

What do the most talented employees need from their workplace? What do they need to thrive? What do they need to stay engaged and to do their best work?

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These were some of the questions that the Gallup Organization set out to answer with a comprehensive research study that has spanned the last twenty-five years. The study has produced many important findings, the most powerful of which is that talented employees need great managers. While factors such as day care facilities, vacation plans, profit sharing, and commitment to employee training may play some role in the attraction and retention of talented employees; research indicates that an employee's immediate supervisor is more important. Locations, branches or stores within a single company can have remarkably different environments and varying productivity, employee retention and satisfaction rates. Cases such as these indicate that a poor manager can derail the efforts of even the best companies.

The Gallup study went further and attempted to determine the minimum number of survey items necessary to accurately measure the environment of the strong workplace. It has been difficult to find a link between employee opinion and business unit performance in the past, but that was the goal. After sifting through a mountain of data dealing with an enormous number of questions that have been asked throughout Gallup's history the field was narrowed to twelve items. These

questions are special because of their ability to differentiate. The only items kept were those where the most engaged employees answered positively, and everyone else answered neutrally or negatively. The twelve questions do not capture everything you may want to know about your workplace, but they do capture the most important information. They measure the core elements needed to attract, focus, and keep the most talented employees. The questions are as follows:

1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
7. At work, do my opinions seem to count?
8. Does the mission/purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?

Source:

Full text from [Overview of the Gallup Organization's Q-12 Survey](#) Louis R. Forbringer, Ph.D.
O.E. Solutions 2002, O.E. Solutions, Inc.

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9. Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Do I have a best friend at work?
11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?
12. This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

At first glance, the questions seem rather ordinary, but a closer examination reveals the characteristics that make them unique. First, the questions contain extremes that make it more difficult to answer with a “5” or “Strongly Agree.” Including extremes was a purposeful act that helps discriminate between the most productive departments and the rest. Removing the extremes weakens the question by eliminating the variability of answers. Second, there is an obvious absence of questions relating to pay, benefits, senior management, or organizational structure. The process eliminated these types of questions because they do not distinguish the great employees from the average and poor. All of those issues have some importance in the workplace, but they are not the answers to attracting and retaining top performers.

The next step was creating a study to test the 12 questions and to explore the possible value they could provide organizations. The questions were tested in 2,500 business units with responses from over 105,000 employees. Results indicate that employees who responded more positively to the twelve questions

also worked in business units with higher levels of productivity, profit, retention, and customer satisfaction. These findings demonstrate a link between employee opinion and business unit performance, across many different companies. Also, employees rated the questions differently depending on which business unit they worked for rather than which company. This information indicates that employee answers were driven not by the policies or procedures of the company, but by the influence and ability of the employee’s immediate supervisor.

Armed with this information it became crucial to determine if there is a recipe for creating an environment in which a manager can secure “5’s” for the twelve questions. Gallup’s research revealed that some questions were more powerful than others. It seems that the questions work better as a tool if the most important questions are addressed first as a foundation. It can be described somewhat like the task of climbing a mountain.

The goal of any mountain climb is to reach the summit, but any mountain worth climbing requires a planful and careful approach. You cannot run to the top of the mountain; you must conquer it in stages. You cannot start near the summit, skipping the lower elevations; you need to be exposed to the thinning air in gradual intervals so your body is prepared for the changes ahead. It is the same for an organization preparing to move towards the “summit” of an environment that fully engages top

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performing employees.

Base Camp (Level 1): **"What do I get?"**

At this stage your needs are pretty basic. You want to know what is expected of you? How much you will earn? What will your resources be? Without answers to these questions it will be difficult to focus on any other issues. Of the twelve questions, these two measure Level 1?

1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?

Camp 1 (Level 2): **"What do I give?"**

As you move along, you begin to see things differently and you start to ask different questions. You want to know how you are doing. Do others think you are doing well? Are they willing to help?

You become focused on your individual contribution and other people's perception of it.

These four questions measure Level 2:

3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?

6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?

These questions address the issue of your individual self-esteem and worth. Without a positive answer to these questions, your attempts to move to the next stage will be undermined.

Camp 2 (Level 3): **"Do I belong here?"**

You continue to climb and you have asked some tough questions. The answers have helped you build strength and momentum to continue your climb. Your perspective has widened and you may begin to question whether or not you fit the organization. Do the things that drive you also drive those around you? Is your basic value system in line with that of the organization?

These four questions measure Level 3:

7. At work, do my opinions seem to count?
8. Does the mission/purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?
9. Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Do I have a best friend at work?

Camp 3 (Level 4): **"How can we all grow?"**

This is the most advanced stage of the climb. You become impatient for everyone to improve and grow. The focus is on making things better, learning, growing and innovating. Innovation is possible at this stage largely because of the work done at

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Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3.

Expectations are clear, your confidence is high, and you are aware of the people around you and their possible reaction to your new ideas. If you have been through all of the stages you are in good position to reach the summit. You have the materials you need, you understand your role, have the confidence and attitude to move forward, and you have teammates who are similarly committed and prepared for the final stage.

These two questions measure Level 4:

11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?
12. This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

The Summit

When you can answer positively to all of these twelve questions, then you have reached the summit. The focus is clear and you feel a recurring sense of achievement. The best of you is being called upon and you respond with your best every single day. You are surrounded by others who seem to thrill to the challenge of their work. Strengthened by the group's mutual understanding and a shared sense of purpose you look forward to the challenges ahead. It is difficult to remain on the summit for long due to the changing and shifting ground beneath your feet, but while you are there, it is quite a special feeling.

Mountain Sickness

As a manager, you can see that the metaphorical mountain reveals that the key to building a strong, vibrant workplace lies in meeting employees' needs at Level 1 and Level 2. This is where you should first focus your time and energy. If your employees' needs are not met at this first level, then all other efforts may be a waste of time and resources. However, if you can meet those needs successfully, then future initiatives aimed at higher levels will be much easier to implement and will yield more significant results.

It may be difficult for some managers to start at the beginning due to the fact that they have been encouraged to focus much higher up the mountain over the past several years. Popular programs focused on mission statements, diversity training and self-directed work teams are all Level 3 directives and past total quality management, reengineering, continuous improvement, and learning organization efforts are aimed at Level 4.

All of these ideas are well meaning and many have been well planned and executed, but that has not kept most from withering. They aimed too high, too fast. Without the foundation of Level 1 it does not make sense to start work at higher levels. If an employee does not know what is expected of him as an individual, then how can he become engaged in becoming a better team member. If he remains uncertain of his fit and role, he cannot be expected to be comfortable sharing his ideas for innovation.

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There is a great temptation to implement any number of high-level ideas as soon as possible, but it is like helicoptering onto the mountain at seventeen thousand feet. It feels like a good move at first. It quickly puts you closer to the summit, but ultimately provides your group with a smaller chance of reaching your final goal.

The Focus of Great Managers

Great managers take aim at Level 1 and Level 2. They understand that the foundation of a strong and productive workplace is in the first six questions.

1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?

Obtaining 5's for these first six questions should be among a manager's most important responsibilities. In order to accomplish this you have to be able to set consistent expectations for all your people yet at the same time treat each person differently. You have to be able to make each person feel as though he is in a role that uses his talents, while simultaneously challenging him to grow. You have to care about each person, praise each person, and, if necessary, terminate a person you have cared about and praised. These goals appear to be contradictory, but the great manager finds a way to create a workplace that allows them to be coexisting priorities.

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