

# WHY THE EXPERTS ARE WRONG: BEING ENGAGED AT WORK DOESN'T MATTER

FOR YEARS, COMPANIES HAVE OBSESSED OVER EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT—MEASURING IT, MANAGING IT, TRYING TO SPARK IT. BUT WHAT IF THEY'VE BEEN CHASING THE WRONG THING ALL ALONG?

In 2000, Gallup began regularly reporting on the state of the American workforce. The headline stat—what percent of employees are "engaged at work"—was born. Business leaders latched on. Engagement became the pulse-check of corporate health, a tidy percentage used to justify cultural initiatives, HR investments, and entire departments. But today, 25 years later, the average engagement score in the U.S. is... still just 33%.

Let that sink in. After decades of measurement, billions of dollars spent, and an entire cottage industry of consultants and culture platforms, one in three American workers remains actively engaged. The rest? Either coasting or actively miserable.

It's not just stagnation. In the most recent data, engagement declined. Gallup reported the first sustained drop in over a decade, especially among younger workers and women. At a time when companies claim to care more than ever about employee wellbeing, belonging, and purpose, the supposed gold-standard metric says the workforce is checking out. So what gives?

The answer is simple but inconvenient: we've been measuring the wrong thing. Engagement may feel like the right metric—uplifting, intuitive, and easy to quantify—but it fails to capture the deeper drivers of commitment and growth. We've elevated a nebulous feeling—one part motivation, one part morale—into the proxy for organizational health. But we've never stopped to ask whether it actually predicts the things that matter: performance, retention, brand loyalty, customer trust.



Here's what the data shows when you dig deeper: Engagement is a lagging indicator. It's reactive. It fluctuates with managerial style, workload, even the weather. And in high-performing organizations, engagement is often not the differentiator. What is? A deeper sense of identity.

## Identification, Not Engagement

What actually drives sustainable performance isn't whether employees are momentarily "engaged." It's whether they identify with the mission, the brand, the team. It's whether their goals align with the organization's goals—not just on paper, but at a gut level. This is called Collective Organizational Identification (COI™), and it's the missing link in the workplace debate.

**“COI™ is not a mood. It's a mindset—one that shows up in behavior.**



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Employees with high COI™ don't just do their jobs well; they advocate for the brand, defend its reputation, and stay committed through turbulence. In a multi-year study across sectors—from tech to retail to professional services—we found that COI™ explains up to 25% more variance in business outcomes than employee engagement. Organizations with high COI™ scores had 40% more employees actively promoting the brand, not because they were told to, but because they wanted to. They stayed longer. They innovated more. They showed up for each other in ways no pulse survey can capture.

At one global tech company, for instance, employees with high COI™ not only outperformed their peers—they also recruited more top talent into the organization, unprompted. Their identity was tied to the company's success.

The irony? Many of the same companies that obsessively track engagement haven't even considered identification. They've treated employees as motivation problems to solve rather than members of a shared mission. The result? Programs that are performative, fragmented, or worse—disengaging.

### Chasing the Wrong Thing

It's not that engagement is bad. But it's incomplete. It measures energy without direction. It's like tracking the RPM of an engine without asking if the car is headed anywhere. You might see a spike in engagement after a company all-hands or new perks program. But does that mean people trust leadership? Believe in the product? Feel proud to wear the logo?

We've mistaken a temperature check for a diagnosis. Meanwhile, companies continue to incentivize managers on the basis of engagement scores that tell them very little about long-term alignment or commitment. It's like managing by vibes.

Advocates of engagement often point to studies linking it to productivity or customer satisfaction. But these effects are typically short-term, and they disappear in environments with high turnover, weak leadership, or poor strategy. Engagement doesn't cause success—it sometimes reflects it.

### A Better Way Forward

The next frontier isn't about making employees happier in the short term. It's about helping them belong in the long term. That means redesigning leadership systems, not just offering mindfulness apps. It means linking individual roles to enterprise value—showing people how what they do actually matters. It means understanding that purpose isn't a poster; it's a practice.



We don't need more dashboards. We need more clarity. Employees are asking a different question now—not “Do I like my job?” but “Does this place reflect who I am and what I value?”

This isn't just a workplace issue—it mirrors a broader cultural shift. People are gravitating toward organizations, movements, and brands that align with their identity. It's why Gen Z rallies around values-based startups and why institutions that once commanded loyalty are struggling to stay relevant.

Until leaders shift from managing engagement to fostering identification, we'll be stuck in the same cycle: chasing a number that never moves.