Gallup Q^{12}® and Employee Engagement FAQs

Frequently Asked Questions About Employee Engagement and the Engagement Survey

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Gallup® Q12® and Employee Engagement FAQs

This guide provides answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about Gallup's Q12 survey and developing an employee engagement strategy.

Questions About the Q12 Survey and Methodology

Question: Why care about employee engagement?

Answer: The world's top-performing organizations understand that employee engagement is a force that drives business outcomes. Research shows that engaged employees are more productive employees. They are more profitable, more customer-focused, safer and more likely to withstand temptations to leave the organization. In the best organizations, employee engagement transcends an isolated initiative — it is the way they do business.

The best-performing companies know that developing an employee engagement strategy and linking it to achieving performance goals will help them win in the marketplace.

Question: What does the term "engaged" mean? How do you describe an "engaged employee"?

Answer: Engaged employees are involved in and enthusiastic about their work. They are 100% psychologically committed to their role. They are thrilled at the challenge of their work every day. They are in a role that uses their talents, they know the scope of their job, and they are more likely to look for new and different ways of achieving the outcomes of their role.

Question: Why does Gallup use the 12 items?

Answer: Originally, Gallup interviewed more than 1 million employees and asked hundreds of questions about countless aspects of the workplace. Using the initial data, Gallup determined which items best linked to workplace performance. More than 25 million employees have now answered these 12 items.

Gallup searched for patterns in the data: Which items were simply different ways of measuring the same factor? Which were the best items to measure each factor? Gallup researchers were not interested in items that yielded a unanimous "Yes, I strongly agree" or "No, I strongly disagree." Rather, researchers were searching for items to which the most engaged employees — those who were loyal and productive — answered positively, and everyone else — the average performers and the disengaged — answered neutrally or negatively.

From this research, Gallup discovered that 12 items can measure the strength of a workplace. These 12 items do not capture everything about the workplace, but they do capture the degree to which employees are getting their performance needs met. They measure the core elements needed to attract, focus and retain the most talented employees.

Gallup performs ongoing analysis to ensure that the 12 items continue to link to and predict important business outcomes such as productivity, customer ratings, shrinkage/theft, turnover, absenteeism, safety and quality.

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Question: Why do some Q12 items have extreme wording?

Answer: Some of the questions, such as "I have a best friend at work" or "At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best *every day*," have extreme wording. Gallup uses extreme wording in several of the items because research has proven that this kind of language differentiates high-performing teams from low-performing teams on crucial outcomes such as productivity, profitability, safety and retention.

Question: Why an item about having a best friend? Why does it matter if I have a best friend at work?

Answer: People might think that some Q12 items are unusual to ask — or are even not suited for — the workplace. One of the most controversial Q12 items is the "best friend" item.

Gallup's research indicates that friendships are vital to happiness, achievement and engagement. If you have a best friend at work, you are significantly more likely to engage your fellow team members, partners and internal customers. You are more likely to get more done in less time, have fun on the job, have a safe work environment with fewer accidents, innovate and share ideas, feel informed and know that your opinions count, and have an opportunity to focus on your strengths each day. Without a best friend at work, the chances of you being engaged in your job are one in 12.

People often challenge the "best friend" item by saying, "I have only one best friend. I've known this person for 25 years, and he or she does not work at this organization. How can I answer this item favorably?" Keep in mind that the item says: "I have *a* best friend *at* work." Meaning, is there a person at work whom you would consider a best friend? Two explanations clarify why this item is necessary in measuring the engagement level of managers and employees: a research-based explanation and a theoretical explanation.

The Research-Based Explanation

Gallup tried wording this item in different ways, such as replacing the word "best" with "close" or "good." But the research showed that no other wording variations worked as well as "best friend." Gallup tested this item — and all items — using different wording to determine which words correlated best with positive answers from high-performing teams. Repeatedly, Gallup found that many people on highly productive teams answered this item favorably when using the wording "I have a best friend at work." On the other hand, Gallup found that people on teams with average productivity answered this item less favorably. Gallup's research shows that the "best friend" item has strong linkages to creativity, client/partnership metrics and financial responsibility within teams.

The Theoretical Explanation

Think about the people whom you consider your friends: They entertain you, and you like being around them. Think about the people whom you consider best friends: They share similar values with you. By working with people with whom you share values, you know that you can trust them. Best friends will catch you if you fall. Best friends watch out for you. Having best friends around, you are more confident in making decisions and taking risks and are more productive because you don't have to watch your back. Chances are, you feel like there is more open communication within your team when people have best friends. "I have a best friend at work" is really a proxy for trust, indicating the extent to which trusting relationships exist within a team.

Question: Is the goal of the Q12 survey to improve overall workplace satisfaction?

Answer: No, the goal of the survey is to create a stronger workplace and improve performance. Gallup's definition of a stronger workplace is a more productive workplace: one that is more profitable, experiences a lower turnover rate and has fewer accidents, lower healthcare costs, fewer workers' compensation claims, better customer service and so forth. Gallup selected the 12 items because of the empirical evidence that connects them to these outcomes.

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Question: Why does Gallup ask the overall satisfaction item?

Answer: Overall satisfaction with one's organization is one of the outcomes that the Q12 predicts. People who are extremely satisfied with their organization tend to do many of the extra things that influence their workgroup's performance. As an outcome, overall satisfaction connects to other outcomes such as retention, productivity, profitability and, to varying degrees, customer satisfaction. It is important for employees to be satisfied with their organization because people who are satisfied with their organization are proud, are more likely to stay, and are advocates of their organization as a place to work and of its products and services.

Question: Is satisfaction the same as engagement?

Answer: No, traditional employee surveys are based on the premise that employees should be happy or content. Either satisfaction is the goal by itself or the organization simply assumes satisfied employees will create better business performance. The flaw in this logic is that employees are often "satisfied" for reasons contrary to the interests of the business. While engagement relates to satisfaction and loyalty, it also measures other unique information and directly connects to business outcomes such as retention, safety and productivity. A satisfied employee is not necessarily an engaged employee.

Question: How should an organization interpret a workgroup with high satisfaction but low engagement (as measured by the Q12 GrandMean score)?

Answer: A group with high satisfaction but a low GrandMean score likely has individuals who are connected to the organization but feel their local workgroup is not meeting their needs. They may be proud of what the organization stands for, what it produces or its reputation. Eventually, if their local environment doesn't change or if they do not get other opportunities in the organization to learn, grow or become engaged in their work, they might leave. Although these employees might stay with the job longer because of their satisfaction with or loyalty to the organization, they are probably looking for other opportunities.

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Questions That Often Arise During a Q12 Survey Administration

Question: What should I say if employees ask me to interpret the Q12 items for them?

Answer: Gallup does not recommend interpreting Q12 items for employees and teams. If employees ask, simply tell them, "It is an individual measure. Your interpretation may be different from your coworkers' interpretations. Answer the item based on what you think it means." If managers explain what they think the item means, employees can become biased and led to a certain type of response.

Question: How should I interpret the items?

Answer: Interpret each item based off what it means to you. What the item means to you depends on your role in your organization and what is important to you.

Question: Whom or what am I rating when I answer the overall satisfaction item? Am I rating my immediate supervisor, my department manager, my organization, etc.?

Answer: Think about your workplace environment, which is made up of many things. The greatest concern is whether your workplace needs are being met.

Question: What am I supposed to rate with this survey?

Answer: Rate your current work environment. Whether you have been with your organization or in your current role for two months or 10 years, you should rate your current work environment.

Question: What if I changed jobs during the past year? Which job should I reference when I take the survey?

Answer: Your answers should reflect the position you are in at the time of the survey.

Question About the Confidentiality of Q12 Survey Results

Question: Can my organization identify me from my responses?

Answer: No. The reports contain engagement results for the group only. To protect each person's confidentiality, Gallup does not generate reports for groups that did not have enough people answer the survey items.

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Post-Survey Process and State of the Team Conversation Questions

Question: What happens after the survey?

Answer: Gallup recommends that all managers with a sufficient number of survey respondents receive employee engagement results, which provide a summary for their workgroup and area of the business. Managers should share the employee engagement results with their team to discuss workplace issues. The manager's role is to facilitate open discussion among team members about the employee engagement results and the team's plan for improvement. The State of the Team conversation is an important, local-level action planning strategy for transforming a team into one that is highly engaged. This conversation includes the following steps:

1) Identify a team performance goal.
2) Analyze Gallup Q12 survey results.
3) Select the engagement item to focus on and actions to take.
4) Review and recalibrate.

Question: Who should participate in a State of the Team conversation?

Answer: Everyone should participate in a State of the Team conversation. Every team should have one. All employees should participate in this conversation with their team.

Question: Who creates an action plan (or State of the Team action plan)?

Answer: Everyone on the team helps to create an action plan. While an Engagement Champion and/or manager should lead the State of the Team conversation, it should be a collaborative process during which every employee has an opportunity to contribute. Employee involvement in this process is a foundational step for building engagement. Everyone's opinion must be heard to decide which engagement needs should be prioritized to drive better team and individual performance.

Question: What if our team does not have enough responses to the survey to receive data for our specific workgroup?

Answer: If an insufficient number of employees participate in the survey in any given workgroup, it is still advisable to discuss the engagement needs of the team. Teams can use a larger report to reference during their conversations, but taking action after the survey is a critical step in creating more engaged employees and teams.

Question: What if the composition of our team has changed since we took the survey?

Answer: The workgroup should participate in the State of the Team conversation with the current composition of the team. Remember, the results are just a starting point for discussion and actions that can strengthen the workplace environment going forward.

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Question: Will the organization really use the survey results? Can the results help create change in the organization?

Answer: Gallup recommends that an organization uses the survey results to plan investments in the workplace and to implement organizational and local changes that better meet employees' workplace needs. The survey is part of a process that involves a State of the Team conversation, implementation and follow-up with the work team and management to make the necessary changes to business operations. The survey data are intended to be used as a diagnostic tool to help improve the work environment, enhance employees' ability to perform their jobs and deliver greater value to the customer.

Question: How can we use the results to effect change?

Answer: The survey results are a starting point for dialogue, action planning and follow-up. The real power of the survey is the opportunity it provides to identify and address issues in the organization. The survey results belong to every employee. Every employee plays a role in analyzing what they mean, determining what to improve and making sure that plans turn into action. Each team should follow these steps:

- Identify a team performance goal.
- Discuss the results as a team to understand the issues.
- Identify concrete actions that the team can take to address the priority issues.
- Identify issues that need to be elevated to the next level in the organization for action.
- Follow up on the planned actions to ensure that they are implemented.

Employee engagement results are a powerful tool for improvement; work with your team to make the most of them.

Question: Should managers who manage other managers hold a State of the Team conversation? Should they talk with their direct reports about their teams' results and discuss what they are planning to do to drive employee engagement?

Answer: Yes. All employees, regardless of their titles, should participate in a State of the Team conversation. Therefore, managers of managers should conduct a State of the Team conversation with their direct reports, who are managers, just as they will with their own direct reports. As a team, they should review the direct team's results, if available. After the State of the Team conversation, it is recommended that they sit down one on one with their direct reports who are managers to review their scorecards and talk about how their teams' State of the Team conversations went.

Question: Should teams continue to focus on an engagement item that received high scores? Why not just focus on improving the items that received the lowest scores?

Answer: Gallup encourages workgroups to continue building on those things that already make them strong. There are always ways to improve on strong items. It will only make the team stronger and more engaged by doing so.

Question: If a workgroup feels that some of the engagement items are not important to its situation, is it OK to avoid focusing on these items?

Answer: Yes. Select items that the team specifically feels are important. In doing this, the team will have more ownership over its engagement and will be less likely to let the State of the Team action plan fall by the wayside.

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Question: One of my managers has more than 20 people reporting to her. Should she divide the group into smaller workgroups for action planning? What guidelines should she use in dividing the group?

Answer: The answer to this question depends on the ease of dividing the team into smaller workgroups. If there is a clear definition among the team, and the manager can easily split the team into smaller workgroups, go ahead. Another option is to conduct the State of the Team conversation as an entire workgroup (20+ people); however, during the brainstorming portion of the conversation, divide the group into smaller workgroups. Have the smaller workgroups brainstorm about actions each would implement. Then, as a team, share the results from the smaller workgroups and decide which actions are the best for the entire workgroup.

Question: One of the workgroups consists of individuals with functionally different roles. Should the manager divide the group when conducting a feedback session?

Answer: The answer to this question will vary depending on the team. If the team is made up of individuals with functionally different roles, yet they still perform as a team, the members should conduct the State of the Team conversation together.

Question: Can managers compare their results and their teams' State of the Team action plans with other teams'?

Answer: Of course. Sharing best practices and key takeaways is always recommended as a means to help improve the workplace experience. It is important to focus less on the actual scores for each team and more on what each team determines is an effective strategy toward driving higher employee engagement results.

Question: Imagine that your team is too busy to review results as a team or have a State of the Team conversation at this time and that team members decide to do it later in the year. How do you handle this situation?

Answer: When you can influence and inspire engagement, your job becomes easier and more rewarding. You and your team will have the best opportunity to focus on business outcomes. Taking the time to have a State of the Team conversation and taking steps to increase engagement is a part of people management and continuous improvement. Although an initial review of results and a State of the Team conversation may take time, regularly scheduled staff meetings are a great opportunity to host State of the Team conversations as they do not require any additional time.

Question: I have employees who work in more than one geographical location. How should I conduct the State of the Team conversation with these individuals?

Answer: Think about how you normally communicate with your team. No matter what kinds of communication you currently use, the most important thing is to discuss the survey results with each of your employees. As a team, make a commitment to improving engagement.

If you can't meet with all of your employees at the same time, you might consider scheduling individual or conference calls with your remote employees to talk about the issues affecting their engagement. Use authentic discussions — whether they are one on one, in person or virtual — as an opportunity to connect.

Do everything you can to make this work. You don't have to meet face to face to talk about the issues that affect each individual's engagement. Ongoing dialogue and the active involvement of employees is the key to making meaningful and lasting gains in engagement scores.

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Question: My survey results are good, so I don't need to work on anything. What should I do now?

Answer: Do you want to be good, or do you want to be great? Great employees outperform good employees on every statistic, including customer ratings, absenteeism, productivity, retention and profitability. Great managers feel that they can never learn enough about their employees. The only way to learn more about your employees is to have frequent, open discussions. Employees' performance and engagement needs are ongoing. Even if every person on your team rated every question item a "5," it does not mean they no longer have engagement needs. Employees deserve the right to share and discuss their results.

Challenge your team by asking questions such as: "What can we get better at?" "How can we share what we know about engagement with other teams?" "Are there new things we want to try?"

Question: I want to increase my team's engagement, but my team is not interested in working on the items I think are important. What do I do?

Answer: As a people manager, you have the opportunity to lead an engaging discussion. Ask the team: "What's working well?" "What areas can we improve?" "What's our plan moving forward?"

This process is an opportunity to understand the needs of your most valuable assets — your people. Discussing the team's engagement, developing engagement action steps and setting goals to improve engagement will help you understand how to meet the needs of your team members and become an even stronger team.

Listen to your employees and validate their concerns. In most cases, they will tell you what is on their mind and what is important to them. Remember that the engagement results are as much theirs as they are yours. Engagement is the responsibility of everyone on the team. If employees are concerned about specific issues and motivated to drive change, it is important to validate their concerns and help them drive the change they desire.

That being said, you are the manager. And as the leader, you have the greatest effect on your team's engagement. You can influence and inspire engagement not only by facilitating and managing the process, but also through your individual actions. If you feel strongly about certain issues, commit yourself to identifying your team's needs and taking actions yourself to drive engagement on those issues. You can contribute to your team's engagement through your individual actions.

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