

A Dale Carnegie White Paper

People-Centered Engagement:

How to Engage Through
Humble Leadership

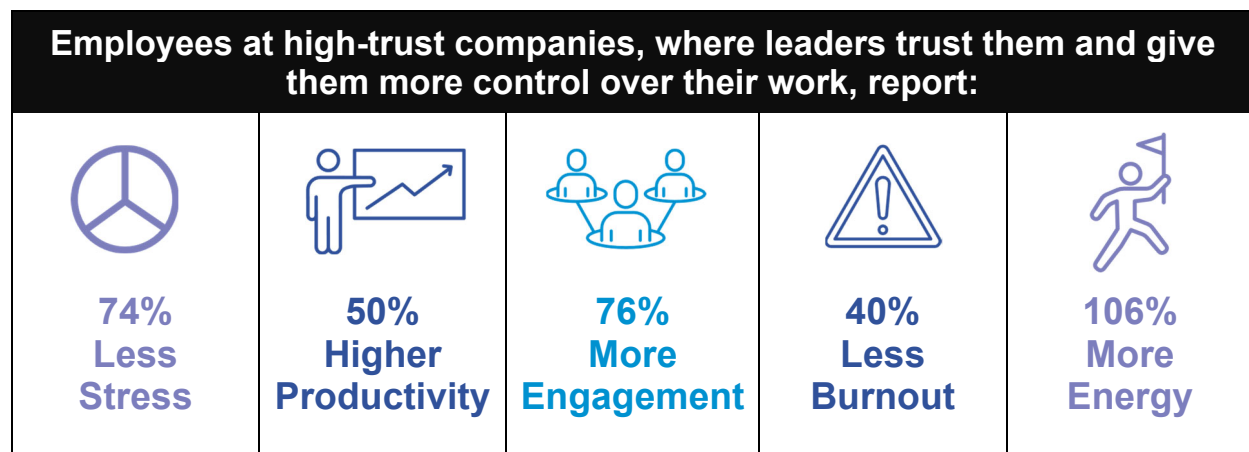


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People-Centered Engagement: How to Engage Through Humble Leadership

Many organizational leaders see employee engagement as synonymous with employee retention. They tend to tie an employee's value to the bottom line and business outcomes, reflecting a more traditional, transactional approach to not only the nature of engagement, but leadership in general.

There is increasing evidence, however, that when leaders prioritize control and end results over the people themselves, those leaders are actually less likely to achieve the desired business outcomes.¹ In contrast, those who exhibit more humble leadership have been shown to be more effective at retaining employees and getting the most out of their teams, with greater business success as an end result. Employees at high-trust companies, where leaders trust them and give them more control over their work, report: 74% less stress, 50% higher productivity, 76% more engagement, 40% less burnout and 106% more energy at work.²



(Source: "The Neuroscience of Trust: Management behaviors that foster employee engagement" in Harvard Business Review Magazine, 2017)

How can professionals in learning and development help leaders embrace a humbler approach at all levels and contribute to a culture of engagement that not only encourages retention, but also creates a balanced and fulfilling workplace culture for all involved?

The answer to this question may be in the hands of leaders and managers who adopt or exhibit a people-centered approach, seeing employees as whole persons, beyond just their professional roles. When leaders use a people-centered approach, they are focused on empowering employees and the overall growth of the team, rather than on strict business outcomes, which in turn better delivers the desired results.

People-centered leaders also care about employees' personal lives and want to understand the individual, including what motivates and engages them in and outside of the workplace; they recognize that life does not stop at the company's door. This approach creates a balance of empathy and empowerment, while building accountability and results, in a leadership style known as humble leadership.

¹ Schein, Edgar, Schein, Peter. *Humble Leadership, Second Edition: The Power of Relationships, Openness and Trust*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2023.

² Zak, Paul J. "The Neuroscience of Trust: Management behaviors that foster employee engagement." Harvard Business Review Magazine, Jan-Feb 2017. <https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>

Humble leaders should build an inclusive environment of psychological safety.

Humble leadership requires that a leader have an accurate view of themselves, recognize the contributions of others, and demonstrate a personal receptiveness to teachability.³ In order to explore this style of leadership, managers and other leaders should seek to have a clear and realistic view of their own abilities; genuinely appreciate the skills and talents of those around them by forging an inclusive environment of psychological safety; and lead by example with an openness to listen and learn with the intent to continuously improve.

In this paper we present our research showing that people-centered employee engagement through humble leadership is an effective way to drive increased productivity, loyalty, commitment, and engagement to an organization's mission and in turn increase retention.

Employees of effective leaders know they are valued and important.

Dale Carnegie's 2022 survey of 6,500 full-time workers in 20 countries shows employee engagement is driven by emotional factors which include an employees' relationships with leadership ranging from immediate supervisors to managers at different organizational levels.

Our research found employees are less satisfied with senior management than with direct supervisors, which in turn influenced their confidence in the organization as a whole. Further, while receiving higher satisfaction scores than that of senior management, employees still felt that their immediate supervisors didn't care enough about their personal lives and how they are impacted by their job. If left unaddressed, these emotional drivers can contribute to employee attrition.

Other research has shown executives often misunderstand why people quit in the first place, assuming it's mainly due to pay, benefits or other amenities. While these factors should not be ignored, they don't tell the whole story. According to [research](#) by McKinsey on the phenomenon of "Great Attrition" in 2021,⁴ the top three factors cited by employees as reasons for quitting were that they:

- **Didn't feel valued by their organizations (54%)**
- **Didn't feel valued by their managers (52%)**
- **Didn't feel a sense of belonging in the workplace (51%)**

Taken together, this suggests that leaders who are willing to explore a humbler relationship with their employees, one that centers people as the most valuable resource in the workplace, can positively address these important issues and strengthen employee engagement. Critical to this approach is creating a space that rewards initiative and genuinely empowers employees to make decisions, thereby motivating them to do their best.

³ "Preparing People for Success with Generative AI." Preparing People for Success with Generative AI | Dale Carnegie Training. Accessed September 20, 2023. <https://www.dalecarnegie.com/en/resources/preparing-people-for-success-with-generative-ai>.

⁴ "Great Attrition" or "Great Attraction"? The choice is yours." McKinsey & Company, McKinsey Quarterly, Sept. 8, 2021. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/great-attrition-or-great-attraction-the-choice-is-yours>

Humble leaders build a culture of psychological safety.

Humble leaders set themselves apart through their focus on creating a space where employees feel safe to come up with ideas, take risks and explore how best to solve problems. Rather than focusing on their own accomplishments and satisfying their own ego, humble leaders want to set the stage for their team to succeed.

For humble leaders, cultivating an inclusive culture of psychological safety – an environment where everyone feels safe and welcome – is a priority.

Since physiological safety begins with trust, building trust is paramount. Respondents to the recent Dale Carnegie survey on employee engagement reported that trust with their immediate supervisor is often an extremely important component of their job.

Additionally, McKinsey's 2021 [research](#) also found 46% of workers surveyed cited a main reason to quit was a desire to find a new workplace where they could work with people who trust and care for each other.⁵ In order to build the kind of trust that would encourage employees to stay at their current job, humble leaders can choose to see their role as serving their employees so they can explore, grow, and thrive.

Establishing a safe environment begins when a leader demonstrates they can be trusted. One way a leader can begin to build trust is to share personal stories, their aspirations and even their past mistakes. This starts to set the framework for trust by humanizing roles beyond positional structures. The leader then can start by sincerely asking employees how they can help them do their job better and then actively listening to what they say. This may involve ongoing conversations over time, particularly for a leader who is trying to create a safe environment from a previously less secure one.

Dale Carnegie's Principles that Help Foster Trusting, Safe Environments:

Talk about your own mistakes before criticizing the other person.

Ask questions instead of giving direct orders.

Source: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie

As an example, for some employees this might include leaders being open to employee feedback and opinions on where and how to work (i.e., remote, hybrid, etc.). Employees trust leaders who offer working options such as work from home days and flexible working hours. While most leaders expect people to return primarily to in-person office work since the pandemic, the majority of workers want flexibility for a variety of reasons⁶ and actively soliciting employee input for genuine consideration without repercussions is a step a leader can take to begin to build trust.

Another step toward creating an inclusive, safe environment is encouraging new ideas with little to no risk of doing so for contributors. Humble leaders set the tone of what it means to effectively brainstorm and instill the importance of encouraging and supporting others in the development of new ideas. They understand and share with their team that not every new idea needs to be perfect or solve every issue and that even an imperfect idea can lead to a better strategy, and eventually a solution. Creating this culture of psychological safety also aligns

⁶ De Smet, Aaron, et. al. "It's time for leaders to get real about hybrid." McKinsey Quarterly, July 9, 2021. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/its-time-for-leaders-to-get-real-about-hybrid>

with one of Dale Carnegie's leadership principles: "Don't criticize, condemn or complain."⁷ Leaders who create an environment where people aren't afraid of being criticized for making mistakes or suggesting different approaches will be better able to unlock employees' full potential.

A third step to creating a safe environment is in the very name of this leadership style itself: be humble and respectful to every member of the team, regardless of their role in the organization. Don't let positional power get in the way of developing high-quality professional relationships connected by mutual respect for the individual. This is a consideration that is beyond titles and one that leaders need to be continuously conscious of in every interaction.

Don't let positional power get in the way of developing high-quality professional relationships.

Humble leaders are transparent in their intent to learn from others.

A key component of humble leadership is having the courage and insight to admit when you can benefit from the expertise of others, including from those with less workplace power or authority.

When a leader is willing to learn from others, it creates a level of transparency and tells employees they are valued. At a high level, transparency underscores high-trust relationships between employees and managers and establishes a culture of high performance and success.⁸ On a personal level, it shows that a leader sees learning opportunities as going both ways. The more a leader listens with the intent to learn, the more he or she can help make work and job roles more personally rewarding for employees.⁹ It can also ensure employees feel engaged not only in their role, but toward their organization and its mission; a connection that is often lacking.

By listening and learning what motivates the individuals on their team, humble leaders are in a better position to articulate clear connections between their employees' roles and how they impact a company's direction.

A [poll by Gallup](#) in 2019 found only 40% of employees felt strongly connected to their company's mission.¹⁰ That lack of connection may be partially explained by a failure of clear, transparent communication on how a vision statement connects to an employee's everyday life at work. By listening and learning what motivates the individuals on their team, humble leaders are in a better position to articulate clear connections between their employees' roles and how they impact a company's direction.

Learning and listening by leaders can pay dividends. Our survey on the drivers behind employee engagement found that a belief in the purpose and direction of the company was employees' third most important aspect of their job, just after salary and the job itself. In *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, Dale Carnegie encouraged people to "give honest and sincere appreciation," and humble leaders who follow this principle show their willingness to learn and grow from others.

Leaders who discover ways to effectively communicate with, and also learn from, employees are directly contributing to better engagement.

⁷ Carnegie, Dale. *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. Pocket Books, 1998.

⁸ Moore, Martin. "How Transparent Should You Be with Your Team?" *Harvard Business Review*, Jan. 13, 2023. <https://hbr.org/2023/01/how-transparent-should-you-be-with-your-team>

⁹ Inesi, Ena. "What kind of leader will you be?" *Think at London Business School*. Dec. 4, 2020. <https://www.london.edu/think/what-kind-of-leader-will-you-be>

¹⁰ Musser, Chris. "One Employee Question That Leaders Can't Ignore." *Gallup*, Sept. 27, 2019. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/267014/one-employee-question-leaders-afford-ignore.aspx>

Humble leaders' model how to be open and enthusiastic.

One of the reasons humble leaders can be so effective is that they serve as role models for the rest of their team and organization. They model how seeking out opportunities to develop, learn and grow in the workplace, even when experiencing uncertainty or doubt, can have a positive impact.¹¹

This type of role modeling requires a certain level of vulnerability,¹² although some leaders may be resistant to opening up, especially to employees they may consider subordinates. How can learning and development professionals help leaders unlock their own vulnerability, and in turn show other employees the benefits of a humble approach?

The answer may be as simple as encouraging leadership to learn how to show genuine enthusiasm that others can notice and be inspired by.

The key word here is “show.” For example, assuming that team members know implicitly how much a leader or supervisor values his or her employees, cares about their role, or places high value on competence and effectiveness without it needing to be said or demonstrated can lead to issues. That type of environment encourages disconnected interpretations and can be confusing to the team member who relies on leadership for clear expectations. In lieu of assumptions, there should be an outward demonstration that can be easily recognized by others.

Employees need to see, hear and experience that their managers, supervisors, senior leadership, and other stakeholders care about the work they do. They need to experience that enthusiasm; don't rely on team members to read your mind.

Engagement hinges on whether an employee feels valued, and how that value is demonstrated by leaders, coworkers, and the organization as a whole. Dale Carnegie's survey results on employee engagement found that employees who feel valued are nearly three times more likely to put in extra hours when needed, demonstrating their engagement to the company in a willingness to work hard. Fostering that engagement starts with leaders who approach relationships with their employees with a mindset of energy and openness.

In *The Inspiring Leader*, a group of researchers analyzed survey data from 25,000 leaders to understand how some people are able to get the most from the people around them. Enthusiasm was found to be an effective way to channel the energy of a team.¹³ For individuals who may have a harder time expressing enthusiasm, even if it is something they genuinely feel, the authors suggested focusing on three questions:

Engagement hinges on whether an employee feels valued, and how that value is demonstrated within the organization.

3 questions to help leaders generate enthusiasm

What about this meeting or project gives me reasons for optimism?

How does it connect to a greater outcome than we are talking about?

How can I share this with positive energy?

Source: *The Inspiring Leader: Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate*. By John Zenger.

¹¹ Owens, Bradley, Heckman, David. “Modeling How to Grow: an Inductive Examination of Humble Leader Behaviors, Contingencies, and Outcomes.” *Academy of Management Journal* 2012, Vol. 55, No. 4, 787–818. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0441>

¹² Morgan, Jacob. *Leading with Vulnerability: Unlock Your Greatest Superpower to Transform Yourself, Your Team, and Your Organization*. Wiley, 2023.

¹³ Zenger, John et. al. *The Inspiring Leader: Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate*. McGraw Hill, May 26, 2009.

Humble leaders highlight & communicate specific value their employees bring to the team.

L&D professionals can play a key role in helping leaders answer these questions and unlock how to model energy and enthusiasm to their team.

Something that sets humble leaders apart from other more traditional managers is their willingness to push their employees into the spotlight. They're not afraid of being outshined. In fact, they are deliberate in highlighting and communicating the specific value their employees bring to the team and the organization.

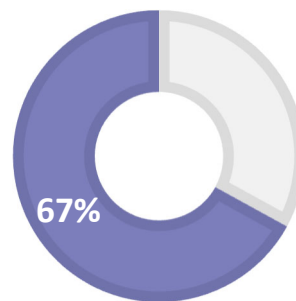
A humble leader self-confidently sets the tone for the outlook and energy of the team and project, with an enthusiastic approach intended to leverage employees' individual strengths as effectively as possible. By embodying this enthusiasm, leaders are following another of Dale Carnegie's most famous principles in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: "Make the other person happy about doing the thing you suggest."¹⁴

A humble approach drives higher performance.

Humble leadership is not just a more thoughtful, emotionally intelligent approach, it is also usually more effective than traditional leadership models based on power and control. Research from the [London School of Economics](#) shows humble leaders drive higher employee performance by increasing their sense of empowerment and self-efficacy.¹⁵ By centering employees, a leader can help them discover their highest level of achievement.

So how can professionals in learning and development help leaders at all levels contribute to a culture of engagement that not only encourages retention, but also creates a shift toward a humbler, balanced and fulfilling workplace culture for all involved? To be sustainable, organizational change should start at the top. This might mean offering managers or aspiring leaders the opportunity to promote and develop a humble mindset and the soft skills to put it into action on their own teams. Central to this goal is guiding and directing leaders in the best ways to connect with employees in ways that inspire loyalty and commitment generated from a people-centered approach.

When contemplating the benefits of embracing a humble leadership style, consider that Dale Carnegie's survey on employee engagement found that only 67 percent of employees surveyed believe their immediate supervisor cares about them as a person, their personal life, and the impact it has on their job. Another way to look at this is that 33 percent did not feel this way. For the many leaders who genuinely care about their employees, this may be sobering, especially since these emotional drivers can contribute to employee attrition if left unaddressed.



Only 67%

of surveyed employees believe their immediate supervisor cares about them as a person.

¹⁴ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*.

¹⁵ Keleman, Thomas et. al. "Essential advice for leaders from a decade of research on humble leadership." LSE Business Review, Jan 17, 2023. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2023/01/17/essential-advice-for-leaders-from-a-decade-of-research-on-humble-leadership/#:~:text=Leaders%20may%20have%20the%20most,spilling%20over%20to%20family%20life.>

The impact personal attention can have is a compelling reason for leaders to be intentional about focusing on the people at the heart of their organization, with their needs, satisfaction, and engagement at the center.

Incorporating this leadership approach is also universally available. While leaders can have different opportunities to impact engagement where some are more tangible than others, such as changes to policies or work conditions, everyone, can choose to find ways to be humble and sincere in their interactions with others in the workplace.

Dale Carnegie knew this. One of his most famous principles from *How to Win Friends and Influence People* says, “First, take a genuine interest in other people. Genuine is the key word. Don’t fake it. Train yourself to become interested in other people’s lives.”¹⁶

We believe every leader can find ways to connect emotionally and meaningfully with employees, in ways big and small.

“First, take a genuine interest in other people.”



Within this paper, we focused on three areas where leaders can develop a humbler leadership style: creating a safe, empowering environment for employees that values their ideas and contributions; listening with an intent to learn and improve; and leading by example with an enthusiastic mindset.

That commitment to humility will ultimately pay off, with productive employees who feel a deeper connection with their organization, leaders, managers, and other employees.

¹⁶ Carnegie, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*.