

Connecting the dots
IN EMPLOYEE LISTENING

Using Your Employee Engagement Score as a Goal Can Backfire

What to do instead



Using Your Employee Engagement Score as a Goal Can Backfire: What to Do Instead

Our clients frequently ask us for support in setting employee engagement survey score goals. Typically, they're hoping to identify a specific score their organization should reach on their next survey.

While we understand the positive intent behind this question, we like to challenge the notion altogether. **When it comes to employee engagement metrics, it is important to emphasize actions instead of scores.** Why? Because, according to Goodhart's Law, "when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure." In the context of setting employee engagement goals, Goodhart's Law warns that placing too much emphasis on improving a specific engagement score (such as "moving from 75% to 78%"), those metrics can lose their value as true indicators of employee engagement. This happens because leaders or teams may focus on manipulating the metrics to meet the target, rather than addressing the deeper, underlying issues that truly drive engagement.

For example, if an organization sets a goal to increase engagement survey scores by three points, teams might focus on superficial or short-term actions that boost scores—like asking employees to give higher scores or offering temporary incentives. These actions may improve the numbers temporarily without truly resolving problems needed to improve the employee experience (like poor communication, lack of development opportunities, or trust in leadership).

To avoid this, it's important to focus on meaningful actions and outcomes that improve the actual workplace environment, not just the number. Here are four examples of actionable goals organizations can set to drive improvements to employee engagement:

- Percentage or number of leaders who logged into their dashboards and created an action plan based on their team's feedback.
- Percentage or number of leaders who have executed their action plan(s) since the last survey.
- Follow-through on a specific initiative that was set for a particular group, committee, ERG, leadership team, and/or department following the survey.
- Increase in agreement with survey items that gauge the efficacy of action (e.g., "I believe that positive change will happen as a result of this survey").

But what if you're dealing with internal pressure to make the measurement of success all about the scores? For example, what if the Board has already made the decision to use this metric as a performance indicator for managers?

We understand that this approach is typically adopted with good intentions. Being in this position means your executives care about engagement and want to make it an organizational KPI (key performance indicator). However, we still recommend challenging this idea by discussing the potential drawbacks and proposing an alternative approach (see previous page). At the same time, we can certainly appreciate that there are scenarios where your "hands are tied." If the alternate measures we've proposed truly aren't feasible, be sure to consider four factors when determining an engagement score goal:

1. Statistical Significance

Consider how much of a change in scores between survey timepoints would be statistically significant (ask your Newmeasures consultant if you're uncertain about that figure). Based on sample size and scores, this can be a helpful insight to indicate if a shift was due to real change and not chance or natural fluctuation. A two-point change might not feel impressive, but you may learn it is statistically significant for your population. As a general rule, we do not recommend setting a goal that extends beyond the statistical significance threshold, as it can be unrealistic, challenging, and demotivating.

2. Organizational Context

When setting goals for engagement scores, consider what efforts are being made to "move the needle" internally. For example, if initiatives across the organization are in the works to affect engagement, you can expect more movement in scores than when efforts are stagnant. Similarly, if there is substantial leadership commitment, you can expect more movement in scores than when they are not involved.

Additionally, consider any internal changes that could increase uncertainty in the coming year, such as shifts in the executive team, mergers or acquisitions, a return-to-office mandate, or high workloads due to staffing shortages. These factors can negatively impact engagement and should be accounted for when setting goals. Your goal should reflect your organization's reality at that moment in time by factoring in elements that may be outside of leaders' and managers' control.

3. External Benchmarks

External benchmarks are useful tools, but they reveal only one part of the story. As such, we do not recommend our clients to use them as any form of goal metric. Norms are a moving target when aggregate data is continuously rolling in. They also never represent a “perfect” comparison to your organization, and therefore should not be the baseline for how you measure success.

When comparing your scores to external benchmarks, consider whether your scores are above or below the average. Improvement naturally becomes slower and more challenging as your scores get higher. Therefore, your goal should focus on sustaining strong engagement rather than expecting drastic improvement. After all, maintaining high engagement is no small feat! On the other hand, if scoring below average, there’s often room for growth, which makes larger strides in improving scores more feasible.

4. Timing

As it’s often said, “timing is everything”! Organizational change is often a slow and non-linear process, so it's important to allow ample time for changes to take root and be reflected in survey results. Remember, employee engagement is a journey, and progress may not always be immediate or steady.

Historical trends can also provide valuable context. If you saw a significant increase in your last survey scores, it’s possible that future improvements might be more modest.

Finally, consider your survey frequency when setting goals. You may aim for substantial improvements in your annual surveys, whereas smaller, incremental goals are usually more realistic for quarterly pulse surveys.



How we set goals is influential and has the potential to impact your broader culture. We recommend prioritizing actions that lead to meaningful change, not just numbers on a dashboard.

Recommended Reading:

To learn more about how monetary incentives impact metrics, check out [Should You Tie Bonuses to Employee Experience Metrics?](#)

About Newmeasures

Newmeasures is a boutique firm of Industrial & Organizational Psychologists with expertise in designing and executing employee listening strategies. Our mission is to help people within organizations listen to one another so they can thrive – both as individuals and collectively. We are passionate about providing white-glove service and tailoring our services to meet our clients exactly where they are.

We believe that employee listening should connect the dots rather than simply checking boxes. By utilizing multiple listening methods and linking employee experience (EX) and operational (O) data, we help our clients gain the insights they need to make informed decisions in real-time.

In addition, our offerings include a built-in system of action to support clients in using employee feedback to improve the employee experience in the ways that matter most.

Contact us to learn how we can help you evolve your listening program beyond engagement to help create compelling and differentiating employee experiences.



1-877-888-3817



info@newmeasures.com