



LOOKING TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT?

Look No Further Than CAREER DEVELOPMENT

by Julie Winkle Giulioni and Christine DiDonato

Advantage



GETTING TO THE HEART OF DISENGAGEMENT

Disruption and constant innovation define today's business landscape. New operating models, new technologies, and new ways of working continuously drive organizations to change and transform. COVID-19 has only accelerated the drive toward transformation. It has rewarded those with an agile mindset and practices and exacerbated ongoing challenges with culture, retention, and engagement.

Employee Engagement is in Flux

Gallup has researched and reported on employee engagement for the last 20 years. Pre-pandemic, we saw that engagement levels were improving year after year, peaking in 2019. However, [Gallup reports](#) that in 2020 "engagement levels have fluctuated more than ever before." In some cases, organizations are seeing engagement scores return to pre-pandemic levels or even exceed them while other organizations continue to experience challenges and less-than-satisfying engagement results.

Organizations along the entire continuum have responded impressively to the challenges presented by the pandemic by focusing on employee well being, from amping up wellness programs to funding work-from-home set-ups, to virtual team building and flexible work hours to accommodate at-home schooling. But, what will happen when we transition to a new set of norms?

Crash to Come

These commendable just-in-time efforts may be producing an engagement "high," but potentially an artificial and unsustainable one. Short-term engagement strategies have helped organizations see the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. But when we emerge on the other side of this crisis, it will be tempting to take the foot off the gas—just when exhausted employees will need it most.

Taking action now may help to avoid the engagement crash that's to come. Addressing the underlying issues that have undermined engagement for some time means committing to strategies that have staying power and can produce real, lasting results.



Post-Crisis Career Development Focus

Study after study confirms that career development is one of the top drivers of employee engagement. It's been known for some time and yet many organizations have simply not cracked the code on how to leverage engagement to improve results.

But organizations that fail to prioritize career development do so at their own peril. The past 18+ months of uncertainty and insecurity have prompted significant soul searching on the part of employees. They've stared down not just unfathomed workplace challenges but in some cases life and death issues. Their relationship with work may have changed. Their expectations of the job may be morphing. What career success looks like may be a moving target. Whatever the new perspectives, career development remains top of mind.

Organizations that will succeed will do so because of a deep and abiding understanding that elevating engagement results in large part boils down to facilitating the career development employees crave. And the good news is that there are three distinct levers to help make that happen:

- Consider how you're evaluating engagement;
- Prepare leaders to assume a new development role; and
- Enable employees to own their development.

This guide offers strategies and tactics to address all three of these key priorities. So, if employee engagement is important to you, read on.

EVALUATION METHODS: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR

We try to measure everything in business, don't we? Some things are easy to quantify. Revenue. Expenses. Turnover. Some things not so much—like engagement and satisfaction with career development. And yet, organizations invest considerable resources each year in defining, measuring, and planning how to elevate this essential workplace factor—frequently with lackluster results. So, perhaps it's time to look critically at how this process plays out and, more importantly, how to improve it.

Consider your own organization's approach.

- How many of the same questions have been recycled and used over and over again—for years or even decades?
- To what extent do the questions asked of employees align with the organization's philosophy of career development?
- Do your questions subliminally define career development in terms of promotions and positions—which are just a small part of what career development encompasses?
- How many of your questions telegraph an expectation that leans toward the organization or leader being responsible for career development?

It's time to
rethink the
instrument
you use and
the questions you
ask to simultaneously
evaluate satisfaction
and **educate**
employees about what
career development
means within the
organization.



These are just a few examples of the problems associated with the typical career development questions that appear in engagement surveys as well as alternatives that allow you to ask and measure what really matters.

Common (Real) Questions	The Problem	Updated (Better) Options
Does your manager show a genuine interest in your career aspirations?	Obviously, highly effective managers do this; but many don't and that doesn't have to be a deal-breaker when it comes to development. Skip-level leaders, mentors, sponsors, and even colleagues are part of today's broader career network. Expanding 'who' can support career development is key to elevating satisfaction.	Do you have at least one person in the organization who is genuinely interested in your career development?
Do you see a path for career advancement here?	Career paths and advancement are just a drop in the ocean of what's possible for employees looking for development. This narrow definition invites dissatisfaction because, in most organizations, promotions and moves are limited. De-emphasizing advancement allows you to focus on what is more plentiful: meaningful challenges and development experiences.	Are you offered the challenges and experiences required for your continued development and growth?
Do you have access to the training you need to develop your career?	This is another way traditional questioning methods set unreasonable expectations with employees and lead to dissatisfaction. Development happens day-in and day-out through countless formal (and more frequently) informal ways. Training, while important, is a relatively small element of the ecosystem of activities to drive development. And questions like this focus on areas over which managers have little control rather than those that are squarely within their spheres of influence.	Do you have opportunities to learn and grow on a regular basis - through others or through activities and experiences that allow you to develop in ways that are meaningful to you?
Do you have a documented development plan with concrete steps you need to take in order to reach your career goal within the next year?	Given the speed of business and the speed of change within business, annual plans are quickly becoming a thing of the past. Organizations and individuals must be more agile and nimble. This means shorter windows, sprints, an ongoing organic dialogue that takes advantage of opportunities in the moment.	Do you routinely engage in discussions with others about (even small) ways to learn, stretch yourself, build new skills, and/or grow in your current role?

And the list goes on. The quality of engagement survey responses is based largely upon the quality of the questions that are asked. Updating the questions offers an opportunity to update the way employees think about career development and, in the process, establishes a mindset that aligns with what's possible in today's workplace.



HELP LEADERS STEP UP TO A NEW ROLE

Enhancing satisfaction with career development and the engagement that follows depends largely upon revisiting the definition of career development as well as the roles that leaders and employees play in it.

For too long, we expected leaders to make career development happen. They scheduled the meetings. They guided the goal setting. They documented the plans. They found the opportunities. And, too frequently, they simply couldn't be the hero of the story and do it all.

Recognizing the heavy burden these expectations placed on already time-starved leaders, employers updated their approach with models that flipped the script entirely, expecting employees to wholly own their development with managers playing a hands-off role.

But success is found somewhere in the middle with employees retaining ownership of their career development and leaders offering the support needed to pursue and achieve results. That sweet spot between hero and hands-off is the role of a helper. And it's not necessarily a role that all leaders are equipped to assume.

From Hero to Hands-Off to Helper

Consider the leaders in your organization. How effective are they at helping employees own their development by:

- Promoting and encouraging reflection?
- Facilitating (not imposing) goal setting?
- Making introductions and suggestions for development?
- Offering both positive and constructive feedback?
- Co-creating flexible plans that others can own?
- Offering resources and support when needed?
- Jointly addressing barriers and obstacles to progress?
- Holding others accountable to the development commitments they've made?
- Debriefing insights and learnings from development experiences?

The career development portion of a leader's job description is ripe for an update. And these are the new expectations that define the role employees who own their growth need their managers to play to ensure success.

Make Conversations Count

A [study](#) by Quantum Workplace found that 82 percent of employees who have career conversations more than once a month are highly engaged, compared to the 53 percent who only talk about their careers once a year or less.

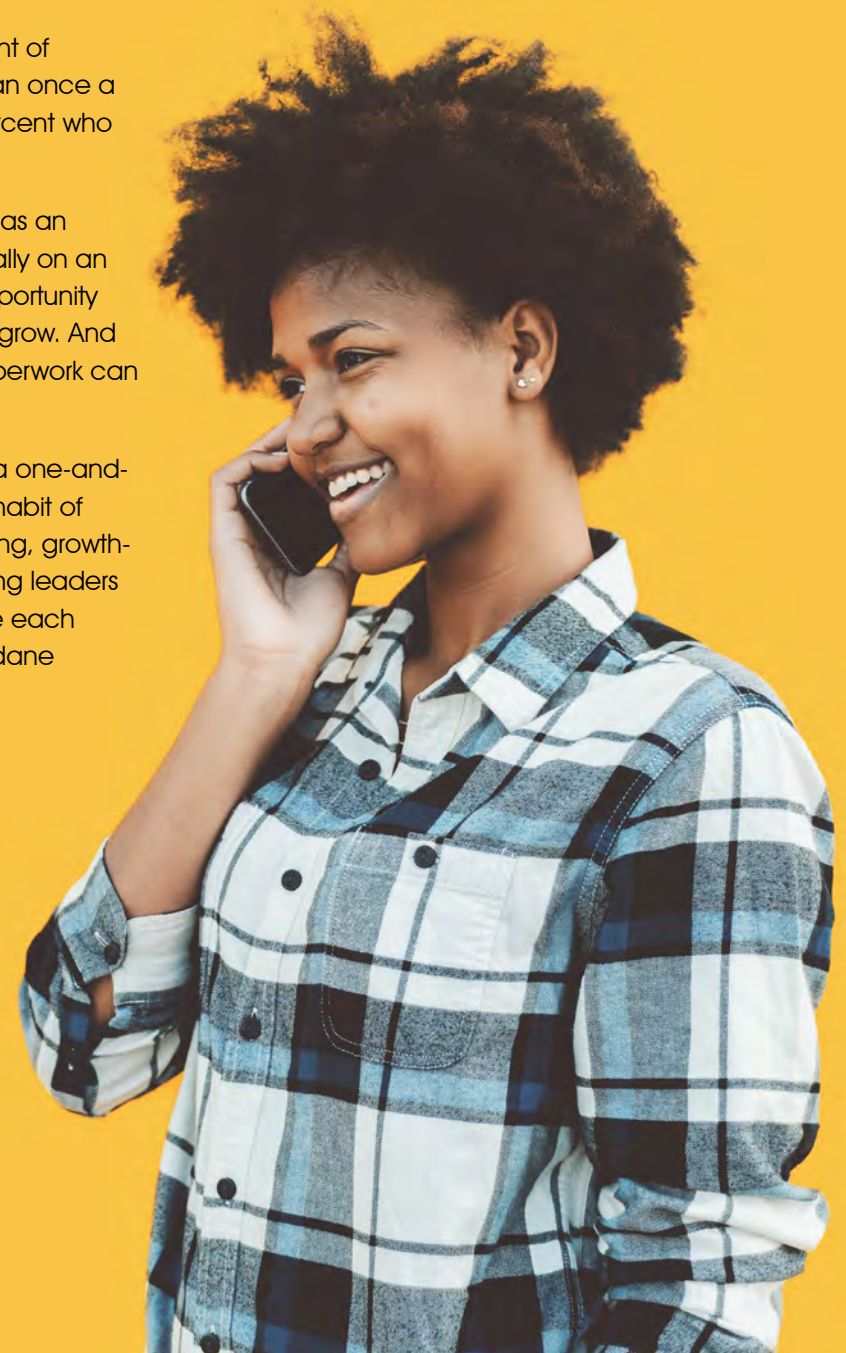
For too long, career development has been treated as an event—something that happens episodically, generally on an annual basis. It's a formal line in the sand and an opportunity to connect and contract around how to help others grow. And despite the best of intentions, the processes and paperwork can actually dehumanize development.

Authentic, sustainable, engaging development isn't a one-and-done yearly event. It's a monthly, weekly, even daily habit of effective leaders who appreciate the value of ongoing, growth-promoting dialogue. This habit is based upon enabling leaders to respond to the hundreds of opportunities that arise each day—cues that with the right question can turn mundane conversations into dynamic development dialogue.

Questions like:

- What's most interesting about what you're doing these days?
- How must our work change to better respond to customer and/or marketplace needs?
- What kinds of problems do you want to be solving?
- What do you want to learn or experience?

Short, in-the-moment conversations offer profound insights and development opportunities right in the workflow, but only to leaders who are encouraged and prepared to embrace a new cadence and adopt a new approach to helping others grow.



**You can do
the math.**
More
frequent
career conversations
equal
greater engagement.



EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP IS KEY

Not All Development is Created Equally

Today's professionals expect more career development, feedback, and mentoring than prior generations. At the same time, today's people managers struggle to keep up with changing business priorities while also playing the role of "career coach." (Let's not forget that leaders and managers are employees too, focused on their own career aspirations). As this gap between employee expectations and what their managers can realistically deliver increases, organizations are losing critical leadership bench strength that can prove hard to recover. This is especially concerning as economists forecast that with post-pandemic economic recovery in sight, employees will have increased employment opportunities.

The time is now to meet managers halfway and invest more into training the employees who want—and need—it most.

By looking at career development through the eyes of our employees, we have an opportunity to meet them where they are and invest in strategies, programs, and resources they will recognize as an investment in their future. Whether at an organizational, team, or individual level, the following strategies will have immediate impact.



Ownership Can Be Taught

What would be the business impact if employees took ownership of their career development? Imagine if they increased their self-awareness, could articulate their strengths, and knew how to channel their energy into business priorities. Leaders would thank you, and employees would stay longer and be more productive. And engagement would be off the charts.

Question: What does employee ownership of career development look like?

Answer: Employees who routinely:

- Initiate career conversations with their managers
- Can articulate their strengths and weaknesses
- Have a clear direction and well-defined goals
- Follow-through on development commitments
- Readily acknowledge mistakes and learn from them
- Proactively seek feedback to uncover potential blind spots

Elevating engagement through employee ownership of career development demands skills that many employees don't yet possess. But first, it demands they shift their mindset and embrace a set of expectations that align with the realities facing most organizations today—the corporate ladder has been overtaken by the rock wall.

Develop to Scale the “Wall”—Not Climb the “Ladder”

You may remember the days of the “career ladder” binder—an attempt to create and manage well-defined career paths for the various roles in our organization or team. But, given changing workplace conditions, trimmed hierarchies, and new ways of accomplishing work, much of that position-oriented work has been left to the paper shredder. It’s been replaced with a new metaphor: the rock wall.

A rock wall model implies that people won’t have the same path or pace of growth. It suggests that development opportunities are available all of the time. Seeing career development as a climbing wall means seeing multi-directional options rather than just looking up the ladder to the next promotion – so it helps employees see realistic and more expansive expectations for what’s possible. The key is teaching employees how to recognize and seize these opportunities throughout their careers.

Development is All Around

Shrinking budgets and never-enough-time mean that traditional methods of learning may be less available than in the past. But that’s no reason to put growth on hold. Opportunities for meaningful development are plentiful and can address the employee’s desires for accelerated growth as well as the manager’s need to get pressing work done.

From on-the-job-experiences and special projects to informational interviews and networking, organizations can benefit from promoting and recognizing these opportunities as significant growth opportunities. LinkedIn Learning’s annual “Workplace Learning Report” concluded that “the majority of learners want social workplace learning experiences.”

Here are a few ways organizations and leaders can support career development ownership:

- Offer formal career development training specifically for individual contributors
- Create peer coaching groups
- Provide opportunities to volunteer in the community
- Encourage formal and informal mentoring
- Offer open-enrollment personal and professional development courses

The key is helping employees recognize and seize a range of development opportunities to promote their growth.



START SMALL, BUT START SOMEWHERE

According to LinkedIn Learning's latest "Workplace Learning Report," 94 percent of employees would stay at a company longer if it invested in their career. Retention and engagement depend upon your organization's investment in development.

So, if you're wondering where to start, the answer is simple. Anywhere!

Whether you revisit how you evaluate engagement, enable managers to enable the growth of others, or make new investments in supporting employees to own their careers, you will see positive and long-lasting impact to engagement and your business. The key is to get started. Now.



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