

What Engaged Employees Actually Want From Their Leaders

New research on the communication gap a KNow Research & University of San Francisco Marketing Intelligence capstone project, produced in partnership with ProjectNext Leadership.

This piece is about **followership**, the idea that what makes someone choose to follow a leader is different from what makes them simply report to one. New research from engaged employees reveals **3 specific gaps between how leaders think they're communicating and what their teams actually experience**, then closes with 4 practices leaders can start using with their teams **immediately**. No leadership overhaul required, just a clearer picture of what earns trust enough to be followed.

Each year, KNow Research pairs a cohort of USF Marketing Intelligence graduate students with a client recipient through our practicum partnership. The program is led by Professor Stephen Kraus, who helped launch USF's Marketing Intelligence program and has spent his career at the intersection of marketing and consumer insights. Kraus crafted the program around the premise that students learn market research by doing it. Under his guidance, each cohort designs and fields original research for a real client who's actually going to use what they find, not a hypothetical case study.

This year, the capstone project recipient was ProjectNext Leadership. PNL is a boutique executive coaching firm built on the idea that leadership is fundamentally about connection, not just hard skills. Co-founded and co-led by Molly Rosen and Jeff Rosenthal, PNL works with director-level through C-suite leaders across tech, biotech, entertainment, and consumer goods, building what they call "connective skills," the capabilities that let a leader bridge silos rather than manage within their own lane. In their ongoing exploration of the relationship between leadership and followership, the PNL team wanted to know: **what do engaged employees, people who are genuinely invested in their job and their company, actually need from their leaders when it comes to communication?**

We approached this as a joint effort with our quant partner, Lexicon & Line to field a survey of N~300 engaged employees across the 3 industries PNL works in most: biotech/pharma, tech, and consumer goods. From there, PNL invited a group of respondents back for in-depth interviews. These conversations went deeper on why people chose to follow a specific leader, what made them trust that leader's judgment and believe in their direction, and the difference between feeling informed by a leader and actually feeling heard by one.

Meanwhile, USF students built a supplemental research stream, reviewing existing workplace research with additional interviews and another quantitative survey of engaged employees. PNL's will combine both streams – plus additional research of their own – into published leadership pieces. Look out for those pieces later in the fall, but here's a preview of some key findings.

What Makes a Leader Worth Following?

The days of joining a company at 22 and retiring from the same desk 30 years later are largely behind us, and employers are feeling it. People move faster now, opportunities are more visible, and loyalty to a company is no longer a given. That's a real challenge for organizations trying to hold onto good people. But we found that a **good leader can still be the reason someone stays**. When asked what actually kept them in a job, engaged employees rank *"having a leader*

What Engaged Employees Actually Want From Their Leaders

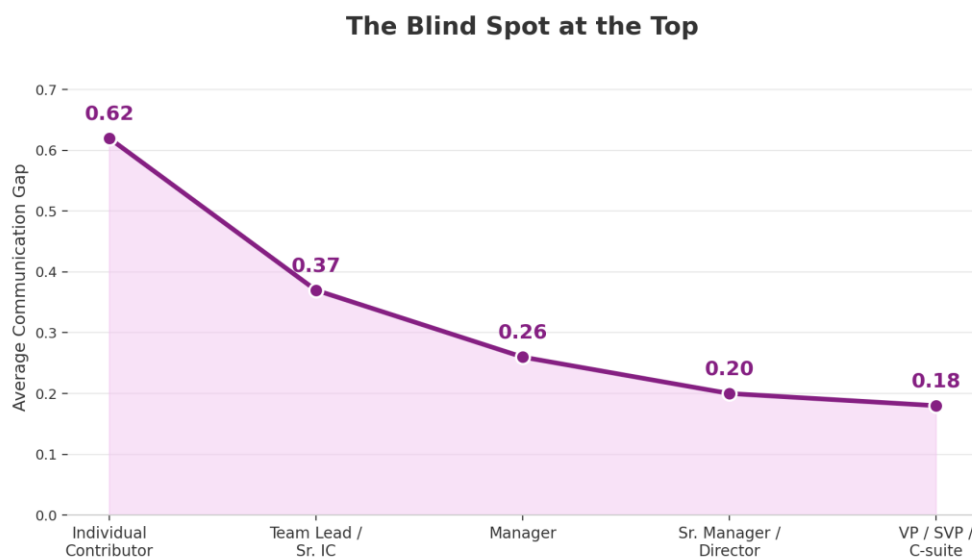
I want to follow" above career growth, compensation, team culture, company stability, and flexibility.

So what makes a leader worth following? Communication came out on top: clear, consistent communication was the number one reason people said they followed their leader, followed closely by belief in the leader's vision, genuine care for people, and trust in their judgment. None of these are personality traits someone either has or doesn't. They are **behaviors a leader can practice** – starting with how they communicate one-on-one.

Employees say direct conversations move them to follow a leader far more than any group update or messaging platform, which makes the one-on-one the single highest-leverage habit on this list.

3 Gaps Between What Leaders Think and What Employees Feel

1. The people closest to the work feel the biggest gap, and it's not close.



GRAPH: *The Blind Spot at the Top*. Average communication gap between what employees want and what they get, by role level

A leader who *feels* like their communication is landing fine may simply be too far from the front line to notice that it isn't. This isn't a reason to doubt every message that seems to be landing well. It's a reminder that **comfort at the senior level and clarity at the front line aren't the same thing**, and **the people who feel the gap most are usually the ones with the least room to say so**.

How to close this communication gap: Cultivate an environment that makes employees feel "safe" to disagree.

Leaders who actually shrink this gap are the ones who look for the feedback they're unlikely to hear organically, and treat it as more valuable, not more threatening, than the version that

What Engaged Employees Actually Want From Their Leaders

confirms they're doing fine. It shows up in the numbers too: employees who described their communication with a leader as mostly two-way reported significantly higher satisfaction than those getting mostly one-way updates. **Dialogue isn't just nice-to-have on top of good communication, it's what makes communication good in the first place.**

2. Employees want more decision transparency.

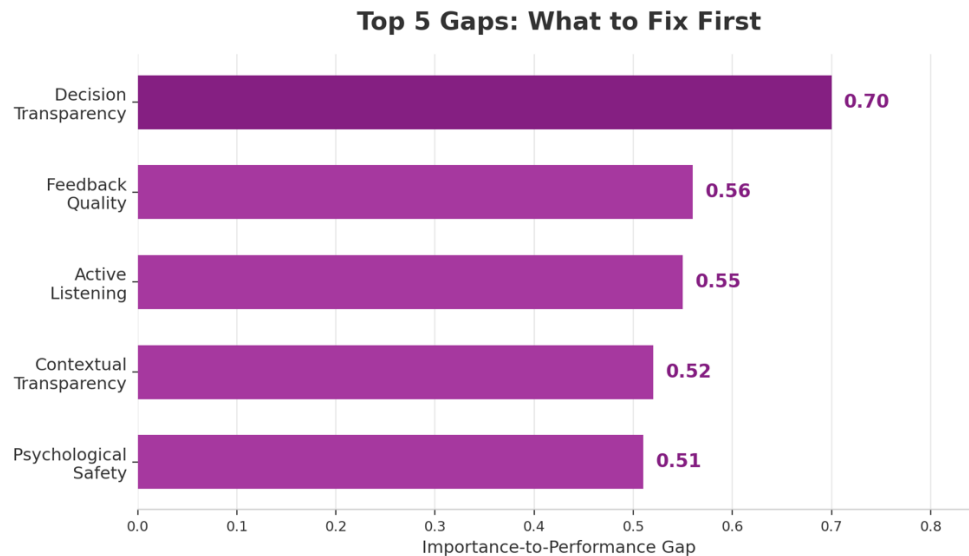


CHART: Top 5 Gaps, What to Fix First. Decision transparency shows the largest importance-to-performance gap of anything measured, ahead of feedback quality, active listening, contextual transparency, and psychological safety

Employees want to understand **the why behind decisions**. While they understand not every decision can be collaborative, it's frustrating when they are left out of the reasoning altogether. One participant summed up the frustration behind the numbers: *"[They] often assume we know the reasoning behind things without explaining, which actually creates more unnecessary confusion."*

Leaders: Think about how you can let your team in on the reasoning behind decisions.

Employees don't need to agree with a call to stay invested in the person who made it, they need to feel like their perspective was worth hearing before it happened.

3. Gen X, not Gen Z, has the widest gap between what they want and what they're getting.

What Engaged Employees Actually Want From Their Leaders

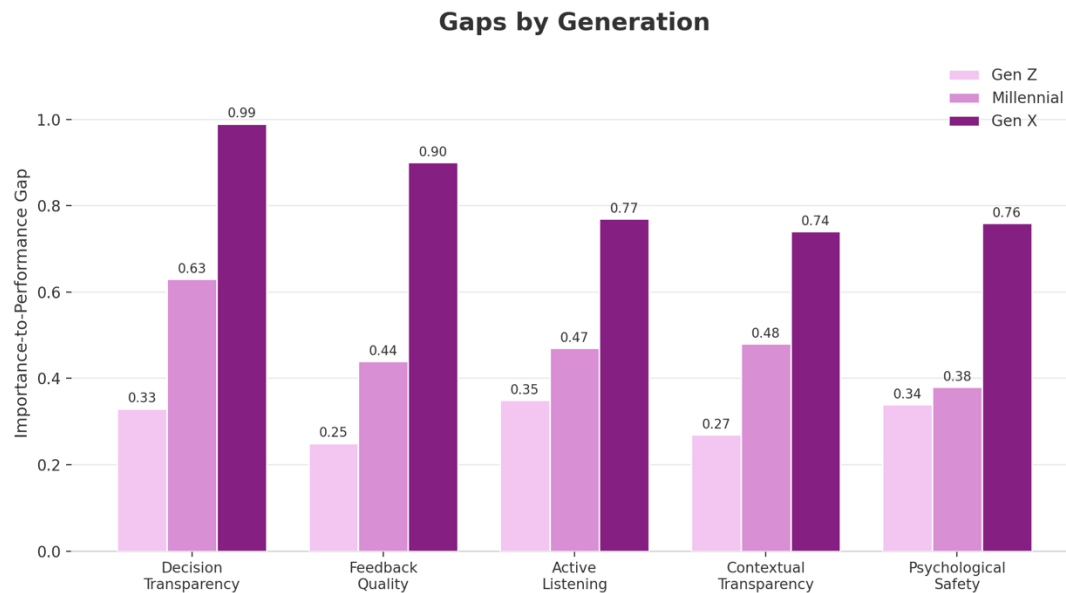


CHART: Gaps by Generation. Gen X respondents report dramatically wider importance-to-performance gaps than Gen Z or Millennials across nearly every dimension measured

Workplace narratives tend to center Gen Z as the generation leaders need to figure out. This data suggests **Gen X may be quietly experiencing the largest disconnect between the leadership they expect and the leadership they're getting**, without speaking up.

Leaders: this is another reason to question the assumption that quiet means fine.

Gen X employees are often the ones holding a team's institutional knowledge and day-to-day stability, and rarely the group that leadership designs a listening session around. Consider how you can create space for them to speak up.

What This Means for Your Team

No need for a leadership overhaul. Here are **5 specific, doable practices** that move engaged employees to follow a leader (and stay with a company!)

1. **Explain the why, not just the what.** Whether it's a decision, a priority shift, or a piece of feedback, the reasoning matters to employees as much as the message itself
2. **Give feedback before it becomes a surprise.** The employees who felt most supported weren't the ones who heard the least criticism. They were the ones who heard it early and often, in a way that helped them adjust before small issues became bigger ones
3. **Offer autonomy, not distance.** The employees who felt most trusted described managers who gave them room to work while still staying reachable and engaged
4. **Default to the conversation, not the channel.** Messaging platforms are the fastest way to reach a team, but rarely the most effective. Employees told us one-on-one conversations did more to earn their trust than any group message or company-wide

What Engaged Employees Actually Want From Their Leaders

update. Before defaulting to Slack, ask whether this is actually a moment for a real conversation.

5. **Ask before deciding.** Even when the outcome doesn't change, being asked makes people's voices feel heard and changes how they experience the decision.

Sometimes the most honest feedback only comes out when employees know it can't be traced back to them, and that's the kind of space a neutral third party can help create. We've partnered with organizations to build safe, anonymous ways for employees to speak candidly, surfacing the kind of honesty a leader would never hear directly. If that's something your team could use, KNow can help you build it.

The Bottom Line

Communication isn't measured by how much a leader says, it's measured by what the person on the other end actually *experiences*. Employees closest to the work often feel the widest gap, and they're the least likely to be the ones telling you it exists. Closing it doesn't take a new communication style, but **recognizing that gap in the first place, and asking who in the room is least likely to speak up about it.**

Closing that gap is also what earns a leader the right to be followed, not just reported to. What makes someone worth following was never more perks or more praise. It's **trust, built through transparency that has to be renewed continuously, not earned once.** Participants in this research were screened to be engaged at work. They show up, invested, do good work, and believe in their leaders. If the gap is this wide for the employees already committed to staying, it's worth considering what it looks like for the ones who aren't!

But feeling connected to a leader isn't the same as feeling clear on where they're headed. Employees felt heard and hopeful more often than they were given clear direction – a second, equally important gap. Explaining the why behind a decision builds trust day to day. The same one-on-one conversations closing the communication gap can close the trust gap too. Neither happens with one big initiative; what makes a leader worth following is **consistency and intention.**

PNL's research is still underway, so keep an eye out for their workshop and published leadership pieces to follow this year.

About KNow Research

KNow Research is a full-service qualitative research agency based in San Francisco. To learn more about our higher education research or to talk with us about a research question of your own, visit knowresearch.com or reach out at admin@knowresearch.com.