

# A Few Hard Truths About Employee Engagement Surveys

## Pitfalls to avoid and strategies to keep engagement high

 By **Yoram Solomon**, Innovation Culture Institute™ LLC.

Employee engagement is essential to companies. It affects the company's culture and performance. But it has also declined in the past several years. Because of that, many companies conduct employee engagement surveys. However, before you set off to conduct an employee engagement survey, there are a few things you should know and consider, because you may end up not really hearing what you *need* to hear, but rather only what you *want* to hear, and because you might do more harm than good with those surveys. This article will explain those, with examples and research data, and at the end, you'll see what you *should* do to keep employee engagement high. Because, after all, that's your goal. Right? And yes, it has everything to do with *trust*.

### Is Employee Engagement Important?

In 2020, Gallup conducted a [meta-analysis](#) of 456 studies covering 276 organizations in 54 industries and 96 countries, representing 2,708,538 employees. They found that employee engagement has a very significant impact on employees, culture, and company performance. A few key findings indicated that if employee engagement was at the top quartile (compared to the bottom one), turnover was 18-43% lower, absenteeism was 81% lower, and well-being

was 66% higher. Furthermore, those companies experienced 10% higher customer loyalty, 23% higher profitability, 18% higher productivity, and significantly fewer safety incidents and quality problems. Employee engagement is an important contributor to company success.

Unfortunately, another 2023 [Gallup](#) survey shows that after a decade of increase in employee engagement, the last two years showed a decline. Active engagement declined from 36% to 32%, while active disengagement increased from 13% to 18%.

Given the strong link between employee engagement and company performance, it is not surprising that many companies conduct employee engagement surveys regularly or not-so-regularly. But that raises the following question.

### Are Employee Engagement Surveys Reliable?

The American Educational Research Association (AERA) conducted a 2017 study of 454 participants. They found that 75% are more inclined to complete a survey truthfully if they are assured of the anonymity of the responses. Only 18.9% didn't mind anonymity

at all. In a small LinkedIn Poll I conducted, out of 29 responses, 45% believed that their responses to an employee engagement survey could be tracked to them, and 34% were not sure. Only 21% were confident that the response could not be used to identify them.

There could be several reasons why responses could be used to identify the respondent:

- Because the survey was intentionally built that way
- Because of very detailed demographic and other information
- Because of a mistake or data breach

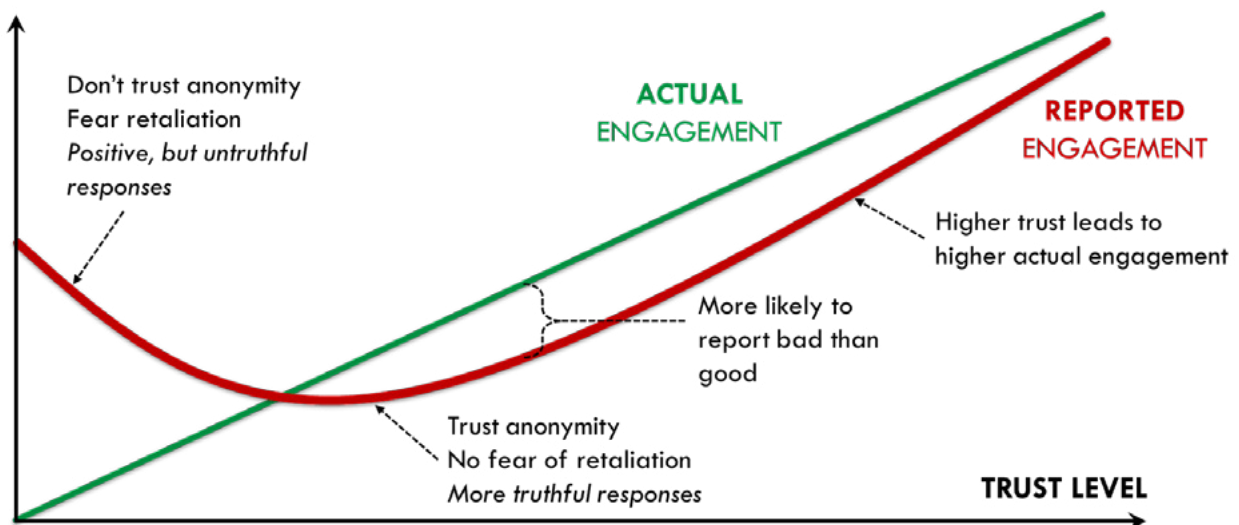
The perception that survey results are not anonymous could also be fueled by the “you have not filled out the survey yet” message, even if that message is automatically sent by the survey tool without the researchers or decision-makers knowing. But the perception is still there.

Undoubtedly, some people are not worried about anonymity and would provide the same responses to the survey as they would in person. But it seems that those are the exception rather than the rule. Most employees care about the anonymity of their responses, and unfortunately, most people also don't believe the surveys are anonymous.

Those employees worry about retaliation from their managers if their responses to the survey are not what their managers want to hear. As a result, they will either refrain from responding to the survey or, if forced, respond with what they believe their managers *want* to hear rather than with what they *need* to hear.

Trust, therefore, plays a major role in getting good responses to the employee engagement survey. Most employees must trust that the survey is anonymous and that their management would not retaliate against them if they responded truthfully. In one of my surveys, I found that where trust is high, people are 240% more willing to be vulnerable and 106% more willing to provide genuine feedback.

The result is counter-intuitive: *the less trust the employees have in the company, the more positive the results are* (because employees would respond with what they believe the company *wants* to hear). Of course, at some point, the level of trust is high enough not only to cause employees to report an accurate engagement level, but the actual engagement is truly higher because of the increase in trust. Add to that the fact that people are more inclined to give negative feedback if they had a bad experience than to provide positive feedback if they had a positive experience, and the reported engagement level will even then be lower than the actual engagement level.





### Are You Asking the Right Questions?

Another possible source for survey bias could be the questions themselves. An excellent illustration of that comes from the British TV comedy “Yes, Prime Minister.” In one of the [episodes](#), they demonstrate how a poll could provide opposite results depending on the questions themselves. The bias doesn’t have to be intentional, but it could still exist.

A further potential bias comes from the *depth* of the survey. Interview-based qualitative research tends to be more exploratory (“peeling the onion”) but not feasible in large companies. As a result, conducting a large-sample study would typically require a survey-based, multiple-option question quantitative poll, which would provide less depth.

### The Dangers of Statistics

The analysis part of the survey process could introduce problems as well. A sample could mask problems in one area of the company (if that area was not clearly identified in the demographic section of the survey). Imagine that one group (or level, or functional area) in the company would respond to a question with an average of 4.5 on a 5-point scale, while another group would respond with an average of 1.5. The overall average would be 3, masking a problem in one company area and the best practices that could be learned from another.

The sample itself can introduce additional bias. Engaged employees are more likely to respond to the survey than disengaged employees. First, because they are more engaged, and second because they are less worried about retaliation due to their responses. A great illustration of the sampling problem was given in 1948 when a [presidential election poll](#) was conducted and predicted that Dewey would defeat Truman. The reason you won’t find Dewey in the list of U.S. Presidents is that the survey sample itself caused a bias, and this became a case study in survey sampling.

### You’ve Done the Employee Engagement Survey. Now What?

Once you have started to conduct an employee engagement survey, it is as if you pulled the pin out of a hand grenade. The employees will now be waiting for the results and, more importantly, what you will *do* about them. How you deal with the survey and the results could cause more harm than good for the following reasons:

- **The results could be skewed due to any of the reasons listed above.** Regardless, when the employees feel that the survey result are biased, they will not trust the survey or your actions.
- **Your misinterpretation or misrepresentation of the results.** I once observed a Chief Human Resources Officer present the survey results to employees, saying, “we did great!” First, the results should not be graded. It’s not a competition. It’s a temperature check. Second, the results were *not* great. When I asked, “why did you say it was great?” the answer was, “I expected the results to be so bad that the fact they were industry average exceeded my wildest expectations.” Misinterpreting or misrepresenting the results would cause the employees to distrust the survey or the resulting management actions. Furthermore, if the results are presented as “great,” employees will not feel the need to do something about them. After all, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!



- **It takes too long to get the results, or the results are not shared with all employees.** Either the timeline was not shared with the employees (how long will the survey be open? How long will it take to analyze the results? When will they be shared with the employees?), or it just takes longer than it was planned, employees will assume you are not doing anything about it.
- **You don't follow up the survey results with action.** Often, the plan includes only conducting the survey, but once the results are in, the issue falls to the sidelines. Either there is no budget to deploy a program to improve engagement, or management doesn't think the problem is serious enough (which would happen when employees tell management what they think management wants to hear rather than what reality is or when the CHRO reports the results as "great" to show they are doing their job well). The employees will now feel that they wasted their time and that the company did the survey only "for show" without any plans to do anything about it.

## So, What Should You Do?

The first question you must ask yourself is, why are you planning to conduct an employee engagement survey? Is it because you don't know how engaged the employees are, or because you want to improve employee engagement and are conducting the survey to establish a baseline, after which you are committed to making an effort and improving employee engagement?

The second question you must ask yourself is, do you really not know the level of employee engagement in your company? What would you do if your gut tells you that the engagement level is high, while the survey shows the opposite, or if your gut tells you the engagement level is low, while the survey indicates it is high? Which would you trust, your gut or the survey results?

The bottom line is that for employee engagement, you must always *keep your ear to the ground and not bury your head in the sand*. Conducting an employee engagement survey once every three years (or even every year) is not enough.

When it's time to take action, make the employees part of the *solution* and not part of the *problem*. Remind the employees that culture starts with *them* and not their management. Present the findings, and ask employees for ideas on what would help increase their engagement.

This is the time to let you in on a secret. Research shows that when the level of *trust* in the company is in the top quartile, employee engagement is 76% higher than when trust is in the bottom quartile. Trust is the foundation for employee engagement, not only for the reasons listed in this article. In the 1992 movie *Glengarry Glen Ross*, actor Alec Baldwin plays an executive who speaks to the sales team and presents the acronym ABC: Always Be Closing. I would challenge you with a different acronym: ABBT: Always Be Building Trust. *Building* trust is easier than *rebuilding* trust once you lost it. If you keep your ear to the ground to gauge the level of engagement and trust, and constantly take action to build trust, you will never have to conduct an employee engagement survey.

But if you decide to conduct such a survey, first be aware that the results could be biased for the above mentioned reasons. Second, share the timeline for completing the survey and sharing the results, and stick to it. Third, get the employees involved in finding solutions and not only identifying the problems. Finally, conduct the survey only when you plan to follow up with action. Don't do it just to be able to say you did something about it. You could do more harm than good.



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