

Harnessing the Engagement of Your Employees



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About NACo

The National Association of Counties (NACo) unites America's 3,069 county governments. Founded in 1935, NACo brings county officials together to advocate with a collective voice on national policy, exchange ideas and build new leadership skills, pursue transformational county solutions, enrich the public's understanding of county government and exercise exemplary leadership in public service.

About the Counties Futures Lab

The NACo Counties Future Lab brings together leading national experts to examine and forecast the trends, innovations and promises of county government with an eye toward positioning America's county leaders for success. Focusing primarily on pressing county governance and management issues — and grounded in analytics, data and knowledge sharing — the Lab delivers research studies, reports and other actionable intelligence to a variety of venues in collaboration with corporate, academic and philanthropic thought leaders to promote the county government of the future.

Introduction

Counties continually must find more efficient ways to deliver essential services, under the pressure of rising federal and state mandates and increasingly stringent caps on their ability to raise revenue. One solution can be found in each and every county — county employees. Counties that make employee engagement a priority save time and money and get better overall organizational performance and service delivery.

At NACo's 2017 Annual Conference, the Counties Futures Lab hosted a workshop on how county officials can harness the engagement of their employees. Bob Lavigna, the Director of the CPS HR Consulting Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement, shared his insights on employee engagement, why it matters and how counties can create a culture of engagement within their workforce.



ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Bob Lavigna is director of the CPS HR Consulting Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement. The institute is dedicated to helping public sector and nonprofit organizations measure and improve employee engagement. Before joining CPS HR, Mr. Lavigna was assistant vice chancellor and director of human resources for the University of Wisconsin. He is also the author of *Engaging Government Employees* (American Management Association). For more information, visit <http://cpshr.us/EmployeeEngagement/index.html>.

What are engaged employees?

Engaged employees:

- Have pride in their work
- Have a heightened connection with their employers
- Show personal interest in the organization's visions and goals
- Go the extra mile for customers and stays on board, even for less money
- Volunteers ideas
- Show up and gets things done
- Deliver "discretionary effort," or a willingness to do whatever needs to be done for the organization to succeed



Why Does Employee Engagement Matter?

Across employment sectors, a majority of employees state that they feel fully or somewhat engaged with their employer. According to a 2017 CPS HR Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement national poll, 44 percent of local government employees feel that they are fully engaged, while 37 percent feel somewhat engaged (See Figure 1).¹ This is a higher percentage than for federal or state government and comparable only to the private sector. Engaged employees have a more positive view of their organization than disengaged employees. When asked, 76 percent of engaged local government employees agree that their organization is successful at accomplishing its mission, more than the 64 percent of state and federal government employees and comparable to the private sector.² The local government employees who stay involved with their organization also believe that they can positively affect quality, cost and customer service through their work.

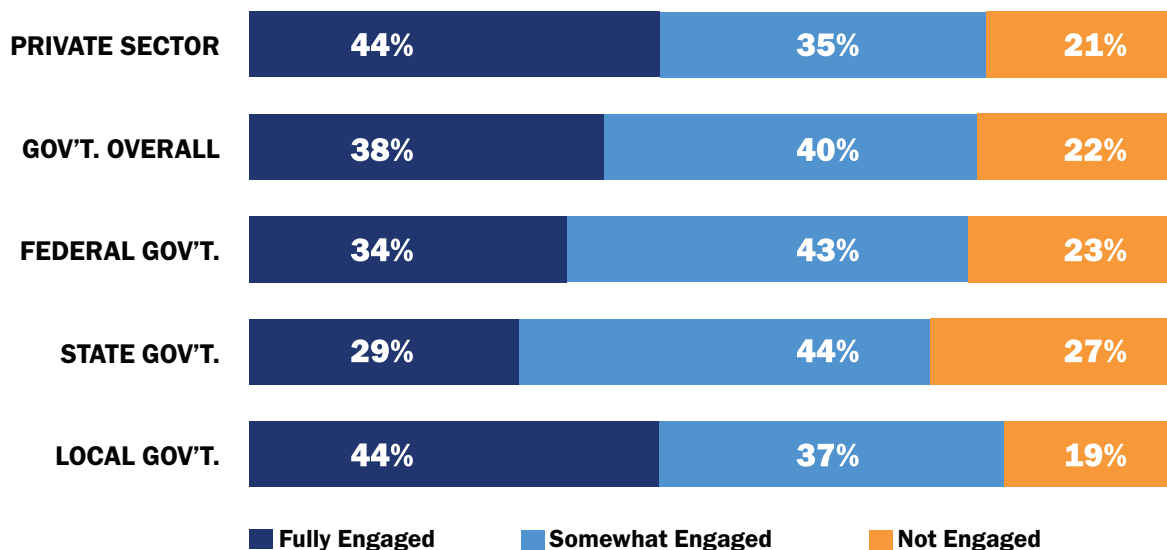
The engagement value chain is a virtuous cycle, according to Bob Lavigna.³ As the level of engagement increases, performance also increases. Highly engaged workers are more productive and are more proactive in servicing customers than disengaged workers. Customers and residents that interact with engaged front-line county employees in turn have more trust in their government.

“Employee engagement is about performance. It is not another HR thing... It is about improving the level of commitment that our employees have to their organization so that we can deliver better, high quality performance and services to the citizens we serve.”

—Bob Lavigna, Director,
CPS HR Consulting Institute

Improved citizens' attitudes towards government contribute to a confirmation of a job well done and a higher level of pride for local government employees who become further engaged. Employee engagement translates into dollars, as higher productivity, lower turnover and lower absentee rates have a positive budgetary impact. For example, high turnover rates amongst millennials alone cost employers \$30.5 billion a year.⁴

Figure 1. Level of Engagement across Employment Sectors, 2016



Source: Bob Lavigna, "Driving Employee Engagement: Results from a National Survey", CPS HR Consulting, September 2017.

Best Practices in Employee Engagement

ENGAGEMENT STARTS WITH LEADERSHIP

To increase engagement, Mr. Lavigna stated that counties should focus on several areas: leadership, strategy, hiring and onboarding.

With close to 90,000 local governments throughout the United States, there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution for improving employee engagement.⁵ All efforts start with the leadership of the organization. The CPS HR Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement found that the top engagement driver for government is organizational leadership and its ability to manage change well. Yet, only 53 percent of local government employees agree that change in their organization is managed well, still higher than for federal or state government employees.⁶ Further, according to Gallup, 51 percent of disengaged employees would fire their boss if given the chance, compared to just 6 percent for engaged employees.⁷

ENGAGEMENT MUST BE AN INTEGRAL PART OF A COUNTY'S STRATEGY

Counties must make employee engagement an integral part of a county's strategy and values and look beyond its

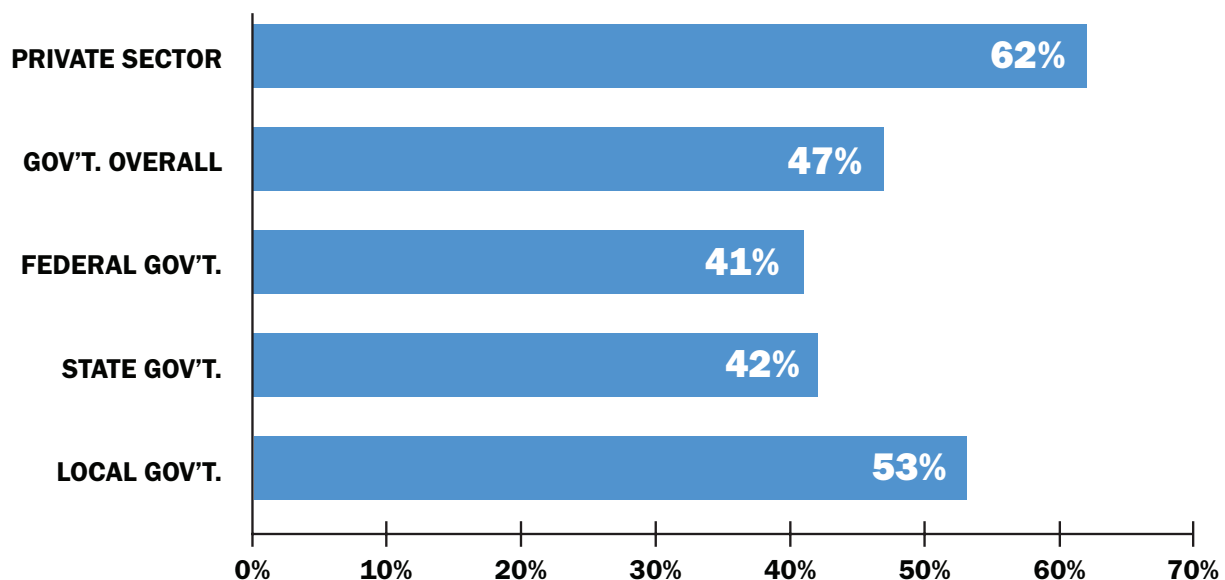
“The level of engagement often comes down to the quality of the relationship between an individual supervisor or manager and the front-line employee. When that is a good relationship, that creates the condition for high engagement.”

—Bob Lavigna, Director,
CPS HR Consulting Institute

aspect of human resources management. Leadership must commit to this goal by requiring managers to meet regularly with employees and to provide opportunities for growth and development, which are additional drivers that keep employees invested in their work. Managers should also build a culture of engagement and be held accountable for the results (See below: Creating a Culture of Engagement).

Figure 2. Managing Change by Leadership across Employment Sectors

Percentage agreement - "I feel that change is managed well in my organization"



Source: Bob Lavigna, "Driving Employee Engagement: Results from a National Survey", CPS HR Consulting, September 2017

Harnessing the Engagement of Your Employees

HOW TO CREATE A CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

The **hiring process** is an important component for increasing engagement. During the candidate assessment and interview process, managers should seek out candidates that show interest in being highly involved in their workplace. Assessment approaches can be used during the interview process to enable hiring managers to identify candidates that can maintain a high level of engagement. Even a quick survey of what candidates value in their work and office environment not only determines if a candidate would be a good fit, but whether their engagement will be meaningful and sustainable over time.

Another important tool is the **onboarding process**, which is an important driver of employee retention, engagement and success. Onboarding should begin when the new hire accepts the job offer through at least their first 12 months on the job. During this time, new employees should become well versed in the organization's mission and values, be assigned meaningful work, receive feedback and have frequent interaction not only with their supervisors, but with other senior staff members. Counties should review their process and create a checklist of specific activities for each new employee, such as meeting with heads of departments and learning about specific projects. Also, creating a library of resources that include mission

statements, organization charts and biographies of fellow employees, will help the new employee get familiar with workplace culture faster.

Building engagement is linked to a **manager's direct involvement with their employees**. Managers must foster recognition, innovation and inclusion among their employees. They should also connect an employee's work to the county's mission and demonstrate to their employees that their work is not only valuable, but vital to the county's success. Managers should listen to employees' concerns and be prepared and willing to make changes within the organization. Leadership must be willing to make this a priority amongst other county goals for a culture of engagement to work.

And finally, **never underestimate the power of a "thank you."** Employees and their efforts should be appreciated and recognized, and recognition can be acknowledged beyond monetary benefits. Examples include:

- Acknowledging employee achievements at staff meetings
- Complimenting employees within earshot of others
- Mailing a handwritten note to employees' homes
- Pulling employees aside and asking for their opinion

Creating a Culture of Engagement

"A culture of engagement is a set of accepted organizational values, behaviors and practices that promotes increasing levels of engagement as a cultural norm within an organization." Key characteristics of organizations that have achieved a culture of engagement include:

- **The business case for strong engagement is broadly understood within the organization**
- **Leaders/managers work together to drive engagement**
- **Engagement is linked to the mission and critical business outcomes of the organization**
- **Engagement is visible across organization**
- **Engagement is regularly measured/analyzed with action taken as a result**
- **Human resources components are linked to engagement**
- **Robust communication strategy focusing on engagement**

Source: Rebecca Ray and others, "DNA of Engagement" (New York, NY: The Engagement Institute, 2014, p. 6)

Key Takeaways

- 1. An engaged workforce matters.** Such a workforce leads to less turnover, higher performance rates and happier customers because employees are proud of their work and want their organization to succeed.
- 2. Engagement of employees starts at the top.** Leaders set the tone for engagement through their ability to manage change well and strategies put in place to engage all employees.
- 3. Engagement needs to be an integral part of a county's strategy – not just an HR initiative.** Employees at all levels — from senior management to front-line workers — need to be part of the effort to create a culture of engagement that becomes the norm for all departments.
- 4. Creating a culture of engagement starts with the hiring of an employee and continues through the employee's tenure.** Hire employees that are invested in the county's success and listen to their concerns during the onboarding process and beyond.
- 5. Never underestimate the power of a "thank you."** Recognition of efforts and achievements can be accomplished in effective non-monetary ways.

Endnotes

- 1 Bob Lavigna, "Driving Employee Engagement: Results from a National Survey", CPS HR Consulting, September 2017
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Susan Sorenson, "How Employee Engagement Drives Growth", Gallup, June 20, 2013, available at <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/163130/employee-engagement-drives-growth.aspx>.
- 4 Andrew Hartsig, "Managing County Workers: Recruitment, Retention and Retirement", National Association of Counties, July 2017, available at <http://www.naco.org/resources/managing-county-workers-recruitment-retention-and-retirement>.
- 5 "Census Bureau Reports There Are 89,004 Local Governments in the United States", U.S. Census Bureau, August 30, 2012, available at <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/governments/cb12-161.html>.
- 6 Bob Lavigna, "Driving Employee Engagement: Results from a National Survey", CPS HR Consulting, September 2017.
- 7 Bryant Ott and Emily Killham, "Would You Fire Your Boss?", Gallup, September 13, 2017, available at <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/28597/would-fire-your-boss.aspx>.



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