



Employee Engagement in 3 Simple (but Hard) Questions

Do your employees *believe* in your purpose? Do they feel they *belong* to a supportive community? Do they know how they *matter* to your success?

Introduction: The Power of 3 Questions

Leaders have always had plenty to worry about, and each era's leaders tend to feel that "today's pressing questions" are more pressing than those of times past. Still, there's good reason to feel compassion for today's leaders: their 21st-century worries include skills, talent, diversity, artificial intelligence, trade, class, climate, trust—in addition to the enduring stressors of product strength, market share and profit.

These challenge-opportunity items are far from academic, because they involve the organization's humans—each person a striving-worrying multiplier of scale and complexity.

How can a leader know she's giving those humans what they need *to thrive*, for the organization and for themselves? Every single day, she can ask herself three questions:

- Do our employees *believe* in the organization's purpose?
- Do they feel that they *belong* to a community of mutual support?
- Do they know that they *matter* to our success?

When every employee can truly say, "I believe in our purpose, I belong to this community, and I matter to our success," then that organization is prepared to deliver big—and to sustain the effort.

It's not easy, because it calls for every leader and communicator to ask every day, "Are we doing all we can to help our employees believe, belong and matter?" And then

answering—with the dialogue, conversations, policies and programs that bring this spirit to the particular goals and challenges of your organization.

Real Answers—Not Happy Talk

The answers don't have to be pleasant ones. Life and work are full of difficult decisions with tough actions that aren't comfortable. The "believe, belong, matter" framework isn't about happy talk or false paradises. It's about recognizing that organizational strength and business momentum depend on employees who understand and commit to the company's goals, trust their leaders and colleagues, and know how their contribution makes a difference.

It's less about mission statements than the missions themselves.

For example, if the organization is about to enter a new market segment to pursue more growth, create a new product line, or purchase another company, the leaders should ask themselves:

- Will this move be easy or hard to understand in terms of our goals?
- Are we asking employees to do new things, or simply to direct their current skills in new directions?
- Will this step make employees instinctively prouder of the company, or less proud?
- After the transition, will the organization be different?

Every single day,
are you helping your employees...
...**believe** in your mission?
...**belong** to your community?
...**matter** to your success?

- Is the company making this move from strength, or to protect against a current weakness?
- Are leaders and managers prepared to help every single employee understand how her role will help the new approach succeed?

Each answer will affect how employees—the organization’s humans—will believe in the organization’s purpose, feel they belong to a mutually supportive community, and matter to the successful outcome.

It’s important to recognize that “belief” isn’t only about business strategy, “belong” isn’t just about trust and familiarity, and “matter” isn’t just about job role. To believe in a company I also have to sense that it treats employees fairly. To feel I belong here, I have to believe in the company’s strategy. To matter, I have to trust my manager as she guides and recognizes my work.

Know also that the “believe, belong, matter” framework isn’t intended to be a

“messaging house” (though it can greatly inform your messaging). Just as declaring that you’re a “trustworthy” person doesn’t inspire confidence, in my experience talking with employees explicitly about “believe, belong and matter” isn’t the best approach. (It can be done, but it requires really careful navigation not to come off as preachy.) The “believe, belong, matter” framework works best as a set of prompting questions to inform strategy, policy, action and messaging.

These will always be tough questions. Doing the hard work of asking and answering them will help leaders lead, help managers guide, and help employees thrive.

What to Actually Do? Leverage Everything.

How do you implement the “believe, belong, matter” framework in your organization? What do you actually do?

Whether you’re a leader, a manager, or a communications professional, the most important action is to begin thinking in terms of “believe, belong and matter.”

Consider everything

In everything you communicate, from the CEO’s strategy presentation to the vacation policies to the fire drills and cleaning schedules, think about how words and actions can reinforce, or weaken, an environment of “believe, belong and matter.” Use it as a filter, a lens. Watch for opportunities to reinforce the environment in positive ways. Watch for disconnects that risk negative effects.

This framing doesn’t have to take you much time. Then you can decide where upside opportunities or downside risks warrant more time—for greater clarity, for addressing natural questions, or for reconsidering the policy or business step itself.

The good news and the bad news is that nearly everything is connected. Employee strength depends on the strength and clarity of business strategy, on the experienced integrity of leaders and managers, on fair pay and benefits, on the ability of managers to make every employee’s role and contribution clear and recognized.

All of these cross-influences make things more complex, but they also increase the number of opportunities for positive momentum.

Partner well

Appreciate the limits of any individual role—and regardless of your role, become close partners with human resource professionals and business leaders. Each on her own can do a lot, but not nearly as much as you can do together.

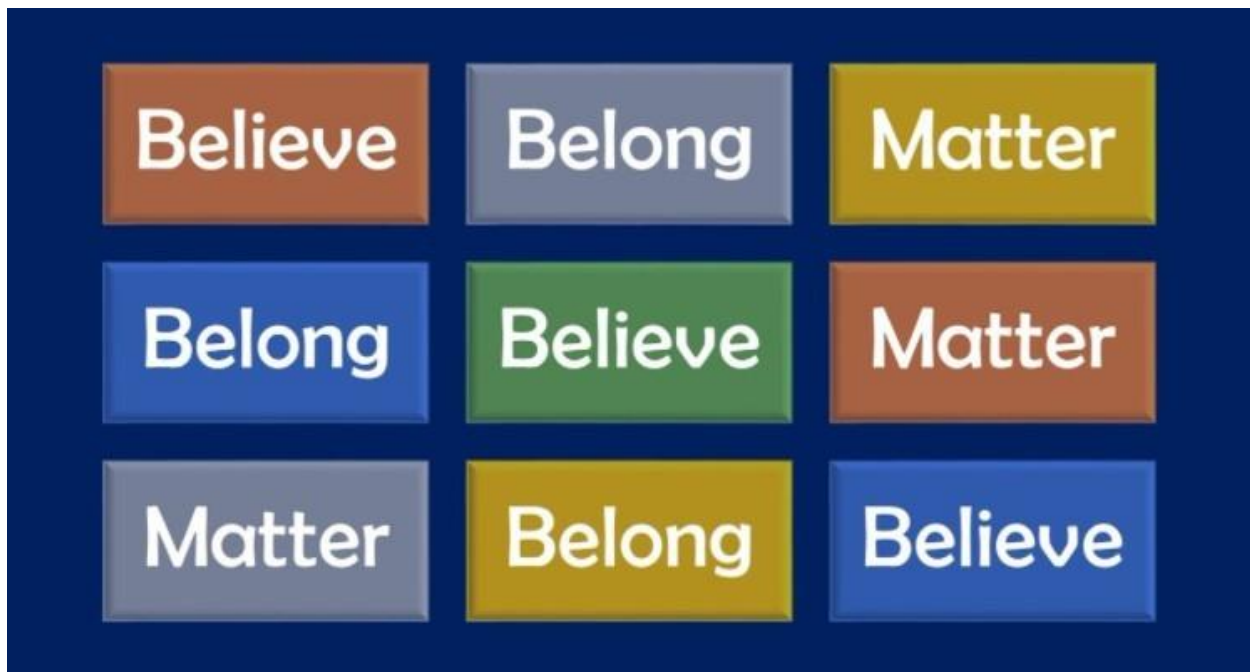
And the most important aspirations—the higher aims of “believe, belong and matter”—can’t be reached without coordinated and mutually supportive efforts to plan, to execute, to measure, to adjust, and to plan and execute again and again.

To be a great partner means to listen closely, to support fully, and to request support clearly. It also means (in this context) not being preachy and absolute about “believe, belong, matter.” The last thing another partner needs to hear is, “your policy is hurting my ‘matter’ goal.”

But talking through the framework, pointing out the ways in which your own work fell short of your goals, seeking to understand the partner’s goals, and exploring ways that your work can help them—these are powerful steps toward strong and beneficial partnering.

Don’t talk about it—live it

In my experience (as I mentioned above), talking publicly about “believe, belong and matter” isn’t a good idea, just as declaring that you’re a trustworthy person doesn’t inspire confidence. It’s better if the “believe,



belong, matter” framework is kept inside the communications and leadership teams, as the framing for other action and communication.

It’s not that the framework needs to be a big secret. The principles aren’t embarrassing and they’re not strategically sensitive.

It’s just that without the right context they sound hollow. Or like someone protesting too much.

In addition, the phrase can feel preachy or misty-eyed. “So, you’re trying to make me a true believer?” an employee might ask in an open forum. And I’d have no trouble answering: “Not at all. I want to make sure we’re pursuing and explaining strategies that you can believe in.” But it would be an unnecessary distraction.

Much better if those employees simply benefit from actions and words that truly

foster an environment of “believe, belong and matter.”

Allocate leaders’ different strengths

Just as there are multi-dimensional relationships between “believe, belong, and matter” and the stuff of work life (business strategy, HR policies, organizational culture), there are many opportunities offered by the differing strengths of executives and leaders in your organization.

Some executives and managers are terrific presenters and speech-makers on a big stage. Some are much more effective in small groups where quiet dialogue happens.

They also have different experiences and stories, and stories—examples—are your friend.

Make good use of those diverse strengths and stories. Build matrices (on whiteboards or in your head) of how those human leaders can best connect with your human

employees in various settings, situations, timings, and communication modes. Invite leaders into your thinking, and leverage their suggestions. Wherever they are suggesting they help, they are likely to be energetic helpers in your mission.

In the meantime, you'll be giving your employees the kind of diverse messages that will build strong foundations of "believe, belong and matter."

Strengthening Other Models of Leadership & Engagement

This leadership and communications framework — "I believe, I belong, I matter" — can be used with any engagement system, change model or cultural approach you're now using, to focus and strengthen that effort's goals, messaging and execution.

The lens of "believe, belong and matter" is a way of looking at the opportunity—the obligation—to help employees thrive.

There are many philosophies of leadership, many modes of communications excellence. Every approach can benefit from this framework.

Professionals, scientists, researchers and authors of all kinds offer blueprints, practices and disciplines that may resonate with you and help propel your momentum. Training and development models, the organizational application of scientific research in physiology, psychology and neurology, the intersections of societal

changes and business strategies—all offer riches to be harvested.

Use them all. I don't suggest the "believe, belong, matter" framework should displace them. But my experience tells me it can help focus and fuel any other system designed to build employee strength in organizations of any size, industry or culture (even if you're trying to change your culture).

All leaders and communicators, from executives and managers to communications professionals, from business group leaders to HR practitioners, have the opportunity—the obligation—to step up to help employees thrive.

It's a wonderful opportunity—and a serious obligation. But who wouldn't want to give every employee this source of strength and power?

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