Making Leaders Accountable for Employee Engagement in Canadian Workplaces



For many years, employee engagement was treated as an HR initiative.

HR departments conducted engagement surveys, developed recognition programs, and introduced workplace culture initiatives. While these efforts often produced useful insights, they rarely solved the deeper issue.

Employee engagement is ultimately shaped by leadership behaviour.

Employees interact with their managers and senior leaders every day. These interactions determine how work is assigned, how feedback is delivered, and how employees experience workplace culture.

If leadership behaviour does not support engagement, HR programs alone cannot compensate.

This is why many Canadian organizations are changing their approach.

Instead of asking HR to “drive engagement,” they are making engagement a leadership responsibility.

Managers and executives are increasingly expected to demonstrate how their leadership practices contribute to employee engagement, retention, and workplace wellbeing.

Why Leadership Accountability Matters

Employee engagement is strongly influenced by trust.

Employees pay close attention to how leaders make decisions, communicate expectations, and respond to challenges. When leaders demonstrate fairness, transparency, and respect, employees are more likely to remain committed to the organization.

Conversely, when employees perceive inconsistent leadership or poor communication, engagement declines quickly.

This dynamic means that engagement cannot be managed entirely through policies or

programs.

It must be reinforced through everyday leadership practices.

When organizations hold leaders accountable for engagement outcomes, they signal that leadership behaviour matters as much as operational results.

Measuring Engagement Through Leadership Metrics

Organizations that want leaders to take engagement seriously often incorporate engagement-related metrics into leadership evaluations.

These metrics may include employee retention rates, team feedback scores, or participation in development initiatives.

When leadership performance reviews include engagement indicators, managers are encouraged to consider how their behaviour affects their teams.

For example, a manager with consistently high turnover within their team may need to examine whether workload expectations, communication practices, or conflict management approaches are contributing to employee departures.

Similarly, positive engagement feedback may highlight leadership practices that could be shared across the organization.

These metrics shift engagement from an abstract concept into a measurable leadership responsibility.

The Legal Expectations Around Leadership Behaviour

Canadian employment law increasingly recognizes the importance of responsible leadership behaviour.

Courts and tribunals have confirmed that employers are responsible for how managers treat employees in the workplace.

In Boucher v. Walmart Canada Corp. (2014 ONCA), the Ontario Court of Appeal upheld a damages award after a manager engaged in repeated abusive behaviour toward an employee. The court concluded that the workplace environment created by the supervisor caused significant harm.

Cases like this demonstrate that leadership behaviour can expose organizations to serious legal consequences.

Similarly, workplace harassment legislation across Canada requires employers to prevent and address harmful conduct in the workplace.

Supervisors often play a key role in responding to complaints, conducting investigations, and maintaining respectful work environments.

Organizations that fail to train or supervise managers properly may face regulatory enforcement or civil claims.

Holding leaders accountable for respectful and supportive management practices helps reduce these risks.

Leadership Communication and Trust

Engagement also depends heavily on how leaders communicate with employees.

Employees want to understand how organizational decisions affect their work and their future.

When leadership communication is transparent, employees are more likely to trust organizational decisions, even during periods of change.

Conversely, limited or unclear communication can create uncertainty and speculation.

For example, organizational restructuring, economic pressures, or strategic shifts can create anxiety among employees. Leaders who communicate openly about these issues help employees understand the broader context.

This transparency strengthens trust and helps maintain engagement during challenging periods.

Aligning Leadership Development With Engagement Goals

If organizations expect leaders to support engagement, they must also provide the training and resources necessary to develop those skills.

Leadership development programs often focus heavily on operational performance or strategic planning.

However, modern leadership roles also require strong interpersonal and communication skills.

Managers must know how to provide constructive feedback, address workplace conflict, and support employee development.

Organizations that align leadership development with engagement goals often focus on practical leadership scenarios.

Managers may learn how to conduct meaningful one-on-one meetings, respond to employee concerns, or guide employees through career development discussions.

These skills strengthen both engagement and organizational effectiveness.

Creating Consistency Across Leadership Teams

One challenge many organizations face is inconsistency across managers.

Employees may experience strong leadership in one department and weak leadership in another.

This inconsistency can undermine engagement across the organization.

Employees who observe unequal treatment between teams may question whether workplace policies are applied fairly.

Establishing clear leadership expectations helps reduce this variability.

Organizations can define leadership behaviours that support engagement and incorporate those expectations into performance reviews, training programs, and internal communications.

When leadership standards are clear, employees are more likely to experience consistent management practices across the organization.

Engagement as a Strategic Priority

Organizations that treat engagement as a leadership priority often integrate it into broader strategic planning.

Engagement influences several outcomes that matter to organizational performance.

High engagement often leads to stronger collaboration, better customer service, and greater innovation.

Engaged employees are also more likely to remain with the organization, reducing recruitment and training costs.

For these reasons, engagement is increasingly discussed alongside other strategic priorities such as productivity, safety, and operational efficiency.

Leadership teams that recognize this connection are more likely to invest in practices that strengthen employee experience.

The Role of HR in Leadership Accountability

While leaders must take responsibility for engagement, HR departments continue to play an essential supporting role.

HR professionals provide the tools, guidance, and analysis that help leaders understand engagement trends.

They design leadership training programs, support managers in handling complex employee situations, and help interpret engagement data.

HR also helps ensure that leadership practices align with employment law and workplace policies.

Rather than owning engagement entirely, HR acts as a strategic partner that supports leaders in building stronger workplace cultures.

Engagement Is a Leadership Outcome

Employee engagement cannot be delegated to a single department.

It is the result of how leaders communicate, how managers support their teams, and how organizations respond to employee concerns.

Canadian workplaces that treat engagement as a leadership outcome often see stronger retention, better collaboration, and healthier workplace cultures.

When leaders understand that engagement reflects their behaviour and decisions, they are more likely to invest the effort required to support their teams.

For HR leaders, making engagement a leadership responsibility may be one of the most effective strategies for building sustainable workplace performance.