



# Investing in Your Employees: How to Create a Win-Win Situation for Employees and Organizations

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Evaluating Stress as a Baseline for the Employee Experience</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Creating a Win-Win Situation for Employees and Organizations</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Identifying a “Win” for the Employee .....	5
Identifying a “Win” for the Organization .....	5
<b>How Do We Get to a “Win-Win” for the Employee and Organization?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Tools for the Job .....	8
Connection .....	8
Support and Accountability .....	9
Growth and Development .....	10
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>MedBridge: Your Complete Solution</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>About the Author</b> .....	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

While the employee experience has always mattered, it took on new urgency in recent years that saw additional safety precautions, furloughs, a quick pivot to telehealth, and many personal challenges. If you had a team that felt engaged and supported, you discovered that investing in the employee experience led to big payoffs for your staff, your organization, and your patients. These investments cause a ripple effect throughout your organization and the entire continuum of care.

For example, all healthcare organizations faced incredible challenges during the COVID-19 crisis, but team members who had a positive work environment prior to the pandemic had the drive and capacity to handle the stressors in more productive and creative ways than those who came into the situation already feeling stressed, frustrated, and unfulfilled with their work. Teams that were able to leverage their investment in the employee experience discovered that it was a win-win situation for employees and organizations, even during a most stressful year.

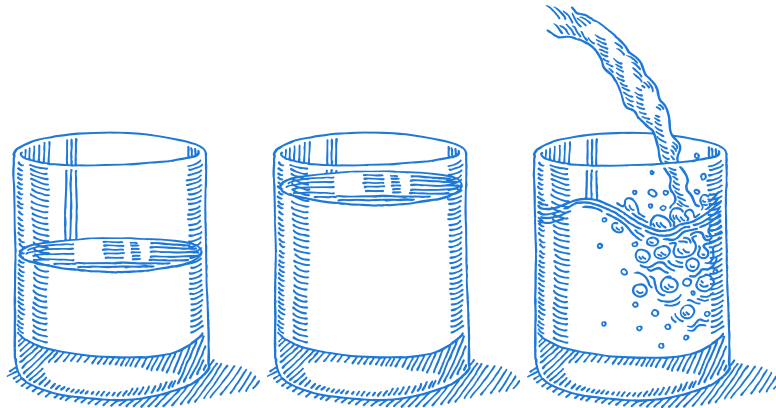
## Evaluating Stress as a Baseline for the Employee Experience

Consider your baseline stress level for a moment. We've all had bad days where we feel like everything is going wrong. Perhaps your alarm didn't go off, or your coffee maker suddenly broke when you needed it most. Individually, these events may not be enough to change the way you view your day, but if you also ran into a traffic jam and were late for work, suddenly this series of smaller events has compounded, increasing your frustration level and making even simple tasks more difficult. If you start the day with a lower stress level, when an unexpected negative event occurs—like the traffic jam—it would have less of an impact than if your baseline stress level was already high.

The employee experience has that same compounding effect. While we can't predict every problem we'll encounter in our day, if an employee does not feel valued or is disengaged in the work, their baseline stress level is likely higher than it would be otherwise, making any additional problems seem more difficult to deal with.

**Team members who had a positive work environment prior to the pandemic had the drive and capacity to handle the stressors in more productive and creative ways**

When you add in all of the anxiety and stress that come with challenges in their personal lives, it's unsurprising that employees who feel unsupported are less effective, aren't as attentive, and experience a negative impact on their overall well-being. A Gallup survey revealed that employee engagement was at an all-time low of 31 percent<sup>1</sup>, exacerbating any new challenges to their workplace.



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Compare that scenario to an organization where employee experience has always been a priority. Take for example the additional stressors presented by adjusting your workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic—quick implementation of structural changes like PPE regulations or practice space restrictions were likely more readily accepted if your employees already felt valued, supported, and respected. Team members in these environments can trust that their leaders are concerned about their well-being, helping to alleviate their anxiety and fear, and allowing for a greater focus on their work— even in stressful circumstances.

As we look to the future, recognize that a positive employee experience becomes the way to future-proof your business from whatever comes next. Your team will have the energy, the desire, and the capacity to tackle any challenge.

<sup>1</sup> Harter, J. (July 2, 2020). Historic drop in employee engagement follows record rise. Gallup. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/313313/historic-drop-employeeengagement-follows-record-rise.aspx>

## Creating a Win-Win Situation for Employees and Organizations

### Identifying a “Win” for the Employee

Investing in the employee experience creates a number of “wins” for team members, and when team members win, they are more likely to be fully engaged in their work and stay with the organization longer. One study showed that employee engagement results in a 41 percent reduction in absenteeism.<sup>2</sup> So how do we provide an employee experience that promotes a lower baseline of stress in the workplace? First, it’s important to identify what employees are hoping to get out of their work experience. During my years of consulting with healthcare teams, I’ve found that the wins that team members most often are looking for are:

- A sense of purpose
- Joy in the workplace
- Less burnout and stress
- A feeling of teamwork
- A sense of accomplishment
- Excitement about adding value through meaningful work

By creating an environment that supports your employees’ pursuit of these wins, you’ll foster an engaged team that is equipped to handle stressful situations and challenges.

### Identifying a “Win” for the Organization

Investing in the employee experience is not just a win for your employees, it’s also a win for the organization. A joint study between Boston Consulting Group and Partner for Public Service examined three years’ worth of data from a variety of medical centers of the Department of Veteran’s Affairs and found that VAs with higher employee engagement scores had a positive correlation with patient satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> In fact, just a one-point increase in employee engagement correlated with a half-point increase in patient satisfaction scores.<sup>4</sup>

2 Harter, J. and Mann, A. (April 12, 2017). The right culture: Not just about employee satisfaction. Workplace. Gallup.com Retrieved from: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236366/right-culture-notemployee-satisfaction.aspx>

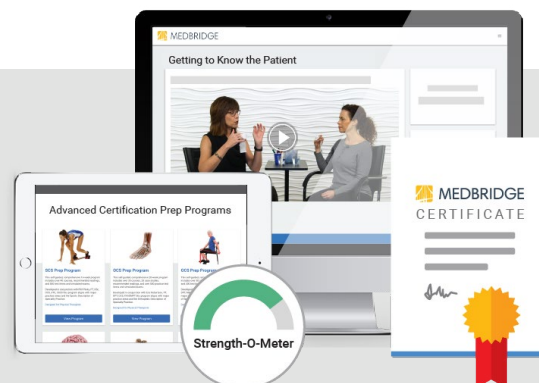
3 Partnership for Public Service & Boston Consulting Group. (2019). The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government. © A Prescription for Better Performance: Engaging Employees at VA Medical Centers. OurPublicService.org. Retrieved from [https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPTW18\\_VA-issue-brief.pdf](https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPTW18_VA-issue-brief.pdf)

4 Heath, S. (n/d). Employee engagement tied to higher patient satisfaction levels. Patient Satisfaction News. Retrieved from <https://patientengagementhit.com/news/employee-engagement-tied-to-higher-patient-satisfaction-levels>

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Invest in your staff, deepen engagement, and retain your best employees through effective onboarding, ongoing career development, and leadership training.

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Take a moment to think about your team and the star performers who are highly engaged. They likely exhibit some of the following winning behaviors that you'll want your entire team to demonstrate:

- Independence and creative problem solving
- Serving as a role model for company culture
- Working towards the company's goals
- Independent with decision making
- Productive with their conflict resolution

These behaviors are ways that someone demonstrates mastery—not just in their clinical skills, but in the overall way they perform at work. While clinicians should always be learning and growing their clinical skills based on best practices, they should also strive to be masters at how to function at the highest level in their workplace.

True mastery is true productivity. That's not just productivity as units billed per hour, but the ability to function independently, to complete tasks efficiently, quickly, and without error.

Analysis of Press Ganey data revealed that better employee engagement correlates with better outcomes in safety and technical quality.<sup>5</sup> If someone needs clarification on a task, has to search several places to find the right equipment, or pauses to review the procedure manual, then they aren't fully productive. Once people reach true productivity, they don't need to spend as much time checking for the right answer because they have a baseline of knowledge and skill to make decisions on their own, and possess the skill set needed to resolve conflict in a productive way that leads to better outcomes.

True mastery also comes from time and experience within the role. There is a strong link between employee engagement and employee retention, as highly engaged business units achieve 24 percent less turnover.<sup>6</sup> Fostering a culture with low turnover and long tenure for team members helps them reach that level of mastery needed to be truly productive.

## How Do We Get to a “Win-Win” for the Employee and Organization?

Before you can achieve a win-win, it's important to ensure that the employee's sense of purpose is validated and aligned with the mission and vision of the organization. Team members want a sense of purpose in their work, but we can't assume that “helping people” makes up their entire sense of purpose. After all, while non-clinical staff are vital for the success of your organization, most aren't directly helping the patient get better. This is why the mindset and

## Better employee engagement correlates with better outcomes in safety and technical quality<sup>5</sup>

5 Buhlman, N. W. & Lee, T. H. (May 8, 2019). When patient experience and employee engagement both improve, hospitals' ratings and profits climb. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2019/05/when-patient-experience-and-employee-engagement-both-improve-hospitals-ratings-and-profits-climb>

6 Harter, J. and Mann, A. (April 12, 2017). The right culture: Not just about employee satisfaction. Workplace. Gallup.com. Retrieved from: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236366/right-culture-not-employee-satisfaction.aspx>

core purpose of the organization is so important. Providing a clear mission and vision ensures everyone has a clear sense of purpose for their work—regardless of role.

It's important to ensure that each employee understands how they add value to the mission and vision of the team. Employees want to be excited by the value their role adds—one study showed that highly engaged teams are 21 percent more productive.<sup>7</sup> A “purpose statement” must contain something clear and powerful enough to inspire dedication and commitment from the people whose job it is to deliver on that mission. When the mission statement clearly articulates the “why” of your organization, your people can recite it with feeling because they live it every day in their work.

For example, at Spooner Physical Therapy, a 22-location practice with almost 400 team members, the core purpose is “Helping People Achieve.” This language expresses the company’s reason for existing. Julianne Brandt, COO, explains that the experience for both patients and team members incorporates the mind, body, and spirit. They provide a clear win for all team members by providing opportunities for a sense of accomplishment and purpose in their work.

While you can say you want employees to have a sense of purpose, unless you design your practice to live that purpose, it is a hollow promise. Effective engagement is driven by four key areas:



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## Tools for the Job

Every team member must have the tools, both figuratively and literally, that they need to do their job, and knowing how to effectively use these tools fosters engagement and self-reliance.

Employees need to know how to use equipment safely, what the procedures are for the associated tasks, and how to find and identify resources for additional training. I encouraged one of my clients to add tools for the job to rounding check-ins and he was shocked by what he discovered. There weren't enough computer stations for recently hired staff, and a key piece of equipment was broken. Employees assumed they just had to work around the problems instead of knowing that their leaders would work to resolve them. Not only was the important piece of equipment broken, but so was the line of communication that could have resolved this issue much earlier. These employees were not equipped with the tools they needed or empowered to ask for help, leaving them short on the tools they needed to perform at their best.

During your next rounding, huddle, or quarterly with team members ask them if they have all the tools they need to perform at their best. Remember, answers can include physical tools, software, training, or something that might not have even occurred to you. Be curious!

## Connection

Employees are seeking real connection at work—and when you consider how much time is spent at work, it's only natural! This connection not only applies to their peers, but their leaders and the organization's purpose as well.

Connection is built through communication that is clear, consistent, and frequent, but many organizations shy away from meaningful meetings because of the time commitment that they require. Unlike meetings that function as status updates or data dumps, meaningful meetings that build connection and alignment are a dialogue, and can be a key driver of communication in your organization. They can be 15 minutes, 30 minutes, or a few hours depending on the topics and goals—determining the appropriate meeting length and style will be unique to your team.

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A study by the O.C. Tanner Institute<sup>8</sup> found that:

- A surprising 54 percent of employees report that their leader actually knows what they do at work. But when leaders clearly articulate an employee's contributions, companies can see a 200 percent increase in the incidence of great work.
- 33 percent of employees report that they dread meeting one-on-one with their leader. However, the study also shows that bi-weekly one-on-one meetings decrease the odds of employee burnout by an astonishing 84 percent.
- Sadly, only 26 percent of employees feel their team works seamlessly together. Nevertheless, when leaders connect their people to one another, they build an environment of trust in team members and see a 363 percent increase in the feeling of psychological safety among those teams.
- Only 51 percent of employees think their organization is great at listening to employees. When companies practice active, multi-method, frequent listening, there is a 1,250 percent increase in employee engagement.

These alarming statistics illustrate the many ways in which employees often feel disconnected from their leaders, resulting in lower employee engagement. Engaged employees want their voices to be heard, and both one-on-one or company-wide meetings are great opportunities to shrink this disconnect. It's also important to follow up on these interactions that ensure the employee knows they've been heard. Once they've given feedback, they want swift action or an update as to what is going to happen based on that feedback.

### **Support and Accountability**

Many leaders and owners shy away from discussions about the non-negotiable rules of their organization. Non-negotiable rules include aspects of professional responsibility within legal, regulatory, and financial guidelines. They include behaviors that are aligned with the core values of the organization.

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<sup>8</sup> O. C. Tanner Institute. (2021). 2021 Global Culture Report. Retrieved from <https://www.octanner.com/content/dam/oc-tanner/images/v2/culture-report/2021/GCR-2021-sm.pdf>

The clearer you are about what employees are accountable for—including successful behaviors that help achieve each goal—the easier it is for a team member to be successful. I've had many clients say "everyone knows what they are supposed to do," but once I'm working with the team, we discover that while this may be true for simple or surface-level tasks, many don't have the clarity they need to truly be successful and demonstrate mastery

In Ken Blanchard's book, co-written with Gary Ridge, CEO of WD-40, *Helping People Win at Work: A Business Philosophy Called "Don't Mark My Paper, Help Me Get an A,"* he explains, "Putting the employee in the driver's seat empowers them to make choices, know what they are measured on, and what it takes to excel in the organization."

## Growth and Development

A survey by The Harris Poll discovered that lack of career growth is the second biggest reason people quit their jobs.<sup>9</sup> Demonstrating interest in someone's career growth shows that you care about them as a person, beyond just their performance in their current role. Engaged employees need opportunities for new experiences and ways in which to be involved in the organization. There is true excitement when a person is able to add value in new and innovative ways.

One of the most powerful ways to keep your staff engaged and grow their career is professional development. Helping them develop new skills and create learning paths builds this joy and excitement for an even greater win. Employees are more productive, engaged, and satisfied when learning and development are prioritized, and organizations can use these learning opportunities to remediate skill gaps and upskill their employees. The organization wins because they provide better quality care over time and save costs by retaining their best employees, and the employees gain new clinical skills and certifications that build their career and equip them for success.

## DEVELOP YOUR WORKFORCE WITH MEDBRIDGE

MedBridge helps you engage your employees and assist them in advancing their careers through opportunities for specialization and ongoing advancement in an easily consumable, just-in-time format.

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<sup>9</sup> Akhtar, A. (Jun 12, 2019). Bosses take note: Workers say lack of engagement is a top reason they'd quit their jobs. Business Insider. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-main-reason-an-employee-would-quit-a-job-2019-6>

Take time to meet with employees and understand the areas in which they want to develop to create a learning plan for them. One way to accomplish this is to shift their annual review to take a look at not only what has happened in the past, but to identify and discuss their goals for the future. Another is to establish an ongoing professional learning framework that can be used to identify specific opportunities for growth that suit each individual employee.

Let the team member guide their learning path and recognize that their learning can include a variety of areas. Once you help them discover their areas of interest, create a pathway for learning that includes timelines and success measures.

- [Soft-skills](#) are often forgotten when evaluating opportunities for career development, but leadership, interpersonal, and other soft-skills training is crucial to developing a well-rounded professional skill set.
- [Certificate programs](#) are a great way for practitioners to differentiate themselves and expand their skill set. Providing advancement opportunities through specialized training helps motivate employees and improve morale, while ensuring they are practicing at the top of their licenses.

## Conclusion

Investing in your employees has always mattered, but employee engagement will play an even greater role in the future as we move forward with our eye on growth. Whether those growth plans include new locations or service offerings, increasing the number of team members, adding top line revenue, or lowering expenses, it is your team that will make those plans come to fruition. Ensuring a positive employee experience is key to future-proofing your business for whatever comes next.

Creating a positive work environment leads to the longevity of team members, stability in the organization, and growth opportunities for all. An engaged employee wants to add value to the organization, but to achieve this, they must know the rules of the road: what they are accountable for, how success is measured, and what the non-negotiables are for the practice. It is easier when there is clear and consistent communication where leaders not only share information but listen for feedback. When employees grow, they bring new skills to clients, greater mastery within the business and a commitment to the organization's growth, as well as their own—a win-win for everyone.

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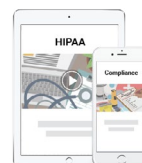
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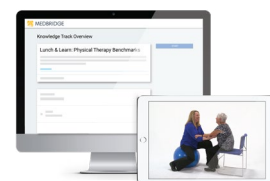
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Give your clinicians the tools they need to pass the test, gain experience, and advance their careers—all while earning CEUs.

## About the Author



### **Amy Lafko, MSPT, MBA**

Amy Lafko, MSPT, MBA, founded Cairn Consulting Solutions with the knowledge that you need to grow your people to grow your business. Amy focuses her work on the employee experience that is derived from skilled leaders and aligned teams. Whether through team dynamics sessions, development workshops, or consulting, Amy provides expertise to improve the entire lifecycle of your team. From hiring to engagement, she assists clients in decreasing turnover as well as increasing productivity and customer satisfaction. Amy earned her MSPT from Ithaca College and her MBA from Loyola University of MD. Amy has partnered with MedBridge to create a series of short videos focused on developing soft skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and accountability, which can be found [here](#).

Many of the concepts, graphics, and examples are inspired by Amy's forthcoming book *People First: A Proven Method for an Exceptional Healthcare Practice*. For the latest information about her new book, sign up for updates [here](#).