinar on employee well-being and stress management, almost 700 sites logged in from 47 states and all levels of the human services system. Participants ranged from federal government employees to front-line service and administrative staff. Most of the questions we received signaled concerns about well-being, stress, and burnout. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened, but not created, these conditions within our agencies.

### **What Is Employee Engagement?**

Engaged employees have a strong and deep connection to their work, their organization, their colleagues, and the families and communities they work alongside each day. Engaged employees find personal meaning in their work, take pride in what they do and, perhaps most important, believe that their organization values them. In return, they go beyond the minimum and deliver “discretionary effort.” In other words, they do what it takes to help the organization and the people they serve succeed.<sup>1</sup>

A shorthand way to think about engagement is that it is the opposite of employee burnout.

How do we know if an employee is engaged? Research<sup>2</sup> has revealed that engaged employees:

- Have strong relationships across the organization
- Go the extra mile for clients/customers
- Volunteer ideas
- Recommend their organization as a good place to work
- Work hard—and smart
- Stay with the organization, even if they can earn more elsewhere
- Show up for work
- Are productive

## Why Does Engagement Matter?

Research in both the public and private sectors has consistently and conclusively shown that improving engagement improves organizational performance and outcomes. In the private sector, high-engagement companies outperform low-engagement companies on key financial indicators such as sales, revenue, revenue growth, profit, stock price, and earnings per share.



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For example, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, research of 693 large publicly traded companies revealed that the best-managed businesses were companies with the largest gains in employee engagement and development—more important than research and development, new products, marketing, and even leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, government does not typically have the same kinds of financial metrics as private-sector firms. However, as described in Robert Lavigna's book, *Engaging Government Employees: Motivate and Inspire Your People to Achieve Superior Performance*, engagement also drives important outcomes in government. Specifically, high-engagement government organizations are more successful in achieving strategic goals, delivering responsive customer service, promoting innovation, retaining talented employees (including new hires), improving attendance, and even keeping workplaces safe.<sup>4</sup> For example, an analysis of employee engagement in the federal government showed that high-engagement agencies were three times more likely than low-engagement agencies to achieve their strategic goals. Further, the annual national survey conducted by Lavigna's organization, the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement (the Institute), has consistently shown that highly engaged employees are up to three times more likely than less-engaged employees to believe that:

- Their organizations are successfully achieving their missions; and
- They can influence outcomes such as cost, quality, and customer service.

## The Virtuous Cycle of Employee Engagement

The impact of employee engagement in government is illustrated in the Institute's "engagement value chain" below:

When a public-sector organization improves its performance by improving employee engagement, clients, customers, and stakeholders will be more satisfied with the services they receive. This improved satisfaction leads to more trust in government. Moreover, when public

servants believe that the people they serve trust them and their work, they are more likely to feel more engaged. In other words, a virtuous cycle.

The benefits of engagement also go beyond the workplace. Research, including information gathered by the Institute, has shown that highly engaged employees feel better about their lives in general. This is because what happens at work affects how we feel and behave when we are not at work. If employees are engaged at work, and believe they are making a difference, they are also more likely to have a higher level of overall well-being. This can translate into improved relationships outside of work, a heightened sense of safety and security, and more time and energy to devote to family and personal interests and goals.

A high level of employee engagement can also help recruit talented employees. Highly committed people want to work with other committed people, in organizations that value engagement.

For example, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is routinely ranked near the top of the annual "Best Places to Work in the Federal Government." On its "Careers@NASA" page, the Administration proudly proclaims that, "NASA consistently is named a best place to work in the federal government."<sup>5</sup> NASA clearly believes that its high level of engagement is an asset in recruiting.

Moreover, APHSA's long-standing model for driving staff retention (*OE Handbook, 6th Edition, 2020*), based on extensive research by the Corporate Leadership Council, clusters 30 primary retention factors into four categories. Each category relates directly to employee engagement:

- reward and recognition;
- quality of the work environment;
- quality of the work itself; and
- quality of the organization as a whole.

The need to measure and improve engagement is highlighted by research showing that engagement is low across the U.S. workforce. Surveys by the Institute and others reveal that only about one-third of employees in both

the public and private sectors are fully engaged.<sup>6</sup> This is a bad news, good news story. Of course, we all want engagement to be higher. The more optimistic take, however, is that there is tremendous potential to improve performance, including in government, by improving employee engagement.

## Engagement Matters for a Healthy Human Services Workforce

In a 2017 APHSA member survey, concerns about the workforce topped the list of what keeps health and human services leaders up at night. Their concerns included how to ensure the well-being of front-line staff and managers, underscoring the APHSA Strategic Playbook goal of creating “an agile workforce.”

The COVID-19 crisis has only heightened agency leaders’ interest in fostering a healthy work environment with robust, intentional engagement efforts. In addition to the unprecedented attendance at our recent webinar on employee well-being and stress management, APHSA blog postings on workforce well-being and resilience have averaged more than 500 views, well above the norm. Human services agencies need to pay attention to employee engagement, even when their employees are not physically working together.

We are not the only voices calling for human services organizations to focus on the workforce. The Center for State and Local Government Excellence (the Center) report, *Innovations in the Health and Human Services Workforce: State and Local Governments Prepare for the Future*,<sup>7</sup> warned that increasing numbers of human services workers are planning to leave their jobs, excluding those who plan to retire. Those considering leaving cited worsening workplace conditions and frustration with their inability to improve these conditions.

According to the Center, some leaders are responding to this impending crisis by establishing evidence-based analysis, designing effective employee engagement programs, and offering professional development and growth opportunities

for their employees. The focus on evidence by these forward-thinking human services leaders supports APHSA’s emphasis on using data to measure and improve performance and client outcomes. We are currently field-testing an impact model that links 23 workforce well-being strategies to a similar number of employee health measures, including time off, job-related illnesses, voluntary turnover, and individual and collective performance.

## Measuring Engagement

The axiom “you can’t manage what you can’t measure” applies to improving employee engagement. But how can organizations measure employee engagement?

The research shows that regular employee engagement surveys are the most effective way to generate data on engagement.<sup>8</sup> Surveys establish an engagement baseline and can also identify the factors that drive employees’ engagement. Over time, regular surveys provide the data to determine if the needle of engagement is moving in the right direction. According to one state government human services professional, “How do you know what employees want if you don’t ask them?” Regular surveys provide the most comprehensive, consistent, and useful data and analytics. Moreover, by surveying the entire workforce, the organization sends a powerful message—everyone’s voice is important, no matter what they do or where they are in the organization.

This does not mean surveys are the only way to understand how employees feel about their work and their organization. There are other approaches, such as one-on-one discussions, employee focus groups, exit interviews, and even “stay interviews” (where employees are asked what makes them want to stay with the organization). Other data sources include employee leave trends, use of the employee assistance program, number of grievances and complaints, program outcome reports, training reports, and customer surveys.

Each approach can generate data to help the organization understand how employees feel about the workplace

and the organization’s culture and help target actions to improve employee engagement.

## Conclusion

Employee engagement matters, especially in human services. To meet the challenge of attracting and retaining a talented, committed, and agile workforce, human services agencies must use data to understand the level of engagement in their organizations—and then act on the data to improve engagement.

This article is the first of a two-part collaboration between APHSA and the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement. In October, we will discuss specific strategies to improve employee engagement, a road map for advancing these strategies, and how to sustain efforts long term. We will also share examples of human services and other agencies that are measuring and improving engagement. 

## Reference Notes

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5. *Careers at NASA: Explore the Extraordinary, Every Day*. Retrieved from <https://www.nasa.gov/careers>
6. Harter, J. (Feb. 4, 2020). “4 Factors Driving Record-High Employee Engagement in U.S.” Gallup Institute data from unpublished research. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/284180/factors-driving-record-high-employee-engagement.aspx>
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