

GUIDE

How to Gain Leadership Buy-in for New Employee Engagement Initiatives



Introduction

Employee engagement and the employee experience are two of the hottest topics in the HR world right now — and that's exciting. Companies are realizing the critical importance of the complete employee experience through the whole employee lifecycle, from candidates to new hires to managers to executives, and are beginning to consider what would move the needle on engagement and retention too.

But as we are also in an environment where companies are carefully watching their spending, and getting your leadership team to invest in new or expanded programs to engage employees can be a hard sell. Employee engagement and wellbeing can be seen as optional, or a nice to have instead of a need, and it can take some serious convincing to get the investment you know needs to happen.

Employee engagement is well worth investing in: it's got a high ROI. Organizations with high levels of engagement have 23% higher profitability, 18% higher productivity, 10% more customer loyalty, and even 41% higher product quality than organizations with low engagement, according to Gallup research.

Organizations with high levels of engagement have 23% higher profitability

But how can you get your leadership team, and your entire organization, on board with a thoughtful, serious employee engagement program? (We're talking about much more than putting a couple pizzas in the break room as a treat.)

It's a challenge, but it's one you can overcome with a strategic plan in place to win their minds and the budget you need to make your workplace a great place for your employees — and a profitable, stable driver of business growth too. Here's your step-by-step guide to gaining leadership buy-in for employee engagement programs (plus a bonus pitch template you can customize for your organization!).

1. Build a Strong Business Case

Your first task to get your business leaders on board is to create a compelling and deeply researched business case for the investment you want to make. That means diving into the numbers to find out exactly where your organization currently stands — important data to gather here includes:

- **Your current engagement rate**
- **Your current employee retention/turnover rate**
- **Your current cost to hire**
- **Your current employee satisfaction rate and/or eNPS if you measure it**
- **Benchmarks for employee engagement in your industry and from competitors if possible**



If your organization isn't already collecting this data, now is a great time to start. It's hard to make a case to improve employee engagement if you don't know where you're starting from, after all, and this data is useful for a whole host of HR projects and priorities.

Make the Economic Case First



Also, in a time of economic uncertainty and stress, companies often resort to cutting HR and employee programs first. But that's a mistake: [Gallup research](#) found that in the 2008 recession, companies that had higher levels of employee engagement rebounded faster than those with low engagement levels. Investing in your employees can be the difference between business success and failure.

That's especially true today with near record low unemployment levels — replacing employees who leave to seek out a better workplace is difficult and expensive. A good way to make your case even stronger is to calculate how much it costs your company to hire just one worker right now, both in direct spend and indirect costs like time spent on hiring instead of other work.

In high-turnover companies, highly engaged teams have 18% less turnover, and that benefit jumps to 43% less turnover in low-turnover organizations. What could an investment in engagement reap in lower hiring and turnover costs for your company? Run the numbers and find out — it will make a strong addition to your business case.

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Tie Everything to Business Goals

Often, leaders are already aware of issues with the company culture that are driving dissatisfaction, disengagement, and turnover, but they simply aren't aware of potential solutions. They also might not be aware of how those negative cultural attributes are driving business issues like poor customer service, low productivity, low levels of innovation, and so on.

Your pitch should make a strong case for the solutions you're proposing to fix those issues and show exactly how they're all a product of low employee engagement. This shows leaders that your engagement program will tie into the goals of the business and directly benefit the whole company — it's about more than just employee wellbeing (though that's a wonderful goal in itself as well).

2. Seek Out Internal Champions

Now that you've got your business case drawn up, it's time to start recruiting a team of champions to help you pitch your cause. Getting your whole HR team on board is the natural starting point, but it's easier to get leadership buy-in if you have people from across the organization advocating for it as well.



2. SEEK OUT INTERNAL CHAMPIONS

You might consider looking for champions who:

- **Have highly-engaged teams and can share learnings about what works**
- **Have low-engagement teams and want to see improvements**
- **Have lots of internal influence**
- **Are currently champions for employee experience and wellbeing**
- **Are leaders and can speak to their peers**
- **Are not leaders so are more in tune with the day-to-day employee experience**

Also, be sure to ask these champions for their feedback on your business case. They may raise questions that leaders will also have, or come up with new and exciting ideas that make your case even stronger. It's important to gather champions from across many departments too so they can offer feedback based on their teams' experiences and needs — you'll have a better-rounded case that way.



Don't discount the benefits of external champions as well — while they probably can't pitch directly to your leadership team, you can learn a lot from leaders in the employee experience and engagement space. LinkedIn is a great place to connect with other teams and leaders who are passionate about engagement, or who conduct research in that space, and staying in touch with them can help you learn about current developments in the field and on top of learnings that can help you further hone your pitch.

3. Hone Your Elevator Pitch



Your champions and your HR team alike will be called to speak about the benefits of your employee engagement program quite a lot as you make the case. Equipping everyone with an excellent elevator pitch gives them, and you, a greater chance of success as it allows everyone to make the case for the program whenever they have an opportunity.

What goes into a great elevator pitch? It's part science and part art. Here are some guidelines to make yours successful:

- **It should be 60 seconds or less (the length of a quick elevator ride!)**
- **It should incorporate at least one compelling data point**
- **It must be forward-looking and focus on what you want to do with the program, not what you don't want to do**
- **Stick to the essentials and how the company will benefit**
- **Even though it's short, it needs to grab the listener's attention and make them want to hear more**

A great elevator pitch is, above all, about practice. Encourage your HR team to practice theirs and the same goes for your champions too. Everyone's pitch can vary — for example, an internal champion who is a people manager might sound different than your CHRO's pitch — but give them the practice and tools they need to make the case as often as possible, in a variety of settings.

4. Paint a Picture of What Success Will Look Like

Once your business case is carefully thought out and put together, you can start working on the story you'll tell about the journey towards a better employee experience and higher engagement levels too. What will your organization look like at the end of this path? What will employees feel and experience along the way? How will customers benefit?

Data is critical, but so is a compelling narrative to shape that data. Humans love stories, so give your leadership team a data-backed narrative about the journey your program will take everyone on and what success will look like at the end.

Speaking of that end goal, you'll also need to lay out how exactly you will measure the success of your employee engagement initiative. Get really granular here — just saying you'll improve engagement isn't enough to gain real investment of time and budget needed. Dig into questions like:

- **How much will engagement improve?**
- **How long will the program last?**
- **How will you measure results? (With surveys, focus groups, etc)**
- **How often will you measure results?**
- **What metrics precisely will you measure?**
- **How will you respond if the expected improvements aren't seen?**

You may find that you need to implement additional employee surveys to track these metrics. Many organizations only gather employee feedback once per year in an employee opinion survey, but that's not often enough to track these changes effectively. Adding in pulse surveys can fill the gap and give you greater insights into the employee experience.

Creating this plan up front gives your leadership team the assurance that this isn't just a feel-good initiative — it's a data-backed, metrics-driven approach with clear goals and a defined way to measure success. This is especially critical if you're asking for a significant raise in your team's budget to put this plan into place, or if you're requesting lots of resources to make it happen. You've got to show your leadership team the expected ROI and that your team is accountable for the results.



5. Adjust the Plan Along the Way

As you present your employee engagement plan to your leadership team and your champions, you'll likely receive plenty of feedback. That's a great sign! Even if the feedback is critical, it's an opportunity to refine and enhance the plan further. It's easy to get defensive or frustrated, especially when you know the plan is sorely needed, but it's also unhelpful in achieving your ultimate goals.

When you receive feedback from leadership, that's getting you one step closer to your final goal of program approval. Carefully consider the feedback and make the necessary changes. But some feedback might be better used to make a stronger case by gathering additional internal or external data, or consulting with your champions and figuring out how to effectively push back.

Also, keep your eyes and ears open for additional internal and external data that can help your case even if you don't get pushback. New research might come out that makes your case stronger, or perhaps a local competitor or an industry leader creates a similar program that your company now needs to compete against. The world of work is changing constantly right now, and so keeping abreast of these developments and proactively adjusting your plan makes it stronger.

6. Create a Compelling Roadmap

A roadmap for your plan is another critical element: how will your company culture shift from A to B? Having a clear, detailed plan in place for making and measuring progress helps you tell your leadership team exactly what you will roll out, when it will all happen, and how soon you'll see progress. Too often, leadership teams view HR programs as squishy and undefined, and that makes them hesitant to invest in the space. Show them a detailed roadmap though, and they're more likely to get onboard.

Your roadmap to success should include:

- **Your expected budget with a detailed breakdown of where the money will be spent**
- **Expected timelines for rolling out every part of the project, from kicking it off to sending feedback surveys and everything in between**
- **The teams who will be in charge of, and accountable for, all parts of the program**
- **The champions who will be out in front leading the program in the organization**
- **Any potential roadblocks in the way of success**
- **How often you'll report on progress and success**

If you're really struggling to get leadership on board right now, even with this great case, consider starting small with the roadmap. A pilot program can start building momentum for bigger changes, especially once leaders see that those changes are feasible and successful.

But even small programs need to have that careful roadmap and accountability built in to make the most of that momentum. And it's helpful to have a plan in place to immediately expand it once you've gotten buy-in, instead of scrambling and starting from the beginning again. These programs tend to work best when you work with the natural momentum, not in a series of start-and-stop initiatives.

7. Find Change Management Champions



Once you've gotten leadership buy-in, it's not time to celebrate just yet! There's still plenty of work ahead to make your program a success, and a lot of that work will be in the change management space. After all, even though your leaders are now on board, your entire organization may not be, and you need to have widespread buy-in to truly change your organization's culture for the better.

Before you implement any changes, look at who will be the drivers of change management for your engagement program — likely managers will play a huge role here. You need to proactively get them on board and set them up for success with any training, resources, and incentives needed to make the changes effectively.

Internal communications is also critical at this stage — you want to regularly let employees know critical updates like:

- **How you're making changes**
- **Why those changes are needed**
- **What those changes mean for them**
- **How they can play a part in making your organization a better place to work**
- **Updates on your progress**

Employees are also major stakeholders in this effort too! And having employee buy-in and participation makes it more likely the program will be a success, making it easier to get buy-in for future projects as well. If they're helping to drive changes for the better in your organization, that's also good for their engagement levels, as is feeling that they have a voice and are valued.

8. Regularly Report on Your Progress

Finally, once your employee engagement plan has been in place for a while, it's time to report on the progress you've made to your leadership team and stakeholders. You should already have a framework in place for this based on your plan and the metrics and tactics you chose to use to measure your success, like employee engagement surveys.

If your progress is better than expected, wonderful! It's definitely time to celebrate, though it doesn't let you off the hook for continuously improving the employee experience in the future as well. It just gives you a better starting position and roadmap for that continued evolution.

But if you didn't quite reach the levels of engagement you had hoped, it's time to go back and dig into the data and talk to employees directly to find out what went wrong. Failure is also a valuable learning experience, and the data you collected and initiatives you tried gives you a more educated start for the next round of improvements.

Keeping employees in the loop as well treats them as a critical part of this process, which they are. And it helps to hold everyone accountable for creating a great employee experience, from senior leadership down to front-line employees.



Template for Planning Your Successful Pitch

How can you set yourself up for success when pitching an employee engagement strategy to your leadership team? The process and perfect pitch will need to be tailored to your unique company, employees, and leadership team, of course. But this pitch template outlines the most important elements of a pitch to get leadership buy-in — fill in according to your organization's specific needs.



Build a Strong Business Case

- Gather internal data about the current state of employee engagement
- Determine where your organization will be at the end of the plan if it succeeds
- Look at benchmarks for engagement in your industry and area

Seek Out Internal Champions

- Get all of HR onboard first
- Find cross-organizational leaders and influencers who can champion the plan
- Help them understand why the project matters and what they'll gain from it

Hone Your Elevator Pitch

- Create a 60 second overview of why the engagement strategy is needed and will benefit the company's bottom line and give it as often as possible
- Also help your champions develop their own version so you can gain even more buy-in slowly but surely

Paint a Picture of What Success Will Look Like

- Craft a narrative using your data about what success will look like in your organization, for both leaders and employees
- Determine what metrics you'll measure to gauge your success and be up front about them

Adjust the Plan Along the Way

- Feedback and issues will come up as you make the case to leadership, so incorporate the feedback that matters
- Don't be afraid to iterate and refine your plan over time

Create a Compelling Roadmap

- Draw up every step of the plan to present to leadership, including each critical milestone and measurement point, to show them the way
- Include a detailed budget proposal in this stage as well as expected ROI to make a strong case for this investment

Find Change Management Champions

- Once the plan is approved, change management across the organization is needed to make the changes effective
- Definitely recruit managers here, and also look among leaders and employees for your change management champions to lead the way

Regularly Report on Your Progress

- Update your leadership team frequently on your progress according to the metrics you committed to tracking
- Don't forget to keep employees in the loop as well — it's a program for their benefit!