

From Listening to Action: Why Employee Engagement Surveys Fail When HR Doesn't Close the Loop



Most employees have completed an engagement survey at some point in their career. They click through questions about leadership, communication, workload, recognition, career development, and whether they'd recommend the organization as a good place to work. They may add thoughtful comments in the open-text fields. They may even take a few extra minutes to explain what's really affecting their team.

Then, too often, nothing visible happens.

Maybe HR presents the results to the executive team. Maybe the leadership group agrees that the findings are "important." Maybe managers receive a dashboard and are asked to create action plans. But from the employee's perspective, the process disappears. They gave feedback, waited for a response, and eventually concluded that the survey was more about measurement than change.

That's where engagement surveys begin to fail. The problem is rarely that organizations don't collect enough employee feedback. In fact, many organizations collect more than enough. They run annual engagement surveys, pulse surveys, onboarding surveys, exit surveys, stay interviews, and culture assessments. The problem is that employees often don't see a clear connection between what they said and what the organization did next.

For Canadian HR leaders, this is becoming a serious issue. Employee listening is only valuable if it builds trust. When employees believe feedback will be heard, considered, and acted on, the process can strengthen engagement. When they believe feedback will disappear into a report, the process can create cynicism.

The difference is follow-through.

Why Engagement Surveys Create Expectations

An engagement survey is not a neutral exercise. It sends a message to employees that the organization wants to hear what they think. That message creates an expectation that someone will listen, respond, and take the feedback seriously.

When that doesn't happen, employees may feel worse than if they had never been asked.

This is especially true when employees raise concerns about workload, leadership behaviour, compensation, harassment, psychological safety, or burnout. These are not minor workplace preferences. They're often tied to trust, wellbeing, and whether employees believe the organization is fair.

A survey that asks about these issues but produces no visible response can feel performative. Employees may begin to believe leadership wanted the appearance of consultation without the responsibility of action.

The TTC's 2025 Employee Engagement Study provides a useful Canadian example of how fragile this trust can be. More than 11,000 TTC employees participated in the study, and while 78% said they were proud to work there, only 43% trusted that action would be taken based on survey results. Only 50% felt the TTC cared about their wellbeing, 48% felt valued, and 47% agreed that the TTC was taking steps to create a workplace where employees could share ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences. ([City of Toronto](#))

Those numbers tell an important story. Pride and belonging can exist alongside doubt. Employees may care deeply about the organization and still question whether leadership will act on what they say. That's the gap HR leaders need to close.

Listening Without Action Can Damage Trust

Employee listening programs are often launched with good intentions. HR wants better insight. Leaders want to understand the employee experience. The organization wants to identify risks before they become turnover, conflict, or performance problems.

But good intentions don't erase the damage caused by inaction.

When employees repeatedly complete surveys and see little change, they learn a lesson. They learn that feedback may be collected but not used. Over time, this changes how they respond. Some employees stop participating. Others participate but provide less detail. Some become more cynical in their comments because they no longer believe the process matters.

This creates a data quality problem. If employees don't trust the survey process, the organization's data becomes less reliable. Low participation, guarded responses, and emotionally charged comments can all reflect a damaged listening culture.

It also creates a leadership credibility problem. Employees judge leadership not only by what leaders say, but by what they do after asking for input. If leaders ask for feedback and then fail to respond, the organization's credibility weakens.

This is why "survey fatigue" is often misdiagnosed. Employees are not necessarily tired of surveys. They're tired of surveys that do not lead anywhere.

The Real Issue Is Often Governance

When engagement surveys fail, organizations often blame the survey tool, the questions, the timing, or the response rate. Those factors matter, but they're rarely the whole problem.

The deeper issue is usually governance.

Before launching a survey, HR should be able to answer several basic questions. Who owns the results? Who will decide which issues require action? How will priorities be selected? What role will executives play? What are managers expected to do with team-level data? How will progress be tracked? When will employees hear back? What happens

if results reveal serious concerns?

If those questions are not answered before the survey goes out, the organization is already at risk of disappointing employees.

A strong employee listening process requires clear accountability. HR can design the process, analyze the findings, and advise leaders, but HR cannot be the only owner of action. Executives must own enterprise-wide issues, and managers must own team-level conversations and follow-up.

This matters because many engagement problems are not purely HR problems. If employees identify excessive workload, unclear priorities, weak communication, or poor manager support, those issues require operational decisions. HR can help diagnose the problem, but the business must help solve it.

McLean & Company's 2026 employee engagement research makes this point indirectly. The firm found that stable engagement scores alone don't mean organizations are succeeding. Without targeted action on career growth, total rewards, collaboration, stress, and manager coaching, organizations may struggle to convert engagement stability into stronger business outcomes. ([NewsWire](#))

That's the central challenge. Listening creates data. Governance turns data into decisions.

Employees Need to Hear What Was Learned

One of the simplest ways to close the loop is also one of the most overlooked. Employees need to hear what the organization learned.

This does not mean sharing every data point or every sensitive comment. It means communicating the major themes in a way that feels honest, specific, and respectful.

Too many organizations respond to engagement surveys with vague messages. They say things like, "We heard your feedback," or "We're committed to improving communication." Employees have heard that language before. It's too broad to be meaningful.

A stronger response sounds more concrete. It might say: "Employees told us that workload is becoming harder to manage because priorities are changing faster than teams can absorb. We also heard that career development feels unclear, especially for employees who've been in role for more than two years. Over the next quarter, each department will review workload priorities, and HR will work with leaders to create clearer internal mobility pathways."

That kind of message does three things. It proves the organization listened. It validates the employee experience. And it sets expectations for what will happen next.

Employees do not need the organization to fix everything immediately. But they do need to know that their feedback was understood and that leadership is prepared to respond.

Not Every Issue Can Be Fixed Immediately

One reason leaders hesitate to communicate survey results is that they worry about creating expectations they cannot meet. This is understandable. Engagement surveys often surface complex issues that require time, resources, and difficult trade-offs.

For example, employees may want higher compensation, more flexibility, more staff, clearer career paths, better technology, and fewer meetings. Some of those issues may be solvable quickly. Others may require budget approval, operational redesign, or longer-term planning.

The mistake is assuming that if the organization cannot solve everything, it should say very little.

Employees can usually handle nuance. What frustrates them is silence or vague reassurance. If leadership cannot address a concern immediately, it should explain why and describe what will happen next.

For example, if employees raise concerns about compensation and the organization cannot make immediate adjustments, leadership can still commit to reviewing salary structures, benchmarking key roles, or improving communication about how pay decisions are made. That may not satisfy every employee, but it is more credible than avoiding the issue.

Transparency does not require perfect answers. It requires honest ones.

Managers Must Be Equipped to Discuss Results

Engagement surveys often fail at the manager level because managers are handed results without enough support.

Some managers may feel defensive when they see low scores. Others may not know how to interpret the data. Some may avoid discussing results with their team because they're worried the conversation will become negative or personal.

This is a missed opportunity.

Managers are the most important link between listening and action because employees experience the workplace through their direct supervisor. If managers do not discuss results with their teams, the survey process remains distant and abstract.

HR should prepare managers before results are released. They need guidance on how to read the data, how to identify themes, how to facilitate a constructive conversation, and how to create realistic action steps. They also need to understand what not to do.

Managers should not try to identify who made specific comments. They should not dismiss negative feedback. They should not overpromise changes they cannot deliver. And they should not treat the conversation as a one-time obligation.

A good manager conversation begins with curiosity. It acknowledges the results, asks employees for context, and focuses on what can be improved. The goal is not to defend the score. The goal is to understand the employee experience well enough to act on it.

Psychological Safety Determines the Quality of Feedback

Employee listening depends on psychological safety. If employees fear retaliation, embarrassment, or career consequences, they will not provide honest feedback.

This is particularly important when surveys ask about leadership behaviour, harassment, discrimination, workload stress, or trust in senior management. Employees may hesitate to share candid responses if they believe their identity could be inferred or if their manager has a history of reacting poorly to criticism.

The TTC study is again instructive because it showed a gap between pride in the organization and confidence in speaking up. Only 47% of employees agreed that the organization was taking steps to create a workplace where people could share ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences. ([City of Toronto](#))

For HR, that kind of result should not be treated as merely a culture score. It is a risk indicator. Low psychological safety can affect harassment reporting, safety reporting, incident prevention, innovation, and retention. Employees who do not feel safe speaking up may withhold information the organization needs to manage risk.

Canadian employers also need to recognize the legal context. Occupational health and safety laws across Canada require employers to address workplace harassment and violence. Human rights laws require employers to respond appropriately to discrimination and accommodation concerns. If employees do not trust internal systems enough to raise concerns, problems may surface later through complaints, grievances, legal claims, or external regulators.

An employee listening strategy should therefore reinforce, not replace, formal reporting channels. Surveys can identify patterns, but they are not a substitute for proper complaint handling, investigation procedures, or respectful workplace obligations.

Action Plans Should Be Specific Enough to Matter

Many organizations create engagement action plans after surveys, but the plans often fail because they are too broad.

A weak action plan says: "Improve communication." A stronger action plan says: "Beginning next month, each department head will provide a monthly update explaining current priorities, upcoming changes, and decisions affecting team workload. Managers will review these updates in team meetings and collect questions for follow-up."

A weak action plan says: "Support career development." A stronger action plan says: "By the end of Q2, each manager will hold a development conversation with every employee and document one skill-building opportunity, project assignment, or learning goal."

Specificity matters because it turns feedback into behaviour. Employees can see whether the action happened. Leaders can track progress. HR can evaluate whether the intervention changed anything.

The best action plans focus on a small number of priorities. If an engagement survey produces ten areas of concern, leaders should resist the urge to address all ten superficially. It is better to choose two or three priorities that matter most and make visible progress.

Employees are more likely to trust the process when they see real movement on a few important issues than when they see a long list of vague promises.

HR Should Track Follow-Through Like Any Other Business Process

If engagement follow-up matters, it should be measured.

HR should track whether leaders reviewed results, whether managers held team discussions, whether action plans were created, whether actions were completed, and whether employees were updated on progress.

This is not about policing managers. It is about ensuring that employee feedback

receives the same discipline as other business priorities.

Organizations would not launch a major customer survey and then ignore whether customer issues were addressed. They would track response plans, timelines, ownership, and outcomes. Employee feedback deserves the same seriousness.

Follow-through metrics can also reveal where the process is breaking down. If managers are not holding team discussions, they may need more support. If action plans are created but not completed, priorities may be unrealistic or ownership may be unclear. If employees still do not believe action will be taken, communication may be insufficient or past inaction may have damaged trust.

The point is to treat engagement as an operating system, not an annual HR event.

Pulse Surveys Can Help, But Only If They're Used Properly

Many organizations are moving from annual surveys to pulse surveys. This can be useful because pulse surveys allow HR to measure employee sentiment more frequently and respond to emerging issues faster.

However, pulse surveys can also make the problem worse if they create more requests for feedback without more action.

Before adding more surveys, HR should ask whether the organization has the capacity to respond. A shorter survey is not automatically better if employees still see no follow-through.

Pulse surveys work best when they are focused, timely, and tied to decisions. For example, after a return-to-office policy change, HR may use a short pulse survey to understand whether employees have clarity about expectations, whether commute burden is affecting morale, and whether team collaboration has improved. After a restructuring, HR may use a pulse survey to assess communication, workload, and confidence in leadership.

The survey should be designed around a question the organization is prepared to act on. If leadership is not willing to change anything based on the results, HR should reconsider whether the survey is necessary.

The Role of Executive Leadership

Engagement surveys fail when leaders treat them as HR's project.

Employees need to see that senior leadership takes feedback seriously. That means executives must be visible in the response process. They should acknowledge the findings, identify organization-wide priorities, and explain how the results connect to business decisions.

This is particularly important when feedback points to issues beyond a single manager's control. Compensation, staffing levels, workload expectations, organizational communication, and career architecture often require executive ownership.

If leaders delegate all follow-up to HR, employees may conclude that the organization is not serious about change.

Executive involvement does not require lengthy speeches or polished campaigns. It requires credible communication and visible accountability. Leaders should say what they heard, what they will do, what they cannot do yet, and how progress will be

reviewed.

That level of honesty can strengthen trust, even when the results are uncomfortable.

Closing the Loop Builds a Stronger Culture

The best employee listening programs create a rhythm of trust.

Employees provide feedback. The organization listens. Leaders communicate what they heard. Managers discuss the results with their teams. Actions are taken. Progress is shared. Employees are asked whether the changes helped.

This rhythm shows employees that their voice matters. It also helps the organization become more responsive and adaptive.

Over time, closing the loop can improve more than engagement scores. It can strengthen psychological safety, reduce preventable turnover, identify operational friction, and improve leadership accountability.

The opposite is also true. When organizations fail to close the loop, employee listening becomes a liability. It raises expectations, exposes problems, and then leaves employees wondering why they bothered.

The Real Test of Employee Listening

The real test of an engagement survey is not the response rate. It is not the dashboard. It is not the benchmark comparison.

The real test is whether anything meaningful changes afterward.

Canadian HR leaders should treat engagement surveys as the beginning of a management process, not the end of a measurement process. The value of listening comes from what leaders do with what they hear.

Employees do not expect every issue to be solved overnight. But they do expect honesty, visible effort, and accountability. They want to know that if they take the risk of being candid, someone will treat that feedback with respect.

That is how employee listening becomes more than data collection. It becomes a trust-building process.

And in a workplace where trust is increasingly difficult to earn and easy to lose, closing the loop may be one of HR's most important engagement strategies.