LIMITLESS LEADERSHIP AT WORK

Insights and Actions to Transform Your Teams.

Prepared for the Points of Light,
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WHAT IF YOUR PEOPLE BROUGHT EVERYTHING THEY ARE TO EVERYTHING THEY DO?

THEY CAN.
AND YOU WILL SHOW THEM HOW.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the world, leaders are trying to solve the same puzzle: why are talented, well-paid, well-cared-for people — people in roles they once wanted — still restless, still leaving, still holding back the best of what they have to give? The answer in our data is not pay or perks. It is alignment: the feeling that the work people do each day matches what they value and who they are. We call that consonance — the moment when what you do and who you are line up.

The Limitless Assessment — a seven-year global study of nearly 10,000 workers across 113 countries — finds that consonance rests on four pillars that, together, predict engagement, retention, and performance far better than any traditional HR lever:

Calling — a sense of purpose or identity in the work
Connection — understanding the relevance and impact of one's work
Contribution — how work enhances one's life, goals, and stability
Control — agency over time, decisions, and work environment

If any culture has made a religion of purpose, it is America — "follow your passion," "find your why," "do what you love." But the data says the hunger isn't only American; it's nearly universal. Some 95% of workers globally want their work to be the thing that gets them out of bed in the morning; only 38% report to a leader who inspires them. That delta — between a near-universal hunger for meaning and a lived experience that rarely delivers it — is the central emotion of the modern workforce.

It is also the opportunity that belongs to you. Of the four pillars, the one most likely to be missing — and the one most directly in your hands — is Contribution: the felt sense that the work gives something forward. You are not running the soft stuff. You are running the Contribution engine for the entire workforce. Calling that a nice-to-have is not a difference of values; it is an empirical error. Underfunding it doesn't cut cost — it raises turnover.

This paper shows you the numbers behind that claim, and what to do about it.

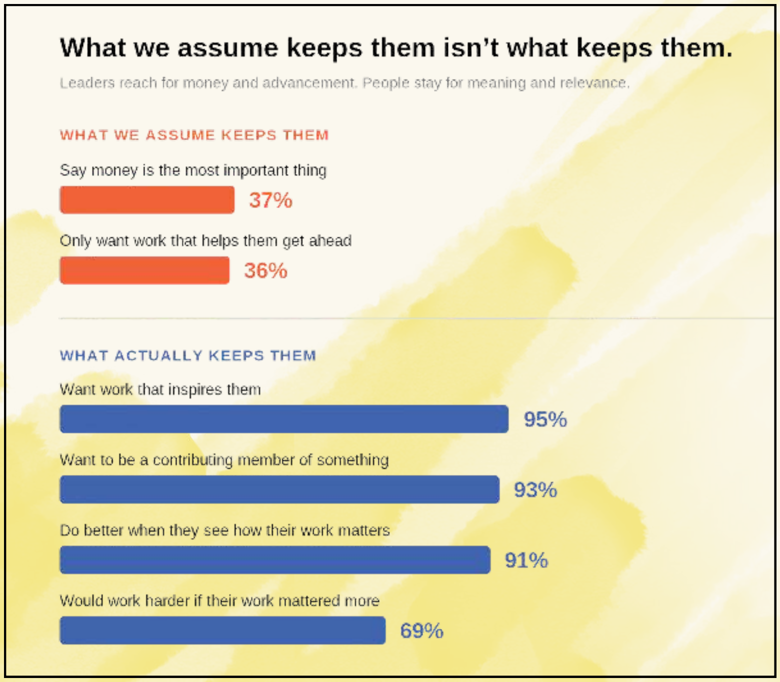
WHY THIS MATTERS

By Gallup's count*, employee engagement is actually on the rise — the highest it's been in over a decade. And it is 23%. Barely one in five.

And, what's worse is that even the people leaders count on most — managers, who carry culture and accountability to everyone else — are also slipping, with the sharpest declines among younger and female managers.

That disengagement carries an estimated price tag of $8.8 trillion in lost productivity, close to 9% of global GDP. Read the other way, the same number is the opportunity: a fully engaged workforce could add nearly that much back.

For a global company, this isn't a soft people-problem at the margins. It is one of the largest unclaimed sources of value on the balance sheet.



For twenty years as a retained executive recruiter, much of my work was spent disentangling clients from a single, tired scorecard: the eight factors said to motivate anyone, anywhere, to jump ship — inspiration, mission, challenge, impact, skills, prestige, location, and money. That list captures the value of a job. It says nothing about the value of a job to a particular person — and that, the data shows, is the only thing that actually moves them.

But there is a better way.

**Source: Gallup State of the Global Workplace 2024*

Here is the gap between what leaders assume and what the data says. We assume people stay for advancement and money. Yet only about a third of workers (37%) say money is the most important factor in their happiness at work, and only about a third want work merely to help them get ahead.

What actually keeps them is meaning and relevance: 95% want inspiring work, 93% want to be a contributing member of something larger, 91% do better when they can see how their work matters — and more than two-thirds (69%) say they would work harder and longer if what they did mattered more.

That last figure isn't sentiment. It is discretionary effort, left on the table, that meaning unlocks. The gap between the scorecard companies still use and the alignment people now want is exactly the gap corporate social impact is built to close.

The Business Case for CSR in 60 Seconds

The problem. Global employee engagement sits at just 23% — and disengagement drains an estimated $8.8 trillion a year, nearly 9% of global GDP. The cause isn't pay or advancement. It's the absence of meaning.

What the data says (nearly 10,000 workers, 113 countries):

95%	38%	15 point	69%
want work to be part of what inspires them	have a leader who delivers that inspiration	prouder of the work (72%) than the company (57%)	would work harder if it mattered to them more

The mechanism. Consonance — work aligned with who you are — rests on four pillars: Calling, Connection, Contribution, Control. Miss any one and you don't have a satisfied employee; you have a resignation that hasn't been written yet. The pillar most often missing is Contribution.

Why it's yours. Contribution is the one pillar leadership can't buy with compensation — and it's the one corporate social impact owns. CSR isn't a nice-to-have. It's a retention strategy that happens to do good.

The ask. Fund it as retention infrastructure, not goodwill. Measure it against turnover, not participation. Report it alongside the rest of the talent strategy.

POST-PANDEMIC SHIFTS IN WORKER ATTITUDE

It's easy to blame the pandemic.

But that's a cop out.

The pandemic did not simply disrupt how people work; it recalibrated what they believe work should do in their lives. The data trace a clean arc: the desire for alignment rose, while the experience of alignment fell – and the contrast, already visible before 2020, widened sharply afterward. This is a story of rising expectations meeting falling experiences, and a deeper insistence on coherence.

Workers did not emerge from the pandemic craving passion in the cinematic sense. They emerged insisting that work fit into a life, rather than consume it. Their desire for work that supports their lives climbed; their lived experience of it did not keep pace. The result is a workforce that is not merely disengaged but misaligned – doing meaningful work in roles that increasingly fail to match what they value.

Three shifts stand out. First, strategic visibility collapsed: barely half of workers feel oriented to how their work connects to the larger plan, and that disorientation reads less as a lack of ambition than as a loss of emotional safety. Second, the meaning of "a good job" moved away from prestige and advancement and toward sustainability, flexibility, and life-relevance – the very things people report wanting most and experiencing least. Third, the appetite for control surged, but as a need for predictability and fair, transparent systems rather than for unbounded freedom.

None of this is a temporary "righting of the ship" after the Great Resignation. The pain points predate the pandemic; the pandemic simply made them impossible to ignore. The gap between what workers want and what they experience is not evidence that they have checked out. It is evidence that they know exactly what they need – and increasingly feel they do not have it.

That is the opening for CSR leaders.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH DESIGN

After twenty years in executive search, one observation became unavoidable: it wasn't the highest title or the biggest paycheck that determined whether a leader felt successful, it was whether the job aligned with who they were and how they wanted to live. The more their daily work bumped up against their values, identity, or sense of progress, the more disengaged they became—even in outwardly "successful" roles.

To better understand these dynamics, we developed the Limitless Assessment, a diagnostic tool designed to quantify the alignment between what people want from work and what they experience. It measures four constructs:

- ***Calling:*** *the degree to which work aligns with identity and sense of purpose, or the gravitational pull that excited them or inspires them to do their best work*
- ***Connection:*** *the clarity with which employees understand the relevance of their work and the impact of the quality of their work on themselves, others, and the bottom line*
- ***Contribution:*** *how work enriches an employee's life, whether financially, professionally, personally, or through flexibility and wellbeing*
- ***Control:*** *a person's sense of agency over time, decisions, environment, work structure, and the metrics by which they and their work will be judged*

The assessment launched in January 2019, ran throughout the pandemic, and continues today: nearly 10,000 responses from 113 countries, across every industry and demographic. Fifty-six questions were posed, 14 for each pillar of consonance, equally divided between one's compulsion (want) and quotient (have). At the end of the survey, a series of demographic questions were asked regarding sex, race, education, industry, and employment status. Survey takers were automatically tagged by geography.

KEY FINDINGS

A new lens on workforce engagement.

Across nearly 10,000 global responses, one insight stands out clearly: employees everywhere want the same four things from their work – calling, connection, contribution, and control. That hasn't changed. What the pandemic changed is not what people want, but how much they're willing to leave to get it.

On the surface, the mood looks stable, and it's tempting to conclude that engagement has simply returned to normal. Yet when we examine the drivers underneath the mood – what actually creates each pillar day to day – a more nuanced, and far more actionable, story emerges. The pandemic didn't create the disengagement leaders are now scrambling to fix. It exposed what had been brewing for decades, and it raised the floor on what people expect work to mean.

Before, employees were fueled by identity, ambition, and the next opportunity. Now they are grounded by meaning, fairness, and whether a company's stated values actually show up in the world. And of the four pillars, the one most often missing – and the one corporate social impact most directly creates – is Contribution. Whether we examine calling, connection, contribution, or control, the post-pandemic worker is asking a sharper question: not "what will this job give me?" but "is this work, and this company, worth my one limited life?"

What follows are the most striking shifts we found:

- Before the pandemic, purpose was a line in the recruiting pitch; now it's a threshold people quit over — and they read it in what a company does, not what it says.
- Strategic visibility once helped teams move faster; across distance and hybrid work, it is now what builds the trust and belonging that hold people in place.
- Growth and the next title used to fuel motivation; now people measure their employer by its impact, and the gap between pride in the work and pride in the company is the one CSR is built to close.
- Autonomy used to be a flexible perk; now agency over how, when, and where is the single thing the happiest post-pandemic workers actually gained — and the quietest reason the rest walk.

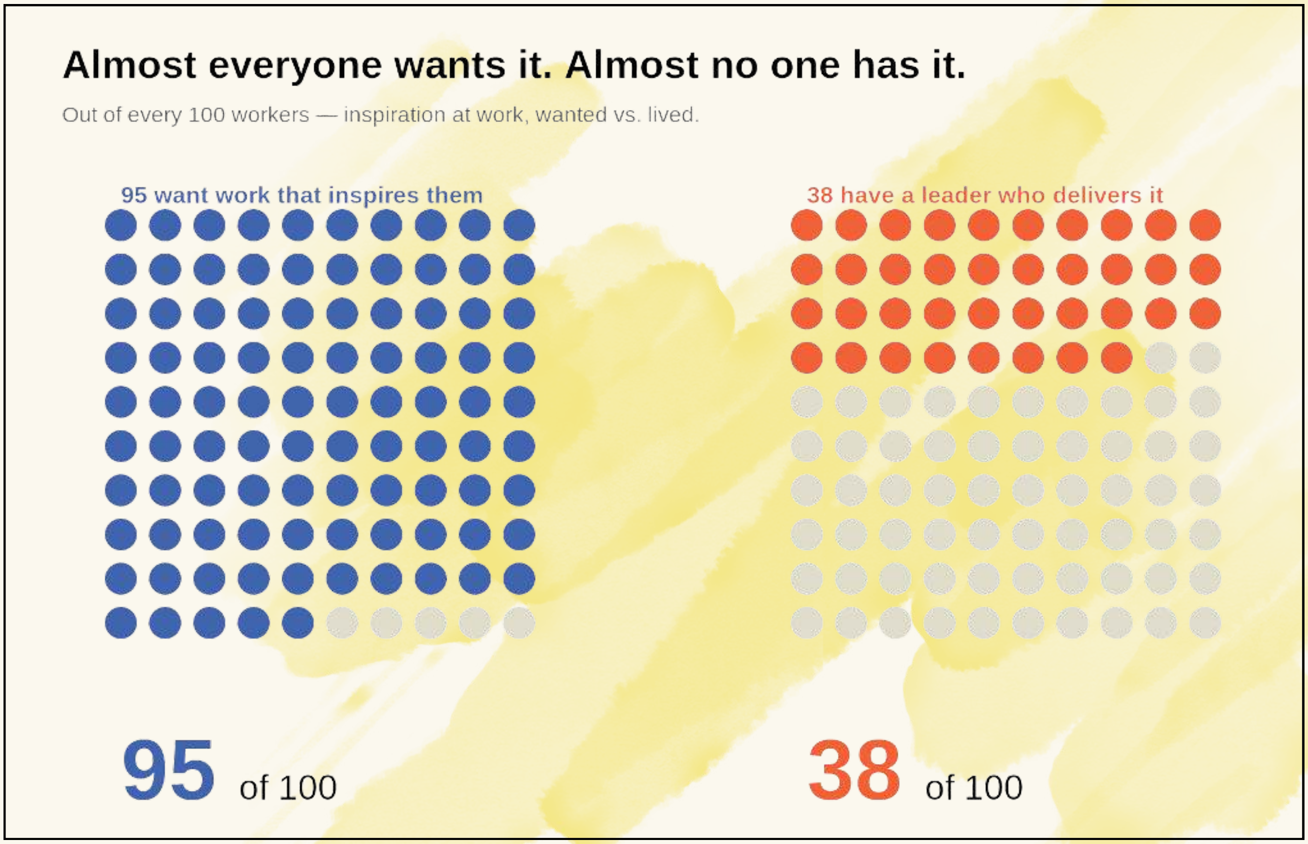
Together, these findings give leaders — and the corporate social impact teams who own the Contribution lever — a more precise way to activate the engagement levers that matter most: matching programs and leadership behaviors to the way people actually experience alignment at work now.

Let's dig into them one by one.

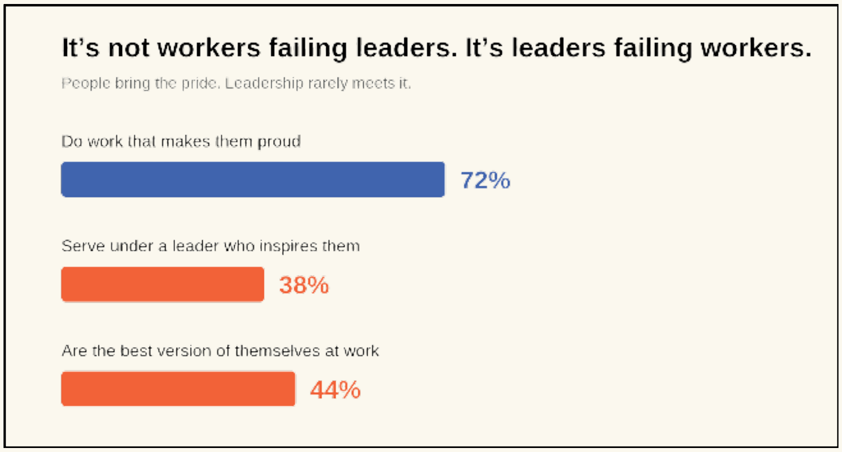
FINDING #1: CALLING

The Desire for Inspiration Is Nearly Universal. Delivering It Is Rare.

If Americans have a national religion, it might just be purpose — or at least the mythologized, Instagram-ready version of it. "Follow your passion!" "Find your why!" "Do what you love!" Work, in the American imagination, is supposed to double as a vocation, an identity, and a spiritual quest. But when we widened the lens to nearly 10,000 workers across 113 countries, the hunger didn't shrink — it held. Calling is the gravitational pull, the sense that the work is worth doing because it connects to who you are. It is also the pillar leaders most consistently misread, because they assume that since almost everyone wants it, almost everyone must have it. The data says otherwise.



People show up with the pride already loaded: 72% say they do work that makes them proud. What's missing isn't effort, or buy-in, or some generational allergy to hard work. It's leadership that meets them where they already are. Only 38% serve under a leader who inspires them to be their best, and only 44% say they are the best version of themselves at work. The want? Universal. The supply is the failure.



The post-pandemic shift is what makes this urgent. Inspiration used to be a recruiting flourish — something you gestured at in the offer letter and quietly dropped once people were in their seats. Now it's a threshold people quit over. And critically, they no longer take it on faith. They read a company's purpose in what it does in the world, not in what it claims on the careers page. This is precisely where leaders reach for the wrong tool: they answer a hunger for meaning with money. But money is the minority motive. Only 37% rank pay as the most important factor in their happiness at work, while 95% want inspiring work, 91% need to feel appreciated, 91% do better when they can see how their work matters, and 93% want to be a contributing part of something larger. Calling isn't a perk you bolt on. It's the thing the perks have been failing to substitute for all along.

Leadership Opportunity

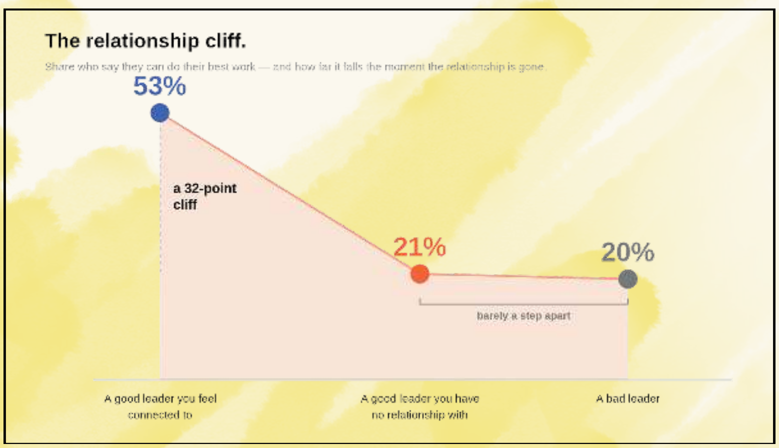
The implication here isn't a communication tactic; it's a decision about where leaders spend their credibility. Inspiration doesn't scale from the stage — the all-hands that thrills the company reads, to the individual, as great for them, but what about me? It scales from proximity to the work. The leader who trades the annual review for frequent, low-stakes contact with the actual problem in front of someone is the only leader positioned to connect that person's effort to something larger, because that connection lands in just one place: the specific, the personal, the now. Even the question matters. "How can I help?" casts the leader as the hero; "What do you need to solve this?" casts the employee as the one who matters.

Calling, in the end, is not delivered in speeches. It is delivered in attention.

FINDING #2: CONNECTION

Good Leaders with No Relationship with Their Team Members are Just as Bad as Bad Leaders.

We tend to treat leadership quality as a binary – good leaders keep people, bad leaders lose them – and stop the analysis there. Connection complicates that story, and turns out to be the variable that matters most. When the relationship is real, 53% of workers say they can do their best work. When the leader is, by every other measure, a good one – competent, respected, well-liked – but the relationship isn't there, that number collapses to roughly 21%, barely distinguishable from working for a bad leader outright. There are a million miles between being loved and being seen. If your people believe you value them because they do what's in their job description, but sense you don't actually understand what brings them to life, they will leave. Good intentions delivered from a distance read as no intentions at all.

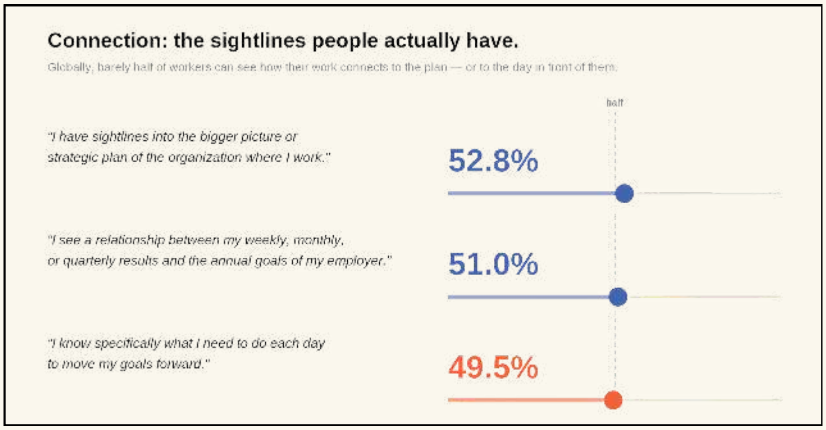


The pandemic widened exactly this fault line. Distance and hybrid work stripped out the ambient, accidental connection that used to happen in hallways and over desks, and it exposed how many "good" managers had been relying on proximity to do the relational work for them. Strategic visibility – letting people see how their piece connects to the whole – used to be a way to help teams move faster. Now it does something more fundamental: it builds the trust and belonging that hold people in place when there's no physical office holding them there.

The leaders losing their best people right now are often not the obviously bad ones. They're the competent ones who never noticed that being good in a vacuum isn't the same as being known.

Leadership Opportunity

The strategic error is auditing leaders for competence when the variable that actually predicts retention is relationship. A manager can pass every performance review and still be, to the people beneath them, functionally absent — and that absence, the data shows, costs nearly as much as bad leadership outright.



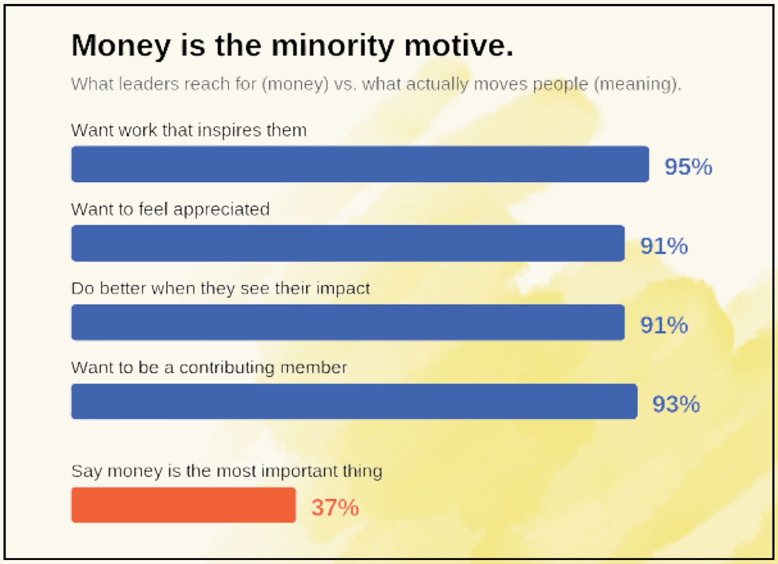
So stop measuring whether your leaders are good and start measuring whether their people feel known: whether they have a real say in how they work, and whether they understand why it matters. The counterintuitive part is what to do when the answer is yes — because that is exactly the moment most organizations stop investing, and exactly where good leaders quietly lose good people.

Connection isn't a milestone you reach. It's a position you have to keep defending.

FINDING #3: CONTRIBUTION

A Lack of Meaning is a Leading Driver of Workforce Attrition, Disengagement, Quiet Quitting.

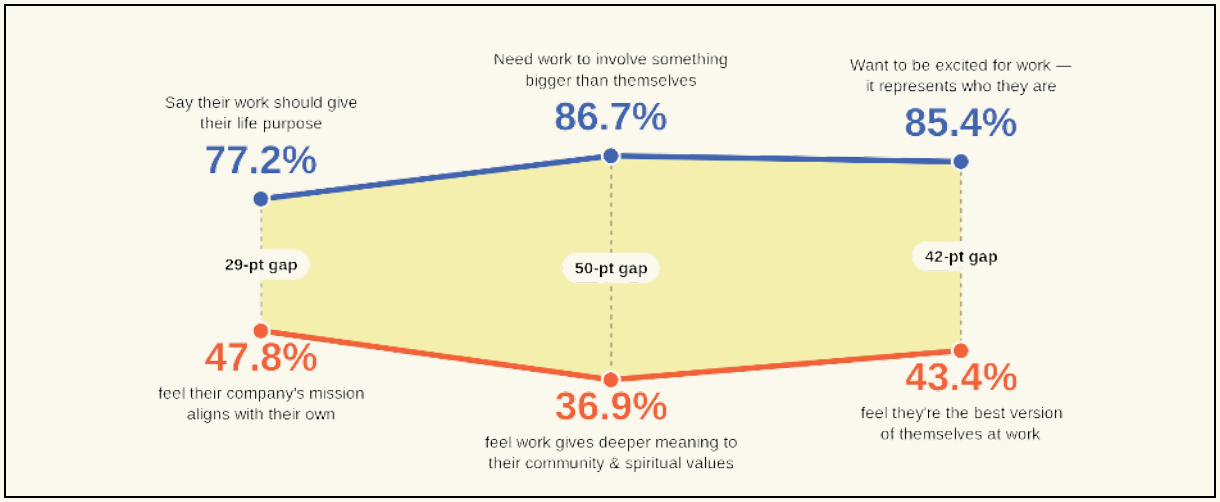
If Calling is the most misread pillar, Contribution is the most underused – and it is the one your work was built to supply. Contribution is the sense that the work is bigger than yourself: the volunteer day, the cause people actually care about, the grant that changes a community, the chance for someone to feel their Tuesday mattered beyond the quarterly number. That is not the soft stuff around the edges of the business. You are running the Contribution engine for the entire workforce – and calling it a nice-to-have isn't a difference of values. It is an empirical error.



Here is the gap that should reach the CFO. People are markedly prouder of what they do than of who they do it for: 72% are proud of their work; only 57% are proud of their employer. That fifteen-point pride gap is not a branding problem. It is a retention liability hiding in plain sight, and it is the precise gap your impact work closes. Contribution is also the pillar most often missing – only 37% feel their work delivers deeper meaning to their community or values, though the desire for it is nearly universal. And the upside is measurable: more than two-thirds of workers (69%) say they would work harder and longer if what they did mattered more to them. Meaning doesn't just retain people; it unlocks the effort they're currently holding back.

This is why three of the four C's is not a reassuring score. A worker who has Calling, Connection, and Control but lacks Contribution is not a satisfied employee with one small gap. That is a resignation that hasn't been written yet – and it is the one a CSR leader is best positioned to prevent. People don't stay for the money. They stay for the meaning. And meaning is the thing you make.

The Points of Light exists because a president once said that a thousand points of light were not a sentiment — they were a strategy. The data proves him right. Contribution is one of the four levers that decide whether your best people stay put and stay engaged. Funded as retention infrastructure rather than goodwill, measured against turnover rather than participation, and reported alongside the rest of the talent strategy, corporate social impact stops being the line item cut first in a downturn and becomes the reason your best people were still there when it ended.



Leadership Opportunity

This is the pillar where corporate social impact stops being a values argument and becomes a balance-sheet one. The fifteen-point gap between pride in the work and pride in the employer is not a branding problem for communications to manage; it is a retention signal to be tracked like one.

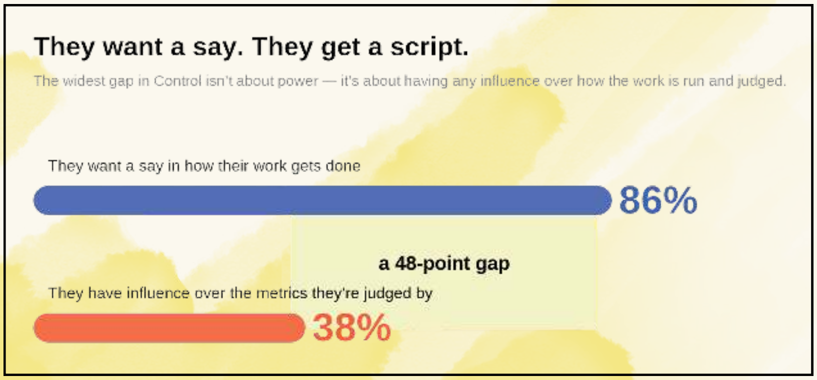
Put it on the same dashboard as turnover — measure how proud people are to say where they work, and watch that number move against your impact investments rather than your perks budget. Make the company's contribution to the world as visible to the people inside it as it is to the market outside it, and you convert an abstraction into the one pillar leadership cannot buy. When the CFO asks what CSR returns, the honest answer is no longer "goodwill." It's "the people we didn't have to replace."

FINDING #4: CONTROL

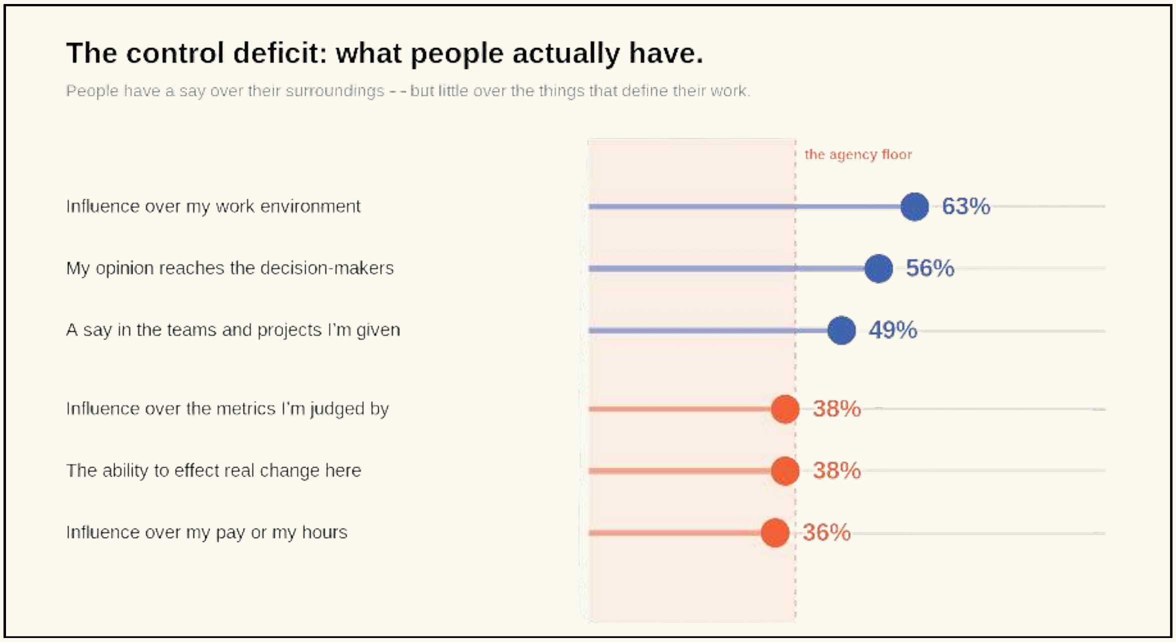
People Choose Relevance Over Power.

Control is the quietest of the four pillars, and the one most often mistaken for something it isn't. Leaders hear "control" and think of ambition — people wanting more authority, a bigger remit, a seat at a higher table. The data points somewhere humbler and more durable. What people actually want is agency over how, when, and where their work gets done, and a real say in the metrics by which it's judged. Given the choice, 86% choose relevance over power, and 78% choose influence over status. They are not angling to run the company. They are asking to not feel like a cog inside it.

This is the pillar the pandemic most visibly rewrote. For a brief window, millions of people gained genuine agency over their working lives — and the research is unambiguous that the happiest post-pandemic workers are precisely the ones who kept it. Autonomy stopped being a flexible perk handed down at management's discretion and became a baseline expectation, a marker of whether you trust the people you hired.



That's why the current fight over where and how work happens is rarely, underneath, about productivity. It's about control, and about respect. Hand people authority over their own metrics and the texture of their own days, and you remove the quietest, least dramatic, and most common reason good people leave: the slow accumulation of feeling that their work happens to them rather than through them.



Leadership Opportunity

The instinct is to read low control scores as a demand for freedom and to answer with more autonomy. The data points elsewhere: control erodes most under inconsistency – shifting priorities, opaque evaluation, decisions that arrive without their reasoning. People aren't asking to be unmanaged; they're asking to be able to predict the system they operate inside.

The lever, then, isn't loosening the reins but making them legible: stating expectations the same way twice, being transparent about how the work will be judged, and treating people's time as the finite resource it is rather than the shock absorber for every reactive fire. Agency, it turns out, is mostly a function of trust – and trust is mostly a function of consistency.

WHAT TO DO NOW

The end of the universal "bigger, better, faster, more" lever.

For a generation, engagement was managed like weather — measured company-wide, reported in aggregate, and addressed with a single program applied to everyone. That model is now a liability. The post-pandemic workforce hasn't become harder to satisfy; it has become more legible. At any given moment, each of your people is missing a specific pillar — and the cost of answering a Contribution gap with a Control intervention, or a meaning problem with a compensation fix, is no longer just wasted budget. It is the slow attrition of the people you can least afford to lose.

The strategic shift is from measuring satisfaction to diagnosing consonance. Satisfaction tells you how people feel; consonance tells you why — and which lever actually moves it. A workforce can post healthy engagement scores while three of its four pillars quietly erode, because aggregate numbers hide the individual gap that precedes every resignation. The companies that win the next decade of talent won't be the ones with the most generous perks. They'll be the ones who can name, for any team, which of the four C's is thinnest — and who own the function best equipped to rebuild it.

For most organizations, that function is corporate social impact, and that pillar is Contribution. It is the one pillar leadership cannot manufacture through compensation, the one most often missing, and the one with the shortest path from investment to retained talent. Funded as infrastructure rather than goodwill, measured against turnover rather than participation, and reported alongside the rest of the talent strategy, it stops being the line item cut first in a downturn and becomes the reason your best people were still there when the downturn ended.

For a corporate social impact leader, the distance between these numbers and a stronger seat at the table is short. It begins by measuring the four C's — especially Contribution — in place of generic satisfaction scores; whatever isn't one of the four is sentiment, not signal. From there, the shift is to fund your programs as retention infrastructure rather than discretionary spend, and to evaluate them against turnover, not participation. Protect the cross-functional, mission-driven work that lets people see the bigger picture and feel they are giving something forward — no other function produces that at scale. And change the question you ask your people: replace "are you happy here" with "which of the four C's feels weakest right now." One gets you noise; the other gets you the truth in thirty seconds. Tie that work to a stated retention target, and report it beside the rest of the talent strategy.

The future of engagement isn't about guessing what drives all people. It's about understanding what activates your people.

And, that starts with what you do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When companies want to build limitless leaders, they call Laura Gassner Otting.

Laura is the Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author of three books, Wonderhell, Limitless, and Mission-Driven. A keynote speaker and a researcher, she is an ABC contributor and regular expert on Good Morning America, the TODAY Show, Harvard Business Review, and Oprah Daily. She has advised thousands of leaders, from the corner office to the Oval Office, on their most important decisions involving talent, stewarding hundreds of organizations through massive moments of disruption. Her own 30-year resume is defined by her entrepreneurial edge. Laura served as a Presidential Appointee in Bill Clinton's White House, helping shape AmeriCorps; left a leadership role at a respected national search firma to expand a tech start-up; and founded, ran, and sold her own global search firm.

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