CULTURE PARTNERS

Underperformance and Stress in the Workplace

Research on Frontline Workers

Create a *Culture* That Means *Business*

It's rare to find a workplace culture that doesn't struggle with employees' feeling undervalued or underperformance issues that aren't just noticed top-down, but also among all team members trying to meet goals.

To understand the sentiments of frontline employees better, Dr. Jessica Kriegel from Culture Partners and John Frehse, senior managing director at Ankura, collaborated on related research—analyzing data from 50,000 frontline employees.

Data was collected over approximately the last ten years and across industries, including manufacturing, retail, supply chain, pharma, field services, mining, and healthcare organizations located mostly in the U.S.

Jessica Kriegel

Dr. Jessica Kriegel is the chief scientist of workplace culture at Culture Partners. She is driven by data and defined by results, working to transform organizational culture for success. As a member of the executive team at Culture Partners, Jessica leads groundbreaking research, strategy, and innovation alongside institutions like Stanford University.

John Frehse

John Frehse is a senior managing director at Ankura. He has more than 20 years of experience focused on labor and operations strategy. John has developed and implemented strategies for more than 100 companies, and he delivers innovative labor solutions addressing employee needs to corporate leaders across a wide range of industries.

Management Relationship with Employees

Research findings on employee's relationship with management highlighted a significant issue: management's failure to consistently show care with employees over time.

The data revealed a **sharp decline in the perceived care** from management as employees' tenure increased.

Number of employees who felt management cared about them within their first month

Number of employees who felt management cared about them by their third month

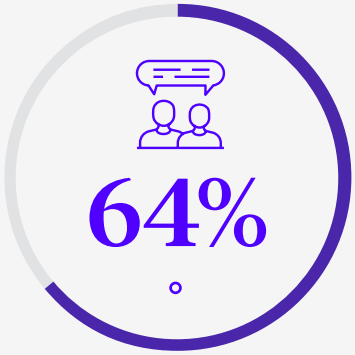
Number of employees who felt management cared about them by year end

Initially, 72% of respondents within their first month felt that management cared about them. However, this percentage dropped to 51% by the third month and continued declining to just over a third by the end of the first year.

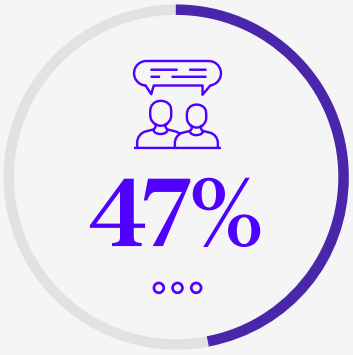
"Further research showed leaders worked hard in the first weeks of new employee orientation and training to introduce themselves and express interest in their workforce," explains Frehse. "After these initial weeks, leaders disappeared and were no longer available to the broader population, leaving employees questioning how much they cared about them."

Management Communication

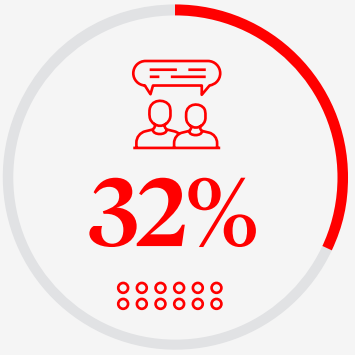
The data reports a similar trend in employees' views on how well management communicated with them.



Management communicated well during the first month.



Management communicated well by the third month.



Management communicated well by year end.

Initially, 64% of employees felt management communicated well, but this dropped to 47% by the third month and to only 32% by the end of the first year.

The analysis showed a **strong link between how cared-for employees felt and how well they thought management communicated with them**. This indicates that effective communication from management is closely tied to employees feeling valued.

"These findings validate an ongoing strategy that includes a bias towards overcommunication," says Kriegel. "And when this communication continually reinforces an organization's purpose and strategy, it helps employees anchor themselves into the culture and what's needed to drive results."

Impacts of Tolerating Underperformance

When management tolerates underperformance, it sends a damaging message to every employee. High-performing employees, or "A players," thrive in environments where leaders recognize and reward excellence. When "C players" get away with poor performance, it demotivates top performers—breeding both resentment and employee disengagement.

Tolerating underperformance can also lead to increased stress levels among high achievers who feel burdened with picking up the slack. This additional stress can erode their job satisfaction and drive them to look for opportunities elsewhere, further depleting the organization of its best talent.

So, what did frontline workers have to say about stress in the workplace?

Understanding stress in the workplace is crucial. Of those who answered this question, nearly 70% described their job as having an above-average or high level of stress.

According to John Frehse, reducing stress levels requires leadership to take clear and decisive action. During a keynote, a leader once asked him, "Nine out of 10 of my supervisors are very underperforming. What should I do?" John's reply? "If you care about your employees, you should fire the underperforming supervisors because doing so says that underperformance is unacceptable. You should only have supervisors who are real leaders."

Combatting Stress-Related Underperformance

Notably, employees who believe that management communicates effectively are four times less likely to feel stressed. Similarly, those who feel management genuinely cares about them are three times less likely to feel stressed.

4X 

less stressed

My management communicates effectively.

3X 

less stressed

My management cares about me.

This underscores the importance of management practices that prioritize effective communication and genuine care for employees. When management fails to address underperformance, it signals a lack of care and weakens overall communication within the organization.

To build a thriving organizational culture, management must take a firm stance against underperformance. This means not only setting high standards but also holding every employee accountable to those standards. By doing so, management shows a commitment to excellence and fairness, which in turn motivates high-performing employees to keep striving for success and producing desired results.

About Culture Partners

Using human industrial-organizational psychological methods, Culture Partners helps organizations achieve record-breaking results by connecting experiences, beliefs, and actions to those results through culture. Our culture management frameworks and tools help thousands of top organizations realize their potential by owning their growth.

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