

| PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



S K Cheong

President

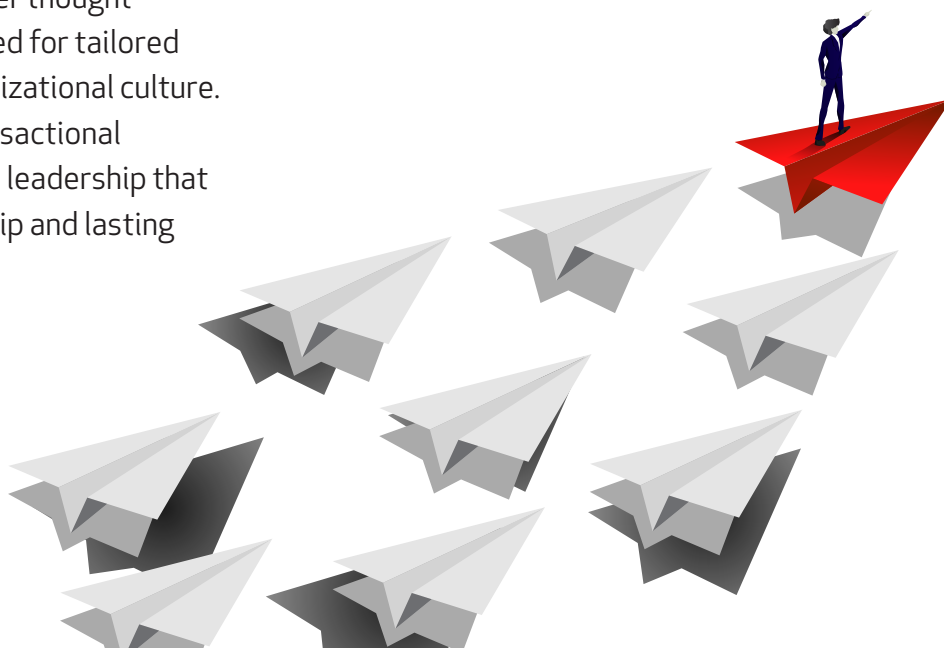
Asian Association
of Management
Organizations

This edition examines the evolving paradigms of leadership through the lenses of empowerment and empathy—critical pillars for navigating today's complex workforce dynamics.

Ullhas Pagey's **"Elevate, Engage, Engineer"** dissects the often-misunderstood concept of employee engagement, urging organizations to move beyond superficial perks and instead foster genuine empowerment. Pagey argues that true engagement stems from trust, autonomy, and purpose—not ping-pong tables or mandatory camaraderie. Drawing on research from Gallup, McKinsey, and other thought leaders, he underscores the need for tailored strategies that align with organizational culture. His call to action? Replace transactional gestures with transformational leadership that inspires psychological ownership and lasting impact.

Anju Mishra of the Management Association of Nepal echoes this human-centric approach in **"Leading with Empathy"**. Amid economic pressures that strain morale, Mishra advocates for creative, compassionate leadership. When monetary incentives fall short, she proposes flexible work structures, well-being initiatives, and transparent communication to rebuild trust. Her insights resonate deeply in today's climate, reminding us that resilience is forged through psychological safety and shared purpose. Together, these articles illuminate a path forward: Leadership must elevate by nurturing potential, engage through authenticity, and engineer cultures where empathy and empowerment thrive. Let this issue serve as a compass for those committed to shaping workplaces of the future.

Happy reading!



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ELEVATE, ENGAGE, ENGINEER

Organisations that prioritise employee engagement will reap substantial rewards and thrive in the increasingly competitive talent market.

BY MR ULLHAS PAGEY ALL INDIA MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION



In today's hyper-competitive talent landscape, 'employee engagement' has become the lingua franca of HR departments and C-suites alike. It is the buzzword whispered in strategy meetings, the metric scrutinised in quarterly reports, the holy grail sought by organisations striving for peak performance. But is this much-vaunted concept truly the sine qua non of a thriving workforce, or is it merely a mirage shimmering in the desert of disengaged employees? Here, we would dive deep into the convoluted world of employee engagement, separating myth from reality and exploring how organisations can engineer genuine empowerment through strategic engagement initiatives.

Employee engagement, at its core, is the degree to which employees feel invested in their work, committed to their organisation's goals, and motivated to contribute to its success. It is that *je ne sais quoi* that distinguishes a merely compliant workforce from one that is truly passionate and productive. However, the term has become so

ubiquitous, so laden with interpretations, that its meaning has become, dare we say, diluted. It's often conflated with employee satisfaction, happiness, or even perks, leading to a fundamental misunderstanding of its true essence. Engagement is not about ping-pong tables and free snacks; it's about fostering a deep connection between employees and their work, a sense of purpose that transcends mere financial compensation. Employee engagement is not forced camaraderie, superficial team-building exercises, or top-down mandates nor a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather a nuanced and evolving process that requires a deep understanding of the specific needs and aspirations of the workforce. The perception of engagement often falls prey to confirmation bias, with leaders wanting to see happy faces rather than digging deeper into the underlying drivers of true engagement.

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Employee engagement, at its core, is the degree to which employees feel invested in their work, committed to their organisation's goals, and motivated to contribute to its success. It is that *je ne sais quoi* that distinguishes a merely compliant workforce from one that is truly passionate and productive. However, the term has become so ubiquitous, so laden with interpretations, that its meaning has become, dare we say, diluted. It's often conflated with employee satisfaction, happiness, or even perks, leading to a fundamental misunderstanding of its true essence. Engagement is not about ping-pong tables and free snacks; it's about fostering a deep connection between employees and their work, a sense of purpose that transcends mere financial compensation. Employee engagement is not forced camaraderie, superficial team-

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The consulting world has embraced employee engagement with open arms, producing a veritable deluge of research and reports. Gallup's decades of work on the topic has established a strong correlation between engagement and business outcomes, from increased profitability to reduced turnover. Their meta-analyses have consistently shown that highly engaged teams outperform their disengaged counterparts by significant margins. KPMG's studies have highlighted the importance of aligning individual goals with organisational objectives, emphasising the need for clear communication and a shared vision. Accenture's research has emphasised the role of technology in fostering engagement, exploring how digital tools can facilitate communication, collaboration, and feedback. McKinsey's work has delved into the specific drivers of engagement, identifying factors such as meaningful work, opportunities for growth, and supportive leadership. BCG has focused on the link between engagement and innovation, demonstrating how a highly engaged workforce can drive creativity and generate new ideas. Korn Ferry's research has explored the psychological

aspects of engagement, emphasising the importance of creating a sense of belonging and purpose. Bain's studies have connected engagement to customer loyalty, showing how engaged employees are more likely to deliver exceptional customer experiences. Deloitte's research has highlighted the importance of creating a positive work environment, where employees feel valued and respected. WTW, Aon, Mercer—the list goes on—each offering their own unique perspectives and frameworks, often focusing on specific industries or demographics. While this wealth of data is invaluable, it can also be overwhelming, creating a paralysis by analysis for organisations trying to navigate the complex landscape of engagement. The sheer volume of research can make it difficult to discern the most relevant and actionable insights.

Over a period of time, numerous engagement models have emerged, each promising to unlock the secret to a highly engaged workforce. From Maslow's hierarchy of needs to Herzberg's two-factor theory to more contemporary models focusing on autonomy, mastery,



and purpose, organisations are faced with a plethora of options. The challenge lies in selecting a model that aligns with their specific culture, values, and strategic objectives. Do organisations actually adhere to these models, or do they merely pay lip service to them? The reality is often a hybrid approach, with organisations cherry-picking elements from different models and adapting them to their own context. This eclectic approach can be effective, but it requires careful consideration and a deep understanding of the underlying principles of each model. For example, an organisation with a strong focus on innovation might prioritise models that emphasise autonomy and creative freedom, while a company with a more hierarchical structure might focus on models that emphasise clear roles and responsibilities.

Measuring employee engagement is crucial for tracking progress and demonstrating ROI. Traditional metrics like employee satisfaction surveys and turnover rates are still relevant, but they provide an incomplete picture. More sophisticated approaches involve pulse surveys, eNPS (employee Net Promoter Score), and qualitative feedback mechanisms like focus groups and one-on-one conversations. The key is to identify metrics that are meaningful, actionable and provide insights that can be used to drive meaningful change. It's not enough to simply collect data; organisations must also analyse it and use it to inform their engagement strategies.

So, how can organisations engineer genuine employee empowerment through engagement? It starts with creating a culture of trust, transparency, and open communication. Employees need to feel that their voices are heard, their contributions are valued, and their development is a priority. This requires a shift from a top-down, command-and-control approach to a more collaborative and participatory style of leadership. Empowerment is not about delegating tasks; it's about giving employees the autonomy, resources, and support they need to take ownership of their work and make a real impact. It is about fostering a sense of psychological ownership, where employees feel a sense of responsibility and accountability for their work. Despite the best intentions, organisations often encounter roadblocks on their journey to employee engagement. If senior leaders are not fully committed to employee engagement, initiatives are likely to fail. Engagement efforts must be integrated across all functions, rather than being confined to HR. Without clear metrics and tracking mechanisms, it's difficult to assess the effectiveness of engagement.

The question of who should own employee engagement—HR or line management—is a critical one. While HR plays a crucial role in designing and implementing engagement strategies, ultimately, engagement is the responsibility of line managers. They are the ones who interact with employees on a daily basis and have the greatest influence on their experience at work. HR can provide

support, guidance, and resources, but line managers must be held accountable for fostering engagement within their teams. This requires equipping managers with the necessary skills and training to effectively engage their employees.

The world of employee engagement is constantly evolving. Recent trends include a greater focus on employee well-being, a recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusion, and the increasing use of technology to personalise and enhance the employee experience. The rise of remote work has also presented new challenges and opportunities for engaging employees in a virtual environment. Organisations that are agile, adaptable, and willing to embrace these emerging trends will be best positioned to attract and retain top talent. The focus is shifting from transactional engagement to transformational engagement, where employees are not just satisfied with their jobs, but also inspired by their work and connected to a larger purpose.

Employee engagement, after all, is not a magic bullet, but it is a critical ingredient for organisational success. It is not about superficial perks or feel-good initiatives; it is about creating a culture where employees feel valued, empowered, and connected to a larger purpose. As Peter Drucker famously said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." In the same vein, genuine employee engagement can fuel

an organisation's success far beyond any tactical manoeuvre. By elevating engagement strategies, organisations can engineer a future where employees are not just engaged but truly empowered to achieve their full potential. And in the words of Richard Branson, "Take care of your employees, and they will take care of your customers." This simple yet profound truth underscores the empowerment imperative in today's business world. The journey to employee empowerment is not easy, but the rewards are substantial. Organisations that prioritise engagement will be the ones that thrive in the increasingly competitive talent.

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LEADING WITH EMPATHY

BY MS ANJU MISHRA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
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Navigating Rising Living Costs and Maintaining Team Motivation

The economic landscape is presenting a formidable challenge for leaders: how to keep their teams satisfied and productive when the cost of living is relentlessly climbing, while salaries often remain stagnant. This creates a palpable tension, impacting morale, engagement, and ultimately, output. Leaders who fail to address this underlying pressure risk a disengaged, demotivated, and potentially departing workforce. However, by embracing empathy, creativity, and proactive strategies, leaders can navigate this challenging terrain and foster a resilient and productive team.

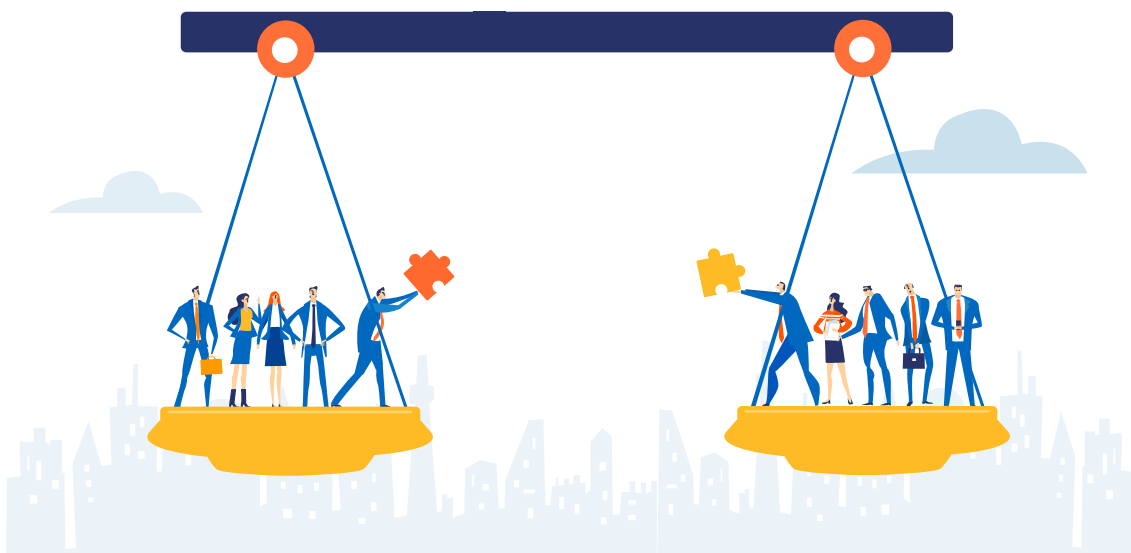
One of the primary hurdles is the **eroding sense of financial security**. Employees facing increased expenses for basic necessities like food, housing, and transportation may experience heightened stress and anxiety. This can directly translate to decreased focus, lower job satisfaction, and even burnout. Leaders must acknowledge

this reality and foster an environment of open communication and empathy. Creating safe spaces for team members to voice their concerns, even if direct financial solutions are limited, can be incredibly valuable in building trust and demonstrating care.

While directly increasing salaries might not always be feasible in the short term, leaders can explore **creative and non-monetary benefits**. This requires thinking outside the traditional compensation box. Consider initiatives such as:

- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Offering remote work options or flexible hours can significantly reduce commuting costs, a substantial burden for many. This also demonstrates trust and empowers employees with greater control over their lives.

- **Enhanced Well-being Programs:** Investing in employee well-being programs, including mental health resources, stress management workshops, and even financial literacy training, can provide valuable support during challenging times.
 - **Skill Development and Growth Opportunities:** Providing opportunities for professional development and upskilling not only enhances individual capabilities but also signals investment in their future, potentially leading to higher-paying roles down the line. This can be a powerful motivator, offering a sense of progress even amidst current financial constraints.
 - **Recognition and Appreciation:** Regularly acknowledging and appreciating team members' contributions, both big and small, can significantly boost morale. Public praise, small gestures of gratitude, and highlighting achievements can reinforce their value and foster a positive work environment.
 - **Exploring Group Benefits:** Investigate the possibility of negotiating group discounts on essential services like healthcare, insurance, or even local amenities. These small savings can collectively make a difference.
 - **Transparent Communication about Company Performance:** Sharing transparent updates about the company's financial situation and future prospects can help employees understand the constraints and potential future opportunities. This fosters a sense of shared understanding and trust.
- Beyond these tangible benefits, effective leadership in this climate requires a shift in **management style**. Micromanagement and excessive pressure can exacerbate existing anxieties. Instead, leaders should focus on:
- **Empowerment and Autonomy:** Providing team members with greater autonomy and ownership over their work can increase engagement and a sense of purpose, shifting focus from financial worries to the satisfaction of meaningful contribution.



- **Clear Goals and Purpose:** Ensuring that team members understand the "why" behind their work and how it contributes to a larger mission can provide intrinsic motivation that transcends immediate financial concerns.
- **Focus on Impact and Contribution:** Highlighting the positive impact of the team's work can instill a sense of pride and accomplishment, reinforcing the value of their efforts beyond just the paycheck.
- **Leading by Example:** Leaders who demonstrate resilience, empathy, and a proactive approach to problem-solving can inspire their teams to navigate challenges with a similar mindset.

Ultimately, navigating the challenge of rising living costs with stagnant wages requires leaders to be **agile, empathetic, and innovative**. While direct financial solutions may be limited, fostering a supportive, engaging, and growth-

oriented environment can significantly mitigate the negative impacts on team satisfaction and productivity. By focusing on non-monetary benefits, open communication, and empowering leadership, organizations can weather this economic storm and retain a motivated and productive workforce. The leaders who prioritize their team's well-being during these challenging times will not only see their teams through but also build stronger, more resilient organizations in the long run.

About the Author



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About AAMO:

AAMO is a partnership of National Management Organisations (NMO) whose purpose is to share and actively leverage resources to enhance the achievement of their respective missions. AAMO is an independent, nonpolitical and not-for-profit Association of NMOs, which promotes, facilitates and supports the development of professional management in the Asia Pacific Region.

The current 9 members of AAMO are Australia and New Zealand, Hong Kong, India, Macau, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka.



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