

## Whitepaper

### How Does Your Leadership Team Rate?

Kelly Emrick, DHSc, PhD, MBA

This survey is based on thorough research on leadership and employee outcomes, which consistently shows that what managers do daily influences whether employees feel satisfied and engaged at work. Work engagement, often described as vigor, dedication, and absorption, differs from job satisfaction, which reflects an overall emotional evaluation of the job. However, leadership behaviors are strong predictors of both. Large-scale meta-analyses indicate that “positive” leadership styles, such as transformational, authentic, empowering, ethical, servant, and strengths-based leadership, show moderate to strong correlations with engagement, generally in the range of  $r=.40-.50$ . These styles tend to overlap, suggesting they share a core set of behaviors as experienced by employees. My goal here is to translate that shared core into a practical set of factors that employees can rate without needing any leadership jargon.

#### What the meta-analyses tell us about leadership and engagement

Recent meta-analytic work by academics reviewed 86 independent samples and compared the association between several well-known positive leadership styles and employee work engagement. They found that transformational, authentic, empowering, ethical, and servant leadership were all related to engagement at roughly the same magnitude, with an average correlation of .47. This means that these styles are statistically distinct. Yet, in practice, they feel similar enough to employees that their effects are almost interchangeable when predicting engagement. A second line of evidence, represented by Banks et al., combines data on authentic and transformational leadership and shows that both are strongly related to follower satisfaction with the leader and to work-related attitudes, partly through trust and identification with the leader.

Country-level meta-analysis by Li and colleagues indicates that the link between leadership and engagement is robust across cultural contexts. However, the strength of the association can vary with national culture and economic conditions. In other words, employees in different countries may express or interpret leadership behaviors differently, but the basic pattern holds: supportive, ethical, and empowering leaders have more engaged and satisfied teams.

Transformational leadership research offers another line of evidence. Meta-analytic and large-sample studies show that transformational behaviors, such as articulating a compelling vision, providing individualized consideration, and intellectually stimulating employees, are tied to engagement, organizational commitment, and better performance. Engagement itself often mediates the relationship between leadership and outcomes such as discretionary effort and innovative behavior. This means that leaders influence performance primarily by shaping how energized and psychologically invested employees feel in their work.

At the same time, research suggests that “support” from both the organization and direct supervisors is a foundational mechanism. Studies grounded in perceived organizational support theory and social exchange theory show that when employees feel their supervisor cares about their well-being, values their contributions, and provides the resources they need, they report higher engagement and satisfaction and lower intentions to quit. Supervisory support also interacts with broader organizational support and work–life balance policies, further amplifying satisfaction and engagement.

Ethical leadership is another consistent driver. Studies in this area show that when leaders behave reasonably, keep promises, model ethical standards, and make decisions transparently, employees report higher job satisfaction and engagement, often through increased trust, psychological safety, and “moral elevation” (a sense that one’s work supports something worthwhile).

Finally, large-scale engagement research from Gallup and others reinforces that what supervisors do day to day, especially around recognition, development conversations, clarifying expectations, and fostering a sense of purpose, is tightly linked with both engagement and team performance outcomes. In short, the empirical base is broad and deep. The challenge is not showing that leadership matters; the challenge is distilling the key ingredients into a concise, employee-facing measurement framework.

### **Ten leadership factors that drive satisfaction and engagement**

Synthesizing across these literatures, I have identified 10 recurring leadership factors that appear in meta-analyses and high-quality studies as drivers of employee satisfaction and engagement. I am framing them conceptually here. I take these factors and convert each factor into questionnaire items written in everyday language from the employee’s perspective.

1. **Perceived supervisor support and relationship quality:** Perceived supervisor support (PSS) and leader–member exchange (LMX) both capture the sense that one’s direct leader cares personally, is available, and stands up for the employee. Meta-analytic and recent empirical work show that PSS is strongly associated with work engagement, job satisfaction, and lower turnover intentions. High-quality relationships make employees feel valued and safe enough to invest energy in their work. From the employee side, this factor thinks like: “My manager has my back, listens to me, and helps me remove obstacles.”
2. **Trust and ethical conduct:** Ethical leadership research shows that honesty, fairness, keeping commitments, and treating people with dignity build trust and psychological safety, which in turn drive satisfaction and engagement. Employees in these environments feel less need to protect themselves and more freedom to invest in the job. Here, the lived experience might sound like: “I can rely on my leader to do the right thing, even when it is inconvenient.”
3. **Clarity of expectations and direction:** Engagement surveys and leadership studies consistently show that clarity regarding role expectations, priorities, and goals is a basic need. Ambiguous expectations create anxiety and drain energy, whereas clear direction allows employees to focus. This factor includes how well leaders communicate what success looks like, how today’s work ties to a broader mission, and whether employees know what is expected of them day to day.
4. **Inspiring purpose and meaning:** Transformational and authentic leadership research points to the importance of articulating a compelling purpose and connecting tasks to a larger mission. When leaders frame work as meaningful and aligned with shared values, employees report higher dedication and enthusiasm. Satisfaction in such settings often stems from a sense that one’s work matters, not only that it pays the bills.
5. **Empowerment, autonomy, and voice:** Empowering leadership and related constructs show that giving employees discretion in how they do their work, involving them in decision making, and actively soliciting input are associated with engagement and satisfaction. Employees who feel they can influence decisions

and use their judgment are more likely to experience vigor and ownership. In contrast, over-control and micromanagement tend to erode engagement.

6. Recognition, appreciation, and feedback: Across engagement studies, recognition for good work and constructive feedback appear as some of the strongest differentiators between engaged and disengaged employees. Leaders who notice effort, say “thank you” in specific ways, and give developmental feedback foster both satisfaction (feeling seen and valued) and engagement (motivation to keep improving). This factor is not about formal awards; it is mainly about day-to-day acknowledgment.
7. Fairness in workload, rewards, and opportunities: Justice-focused research highlights procedural and distributive fairness as predictors of satisfaction and engagement, often mediated by trust. Leaders influence perceived justice when they allocate work and rewards consistently, explain decisions, and give people a voice in processes that affect them. Employees who see their leader as fair, even when outcomes are not ideal, are more likely to remain engaged and less likely to withdraw.
8. Support for development and growth: Leaders who act as coaches, offer stretch assignments, discuss career paths, and support learning tend to have more engaged and satisfied teams. Engagement research shows that the availability of developmental opportunities is a key driver of vigor and dedication, particularly for younger workers. This factor is not just about formal training budgets; it also includes everyday behaviors such as teaching, sharing knowledge, and making time for career conversations.
9. Support for well-being and work–life balance: Studies on perceived organizational and supervisory support note that leaders who respect non-work roles, allow flexibility where possible, and pay attention to workload help employees maintain work–life balance, which feeds engagement and satisfaction. Supervisors can buffer stressors or amplify them, depending on how they respond when employees raise concerns about burnout or family demands.
10. Psychological safety and openness: Finally, psychological safety, often shaped by local leadership, is vital for both engagement and satisfaction. When employees feel safe to speak up, admit mistakes, raise concerns, and share new ideas without fear of ridicule or retaliation, they are more likely to invest effort and to stay with the organization. While much of the psychological safety literature focuses on team learning and error reporting, its link to engagement is increasingly documented. Leaders create safety through how they react to bad news, how they handle failure, and whether they genuinely listen when people speak.

These ten factors capture the practical footprint of the “positive leadership” cluster that appears across meta-analyses. They also align closely with the kinds of items that appear in widely used engagement tools, such as Gallup’s Q12, which emphasize expectations, resources, recognition, development, and a sense of mission.

### **Current debates and what they mean for measurement**

There are at least three active debates in this research space that matter for how I designed this questionnaire.

First, scholars question whether named leadership styles (transformational, authentic, servant, ethical, empowering, strengths-based) are truly distinct or mostly different labels for a shared “construct family.” The meta-analytic work by Decuyper et al. and Banks et al. suggests substantial overlap among these styles in

predicting engagement and satisfaction. For measurement, this implies that we should focus less on theoretical labels and more on concrete behaviors that employees can see and feel.

Second, there is growing recognition that supervisor behaviors do not operate in a vacuum. Organizational systems, such as HR policies, workload, technology, and broader culture, shape what is possible. Studies examining both organizational and supervisor support show that both matter and sometimes interact. For the questionnaire, this suggests we may want to keep the lens on the immediate leader, while acknowledging that some dissatisfaction arises from organizational constraints rather than the person in the supervisor role.

Third, recent work on manager disengagement indicates that many managers themselves feel exhausted and under-supported, which in turn undermines their ability to engage their teams. That context matters for interpreting any data we collect. If employees rate their leaders poorly on support or recognition, we should ask not only “what is wrong with the leader” but also “what resources and conditions have we given that leader?”