The Best Teams

ADP Research INSTITUTE

Though feeling like you're on a team is fundamental to engagement, it's true that some teams are far more engaging than others.

In the most engaged teams — the top quartile — 59% of members are fully engaged, whereas in the bottom quartile 0% are. The ADPRI study strongly suggests that a number of key factors separate the best teams from the rest. From those we can draw the following conclusions for leaders about how to improve their teams:
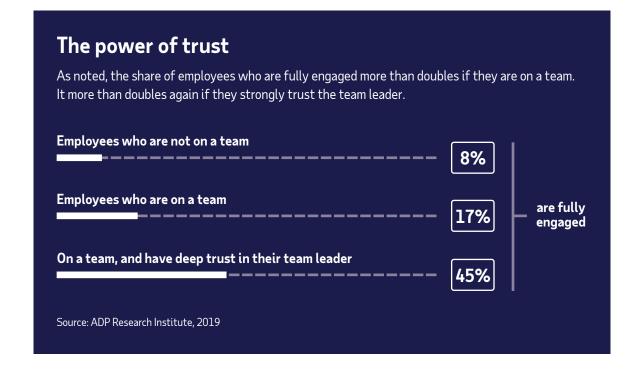
01

Focus on trust.

Our data immediately pinpoints the biggest differentiator between high- and low-performing teams: trust in the team leader. Team members who *strongly agree* that they trust their team leader are *eight times* as likely to be fully engaged as those who don't. This trust must be deep and without question.

A team member who merely *agrees* that she trusts her team leader shows roughly the same level of engagement as does someone who actively distrusts his team leader. For trust to matter, it must be extreme.

The power of trust

As noted, the share of employees who are fully engaged more than doubles if they are on a team. It more than doubles again if they strongly trust the team leader.

Employees who are not on a team

8%

Employees who are on a team

17%

are fully engaged

On a team, and have deep trust in their team leader

45%

Source: ADP Research Institute, 2019

We can go further, to identify the core components of that trust. That is, we know what activities a team leader must engage in to build extreme trust with her team members. In analyzing the ADPRI study to ascertain which concepts are most associated with trust, we discovered that strong agreement with two statements from our survey, "At work, I clearly understand what is expected of me" and "I have the chance to use my strengths every day at work," corresponds with a high level of trust in the team leader. This suggests that despite the fluidity of today's working world, the best team leaders can help each team member feel both understood and focused. *Know me for my best, and then focus my work around that*: These are the fundamental needs of every team member, and the foundation of any high-performing team.

As part of the qualitative analysis that accompanies any quantitative research, we interviewed a woman we'll call Kyona, a social media manager in a professional services firm, because the data revealed that she and her fellow team members were highly engaged.

She described one small way in which a busy team leader can stop the flow of work to show a team member that her strengths are noticed and translated into ongoing expectations. "There was this one team meeting where everyone was spinning around and around, and I jumped in, simplified the issue, and solved it," she said. "My team leader paid attention to that. She called me the Calm in the Chaos, the pragmatic one who avoids getting wrapped up in debate. She named it, pointed it out to the rest of the team, and now in meetings, whenever we get stuck, everyone just naturally turns to me." Kyona and her team leader have taken this understanding beyond team meetings and into their weekly check-ins, during which Kyona shares her priorities and she and her team leader chat about course corrections and small shifts of focus. Over time each check-in serves as both a nudge toward the right outcomes and a reminder that Kyona's strengths are top-of-mind for her team leader. The high level of engagement that the members of Kyona's team feel comes in large part from the trust her team leader builds in this way.

02 Design teams for human attention.

The importance of trust leads us in turn to what we consider to be the most important insight from the ADPRI study about how to create engaged teams. Its outlines appear when we look more closely at our two nurses at work.

In Fritz's department, 76 nurses report to one nurse manager. No matter how brilliant that manager is, she simply cannot address the needs and priorities of every nurse every week — with the result that Fritz and his colleagues feel unseen, unheard, and alone as they face their daily challenges.

In contrast, Jordan's department actually has more nurses and nurse assistants — 97 — but that's just how things look on the org chart. Stanford Health Care is pioneering ways to make frequent, light-touch attention between team member and team leader the fundamental design principle of work. According to its CHRO, David Jones, the organization has not only deliberately put patients at the center of the dynamic teams that spring up every day (this is the "interdisciplinary approach" that so engages Jordan) but is also deploying an ADP team-creation, engagement measurement, and check-in tool called StandOut to every employee. It enables team members to get the attention they need from their team leaders, whether their team is visible on the org chart or just popped up yesterday to focus on a particular patient.

The data from Stanford Health Care — together with other research from Cisco, Deloitte, ADP, Mission Health, and Levi's — tells us that frequent attention to the work of each team member is what we might call the *anchor ritual* of team leadership. These organizations have all instituted a simple weekly conversation between team leaders and each of their team members and have been able to measure increases in engagement as a function of the frequency of these check-ins.

The check-ins address two simple questions — What are your priorities this week, and How can I help? — and serve to ensure that each team member receives the attention needed to do his or her best work. They are focused on the future and on what energizes each team member; they are strengths-based, not remedial.

The data makes an unambiguous case that the frequency of conversations is critical. An earlier ADPRI study at Stanford Health Care showed that team leaders who check in once a week see, on average, engagement levels 21 points higher than what those who check in only once a month see. A recent Cisco study yielded comparable data. And according to Jones, "We can see from our data that teams with more-frequent check-ins have dramatically higher levels of engagement; so, moving forward, we are going to keep experimenting with smaller, more patient-centered, more agile teams, and keep investigating the link between span of control and patient outcomes — and all because we can see the link between attention, teams, and patient care."

The most-engaged teams — and the most-effective team leaders — understand that the currency of engagement is real, human attention. This helps us answer a long-standing question about the optimal span of control in all organizations. Some research puts the number at eight to 10, whereas some workplaces, such as call centers, push the limits with spans as great as 70 team members to one supervisor. Pinpointing the check in, and the frequent attention it provides, as the key driver of engagement shows that "span of control" is more accurately *span of attention*. The research reveals that for people to be engaged, the span of control must allow each team leader to check-in, one on one, with each team member every week of the year. Any relayering, delayering, or org redesign that prevents such frequent attention will ultimately lead to disengagement, burnout, and turnover.

03 Learn together.

How can we help teams improve? One problem is that to teach employees to be better team members, organizations typically send them to a class on, say, empathy, active listening, or project management — alone. They are taught these skills in a context completely separate from the teams where they will actually employ them. Then, when there still seems to be something wrong with how teammates interact, comes a second problematic intervention: They are sent to

workshops and offsites featuring trust falls and other team-building activities that are unrelated to the actual teamwork — and so teach nothing about trusting one another in the context of work and nothing about making that work more transparent and predictable.

There's a different way. At Cisco, where one of us (Ashley) is a senior vice president, rather than teaching "teamwork skills" to employees

and team leaders in isolation, the training is brought to the team through the Power of Teams program. Each session of the program begins with a discussion of engagement on *this* team, *right now*. Team members get to know their current teammates through the lens of their strengths. From those ingredients, the team builds new habits and rituals to accelerate its members' growth together through their work together, on this particular team at this particular moment in time. Cisco has applied this specific,

real-time, one-size-fits-one-team approach to team improvement more than 600 times in the past three years. The company has learned that helping each team to understand how it's doing and to find new approaches rooted in the people on the team and the work in front of them is far more valuable than teaching abstract teaming skills to one person at a time. Such has been the impact of the program at Cisco that leaders have requested more than 400 sessions for the next 12 months alone.

04 Put team experience above team location.

Two recent labor trends have provoked much chatter in big companies thinking about engagement: remote work and gig work. The sense seems to be that remote work detracts from engagement and that gig work is a lonely, atomized experience. The past few years have seen a persistent pull to get workers back into the office. From Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer's 2013 edict that all workers must come to the office every day to more-recent rollbacks of work-from-home policies at Aetna and IBM along with our current fixation on open-plan workspaces and the location of the next new corporate headquarters — the prevailing wisdom appears to be that remote work is neither as productive nor as engaging as colocated work; that if we want people to collaborate and innovate with one another effectively on teams, they need to be bumping into one another in hallways and chatting with one another at coffee stations.

The ADPRI study has shown us something surprisingly different: First off, 23% of workers report that they work from home most of the time, and they turn out to be more engaged than colocated workers — 20% versus 15.8%. Furthermore, better than half of those remote workers (55%), far from feeling isolated, report that they feel part of a team. And of those who feel like part of a team, 27% are fully engaged at work. By contrast, only 17% of colocated team members who report they feel part of a team are fully engaged.

Having combined these initial findings and looked at them through the lens of team versus non-team rather than remote versus colocated, we can say for sure that to engage your people, you should avoid mandating that they show up at the office every day, and also that all the time you spend helping your remote workers join, get to know the other members of, and feel supported by their teams will pay off in the form of more-engaged workers. Engagement is about *who* you work with, not *where*.

05

Make all work more like gig work.

With the rise of the gig economy have come concerns that gig workers are socially isolated. But the ADPRI study revealed that gig work is more engaging than traditional work — 18% of gig-only workers (meaning both full- and part-time contract or contingent workers) are fully engaged, versus 15% of traditional workers (those not participating in the gig economy). That's because of the top two reasons people reported loving their gig work: It gives them far more control over their working lives, and they feel more freedom to do work they love (both of which help explain why the ADPRI study shows that the most common title gig workers bestow on themselves is "president").

Consistent with this, when respondents were asked to describe their work status in detail — one full-time job, two part-time jobs for two companies, one full-time job and one part-time job with the same company, and so on — it turned out that by far the most engaging work status (25% fully engaged) was this: one full-time job and one part-time job for a different company.

The full-time job brings stability and benefits, while the part-time role — like gig work — brings flexibility and the chance for the person to do something he or she truly enjoys (along with additional income).

These findings reveal not only that gig work can be very engaging but that it actually contains elements that can and should be transplanted into our traditional work. We should try to make all work more like gig work: Employees should have more control over their work and a greater chance to do work they love. They should have the best of both worlds: one predictable, stable role with a "home team" (more often than not, the static team depicted on the org chart) and one "side hustle" — a series of opportunities to join dynamic teams inside the same organization. Their greatest value to any of these teams may well be the particular, wonderful, and weird set of strengths they possess. This is not the usual way of designing either work or career paths, but it may be the most engaging.

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