

Want **ENGAGEMENT** and **PERFORMANCE**? Try this!

Enhance performance and engagement by improving manager-employee alignment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, employers witnessed critical market challenges. Among them remote management, communication barriers and new skill gaps resulting from emerging technologies and disruptions in the latter. To cope with these changes efficiently, employers must invest not only in employee engagement and retention, but also in upskilling efforts.

A recent Gallup study shows that 70% of variations in employee engagement are due to management. Managers are the bridge between leadership's vision and the realities of the front line. These findings highlight the importance of employee and manager alignment for business performance.

SUCCESSFUL MANAGER-EMPLOYEE ALIGNMENT: A CONTINUOUS PROCESS

At its heart, manager-employee alignment is an ongoing process between managers and

their direct reports. It entails gaining agreement on role expectations, success measures and the skills and capabilities required to execute the role. Successful alignment is not an annual or even semi-annual process. Rather, sustained alignment requires continual dialogue and check-ins to reinforce prior agreements or create new agreements when situations change.

In most organizations, alignment is integrated into the performance management process. However, historically, such a process has proven to be too rigid to promote the regular dialogue needed to revisit job requirements, goals, and capabilities. A pre-Covid study by Gallup found that, for employees who worked remotely 80 to 100% of the time, engagement increased by nearly four times with feedback given a few times a week, as opposed to a few times per year.

ALIGNMENT BETWEEN MANAGER AND SELF-REPORTED RATINGS

In the past, we worked with organizations (pre-Covid) that had revamped their annual performance management procedure to create a continuous process focused on goal setting, progress reviews, outcome assessment and career development. We found that, when employees clearly understood their goals and how they tied to organizational success, self-reported performance improved by 22% and engagement by 30%. One employee wrote: "The new process helps facilitate a more authentic relationship with my manager, builds trust and open dialog that's enabling more meaningful performance management."

On the other hand, unaligned employees were clearly frustrated. One employee reported: "My manager does not provide feedback in a way to clearly understand what is needed." Another employee wrote: "I have no communication with my manager. When I ask a question, I get ignored or an indirect answer. There is no managerial support to continue to learn. The lack of communication results in poor work."

To further align managers with their employees,

we evaluate alignment through 360 assessments, which have seen a resurgence in recent years. When managers effectively communicate expectations regarding business results, we see a positive correlation between self-assessment and manager assessment ratings. Take for example the results of a multi-rater assessment of two departments that are plotted below. In comparing the two departments, we can see distinct tendencies in the relationship between manager-rating and employee self-rating (see image).

Department A shows a more uniform relationship between manager ratings and self-reported ratings. This leads to increased job satisfaction and business goal alignment. In contrast, for Department B, there is no correlation between the rating scores. The analysis found that about 50% of managers are not communicating effectively, and/or that regular feedback about expectations is lacking.

Measuring alignment is more critical than ever. While alignment has always been critical to an engaged and productive workforce, the urgency to sustain alignment became even more critical during COVID. With workers out of sight in home offices, communication became challenging. Chance encounters disappeared, requiring more purposeful efforts for managers to stay in touch with their remote workers.

HOW WOULD SENIOR LEADERS DISCERN IF MANAGERS AND THEIR PEOPLE WERE DIRECTLY ALIGNED?

One solution is employee journey mapping (EJM), which involves investment in listening strategies to thoroughly understand the employee experience. Improving human experiences leads to happier and more efficient people. In turn, this improvement increases business outcomes that contribute to higher employee experience.

Appropriately integrating a multi-rater or 360 assessment would enable Department B to shift gears and achieve greater alignment, as demonstrated by Department A. For leaders,

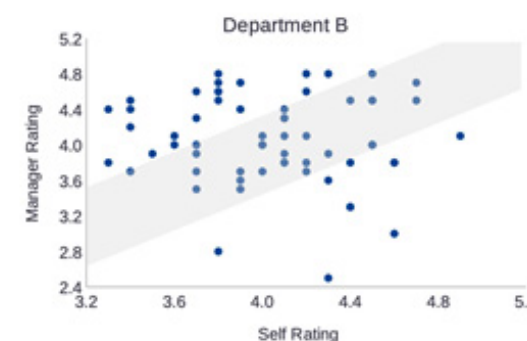
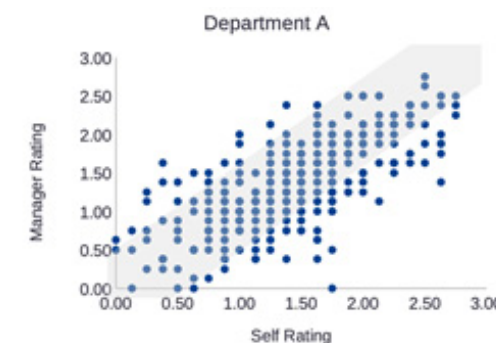
the ability to regularly identify behavioral patterns and skill trends that accelerate business performance is crucial to combating any disruptions. This process will also greatly improve development planning at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Importantly, team leaders' understanding of behavioral and skill tendencies will also increase employee engagement and ensure better alignment with business goals.

ACHIEVE BUSINESS GROWTH THROUGH ALIGNED EMPLOYEES

Through numerous studies over the years, our team has uncovered gaps in expectations between employees and their managers. For instance, some employees attend training courses without preliminary discussions about their manager's expectations for application or performance increase. In other cases, employees and managers assess capabilities without prior conversations on expected competency levels or development plans to acquire them. Regularly integrating alignment questions into learning feedback surveys, multi-rater assessments or engagement surveys helps surface alignment issues, which organizations can then proactively address.

By considering whether employees are clear about their roles, have access to the right materials, equipment and training, and are given the opportunity to succeed, leaders solidify their organization's growth. Moreover, alignment between managers and employees throughout the employee experience enables organizations to identify competent and supportive co-workers. Ultimately, attending to these considerations ensures that everyone is on the same page and working towards growth with a common purpose in mind. ■

PEGGY PARSKEY is Principal Consultant at Explorance and uses her extensive consultancy experience to help Fortune 500 firms build sustainable measurement and evaluation capabilities for Learning and Talent programs. She is the co-author of *Learning Analytics: Using Talent Data to Improve Business Outcomes*.



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