

BEST PRACTICES

In School Personnel

Employee Engagement

As we continue to face a nationwide educator shortage, employee engagement has become more important than ever.



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CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR EMPLOYEES IN K-12 SCHOOLS

A Best Practice for Employee Engagement

by Dr. Mary Boudreaux, Associate Professor;
Southern Connecticut State University; New Haven, CT

Employee engagement is a critical factor in achieving organizational success. Engaged employees are more committed, productive and loyal, leading to improved organizational outcomes, including increased student achievement. While much of the research is on creating safe spaces for K-12 students, creating safe spaces for employees is equally important and is one best practice for enhancing employee engagement, particularly in K-12 schools.

Safe spaces refer to environments where employees feel physically, emotionally and psychologically safe to be themselves and express their views without fear of reprisal or judgment. Pour-Khorshid calls these safe spaces sacred spaces with the goal of creating change in education institutions. These spaces can take different forms, such as designated areas, support groups or peer networks and can address different aspects of employee wellbeing, including stress, workload, culture and identity.

Creating safe spaces for employees in K-12 schools has several benefits for both employees and the organization. These benefits include:

- Improved Well-being: Safe spaces can help employees cope with stress, manage workloads and promote work-life balance. They can also provide a supportive environment for employees experiencing personal or professional challenges.
- Increased Collaboration: Safe spaces can facilitate communication and collaboration among employees, leading to improved teamwork, creativity and problem-solving.
- Enhanced Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Safe spaces can promote a culture of respect and inclusivity, where employees from different backgrounds, cultures and identities feel valued and supported.

Improved Employee Retention

Safe spaces can enhance employee engagement and satisfaction, leading to lower turnover rates, reduced recruitment costs and improved organizational performance. One of the most common types of safe spaces for employers are affinity groups. Affinity groups, also known as Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), are a common method of building community and fostering inclusion in the workplace. Affinity groups provide employees with a space to connect with colleagues who share similar experiences, identities or backgrounds.

Originating in the 1970s to advocate for inclusion and change in Fortune 500 companies, ERGs were representative of racial and ethnic underrepresented workers. In K-12 schools, affinity groups can be especially valuable for educators who face unique challenges in their work environments. Here are some different types of affinity groups for educators in K-12 schools:

Ethnic or Racial Affinity Groups

These groups are formed based on shared ethnicity or race. Members can discuss issues related to race and ethnicity, share cultural experiences and provide support to each other.

Gender Identity Affinity Groups: These groups are formed based on gender identity. Members can discuss issues related to gender identity and expression, share experiences and provide support to each other.

LGBTQ+ Affinity Groups

These groups are formed based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Members can discuss issues related to LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy, share experiences and provide support to each other.

Faith-based Affinity Groups

These groups are formed based on shared religious beliefs or practices. Members can discuss issues related to faith and spirituality, share experiences and provide support to each other.

Age-based Affinity Groups

These groups are formed based on shared age ranges. Members can discuss issues related to age and generational differences, share experiences and provide support to each other.

Disability Affinity Groups

These groups are formed based on shared experiences related to disabilities. Members can discuss issues related to accessibility and accommodation, share experiences and provide support to each other.

Creating Affinity Groups for K-12 Educators

The following steps can be taken to create affinity groups for K-12 educators:

- **Identify the Need:** Begin by identifying the need for affinity groups in your school or district. Collect data on the demographic makeup of your workforce and assess the diversity and inclusion climate within your organization.
- **Determine the Purpose and Goals:** Determine the purpose and goals of the affinity groups you want to create. This can include providing a safe space for educators to share their experiences, offering professional development opportunities or organizing community outreach initiatives.
- **Recruit Members and Allies:** Recruit members and allies who share the group's identity or are committed to supporting their goals. Reach out to colleagues through email, newsletters or social media and consider hosting a launch event to introduce the group to potential members.
- **Establish Group Norms:** Establish group norms and guidelines to ensure that the group remains a safe and

inclusive space. This can include guidelines around confidentiality, respectful communication and promoting diversity of thought and experiences.

- **Develop Programming:** Develop programming that aligns with the group's goals. This can include organizing professional development opportunities, social events or community outreach initiatives.
- **Measure Impact:** Measure the impact of the affinity groups through regular evaluations, surveys or focus groups. Use this feedback to make improvements and adjustments to the group's programming and structure.

Benefits of Affinity Groups for K-12 Educators

Affinity groups can offer numerous benefits to K-12 educators, including:

- **Professional Development Opportunities:** Affinity groups can offer professional development opportunities that are tailored to the specific needs of educators who share similar experiences or backgrounds.
- **Increased Sense of Community:** Affinity groups provide a sense of community and belonging for educators who may otherwise feel isolated or unsupported in their work environments.
- **Improved Retention:** Affinity groups can improve employee retention by fostering a sense of loyalty and commitment to the organization.
- **Enhanced Recruitment:** Affinity groups can enhance recruitment efforts by demonstrating the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion, which can attract top talent.

To implement affinity groups in K-12 school districts for educators, the Society for Human Resource Management suggests that personnel in leadership serve as a representative or sponsor to create a strong case in the development and guidance in the planning process. Rahman echoes a similar perspective by suggesting that the affinity group or ERG seek executive sponsorship as a form of organizational support and buy-in. With the purpose of devising solution-oriented goals, rather than focusing on complaints, the group can address educator working conditions that result in impacting employee engagement and retention. Affinity groups provide employees with a sense of community and connection, which can lead to increased job satisfaction and commitment to the organization.

Creating safe spaces for employees in K-12 schools requires a deliberate and sustained effort from school leaders, supervisors and employees themselves. As a safe space, creating affinity groups for K-12 educators is a valuable tool for building community, fostering inclusion and improving employee engagement. By following the steps outlined above and leveraging academic research, schools can create a more inclusive work environment and support the diverse needs of their workforce.



Dr. Mary K. Boudreaux is an Associate Professor at Southern Connecticut State University and coordinator of the doctoral program in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies. Dr. Boudreaux's research interest includes school improvement, curriculum development and diversity & equity issues in K-12 school districts and post-secondary institutions. Prior to her role as a professor, she served as a teacher, education specialist and school administrator in several urban, suburban and rural school districts. In her current position at Southern, Dr. Boudreaux teaches organizational leadership, social justice and research courses in the doctoral program.

THE BIG LEAN-IN: LEARN FROM EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

by Kirk Koennecke, Superintendent;
Indian Hill Village School District; Cincinnati, OH



Public school employees are facing a crisis of confidence. Like their counterparts in other industries in the United States and around the world, the emergence of engagement issues is not new, nor simply a function of post-global pandemic angst as employees re-evaluate their lives. Employee engagement is low and in some cases has bottomed out.

These issues stem from a crisis of confidence, borne from lingering questions about mental health and wellness brought on by the pandemic. Couple these intense feelings with the antiquated time management systems in the common American workplace, all of which are mired in decades-old bureaucratic governance that has failed to adapt for public education. On top of all of this, money and benefits matter.

Rising Tide Lifts all Ships

Imagine a flotilla of ships, bobbing up and down in an ocean of change, without any wind in the sails of the ships. Now imagine an armada, striking through the cresting waters with full sails, through weather conditions that propel them toward a victorious destination. Get the difference?

Employee understanding of a strategic vision is the most telling indicator of engagement. Direction of engagement and its impact on climate are inextricably connected.

Who's to Blame?

It's easy for employees, from teachers to bus drivers to principals and even superintendents, to point to the skies for the weather. *Off with their heads!* "Board members don't understand; the CFO is stingy. the community doesn't care". But easy climate answers would have led to swift solutions to engage an employee better years ago. Engagement in this career is far more complex.

Blame is a function of unresolved outcomes for individuals and affected groups as they encounter climate changes in their careers. Public educators need to know their value is tied to their "why" and their organization has a direction to travel. Otherwise, why take a journey together?

Create the Weather

All employees, not just the leaders, create the weather. One cannot adjust the climate and create the conditions without a compass and some wisdom from others to navigate uncharted territory.

Feedback is the key. Leaders, therefore, need to use feedback to adapt the elements in the workplace. Whether one uses tools like surveys, focus groups, stay interviews or more formal communication among departments, dialogue is necessary.

Opening up the lines of communication to define topics to explore, describe the conditions for success and articulate options for individuals and groups, must become intentional, routine and consistent in the workplace of any organization struggling with engagement.

Tools for the Journey

How do you get started creating an intentional, routine, consistent map to study engagement? One sail at a time.

- You'll need to gather a core team of employees to gather feedback. You'll need a school calendar. You'll need to discuss outcomes for each tool you choose to employ.
- Surveys are great in measured doses, but too many can lead to a feeling akin to walking the plank!
- Interviews take time and with no incentive attached, many employees will not participate.
- Focus groups provide strength in numbers and can lead to group think.
- Affinity groups provide safe spaces, but can become unknowingly too territorial.

What's a Leader to do?

Become transparent about the goal of each tool. Share how each capture of data will be used and to what degree compared to other tools.

Summarize the findings from each tool to identify and run order priorities. Celebrate the good. Learn from the bad. Most important, acknowledge the time spent by each and every employee who takes time to share input and thank them for their important feedback.

There is no direction without the wind. Gossip, trauma, blame but also curiosity and joy can be found in the wind. Harnessing the wind in your organization is a skill. The master sailors of the world know this and spend years trying to catch that drift!

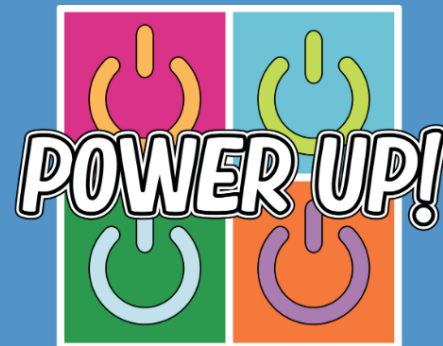


A veteran educational leader with 18 years of experience in administration and 27 years of service to students, Kirk Koennecke is in his 4th year at the Indian Hill School District after serving previously at the Graham Local School District. Kirk has worked as a principal at multiple districts. In addition to his vast experience as a leader in education, Kirk has also been a featured presenter nationally and has published numerous articles within education publications.



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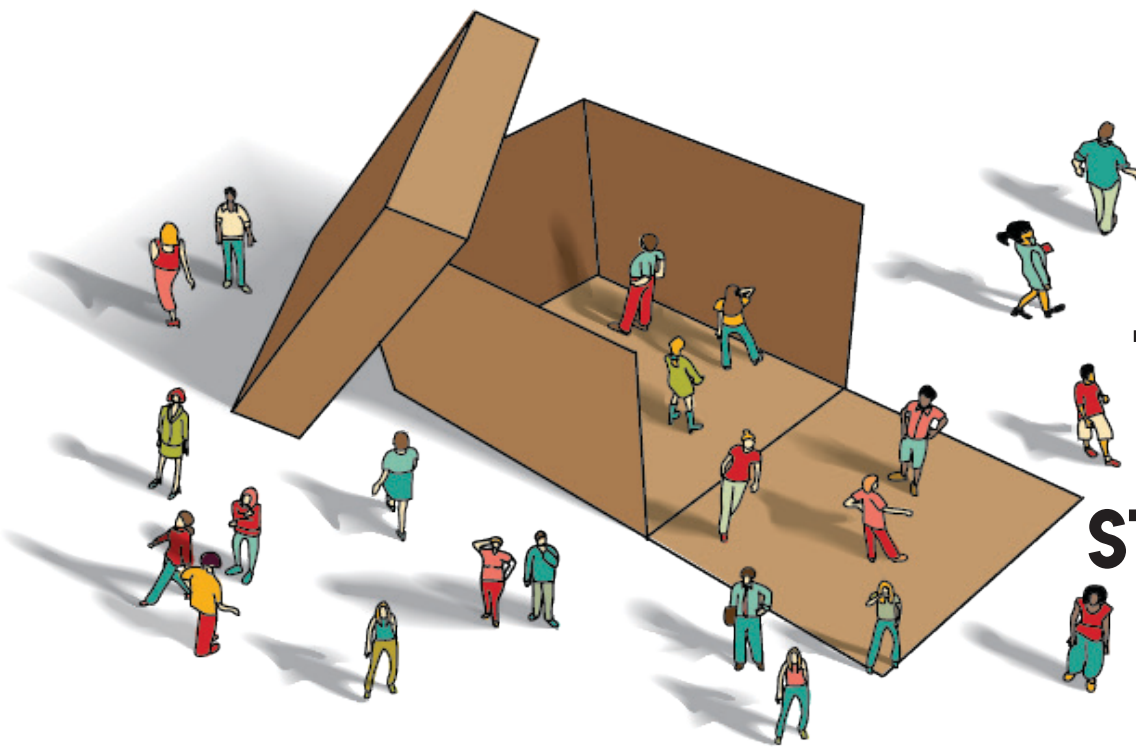


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THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX TO RECRUIT AND KEEP STAFF TURNS INTO BEST PRACTICES

by James Robinette, Director of Human Resources;
Country Club Hills School District 160; Country Club Hills, IL

Everybody knows that there is a teacher shortage, paraprofessional shortage, bus driver shortage, custodial shortage and just about any other type of shortage that one can imagine. In a time when there is one candidate for ten jobs when in the past there have been ten candidates for one job, school districts have had to become creative in recruiting staff, but also creative in keeping staff. Being creative and thinking outside of the box is the only way to entice new staff, but thinking outside the box to make the staff want to stay is the key.

Just like fashion trends, things will begin to come full circle. Why not look outside the box with some seemingly easy fixes that may not have gone away totally, but may have been forgotten? Old fashioned job fairs are one of the easiest ways to get in touch with the most candidates and they seem to offer the biggest bang for the buck when it comes to time on investment. Job fairs give you the option to shine and put your district in the best light for all that attend, whether you have a job for them or not.

Even though job fairs are something that have been around for what seems like forever, how we conduct them has begun to change. If we can take one positive from COVID, it is the use of technology for meetings and gatherings. Virtual job fairs have been popping up during hiring season and these, albeit brief, interactions with candidates can have just as big an impact as being there in person. One way to utilize the virtual job fairs to your advantage is to participate in the ones that give you the list of every candidate that has signed up to participate. Obviously you can not see every candidate at these events, but you will be able to get their contact information and even possibly their resume to contact them at another time. Pouring through as many as 2,500 candidates is time consuming, but if that time yields one full time teacher for the district, it was time well spent.

All teachers need to go through an approved teaching program in order to be certified. Why not go to their classes and speak with them or even offer them interview practice? Being part of the future teacher's development will not only build strong relationships between the colleges or universities and the school district, but it will also allow you to give back to the profession. Colleges and universities love to have human resource departments come to the schools to help support the students in their journey to getting a job. One way to think

outside the box is to offer mock interviews to the students, offer to review resumes and cover letters and you never know, you may even get a teacher or two just by being kind and supportive.

Just like there are the many different shortages for certified staff, there is even a shortage of students going into education. This further hinders the recruitment process since many of the students that have gotten their certificate can then go to the highest bidding district. Why not get them before they get certified? Why not pay student teachers? Wait! Did I just say, pay student teachers? Education is one of, if not the only, field that doesn't pay pre-certified employee interns. Give the student teachers the option to be paid, whatever the district decides is fair and doable, during their student teaching assignment, in return of at least one guaranteed year of teaching in the district after the successful completion of the student teaching experience and graduation. Obviously, this would need to come with some caveats if the person doesn't work for at least a year in the district, but that's why we have a legal team.

Once you have utilized job fairs and college visits, the job gets even more daunting. How do you keep your staff? Time to really think outside the box for this one, but do we really need to look outside or do we look inside? Human resources is, and should be, all about the human aspect of the job. Everything can't be all roses and unicorns all the time, but why can't it be like that sometimes? This daunting task truly doesn't need to be really daunting after all.

Ask yourself, what is something simple that makes people feel happy, appreciated and just downright good? How about a birthday wish, a congratulations or even an atta boy in writing? The answer is to have a drawer full of different types of cards for all types of occasions. Having the district office sign a birthday card and hand deliver it to the staff member goes a long way with building trust, respect and appreciation. Recognize the staff members for the great things that are going on in their life such as a wedding, birth of a child or even an anniversary. Showing that the district cares about the staff member personally goes a long way in retaining staff. If you notice, I am utilizing staff and not just teachers. It is extremely important to retain ALL staff because everybody has an important role to play in the success of a school district.

Human resource personnel are vitally important to the success of school districts. We are the lifeblood of an organization. The HR staff get to celebrate the great things that are happening in the classrooms, schools and the staff's daily lives. We are also there when staff may be at their lowest and need support. It is extremely important to be available at all times for both the good and the bad. One very simple thing to do is to utilize the Google scheduler in the calendar app. This allows others to schedule appointments with you when they are available. Did I say when they are available? Yes! That is the key. We are servant leaders and need to be able to serve the staff when they need it! This scheduler can be included in your email signature so that the staff know you can be reached when needed. It is the little things that go a long way.

In today's job market, it is imperative to think outside the box, but it may be more important to think about the human aspect of human resources. Once you have hired that ideal employee by going out to job fairs, giving back to colleges or even paying student teachers, the human aspect of the job takes precedence. There are many different ways to support the staff and put the human back into human resources. Something as little as sending cards to staff on special occasions and giving the atta boys are important, but the key is to be consistently consistent throughout the years. Looking inside ourselves may be more beneficial than looking outside the box.



Dr. James Robinette is currently the Director of Human Resources and Public Relations at Country Club Hills School District 160 in Country Club Hills, IL. A resident of Lombard, IL, Dr. Robinette sits on the school board of education for District 44. He is an active member of the community as a volunteer soccer, basketball and softball coach.

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U.S. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT NEEDS A REBOUND IN 2023

After trending up in recent years, employee engagement in the U.S. saw its first annual decline in a decade -- dropping from 36% engaged employees in 2020 to 34% in 2021.

by Dr. Jim Harter, Chief Scientist;
Gallup, Washington, DC



This pattern continued into 2022, as 32% of full- and part-time employees working for organizations are now engaged, while 18% are actively disengaged. Active disengagement increased by two percentage points from 2021 and four points from 2020.

The ratio of engaged to actively disengaged workers in the U.S. is 1.8-to-1, down from 2.1-to-1 in 2021 and 2.6-to-1 in 2020. This is the lowest ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees in the U.S. since 2013, almost a decade earlier. The record high is a ratio of 2.7-to-1 recorded in 2019.

Gallup measures employee engagement by asking random samples of the working population about specific workplace elements that link to many organizational outcomes, including profitability, productivity, customer service, retention, safety and overall wellbeing. Gallup conducted quarterly surveys of the working population during 2022 -- random samples of approximately 15,000 U.S. full- and part-time employees each quarter. The results presented here are an average across those four quarters.

The survey measures several workplace elements, including employees' level of agreement about clarity of expectations, opportunities for development and their opinions counting at work. In short, engaged employees are involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace. Actively disengaged employees are disgruntled and disloyal because most of their workplace needs are unmet.

Gallup also found a six-point decline in the percentage of employees who are extremely satisfied with their organization as a place to work. These are all indications that employees are feeling more disconnected from their employers. Clarity of expectations was lower across many demographic groups including age, gender, managerial status, remote working status and job types. Other engagement elements were affected differently across demographic groups.

Age: Younger workers' engagement was impacted more than older workers. Engagement for those under age 35 (young millennials and Gen Zers) decreased by four points and active disengagement in this same group increased by four points compared with before the pandemic. Engagement among older workers (those

Data for Further Consideration

The decline began in late 2021: The 32% of engaged employees in 2022 is equivalent to the percentage in the second half of 2021. The engagement elements that declined the most from the pre-pandemic record-high engagement ratio in 2019 to 2022 were:

- clarity of expectations
- connection to the mission or purpose of the company
- opportunities to learn and grow
- opportunities to do what employees do best
- feeling cared about at work



35 years and older) decreased by two points and the percentage actively disengaged in this group increased by one point. In comparison to older workers, younger workers experienced more decline in:

- feeling cared about
- having someone who encourages their development
- opportunities to learn and grow
- their opinions counting
- having a best friend at work

Gender: Women experienced more of a decline in engagement than men. Engagement among women declined by four points and active disengagement increased by three points. Engagement among men declined by only one point and active disengagement increased by the same amount. In comparison to men, women saw larger declines in:

- feeling cared about at work
- having someone who encourages their development
- having progress discussions

Job Type: When looking at engagement by level in the organization, engagement declined the most among individual contributors and project managers -- the same group that saw the largest increase in the percentage who are actively disengaged. Engagement among project managers declined by six points and active disengagement increased by four points. This group also saw a decline in all 12 of Gallup's engagement elements and overall satisfaction with their employer compared with scores from before the pandemic.

Among job types, engagement declined the most among healthcare workers (seven points) from 2019 to 2022. White-collar workers saw a four-point decline in the percentage engaged. For both healthcare and white-collar workers, nearly all of the shift from engaged employees was into the "quiet quitter" (aka not engaged) category as opposed to actively disengaged.

Remote and On-Site Jobs: For those in hybrid and fully on-site work locations, employee engagement declined from 2019 to 2022. Regardless of work location (including fully remote employees), organizational satisfaction, clarity of expectations, opportunities to do what you do best and feeling connected to the organization's mission or purpose declined substantially.

The largest decline in employee engagement was among those in remote-ready jobs who are currently working fully on-site -- this group saw a decline of five points in engagement and an increase of seven points in active disengagement. It's worth noting that exclusively remote employees saw an increase of four points in "quiet quitting" (aka not engaged in their work and workplace).

How Organizations Can Rebound in 2023

The good news is this: While only 32% of U.S. employees overall were engaged in 2022, there are organizations that have more than doubled this percentage. Gallup's 2022 Exceptional Workplace Award winners averaged 70% employee engagement

even during highly disruptive times.

They maintained this level of engagement by using their organizational culture and values to guide business decisions, embracing flexible and hybrid work while maintaining strong connections between managers and employees -- keeping performance, collaboration, employee wellbeing and the customer at the center of how work gets done. And most importantly, they equipped their managers with the skills and tools to have ongoing meaningful conversations with employees.

Focus on clarifying expectations: The most concerning decline has been in the lack of clear expectations for employees across all demographic groups when comparing engagement pre-pandemic with the latest findings. This element is the most foundational of all engagement elements. A lack of role clarity makes all other engagement elements less impactful -- employees cannot perform at a high level when they are confused as to what they are supposed to do.

Confused employees are more likely to look for other work and eventually leave the organization. What could be causing this consistent lack of clarity?

- Leadership not clearly communicating the organization's intended cultural values and strategy in the new world of work.
- Young workers who are in remote or hybrid settings are the most vulnerable -- the increased frequency of physical separation may contribute to this.
- Managers not being in touch with the ongoing work-life challenges.



Next Steps:

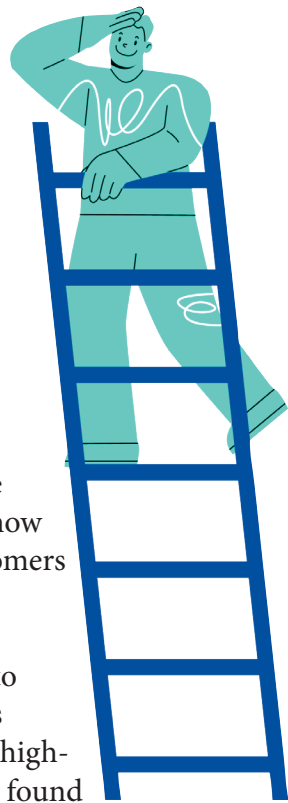
Conduct a “culture audit.” This is a highly qualitative, thorough review of your current and desired culture. This activity involves an evaluation of your strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. The audit can be done quickly and provides a road map to your highest productivity ever.

Embrace hybrid work for remote-ready employees. Do this or you will have an uphill battle in attracting and retaining star employees. Gallup has found the right mix of in-person time can result in the highest levels of employee engagement.

Establish on-site days as Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday. These days match with most employee preferences, but don't make it a policy. Announce it as your new way of working. It is a promise employees make to each other, not a promise they make to management. Employees need to know which days people are in the office together for the highest collaboration and innovation. Customers and suppliers need to know when people are in the office, too.

The manager must now hold one meaningful conversation per week with each employee -- 15 to 30 minutes, about goals, customers, wellbeing and recognition. This is the activity that prevents employees from feeling disconnected from the organization. We find this single habit develops high-performance relationships more than any other single leadership activity. Gallup analytics have found managers can be quickly upskilled to have these ongoing strengths-based conversations that bring clarity and purpose to work -- which is now deteriorating in U.S. organizations.

Gallup data suggest organizations are now beginning to settle into their new normal of hybrid work arrangements. Only 21% of those in remote-ready jobs are working fully on-site. Fifty-three percent of employees have some form of a hybrid work arrangement and 26% are fully remote. The fact that these tendencies are stabilizing means ways of working in the future are more predictable. But these changes raise the bar on the need for high coordination.



The role of the manager has never been more important.



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The article as it was originally published can be found at:
<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx>

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FROM THE MEMBERS: HOW DO YOU ENGAGE THE EMPLOYEES IN YOUR DISTRICT?



As we continue to face a nationwide educator shortage, employee engagement has become more important than ever. AASPA reached out to some members to ask them how they are keeping their employees engaged in 2023.

Employee engagement is often best met by intentional and frequent celebration of achievements with follow-up personal recognition. In our organization we celebrate through an anonymous Google Form and an administrator follows up with a personal card outlining the recognition with a small token of our appreciation of their efforts.
-Randy Cusack, Special Education Supervisor; Lansing School District; Lansing, MI

Our best engagement strategy is a three-pronged approach: Organizational Engagement Team, Engagement Team Metric and Leadership Development. The organizational Employee Engagement Team is comprised of a diverse group employees from across the organization representing various roles, demographics, etc. The team meets regularly and engages in asset and gap-based brainstorming of key engagement drivers to form, implement and monitor an Employee Engagement Plan. A research-based engagement metric is used to identify specific needs based on those engagement drivers, and to examine inequities and inconsistencies in our employee experience. Leadership is trained to better understand the engagement drivers how to grow and develop their teams and how to use the engagement metric to implement and monitor engagement plans at the department/site level.
-Jenny Mauch, Educational Consultant; Hamilton County ESC; Cincinnati, OH

Listening, connecting and recognizing. These three approaches contribute to employee engagement by focusing on efforts to develop and maintain a sense of belonging. One of the most effective tools for this, in my experience, is to conduct stay interviews. In stay interviews, supervisors carve out dedicated time to just ask questions and listen in face to face meetings. In this time to meet, you seek out positives and areas of growth from employees that want to stay and make your organization their home. While doing this, you also make connections with employees that you may not have had in the past – and that is the true beauty of organic conversations such as these interviews. Lastly, ask your staff – how do you like to be recognized? What can we do better?
-Matthew Wygal, Supervisor of Employee Relations; Prince William County Schools; Manassas, VA

In my district, we utilize Shared Decision Making Structures. We support and encourage both formal and informal leadership at all levels of the district. We empower individuals at every building and encourage their participation in committee work throughout the district.
-Dr. Vincent Citarelli, Assistant Superintendent; Garnet Valley School District; Glenn Mills, PA

Professional Human Capital Leader in Education (pHCLE) Learning Opportunities

pHCLE Virtual Class Schedules/Times:

July 11-August 22, 2023 (Tues. 11:00 am - 12:30 pm ET)
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PODCASTING FOR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

by Dr. Christian Manansala, Founder;
Tagpros Children International; Washington, DC



School leadership, employees and instructional staff engagement remain a challenge for many education systems across the United States. According to a recent survey from Gallup, staff who are “not engaged” or are “actively disengaged” at work miss an estimated 2.3 million more work days than those who are “engaged” in their jobs. On the other hand, about six in 10 public school superintendents (58%) in the U.S. are disengaged with their jobs, according to another Gallup survey of 2,300 public school leaders on various education issues.

The challenge is even more profound when dissemination of internal communication or news by the education system’s stakeholders, either through any print modality, such as emails, newsletters or one-pagers, which goes to waste when printed and sometimes gets lost in translation. Many of us, who are rushed routinely, may have missed a text or an email, losing key district information in the process. Thus, many school systems around the world are turning to podcasts to share critical information and keep superintendents, principals, instructional staff and employees engaged. Many of them find podcasts helpful in unifying their organization and fostering a sense of community in a way a live or office environment normally would.

School districts with numerous school sites and offices spread around in any given city, not to mention staff who are remotely working, are pushing a lot of education systems, not only in the US, but around the world toward podcasting, said Jim Tuscano, a school leader and a professional podcast producer based in Manila. “Having an internal podcast where school personnel can come, hear about district updates, hear success stories and feel generally connected to everyone else is crucial,” he said. Unlike emails, podcast content is more likely to appeal to employees and teachers’ emotions and is a more engaging way to spread information.

MODERN TOOL FOR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Podcasts are taking the world by storm, with almost 383.7 million podcast listeners worldwide, while their market value is expected to increase at an annual growth rate (CAGR) of 31.1%, according to the analytics and data firm Demand Sage. Studies also suggest that the United States has the most podcast listeners in the world,



with 100 million projected to reach the country on or before the end of 2023, with 22% episode consumption in the morning while driving to work. In view of these staggering numbers, there are plenty of opportunities available for school districts to leverage podcasting to promote employee engagement.

According to Tuscano, a lot of school systems find podcasting a more cost-efficient way to distribute information internally than many other distribution approaches. “If an employee is looking for some district information all they have to do is use their phone and this can be done on the way to work. In fact, information that needs to be disseminated quickly may still need an email or text, but for events, programs and employee engagement, the podcast is the way to go,” he added.

COLLABORATION FOR INTERNAL NEWS

While podcasting is a channel for spreading internal news, it also fills another void that many employees, especially those who are working remotely or working at various school sites have: a sense of community. “Bringing together teachers from school sites when everyone can’t meet, to make them have a connection is why I think a lot of school systems around the world are turning to podcasts now,” said HR Chief Cristina Palabrica of Tagpros Children International, a nonprofit based in the Washington DC-Virginia area, promoting teacher recruitment and retention via podcasting. “Collaboration among employees, teachers and HR teams is what makes podcasting even

more meaningful and strategic, as it actively engages them in the production process and helps them create something that they have their fingerprint on in a collective manner,” she added.

According to Palabrica, “some school systems use internal podcast episodes to raise awareness of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) issues, such as increasing diversity in instructional staff, propagating equity and inclusion goals in hiring or even creating feature stories about those individuals who champion diversity in their school sites.” Internal podcasts can give any organization opportunities to raise awareness about all sorts of employee issues in a format and medium that are easier for many to digest. In addition to raising awareness of DEI issues, topics regarding lack of morale, burnout, harassment and bullying and interpersonal conflict can be highlighted in podcast episodes, panel discussions or one-on-one formats. With experts, resource speakers and even employees speaking and exchanging ideas with the audience through chats and “on air” methodologies, everyone will have a golden opportunity to partake in shared experiences and learn from the human aspect of the issues presented.

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

In addition to learning new ideas through internal employee collaboration, connecting central office and school site personnel, who are all siloed and segregated physically, can make it easy for HR to enhance understanding, cohesiveness and unity, not to mention promoting a positive internal culture within the organization. With the podcast, designed as a radio talk-show format, central office and school site personnel can discuss, meet and talk with each other recorded or live “on air,” creating new friendships and forming new alliances about any given issue or topic while at the same time, strengthening internal community and understanding in the process.

Also, podcasts can quell rumors and gossip immediately, as podcast producers can invite concerned parties involved in any sensitive topic or issue and enlighten a confused and fragmented audience by providing them the opportunity to hear all sides, empowering them to make informed decisions and factual choices. Thus, by opening lines of communication through continuous and open conversations, all sorts of internal issues can be straightened out and all organizational problems and conflicts can be addressed collectively. This type of approach can be attributed to a town-hall-type of discussion wherein parties are not only resolving issues, but are also providing opportunities for policy makers and school board members to listen to diverse ideas or opinions, which could be critical in crafting internal policies for schools and its central offices.

EDUCATING EMPLOYEES

As of April 2023, there were over 5 million podcasts of different content produced, with over 70 million episodes, with an audience jumping from 464.7 million globally in 2023 to 504.9 million projected at the end of 2024, according to the data presented by Demand Sage. At the height of the pandemic, podcasting was used tremendously by HR teams around the world, not to mention school district stakeholders who sought to communicate with teachers and employees to educate or even convey information with empathy and transparency, relying on the power of voice tone rather than written text, as many struggled with issues like mental health, feelings of isolation and training difficulties.

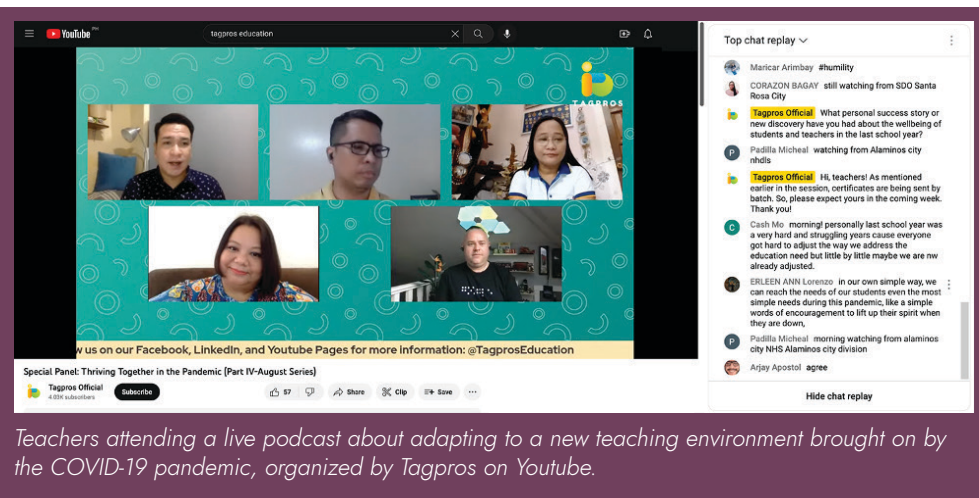
Because of the asynchronous or synchronous nature of podcasts, school districts can convey information and educate employees with sensitivity and versatility, providing them with choices well-suited for an audience of varied and diverse learning styles, pacing and current circumstances. Some employees learn best by listening or watching, while others learn best when they are reading or writing what they hear. Because of the replay, rewind and pausing mechanisms of podcasts, with optional subtitles to boot, HR school leaders may use them as an efficient and effective tool for educating all types of learners, whether one is a visual learner, an auditory one or has learning difficulties.

PODCAST PRODUCTION FUNDAMENTALS

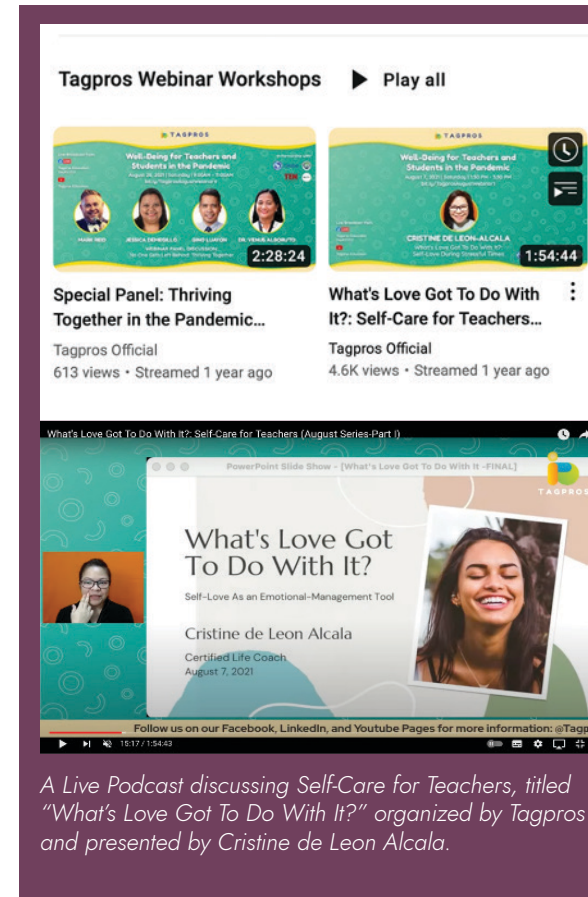
Whether or not your HR team assigns a subteam to handle its podcast production, or finds a reasonably priced third party to manage it and hand over to your team the responsibility of creating content, the goal of an impactful employee engagement program in a school district is very promising in view of its cost-efficiency and wide reach, compared to any type of traditional or conventional modalities. For starters, YouTube Studio is a great resource to create podcasts in view of its global popularity, basic approach, with step-by-step procedure. Nonetheless, the following are the fundamentals to remember whenever one is producing podcast episodes:

ADVANCED EPISODES

Whether it is weekly, monthly or quarterly, consistency in podcast episodes is key to high employee engagement. By planning and producing a few episodes centered around your goals, at least a few months in advance, the production team can make necessary adjustments should resource speakers cancel, reschedule or move around the interview calendar. Thus, your objective is to have advanced episodes in the pipeline at all times to regularly plug in content based on your podcast’s confirmed broadcast schedules.



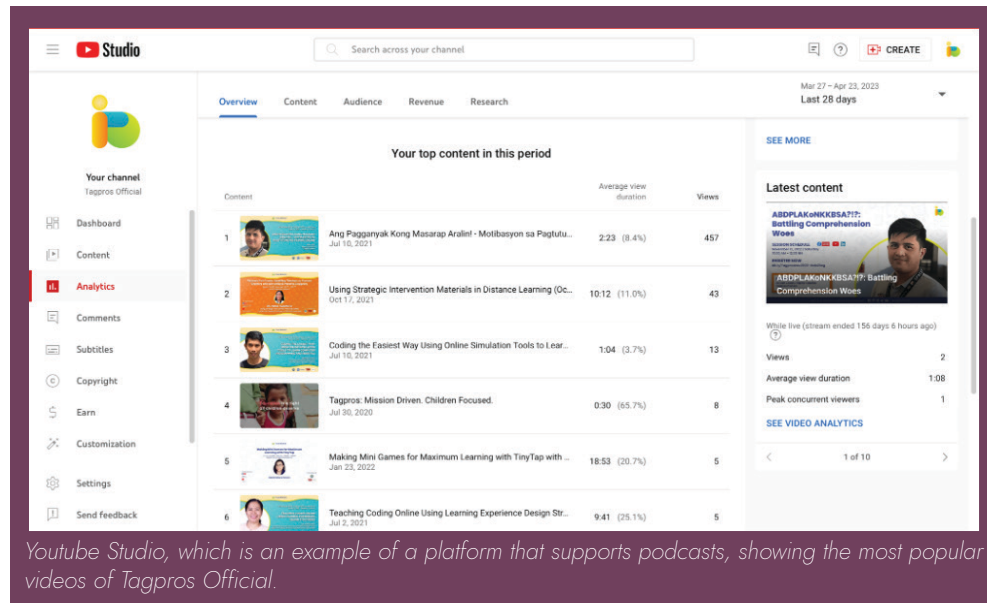
Teachers attending a live podcast about adapting to a new teaching environment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, organized by Tagpros on Youtube.



A Live Podcast discussing Self-Care for Teachers, titled “What’s Love Got To Do With It?” organized by Tagpros and presented by Cristine de Leon Alcala.

EQUIPMENT AND SOFTWARE ACQUISITION

Because of the advent and popularity of hand-held devices, producing quality podcasts is not highly complicated and expensive. However, it is not advisable to use any computers' built in microphones, as sound quality may be compromised. USB microphone brands such as Yeti or Snowball may be able to do the trick for any fledgling podcast initiative. Meanwhile, recording episodes embedded with music will take enormous time, as audio editing eats up the majority of its production. Simple softwares programs such as Audacity, GarageBand and SoundStudio are highly recommended to assist in this type of endeavor.



Youtube Studio, which is an example of a platform that supports podcasts, showing the most popular videos of Tagpros Official.

DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL

Plan and research the right distribution channel for podcast episodes. Google Podcasts, Apple iTunes, Spotify and Stitcher are some of the most reliable choices available. If some episodes are confidential or for internal purposes only, tools such as Transistor can be utilized to make any podcast feel private and password-protected. This particular tool will relegate episodes locked on the web or in podcast apps and only internal staff will be able to listen.

MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

Finally, to determine the success and impact of a podcast with regard to employee engagement, school district stakeholders must be able to analyze the analytics of its episodes. With plug-ins such as Anchor (by Spotify), Podbean, Spreaker, Chartable or ContactMonkey, HR teams can collect both qualitative and quantitative employee feedback for each podcast episode while at the same time share insights and sort tracking by different criteria.

PILOT EPISODE ASSISTANCE

As soon as you get approval from higher ups, that podcast can be instituted to promote employee engagement. You may start creating a team to plan and implement a few pilot episodes and employ simple audience feedback mechanisms, so you can create highly impactful content aligned to your organizational goals. Hence, Tagpros can assist you in your initial episodes and help you measure their popularity by gathering data and audience feedback. The more you're informed about what your audience wants, the better you can promote employee engagement.



Christian Manansala, M.Ed. is the founder of Tagpros Children International. Chris has more than 20 years of experience in international recruitment and K-12 teaching. He has designed strategies and helped numerous human capital teams in the U.S, China, and the Philippines produce podcasts for recruitment, retention, and employee engagement. His vision is to create innovative and cost-effective recruitment, retention, and engagement solutions that would improve institutional efficiencies through emerging technologies and data analytics.

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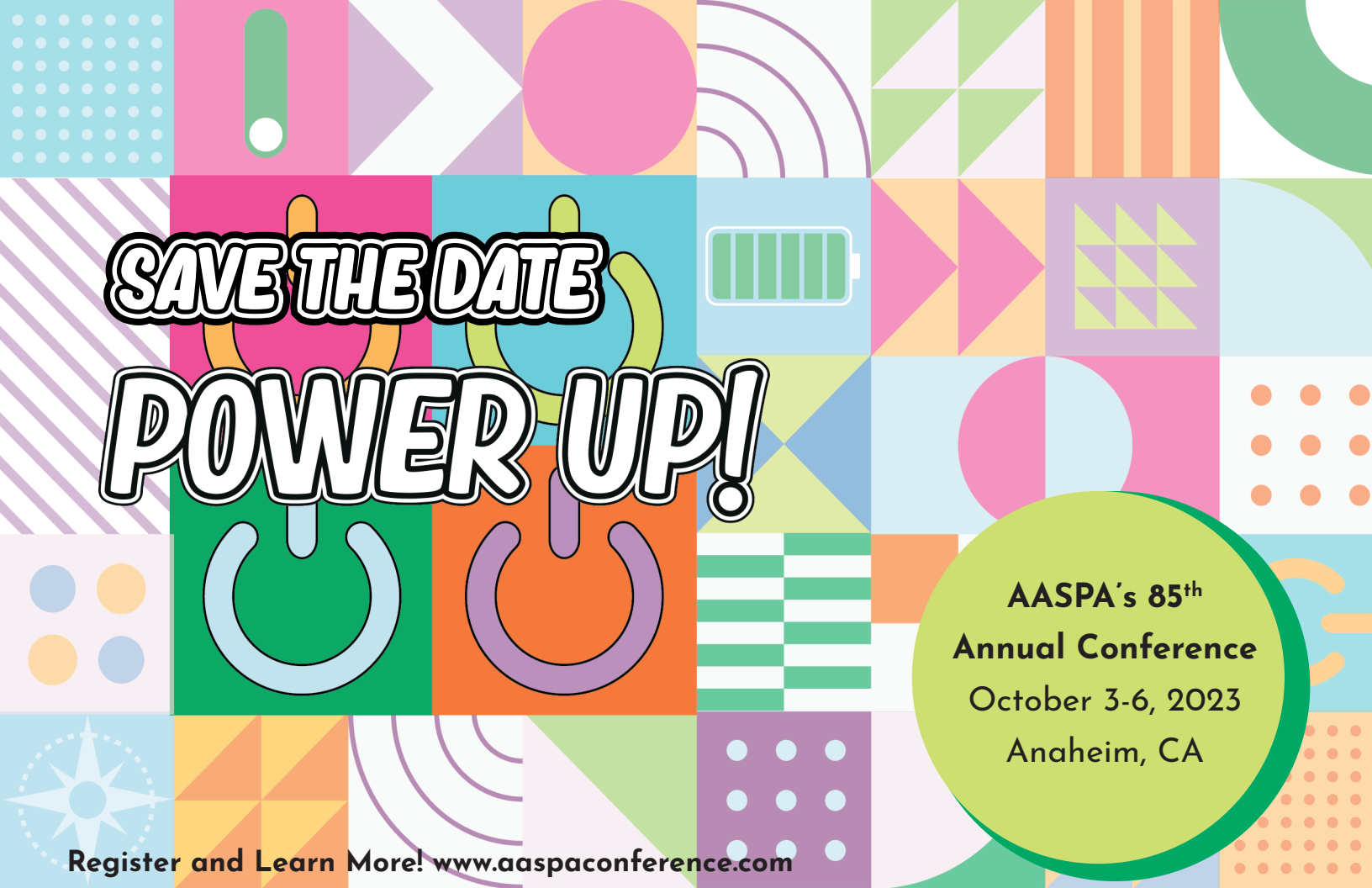
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