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"WE MEASURE, BUT DO NOT UNDERSTAND": STRUCTURAL FAILURES OF ENGAGEMENT MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT
Employee engagement and retention are essential for organizational performance and sustainability, yet implementation often falls short. This paper analyzes organizational and methodological distortions that limit the effectiveness of engagement systems. Drawing on 205 corporate cases and nearly three decades of HR experience, the study combines qualitative analysis with literature review to identify recurring patterns. Two main sources of distortion emerge: (1) weaknesses in measurement—conceptual, methodological, and technical—and (2) organizational-level issues such as cultural misalignment, inadequate leadership, short-term reward logic, and managerial biases. Together, these factors undermine the credibility and impact of engagement initiatives.

KEY0WORDS:
employee engagement, retention management, organizational bias, measurement validity, leadership behavior, qualitative case analysis

INTRODUCTION

Recent research has confirmed that employee engagement is not merely an HR tool, but a clear source of business competitive advantage. According to Gallup's 2023–2024 global meta-analysis, highly engaged teams achieved 23% greater profitability and 18% higher productivity, while also experiencing 81% lower absenteeism and significantly reduced turnover (Gallup, 2023). Gallup also emphasized that the engagement of managers is closely linked to their teams' performance and organizational-level involvement (Zenger & Folkman 2022). Their calculations indicate that the global engagement level fell to 21% in 2024, equating to approximately $438 billion in lost productivity worldwide.

Similar findings were reported in WTW's (formerly Towers Watson) 2021 survey, which showed that companies consciously investing in employee experience and engagement achieved 2.7 times greater productivity growth and 90% lower turnover over three years compared to their competitors (WTW, 2021). According to this research, every 10% increase in engagement may result in up to a 5% improvement in business performance. These findings are consistent with earlier meta-analyses covering thousands of organizations (Macey & Schneider, 2015; Saks & Gruman, 2014), which also highlight the strong positive correlation between engagement and organizational outcomes.

Engagement is not merely a feel-good concept or a cultural goal—it generates tangible and measurable business benefits. Well-managed engagement increases productivity, enhances

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customer experience, reduces turnover and absenteeism, and thus contributes directly to profitability. Organizations that approach engagement at a strategic level—particularly through leadership development, transparent communication, and consistent feedback—can secure a lasting competitive edge.

Managing employee engagement and retention is becoming a key factor in organizational competitiveness. Companies that systematically operate engagement and retention management systems can achieve significant improvements in turnover reduction, productivity gains, and cultural strength. However, even with the best intentions, certain distorting factors may arise that reduce the effectiveness of these systems.

The purpose of this study is to systematically summarize these case-based insights and, supported by relevant scholarly literature, to identify typical organizational phenomena and operational characteristics that hinder the effective application of engagement and retention management. Importantly, the paper does not aim to develop or evaluate solutions to these distorting factors; its goal is solely to diagnose and categorize the problems based on practical experience and theoretical frameworks. As such, the resulting typology is intended for diagnostic—not interventional—purposes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The background

Throughout my professional career[43] in human resource management, note-taking and reflexive analysis have been integral and continuous components of my professional practice. Over the past several years, I have systematically documented observations, dilemmas, and lessons emerging from client interactions related to organizational engagement and retention management. This evolving case repository currently includes 205 corporate cases, the vast majority of which involve organizations operating in Hungary across the industrial, manufacturing, agricultural, and service sectors. The database includes not only experiences from actual clients but also analyses of organizations for which proposals were prepared without resulting in contractual cooperation.

The procedure

The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on the systematic analysis of organizational observations, leadership interviews, workshop notes, and diagnostic field records gathered over more than twenty years of practice. The aim of the research is not statistical hypothesis testing, but the identification and interpretation of organizational distortions and intervention patterns across varied organizational contexts.

The empirical foundation consists of 205 organizational cases collected between 2010 and 2025 across multiple sectors (industry, agriculture, and services). Data collection integrated several types of sources: personal interviews and leadership discussions, field observations from training and development processes, employee engagement measurement results provided by organizations, workshop summaries, and consultant reflections.

[43] I have over 30 years of professional experience in the field of employee engagement and retention. In the first half of my career, I held senior HR executive positions in large corporations, while in the past decade I have worked as a consultant, specializing in the development and implementation of the DSE Engagement and Retention Management toolkit..

The notes and documents were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). First, open coding was applied to identify recurrent concepts, events, and behavioral patterns. These codes were then grouped into contextually coherent categories, from which the seven primary sources of distortion emerged. Through thematic analysis, typical distortion mechanisms were identified, along with corresponding solution patterns drawn from practical intervention experience.

Validity was ensured through a two-step verification process: (1) cross-checking notes originating from multiple sources within the same organizational cases, including comparisons between colleagues' and my own observations, and (2) aligning the findings with the relevant academic literature. This approach strengthened the reliability and consistency of the analytical outcomes.

*Validity and Limitations***:** Given the qualitative nature of the research, generalization is *analytical rather than statistical*: the objective is to identify patterns that can be meaningfully interpreted across diverse organizational situations, rather than to achieve representativeness. The methodological approach is reflective and practice-oriented, drawing on lived organizational development experience.

This methodological framework enables the study to function both diagnostically and developmentally: it supports a deeper understanding of distortions in engagement and retention management systems, while also illustrating practical intervention patterns that can be applied across organizational contexts.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The systematic organization of these notes began approximately two years ago, initially aimed at streamlining digital documentation. However, during the review of the notes, a recurring structural pattern began to emerge: although the examined organizations typically expressed openness to engagement and retention management and often had best-practice solutions in place, over three-quarters of the cases still showed a significant decline in effectiveness during implementation. This loss of impact was not primarily due to poorly defined goals or tools, but rather to deeper organizational factors that exerted a distorting influence during execution. These structural distortions appeared to be largely independent of organizational size, industry, ownership structure, geographic location, or time period

Managing employee engagement and retention is increasingly vital to the competitiveness of today's organizations. Companies that operate structured systems in this domain can significantly reduce turnover, improve productivity, and enhance overall business performance. However, even with the best intentions and high levels of professional knowledge, certain organizational phenomena may still undermine the effectiveness of engagement and retention systems.

The factors distorting engagement measurement can be traced to two primary sources:

1. Measurement-related distortions, such as:

   (1) lack of theoretical foundation behind measurement approaches,

   (2) methodological flaws in the instruments used,

(3) technical and organizational errors in the measurement process itself;

2. Organizational distortions, such as:

(4) underestimation of engagement's importance,

(5) lack of cultural alignment and leadership role modeling,

(6) distorted leadership reward systems,

(7) and individual cognitive biases among leaders.

Lack of theoretical foundation behind measurement approaches, and its consequences

One of the most frequent issues in measuring engagement is the absence of a solid theoretical foundation. This encompasses two main problem areas. The first is whether the organization is truly measuring *engagement* or instead a related construct—such as satisfaction, loyalty, or motivation. These concepts are based on different psychological and organizational mechanisms, and therefore cannot be measured in the same way. The second issue is that many measurement tools fail to reveal the causal factors underlying engagement levels. While *benchmark*-based questionnaires start from generalized organizational patterns, the *selfmark* approach builds on individual value judgments and context, making it more sensitive to differences.

It is often unclear what exactly the company means by "engagement." The term frequently becomes conflated with other concepts such as loyalty, motivation, or satisfaction —although these represent distinct psychological phenomena. Loyalty implies long-term commitment; satisfaction reflects a positive emotional reaction (BasuMallick, 2021; Rumage, 2023); motivation refers to an internal or external driving force (Bakacsi, 1996). Employee experience (EX) is understood as a human-centered perspective shaped by culture, physical environment, and technology (Plaskoff, 2017; Gallup, 2018). Engagement is not simply motivation: while motivation is a short-term driving force, engagement is a stable, longer-term psychological state that can sustain direction even in the absence of immediate motivation (Scholl, 1987). The literature distinguishes four primary interpretations of engagement:

1. *As a psychological state***:** A mental and emotional bond that reduces the likelihood of turnover (Harter et al., 2002; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).
2. *As a relationship between the individual and the organization***:** Psychological attachment, value alignment, and mutual expectations (Carol, 2023; Chiumento, 2004).
3. *As alignment with organizational identity:* Identification with goals and values (Mowday et al., 1982; Towers Perrin, 2008).
4. *As a social exchange relationship:* Reciprocal relationship between opportunities/resources provided by the organization and the employee's contribution (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009; Virág & Szaniszló, 2014, 2016).

These approaches illustrate that engagement is not a uniform concept but rather a multidimensional construct, and without a clear definition, it cannot be validly measured or developed.

The measurement system often fails—or is only partially able—to uncover the causal factors behind engagement levels. Depending on measurement objectives, three main types of tools can be distinguished: *pulse*, *benchmark*, and *selfmark* surveys.

1. *Pulse* surveys: Short, frequent feedback tools suitable for operational monitoring but insufficient for exploring deeper causal factors.
2. *Benchmark* surveys: Rely on external comparisons, aiming to ensure comparability at industry or national level. They use standardized questions, assuming that engagement is determined by universal factors. While they are useful for mapping trends and positioning, they are less able to capture organizational specifics, cultural differences, or current employee experiences (Macey & Schneider, 2015).
3. *Selfmark* surveys: In contrast, these do not use external reference points but rather compare results to the respondent's own priorities. Respondents identify which organizational factors are important to them, then rate their actual experience. Results produce a "heat map" highlighting "important but unmet" areas. This approach allows for context-sensitive, customized interpretation of engagement at the individual, group, organizational unit, or generational level (Virág, 2023) and is particularly useful when the goal is to promote organizational learning and change (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Virág & Szaniszló, 2014).

While *benchmark* surveys have the advantage of broad comparability, they often fail to reflect local operations, cultural context, or workforce diversity. The emphasis lies on positioning against industry norms rather than understanding what works or fails within the internal logic of the organization. This can be especially problematic if measurement is not followed by clear development steps or if employees perceive no feedback (Albrecht & Bakker, 2018; Kuvaas et al., 2017). By contrast, the *selfmark* approach can uncover deeper differences—e.g., by generation, nationality, or site—yielding more relevant and personalized results that increase response rates and development potential. However, it is methodologically more demanding, requiring more complex analysis and thorough managerial

The two phenomena—the ambiguity in defining engagement and the inability of measurement systems to uncover causal factors—can have **consequences** for engagement management, both strategically and operationally.

Conceptual confusion can lead to incoherent objectives and interventions. When leaders and HR professionals interpret "engagement" differently—e.g., as motivation, loyalty, or satisfaction—the resulting programs may pull in different directions and fail to address true engagement. If various leadership or employee groups ascribe different meanings to the term, internal communication effectiveness is reduced, and the legitimacy of interventions is undermined.

Engagement management risks becoming a mere buzzword. Without a clear, shared understanding of which employee behaviors or organizational phenomena represent engagement ("an engaged employee behaves like this…"), engagement initiatives can devolve into vague, immeasurable objectives and empty slogans.

Weak diagnosis leads to flawed conclusions. If only the engagement level is measured, without understanding the underlying factors, the reasons for the current state remain unclear. As a result, poorly targeted measures are implemented, and organizations fail to identify the factors

that could have the greatest impact on improving engagement. Measurements may then result in no meaningful change, or feedback may appear irrelevant—leading employees to become cynical or disengaged from the process (Kuvaas et al., 2017).

The "we measure, but do not understand"[44] *trap* occurs when companies measure regularly but lack clarity about what exactly they are measuring, and results cannot be translated into strategic action. In such cases, HR or leadership may launch "pseudo-engagement programs" whose objectives are unclear to employees and which are based on misunderstood data—ultimately eroding credibility in the long term.

In summary, the absence of a strong conceptual definition and the use of inadequate measurement approaches undermine the strategic role of engagement management. Effective development requires a clear definition of the concept and a measurement system capable of uncovering background factors. This enables the organization to reflect on its own functioning, adapt sensitively to employee experiences, and base targeted development efforts on solid evidence.

Methodological flaws in the instruments' use and its consequences

During the practical implementation of engagement surveys, a number of distorting factors may emerge that fundamentally call into question the **validity and reliability** of the collected data. These distortions may appear at several levels: in how data is collected, when it is collected, how results are interpreted, and how tools are used.

Unstructured data collection: inference based on impressions rather than measurement. It is a common phenomenon for organizations to rely on informal data-gathering practices instead of formal measurement. A typical example is the exclusive use of exit interviews as indicators of engagement or dissatisfaction. This can provide a distorted picture, as it remains unclear whether those who stay do so for reasons different from why others leave (Bersin, 2014).

Placing disproportionate emphasis on the views of informal opinion leaders. Another distortion arises when leadership places disproportionate emphasis on feedback from a few "loud voices". While such individuals may serve as important mouthpieces within the organizational environment, they often represent their own interests rather than those of the broader employee population.

*Timing distortions***.** The chosen timing of a survey can significantly affect the results. In some cases, the timing may be deliberately manipulated—for example, scheduling the survey during the Christmas season or right after bonus payouts may result in engagement scores 2–5% higher than those collected on a rainy Monday morning. Individual perceptions of engagement are often influenced more strongly by recent experiences or impulses than by long-term trends, meaning that surveys may reflect "momentary mood" rather than provide an objective, comprehensive assessment.

Misinterpretation of well-being "noise." Measurement tools are often unable to distinguish between real, structural issues and so-called "well-being complaints"—that is, overemphasized but not truly serious problems. For instance, general complaining may occur even when working

[44] This represents a paradoxical situation in which performance indicators are available, yet the absence of a shared interpretation prevents the results from translating into interventions that address the genuine drivers of employee engagement.

conditions are objectively adequate. Employees may voice dissatisfaction even when "everything is fine," perceiving minor inconveniences as disproportionately serious.

*Inability to distinguish perception from reality***.** Many measurement methods cannot separate organizational "urban legends" from actual, current problems. For example, if employees remember an unfulfilled promise made by a leader years ago, its perceived effect may still persist—regardless of whether organizational practices have since changed. However, survey tools are typically unable to filter out these distorted, past-based perceptions from the present reality.

The distortions in engagement measurement and the management activities built upon it often stem from hidden mechanisms embedded in the organizational context. The following outlines the main ways in which poor measurement practices can distort results and undermine their usefulness.

Reliance on impression-based conclusions instead of structured measurement When structured engagement surveys are replaced with impression-based methods (e.g., relying solely on exit interviews or informal managerial perceptions), the resulting data lacks validity. Consequently, management may misidentify problem areas or implement irrelevant interventions. Measurement loses its predictive function and fails to serve as a solid basis for decision-making.

Timing manipulation and bias Surveys conducted at strategically chosen moments—such as after bonus distributions or during generally positive seasonal moods—introduce timing bias. Temporary satisfaction can mask structural issues, giving leadership a falsely positive picture.

Overemphasis on non-critical "well-being complaints" Engagement surveys sometimes reflect exaggerated but non-critical grievances, which may overshadow serious structural issues. This leads to symptomatic management rather than targeted, effective interventions. *Inability to separate past-based perceptions from current reality* Many survey tools cannot filter out perceptions shaped by outdated or irrelevant past experiences. As a result, management may end up responding to historically obsolete problems rather than addressing present-day challenges.

Technical and organizational errors in the measurement process itself and its consequences

The biases affecting employee engagement surveys can be traced to two main sources. one source is the measurement instrument itself, particularly the questionnaire design features and the other ones are the theoretical and methodological issues linked to engagement as a psychological construct.

In my experience, these distortions are especially common in internally developed questionnaires. The most frequent distortions arising from questionnaire design can be grouped into six categories:

Inaccurate question formulation. The most common distorting factor is poorly formulated questions. Engagement is a complex, multidimensional psychological construct that is highly sensitive to wording nuances. Ambiguous, double-barreled, or leading questions can interfere with respondents' understanding and judgment. For example, a double-barreled item such as *"I am satisfied with my job and my manager"* conflates two separate evaluations. Similarly, leading questions—such as *"You do feel that your manager supports your development, don't you?"*—implicitly suggest the desired answer, thereby restricting spontaneous expression (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Translation distortions. A specific problem arises when internationally developed questionnaires are linguistically correct but conceptually mistranslated, making them unsuitable for the local organizational or cultural context.

*Acquiescence bias***.** This respondent behavior—also known as acquiescence bias—refers to the tendency to agree with statements, particularly when the questionnaire contains predominantly positive items (Kathy et al., 2015).

Social desirability bias. This is another common distortion, occurring when respondents wish to present themselves as a "good employee" by giving answers they believe are correct or expected (Nederhof, 1985). This is particularly problematic when the survey is not anonymous or when respondents fear their answers could be traced back to them.

Recall bias. This problem arises especially in questions covering long time periods (e.g., *"Over the past year, to what extent have you felt your work was valued?"*), since memory can be selective and distorted (Resh et al., 2020).

Participation bias. This bias leads to the overrepresentation of motivated employees with positive experiences, while disengaged or soon-to-depart employees often choose not to participate—making results one-sided (Bethlehem, 2010).

The second group of measurement problems arises from the nature and sensitivity of engagement as both a psychological construct and an organizational topic. These include:

Self-reported engagement levels. The primary methodological distortion here is the subjectivity inherent in self-reporting: the concept of engagement does not carry the same meaning for all respondents. As a result, judgments about their own level of engagement (e.g., *"How engaged do you feel toward the organization?"*) can often be ambiguous or misleading. This method is susceptible to socially desirable responding, self-idealization, and context-dependent interpretation.[45]

*Lack of importance weighing the factors measured***.** Interpreting the meaning of responses becomes more difficult if it is unknown how important a given factor is to the respondent. For intervention purposes, it is not enough to know how an employee perceives the fulfillment of a factor; it is also necessary to understand how critical that factor is within their personal engagement framework. [46]

Lack of "survey experience" design. A recurring question concerns the length and structure of the engagement questionnaire. While short surveys may lack the necessary depth for analysis, overly long instruments can reduce response rates (Stern et al., 2014; Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009). However, response rates are not determined solely by questionnaire length; much depends on whether employees believe in the purpose of the survey and in the likelihood of follow-up actions. If respondents feel their opinion matters and trust that leadership will act on the findings, they will complete even longer questionnaires containing 50–70 items. [47]

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[45] This problem can be addressed by models that rely not on self-assessment but on the identification of behavioral patterns. In such models, employees are classified into different engagement levels based on predefined behavioral traits—such as loyalty, proactivity, and accountability. The respondent's engagement level is then determined through fuzzy logic algorithms, which process the behavioral patterns the respondent indicates as personally preferred.

[46] cf. the benchmark vs. selfmark approach discussed earlier

[47] Over the past 15–18 years, our engagement surveys have typically comprised more than 65 items. In first-time implementations, response rates consistently exceeded 55%, most often reaching above 70%. However, in follow-up surveys conducted 18–24 months later, the response rate was contingent upon whether the initial measurement had been followed by

Lack of trust in anonymity. Respondent trust is a critical factor. Many employees are skeptical of electronic questionnaires, fearing that their answers can be identified. This risk is particularly high if the survey is conducted internally by HR rather than by an independent external party. Paradoxically, while paper-based questionnaires might inspire more trust, they are rarely used due to practical considerations (e.g., environmental concerns, administrative burden), which can also reduce the honesty of responses.

Biases arising from questionnaire design and from the misunderstanding of the nature of engagement itself not only threaten the accuracy of the data but also have systemic consequences for the entire engagement measurement process and the leadership decisions that follow from it. Distortions such as inaccurate question wording, translation errors, or leading statements reduce the psychometric validity of the measurement.

Distorted picture of the organization's engagement level and retention potential. Respondent biases—such as acquiescence bias, socially desirable responding, or recall bias—may create an apparently positive but in reality distorted picture of the organization's engagement level and retention potential. As a result, management may be lulled into a false sense of security, while real problems remain hidden and necessary development steps are not taken.

Distorted conclusions and understanding of present. Participation bias means that those most likely to take part in the surveys are typically employees who are already engaged; as a result, the survey fails to represent the organization's entire employee population. Consequently, organizational-level conclusions drawn from the measurement are distorted, and the most critical target group (e.g., employees considering leaving) is not identified.

The numbers look good, so there's no problem" case The subjective interpretation of the concept of engagement and the reliance on self-reported measurement create methodological uncertainty: if respondents understand "engagement" differently, both comparability and internal consistency of the measurement are compromised. This problem may remain invisible, as the numerical results can create a misleadingly reassuring effect for leadership ("The numbers look good, so there's no problem").

The measurement process loses its legitimacy in the perception of employees, accompanied by a decline in data reliability. Distortions in the survey experience (such as questionnaire length, structure, and user-friendliness), along with a lack of respondent trust, reduce both the willingness to participate and the honesty of responses, thereby diminishing the reliability of the data. Consequently, the survey loses its legitimacy in the eyes of employees, who become disillusioned with the process—particularly when no visible changes follow from the results.

Faulty Intervention Logic: Responding to Perceived Rather Than Actual Problems .The absence of importance weighting means that it is not possible to determine from the measurements which areas genuinely warrant intervention. Factors rated "negatively" by respondents are not necessarily the most critical issues in terms of engagement, while among the positively rated factors there may be some that play a key role in retaining a given employee—leading to a flawed intervention logic. Ultimately, when management makes decisions based on distorted or invalid data, the engagement management function becomes formalistic and ineffective. The organization

actions that were perceptible to employees. Where such actions were implemented, response rates remained stable or increased; in their absence, a significant decline in participation was observed.

responds not to actual needs but to perceived problems, and such interventions fail to increase—and may even further reduce—employee engagement.

Underestimation of engagement's importance and its consequences

The effectiveness of engagement management is most significantly undermined by organizational phenomena that suggest a fundamental lack of awareness regarding the importance of employee engagement. These patterns signal that engagement is not fully integrated into the organization's strategic consciousness, and as such, distort or diminish the intended impact of engagement initiatives.

Engagement initiatives are driven by external pressure rather than internal motivation. Although engagement surveys are frequently conducted, their results are often not communicated, nor do they lead to concrete follow-up actions. In many cases, these surveys are not the outcome of a genuine internal interest but are triggered by shareholder expectations, parent company mandates, ESG reporting obligations, or customer audit requirements. As a result, implementation lacks adequate preparation of leadership and the broader organization, and is not accompanied by measures that could effectively strengthen engagement or reduce turnover intentions. The prevailing attitude in such cases is often: "What matters is that the audit checkbox has been ticked."

It is unclear who within the organization holds responsibility for employee engagement. Another common symptom is the lack of clarity about responsibility for engagement. Many leaders perceive engagement surveys as a "HR decoy," aimed primarily at placating employees, customers, owners, or external auditors. In these settings, a comprehensive accountability structure across the organization is missing. The responsibility for employee engagement can be balanced within the organization: senior management is responsible for designing the overall system, while frontline managers are responsible for adapting it to the local context and implementing it in practice. (Dive, 2008)

No action is taken based on the survey results. A further indicator is when no action is taken based on survey results. In such organizations, the findings are often deemed irrelevant or impractical in the context of daily operations. Leaders fail to recognize the value of the data for decision-making, and engagement development is seen as the sole domain of the HR department. Consequently, survey results remain uncommunicated and unused, reinforcing the perception that engagement is a peripheral concern.

Taken together, these patterns create systemic distortions in how engagement is understood and managed within the organization, which in turn manifest in a series of organizational, leadership, and methodological consequences that fundamentally limit the impact of engagement initiatives.

Eroding the Value of Engagement Measurement. Without organizational awareness of the strategic importance of engagement, both development and measurement become severely distorted. In the absence of organizational-level awareness of the strategic significance of engagement, not only does the development of engagement suffer, but even its measurement becomes fundamentally distorted. In such cases, there is a lack of genuine interest in survey results, and no leadership intent emerges to treat employee responses as a foundation for action. This undermines the perceived importance of measurement, as employees quickly recognize when no

action follows, and their feedback goes without consequence. This erodes trust, diminishes future participation, and fuels skepticism and cynicism.

Engagement management loses its strategic role as a managerial tool. The absence of a clear accountability framework further compromises the integrity of the measurement process. The engagement survey loses its function as a developmental tool; leaders do not perceive the results as relevant to their own responsibilities and do not consider it their task to act upon them. As a consequence, survey data often remain uninterpreted or are simply archived at the HR level, without entering the cycle of organizational learning or action.

Engagement Measurement Reduced to a Formality. A third significant distortion arises from the lack of communication and follow-up. When organizations fail to close the feedback loop—that is, to share what has been learned from the survey and to take tangible steps in response—the entire process loses value in the eyes of employees. They perceive the survey as a mere formal obligation rather than an authentic interest in their views. This not only diminishes the sincerity and depth of responses, but over time jeopardizes the credibility of the entire measurement system.

In summary, if engagement is not recognized as a strategic concern, the measurement system functions primarily as a compliance mechanism, rather than a feedback process that supports learning and organizational development.

Lack of cultural alignment and leadership role modeling and its consequences

A hierarchical and command-based organizational culture poses a significant challenge to engagement management, as it distorts the core psychological and relational factors necessary for the development of genuine employee commitment. In such organizations, interpersonal relationships, trust-building, and psychological safety are often marginalized. These factors are frequently treated as "soft" or secondary considerations, in contrast to business indicators deemed primary—such as productivity, cost-efficiency, or meeting deadlines.

In hierarchical cultures, leaders often lack awareness of the strategic relevance of "human behavior." As a result, the emotional and relational dimensions of engagement—crucial for sustaining long-term motivation and loyalty—are not consciously managed as part of leadership practice (Albrecht et al., 2018).

Due to the absence of psychological safety, employees are reluctant to provide feedback, admit mistakes, or offer new ideas, fearing potential negative consequences. This undermines the credibility of engagement measurement (while also hindering innovation and learning processes) and gives rise to the phenomenon of organizational silence[48]. As Amy Edmondson (1999) has shown, psychological safety is critical for team learning, collaboration, and overall organizational performance.

Employees often adopt a skeptical stance toward engagement initiatives. The lack of trust exacerbates this situation: employees question the sincerity of leadership intentions and perceive

[48] "Organizational silence" is an organizational phenomenon describing situations in which employees deliberately withhold their opinions and do not share their ideas, concerns, or criticisms with management—even when such input would be relevant or beneficial to the organization. This concept was first formally defined by Morrison and Milliken (2000) as a "collective-level phenomenon of saying or doing very little in response to significant problems facing an organization."

engagement initiatives as formal HR-driven projects rather than authentic organizational efforts. As a consequence, engagement development is not integrated into strategic leadership processes and fails to manifest through leadership behavior.

Unsupportive messages and hidden norms also play a critical role. Organizational culture is expressed not only through explicit rules and declared values but also through tacit norms and through what leaders choose not to say or do. When a company lacks systems of recognition, fails to value teamwork, or does not reward proactive behavior, it implicitly communicates to employees that such behaviors are neither expected nor valued.

The absence of leadership role modeling sends a destroying powerful signal. When senior leadership fails to emphasize the importance of engagement—for example, by ignoring employee survey results or not showing personal involvement in related programs—middle managers and frontline supervisors are unlikely to prioritize engagement themselves. In such contexts, the organizational culture sends a clear top-down message: engagement is not a true organizational priority.

Taken together, these cultural patterns systematically erode the psychological foundations of engagement, and their impact becomes visible in a range of behavioral, operational, and performance-related consequences throughout the organization.

A hierarchical, command-driven organizational culture poses a significant barrier to the effective operation of engagement management, as it distorts the fundamental psychological and relational factors—trust, safety, and emotional involvement—that are essential for sustainable commitment (Albrecht et al., 2010). In such environments, leadership often treats engagement as a secondary consideration compared to "hard" business metrics, and as a result, it does not become an integral part of leadership thinking and action.

The organizational silence. The absence of psychological safety creates severe distortions in engagement measurement through the phenomenon of organizational silence. During surveys, employees tend to provide what they believe are expected, conforming responses—or they may refuse to participate entirely—if they feel that giving their opinion could have negative consequences for them. As a result, engagement measurement does not reflect the actual state of affairs but rather the extent to which employees feel safe when providing feedback.

False sense of security by "good numbers.". If employees suspect that their feedback is not handled anonymously, or that it could be traced back to them personally, responses will be distorted, participation rates will drop, and the reliability of measurement results will deteriorate significantly. These distortions prevent engagement measurements from serving as a valid foundation for developmental interventions, and leadership may be lulled into a false sense of security by "good numbers."

Reinforced organizational skepticism. Furthermore, the lack of leadership role modeling reinforces organizational skepticism. When leadership does not reflect on survey results or communicate transparently about goals and changes, employees perceive the survey as a mere formality that will not lead to real change. Over time, this undermines both the legitimacy of the engagement system and employees' willingness to participate.

A hierarchical, command-driven culture undermines engagement management by sidelining trust, safety, and emotional involvement in favor of "hard" business metrics. The absence of psychological safety fosters organizational silence, distorting survey results as

employees give conforming responses or refuse to participate. Concerns over anonymity further reduce participation and reliability, leading leadership to draw false conclusions from seemingly "good" numbers. Without transparent follow-up and visible role modeling, surveys are perceived as mere formalities, eroding both trust and willingness to engage over time.

Distorted leadership reward systems and its consequences

Leadership tends to use engagement management as a tool for crisis management. Employee retention and engagement only become priorities for many leaders when the labor market tightens [49]and recruitment or retention challenges intensify. In such periods, often begin to measure engagement and launch retention or development programs. However, once the immediate crisis subsides[50], managerial focus on engagement and retention management tends to dissipate, and the programs that were initiated are gradually dismantled or deprioritized. This phenomenon is well-documented in studies that highlight how organizations tend to treat engagement as a tool for crisis management rather than as a long-term strategic investment (Buller & McEvoy, 2012).

Managerial bonus structures are primarily focused on short-term performance indicators. In many organizations, managerial performance is assessed exclusively based on short-term indicators aligned with shareholder and investor interests—such as production volume, on-time delivery, cost reduction, EBITDA, or working capital. This short-term, quantitative focus diverts attention from long-term, qualitative factors such as employee engagement and retention. As a result, leaders tend to address engagement only once attrition has reached critical levels, making their interventions reactive and symptomatic (Bersin, 2014). The typical first response involves short-term fixes that offer immediate impact but increase long-term human risks—such as lowering hiring standards, shortening onboarding periods, consolidating job roles, increasing overtime, or extending work scheduling frameworks. While these measures are low-cost and promise quick results, they do not contribute meaningfully to strengthening genuine employee commitment. By contrast, compensation systems aligned with market wages, leadership development efforts, workplace modernization, or technological upgrades can significantly improve engagement levels. However, the impact of such interventions materializes only over the long term and may temporarily suppress key financial indicators such as EBITDA (Jiang et al., 2012).

Employee engagement survey results are formally integrated into the criteria for individual managerial bonuses. At first glance, this may seem like a good idea, as it signals to the manager that engagement is a valued organizational priority. However, based on my experience, in at least three out of five cases, this practice results in a distorted approach to engagement and retention management. In such cases, it is not uncommon for managers to exert pressure on employees during survey completion, or even manipulate response rates and answer patterns to ensure more

[49] in labor economics, a *tight labor market* refers to a situation where the demand for labor exceeds the available supply, leading to increased competition among employers, higher wages, and greater bargaining power for workers. Under such conditions, job mobility tends to increase, as employees can more easily secure new and better opportunities, while employers face heightened recruitment challenges and rising turnover rates.

[50] For example, this may occur because labor market pressures ease (due to a deteriorating economic situation), because labor can be replaced at lower cost (through the employment of foreign guest workers), or because the organization's retention and engagement initiatives—such as leadership development, wage increases, and investments in employee well-being—prove successful.

favorable performance evaluations for themselves. This kind of managerial interference not only undermines the validity of the results but also jeopardizes the integrity of the entire measurement process. Instead of using engagement data as a foundation for analysis and development, many managers perceive it merely as another KPI—one that must be met for its own sake, detached from its developmental purpose.

Campaign-like engagement and retention management initiatives are often launched rapidly in response to crisis, only to be dismantled just as quickly once the perceived threat has passed. This cyclical, reactive approach undermines the strategic weight of engagement as a leadership tool: it is not embedded into organizational culture, nor does it generate continuous, measurable impact on human resource practices. This distortion is further exacerbated when managerial performance evaluations are based solely on short-term financial and operational indicators—such as EBITDA, cost reduction, or deadline compliance.

Taken together, these cultural patterns systematically erode the psychological foundations of engagement, and their impact becomes visible in a range of behavioral, operational, and performance-related consequences throughout the organization.

Increasing long-term human risk. Within such systems, employee engagement—as a qualitative and long-term investment—becomes marginalized, as it does not align with the logic of rapidly realizable, quantifiable metrics. Consequently, managers do not incorporate structured engagement objectives or development efforts into everyday operations, and typically only address engagement when crisis indicators—such as high turnover or declining productivity—emerge. Even then, the typical responses are symptomatic and short-term in nature: increased overtime, job consolidation, relaxed hiring criteria, or low-cost, temporary improvements to the work environment. These actions not only fail to strengthen engagement but often increase long-term human risk.

The validity of engagement data is compromised. The problem is further compounded when engagement survey results are directly linked to managerial bonus systems. While this may appear to be a logical incentive at first glance, practical experience shows that in such cases, engagement measurement becomes instrumentalized: managers treat survey outcomes not as sincere feedback, but as performance indicators subject to manipulation. As a result, the validity of engagement data is compromised, findings are distorted, and they fail to provide a meaningful foundation for diagnosing real problems or informing development efforts.

In summary, the use of engagement as a crisis management tool, the dominance of short-term financial thinking, and the distortive effects of incentive systems collectively devalue engagement management. It becomes a formalistic exercise, stripped of its strategic role within the organization. The real objective—fostering employee involvement, satisfaction, loyalty, and intrinsic motivation—is sidelined, and the system becomes focused on optimizing numbers, not on supporting people.

Individual cognitive biases among leaders and its consequences

It is important to pay attention to those individual, personal biases that may emerge on the part of leaders. These distortions become particularly visible when engagement management is functioning well across the organization as a whole, but at the level of individual leaders—isolated yet consistent—patterns of behavior can be observed that weaken engagement efforts.

The leader takes the results as a personal insult. In the course of delivering expert feedback, I have frequently observed cases in which a leader perceived the results as a personal affront. Such reactions often manifested in either questioning the validity of the findings or interpreting the feedback as assigning them personal responsibility for the identified problems. These responses can be attributed to two primary factors: a deficit in the leader's individual knowledge, and the activation of defensive mechanisms intended to keep organizational issues they had previously "concealed" from coming to light. This phenomenon was particularly prevalent at sites or production units geographically distant from the headquarters, where operations were less visible to central management.

Leaders seek oversimplified explanations. In my experience, the most common—and most dangerous—personal bias is cognitive simplification, a form of cognitive bias (Weick, 1995). A typical example is the belief that "everything is fine here because turnover is low" or the reductive view that "employees only care about money," "we should fix salaries, but the owner won't allow it," etc. (Virág, 2023). This mindset is underpinned by the false assumption that the leader's own role is irrelevant to employee retention and engagement, as these depend solely on external, uncontrollable factors. Such a perspective also absolves the leader of the responsibility to act (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011).

Leaders' lack of knowledge about engagement—and refusal to acknowledge it. I have found that leaders often struggle to interpret engagement results, especially when their effects are indirect in relation to business metrics. Because the impact of engagement does not appear immediately or directly in profitability or performance indicators, many leaders tend to underestimate its significance (Harter et al., 2002). The connections—for example, between engagement and turnover, sick leave, or team functioning—are not always obvious, particularly if leaders have not received appropriate training in interpreting the data and understanding these relationships (Avolio et al., 2004). This lack of knowledge becomes particularly dangerous to long-term business performance when the leader is unwilling to admit, and recognize, that "there are things I don't know or understand." In such cases, leaders almost invariably revert to directive management: "Let's drop this War and Peace-length questionnaire; it's pointless, I know what's going on with my people," and simplify with statements like "everything is fine here, turnover is low, we just need to pay more."

Some leaders equate engagement with loyalty or the absence of complaints. Equating engagement with loyalty or complaint-free behavior is a reductive approach that can significantly distort engagement and retention management. In this view, leaders consider employees engaged if they fit seamlessly into organizational norms without conflict, refrain from criticizing management, and do not voice needs or suggestions. This approach overlooks the emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement, as well as the fact that true engagement manifests in proactive behavior, expressing opinions, and taking responsibility.

As these individual-level distortions accumulate, they do not simply remain personal leadership shortcomings; rather, they translate into systemic consequences that shape team dynamics, weaken trust, and ultimately undermine the organization's ability to sustain genuine employee engagement.

Ineffective development initiatives. Simplified, cognitively biased explanations divert attention away from complex, systemic causes (such as leadership culture, team dynamics, or lack of trust etc.). As a result, leadership decisions do not respond to the real problems but are based on

the "most convenient" explanations. This prevents targeted interventions, and the tools intended to improve engagement become ineffective.

Undermined legitimacy of people management. A lack of leadership knowledge—especially when not acknowledged—results in engagement being treated as a "soft," secondary factor. Because its impact does not appear directly in profit or productivity, engagement management is deprioritized, receiving little attention, resources, or leadership support. This further undermines the legitimacy of the entire system within the organization.

The engagement management initiatives turn into counterproductive efforts. When employees perceive that their feedback is dismissed or not taken seriously by leadership, they lose trust in the system. Staff become less willing to give honest responses, withdraw their emotional investment, and, over time, this can lead to apathy, hidden turnover, and burnout. In such cases, engagement management not only becomes ineffective but can even produce counterproductive effects.

As a consequence of leadership defensiveness, oversimplification, knowledge gaps, and dismissive attitudes, engagement management increasingly becomes a formal, discredited, and powerless function—incapable of achieving meaningful change and losing its strategic significance within organizational operations.

CONCLUSION

Employee engagement and retention management are not merely HR objectives, but key determinants of competitiveness and organizational sustainability. Numerous international studies have confirmed that high levels of engagement positively affect productivity, customer experience, turnover reduction, and business performance. Nevertheless, in practice, efforts to improve engagement and retention often fail to deliver lasting results. This study therefore examined which structural and organizational phenomena distort the functioning of engagement management systems, and how these factors influence organizational learning and change.

The analysis was based on a retrospective, qualitative review of 205 corporate cases drawn from the author's own professional experience as an HR executive and consultant, complemented by systematically maintained case study notes. These case analyses were supplemented by an extensive literature review focusing on the conceptual interpretation and measurement of engagement, as well as its organizational and leadership contexts.

The findings identified two main sources of distortion, together comprising seven key distorting factors. The first source relates to problems arising from the measurement system itself, including: (1) lack of theoretical foundation, (2) methodological weaknesses in measurement tools, and (3) technical and organizational errors in the measurement process. The second source is linked to organizational people management practices and includes four primary factors: (4) underestimation of the importance of engagement, (5) lack of cultural alignment and leadership role modeling, (6) incentive systems optimized for the short term, and (7) leaders' personal biases and cognitive simplifications.

The study highlights that engagement management can only play a truly strategic role if the measurement system is built on a clear theoretical foundation, asks context-sensitive, causally oriented questions, and aligns with the organization's culture, leadership practices, and operational logic. Engagement cannot be treated merely as a technical indicator or an isolated HR project; it

becomes a genuine organizational resource only when it is embedded into everyday leadership thinking and operations.

The findings of this study suggest that distortions in engagement management do not occur in isolation but reinforce one another. Measurement flaws—such as ambiguous conceptual definitions or poorly designed questionnaires—reduce the credibility of engagement data, which in turn weakens organizational willingness to act on the results. At the same time, organizational-level disruptions, including inadequate leadership role modeling and misaligned incentives, exacerbate the methodological weaknesses by undermining employees' trust in the process. This self-reinforcing dynamic contributes to what can be described as a "pseudo-engagement cycle," in which surveys are conducted regularly but fail to produce meaningful change (Albrecht et al., 2018; Kuvaas et al., 2017).

The study's conclusions resonate with several strands of prior research. Edmondson's (1999) work on psychological safety and Morrison & Milliken's (2000) concept of organizational silence provide strong explanatory frameworks for why engagement surveys often yield distorted or superficial results. Employees who perceive feedback channels as unsafe or ineffective are less likely to respond honestly, thereby limiting the reliability of measurement systems. Similarly, Gallup's (2023) findings on global engagement levels highlight that even organizations with robust measurement infrastructures often face declining engagement, underlining the importance of leadership accountability and cultural alignment.

However, the present analysis also extends existing literature by highlighting the role of managerial incentive structures as a systemic source of distortion. While earlier studies acknowledged the short-term logic of corporate performance metrics (Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Jiang et al., 2012), the evidence here demonstrates how directly linking engagement survey outcomes to managerial bonuses can undermine data validity and foster manipulation. This suggests that incentive systems should be redesigned to encourage long-term investment in employee experience rather than short-term optimization of survey scores.

From a theoretical perspective, the results support a shift from treating engagement as a purely psychological construct toward viewing it as a socio-technical phenomenon embedded in organizational systems. Engagement is simultaneously shaped by individual perceptions, methodological instruments, and cultural dynamics. This multidimensionality demands a more integrated conceptual model, one that links measurement validity with leadership accountability, cultural alignment, and incentive logic (Saks & Gruman, 2014). The typology of distortions developed in this study offers a diagnostic framework for analyzing why engagement initiatives often fail, and it highlights the necessity of moving beyond reductionist approaches that equate engagement with either survey data or motivational slogans.

For practitioners, the findings carry several warnings. First, organizations should resist the temptation to treat engagement surveys as compliance exercises or symbolic gestures. Without visible leadership involvement and clear follow-up actions, surveys risk eroding employee trust and legitimacy. Second, managerial development programs must explicitly address the interpretation of engagement data, equipping leaders to move beyond simplistic explanations such as "low turnover equals high engagement." Third, reward and incentive systems should be restructured to balance short-term financial outcomes with long-term human capital development. These practical steps can help organizations transform engagement management from a procedural exercise into a strategic asset.

This study did not attempt to formulate specific recommendations for addressing the identified distortions; its aim was solely to uncover and systematize them. As a future research direction, it would be worthwhile to present empirical studies and case analyses that examine how individual distorting factors can be corrected and what organizational impacts these corrections produce. Such work could contribute to the development of a more mature, learning-oriented engagement management culture.

COMPLETION

This study has sought to uncover the hidden structural distortions that systematically weaken employee engagement and retention management. By combining an extensive case-based repository with insights from the literature, it has demonstrated that measurement-related flaws and organizational-level disruptions are interdependent rather than isolated phenomena. This interconnectedness suggests that addressing engagement cannot be reduced to technical survey improvements or HR-driven initiatives alone; instead, it requires a holistic approach that integrates conceptual clarity, leadership accountability, and cultural alignment.

At the same time, the research has certain limitations. Its case base is geographically concentrated and primarily qualitative, meaning that broader empirical testing and cross-national comparisons would be valuable to enhance external validity. Moreover, the diagnostic focus of the study does not yet extend to designing or evaluating corrective interventions. Future scholarship and practice should therefore move toward evidence-based experimentation to identify which interventions can most effectively counteract the distortions revealed here.

In conclusion, the contribution of this work lies in highlighting that engagement management often fails not because of lack of intent, but because of hidden systemic mechanisms that erode its credibility and impact. Recognizing and openly addressing these mechanisms is the first step toward building organizations where engagement is not a slogan or a compliance exercise, but a genuine driver of resilience, learning, and sustainable performance.

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