



GALLUP'S PERSPECTIVE ON

# Strengthening the Federal Workforce



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Employee and manager burnout. Hybrid and remote work uncertainties. Recruitment and retention urgencies. Lackluster FEVS, AES, DEOCS and Q<sup>12</sup> results ... these are the primary pain points federal government leaders have shared with me over the last year as we work together to launch Gallup's new initiative to create a strengths-based federal government — one in which employees have the opportunity to do what they do best every day through the identification of natural talents that can be nurtured into strengths.

This Gallup publication, *Strengthening the Federal Workforce*, is the first of many communications to come in response to our federal-government-hosted convenings and our workplace research — the world's largest. The purpose of our convenings has been to better understand what you are going through while facilitating a broader network for like-minded federal government leaders across agencies to connect and share best practices.

The government leaders who have been meeting at Gallup's global headquarters in Washington, D.C., as well as those who have done so virtually, recognize there are great possibilities and potential when we identify our natural talents, develop them into strengths, openly share them and then help those around us discover theirs. This is the way to unprecedented and innovative advancements by collectively aiming our strengths at our mission objectives. And when those most dedicated to public service take up the practice, this is the way to strengthen our nation.

This paper focuses on measurement. For without it, how will any of us in our complex environments know where our energy can be best spent and where to point the very best of our talents for success?

If you're a federal government leader reading this who wants to learn more, implement more effective actions to bring your workforce to the next level or who would simply benefit from being in the company of other changemakers across agencies who are striving to help their agency reach its highest potential — becoming the best place to work — please reach out to me and don't hesitate to jump into one of the many facilitated best practice discussions we are now hosting throughout the year.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Ritz, IV".

**MIKE RITZ**

*Executive Director*

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# Table of Contents

- The State of Employee Engagement in the Federal Workforce 2**
- Employee Engagement's Impact on Important Performance Outcomes 3**
- Barriers and Challenges to Employee Engagement 4**
- Focus on the Role of Managers in Employee Engagement 6**
- Use Actionable Employee Engagement Measures 7**
- Use Employee Engagement Data to Lead Conversations and Take Action 9**
- How Gallup Can Strengthen the Federal Workforce 13**

# The State of Employee Engagement in the Federal Workforce

As the nation's largest employer, the U.S. Federal Government sits in a unique position, not only to foster engagement among a large portion of our country's employees, but to act as a leader for how organizations — both public and private — cultivate and sustain an engaged workforce in a changing work environment.

For decades, the Federal Government has recognized the importance of a strong and engaged workforce, utilizing tools such as the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) and the Veterans Affairs' All Employee Survey to survey employees and act on their feedback to create better workplaces.

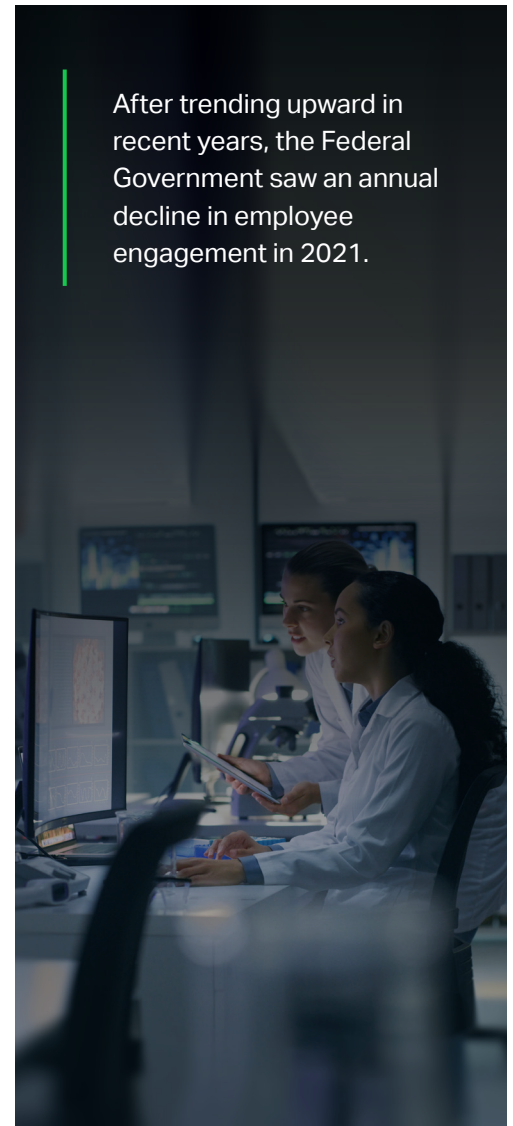
After trending upward in recent years, the Federal Government saw an annual decline in employee engagement in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

While the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) reports overall engagement has stabilized in 2022, recent data from OPM shows that other engagement metrics continue to decline among the federal workforce — most notably in the areas of intrinsic work experiences and perceptions of federal leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Although concerning, these declining employee engagement rates are not unique to the Federal Government. Gallup has tracked employee engagement in the U.S. for more than two decades. Since hitting an all-time high in 2020, employee engagement has been on a decline — following a similar trend as the federal workforce. This broader national trend may reflect confusion about expectations associated with shifting work locations — on-site, at home or in a hybrid work situation.<sup>3</sup>

The Federal Government recognizes that employees are looking for more from their work, and as such, is renewing its commitment to strengthening its workforce through improved engagement practices. The President's Management Agenda presents a road map to *"make every Federal job a good job, where all employees are engaged, supported, heard, and empowered, with opportunities to learn [and] grow."*<sup>4</sup>

The barriers to an improved workforce are not trivial: The competition for top talent is intensifying, budgets are tightening and managerial pressures are rising. To succeed, the Federal Government must ensure its agencies' employees are thriving at work. Agencies with thriving employees contribute not only to the success of their own agency but to the Federal Government as a whole.



After trending upward in recent years, the Federal Government saw an annual decline in employee engagement in 2021.

1 <https://govstrive.com/trend-analysis-fevs-2022-employee-engagement/>

2 Ibid.

3 <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx>

4 <https://www.performance.gov/pma/vision/#section-6>

# Employee Engagement's Impact on Important Performance Outcomes

Every day, employees make decisions and take actions that affect the organization in which they work. In the case of federal employees, such decisions and actions can have implications that extend far beyond the walls of their agency.

Gallup's latest meta-analysis on team engagement — which includes over 2.7 million employees in 276 organizations across 54 industries — reveals that engaged employees are associated with a host of positive performance outcomes compared to their less-engaged counterparts. When comparing employee engagement levels, Gallup found that top- and bottom-quartile business units and teams had the following differences in performance outcomes:<sup>5</sup>

## POSITIVE OUTCOMES

10%

in customer loyalty/  
engagement

18%

in productivity  
(sales)

14%

in productivity (production  
records and evaluations)

66%

in wellbeing

13%

in organizational  
citizenship (participation)

## NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

81%

in absenteeism

18%

in turnover for  
high-turnover organizations

43%

in turnover for  
low-turnover organizations

28%

in shrinkage (theft)

64%

in safety incidents  
(accidents)

58%

in patient safety incidents  
(mortality and falls)

41%

in quality (defects)

<sup>5</sup> The above figures are median percent differences across companies in Gallup's database. High-turnover organizations are those with more than 40% annualized turnover. Low-turnover organizations are those with 40% or lower annualized turnover.

## Barriers and Challenges to Employee Engagement

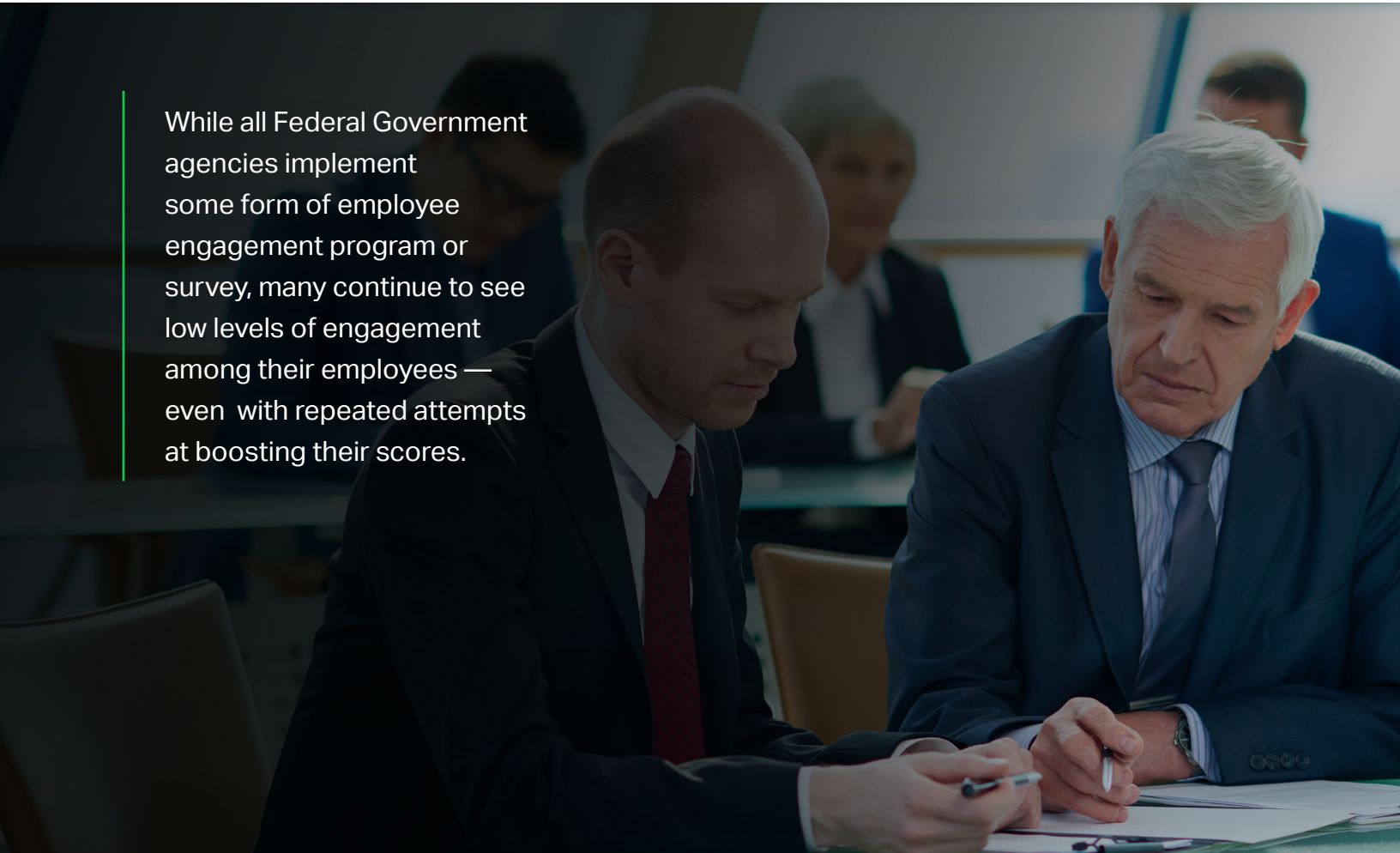
While all Federal Government agencies implement some form of employee engagement program or survey, many continue to see low levels of engagement among their employees — even with repeated attempts at boosting their scores.

Some organizations experience initial increases in engagement, followed by a plateau or steady decline. Leaders at these organizations often assume they have reached the ceiling of employee engagement or that employee engagement is a passing fad that won't result in lasting change.

There are other organizations that think they have high engagement, but their business results tell a different story. They cannot attract strong candidates for open positions and they lose top talent to more appealing competitors. Across the board, they aren't achieving what they have set out to accomplish. Their engagement appears to be disconnected from organizational performance.

67%

of U.S. employees are not engaged or actively disengaged at work.



While all Federal Government agencies implement some form of employee engagement program or survey, many continue to see low levels of engagement among their employees — even with repeated attempts at boosting their scores.

At a loss for explanations, leaders may blame the tool, the measurement, the philosophy, or the cultural or environmental factors they believe make their problems unique. However, the failure of employee engagement initiatives is likely the result of how the engagement program is implemented. Common mistakes include:

### **PROBLEM: OVERCOMPLICATING ENGAGEMENT**

Many leaders overcomplicate employee engagement by straying from its foundational elements and instead focusing on predictors of their organization's successes and failures. Not only are several of these predictors outside of managers' control, but many do not even begin to address the fundamental psychological needs of employees at work that facilitate employee engagement.

*Solution: Focus on training managers to have meaningful engagement conversations with each individual on their team.*

### **PROBLEM: USING INCORRECT METRICS**

Accurate metrics are critical to understanding the state of employee engagement in an organization. Not surveying the entirety of the workforce, focusing on metrics outside the scope of engagement, referencing outdated metrics or using low-bar "percent favorable" metrics can result in inflated — or simply incorrect — scores and create blind spots for an organization. Ultimately, this limits leaders' ability to implement needed change.

*Solution: Use survey items that are actionable by team leaders and statistically connected to performance outcomes.*

### **PROBLEM: NOT TAKING ACTION**

Organizations frequently seek feedback from their employees in the form of annual, quarterly or more frequent pulse surveys. Quick and simple, surveys can provide leaders with insight into what's working — and in many cases, not working — in their organization. But when leaders don't act on the feedback provided to them, whether due to a lack of planning or not knowing how to respond, the message employees hear is, "my organization doesn't care."

*Solution: Use survey items as conversation starters and action planning road maps.*



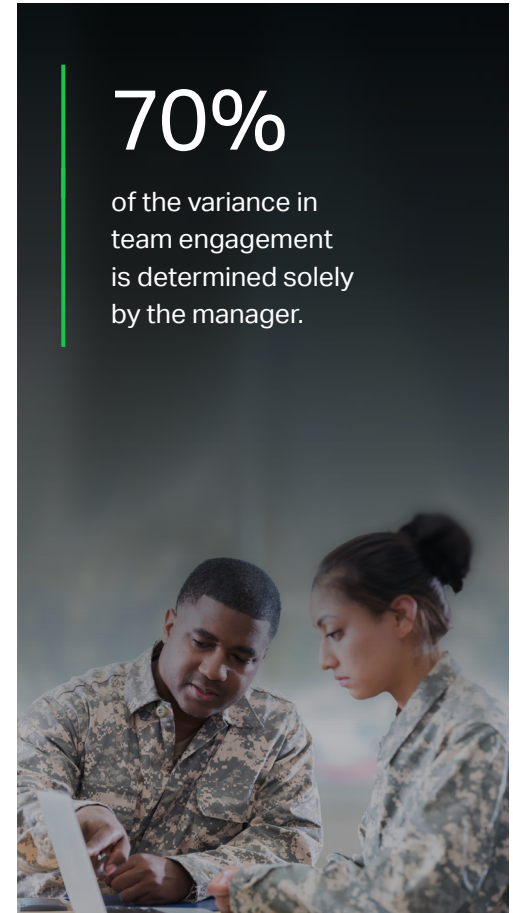
## Focus on the Role of Managers in Employee Engagement

Organizations have invested substantial time and resources into engagement initiatives and performance management programs over the years — often with little success. While these initiatives and programs can have an impact, Gallup discovered that *the key to engaging an organization's employees sits squarely with their manager.*

Managers play a crucial role in the success of an organization. Not only do they ensure that employees know what work needs to be done, but they support them, advocate for them and explain to them the connection between individual tasks and the organization's overall mission. In organizations where upper-level leadership is frequently changing — like the Federal Government — managers provide a consistent and stable foundation from which employees can develop and grow.

While the Federal Government has already begun investing in their managers' development,<sup>6</sup> if agency leaders could prioritize one action, it should be equipping their managers to become coaches. This means putting engagement front and center as the manager's primary role responsibility.

Managers should have a thorough understanding of their employees' talents, needs, preferences and ambitions. They should involve employees in goal setting and connect those goals to the agency's mission. By listening to employees, identifying their strengths and seeking out opportunities for them to grow, managers can foster a strong culture of engagement.



Coaching is primarily accomplished through ongoing conversations. The five coaching conversations that drive performance include role and relationship orientation, quick connects, check-ins, developmental coaching, and progress reviews.

And the frequency of these conversations matters. Employees who receive daily feedback from their manager are three times more likely to be engaged than those who receive feedback once a year or less.

**But it will not be enough for agency leaders to tell managers to coach. Agency leaders must:**

- Redefine managers' roles and expectations to allow them to prioritize employee engagement.
- Provide managers with the training and resources they need to succeed as coaches.
- Establish evaluation practices that help managers accurately measure performance, hold employees accountable and identify opportunities for development.

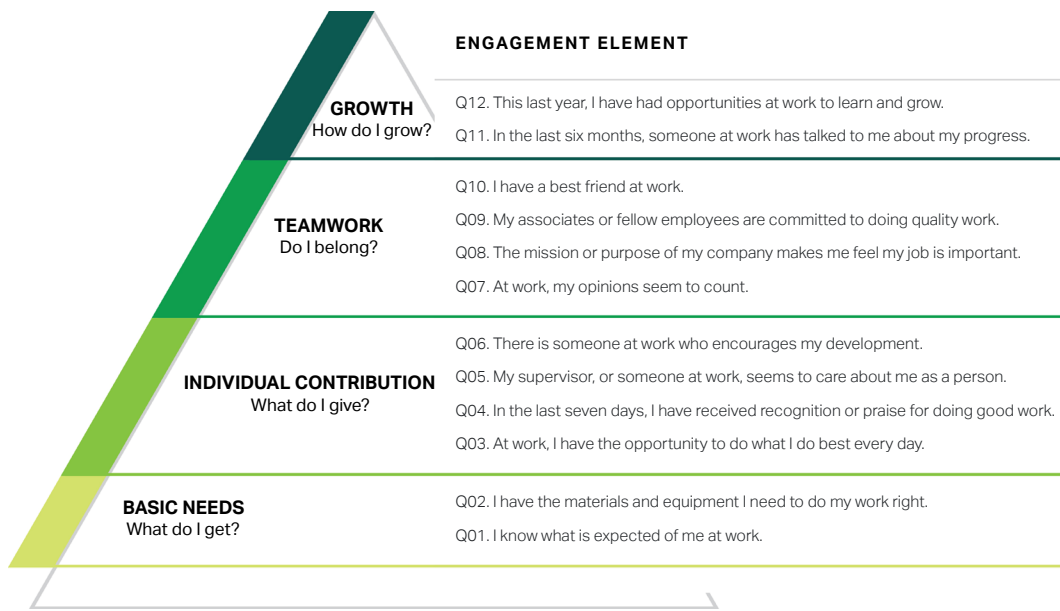
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-5/chapter-I/subchapter-B/part-410>

# Use Actionable Employee Engagement Measures

Gallup knows the hard work the Federal Government has done to create surveys such as the FEVS. In the past, Gallup has collaborated with many agencies to analyze their FEVS results and identify opportunities to engage and strengthen their workforce. As a result, Gallup has become familiar with the Federal Government's goals and has something unique to bring to the table to assist in achieving them — the Q<sup>12</sup><sup>®</sup> framework.

Gallup has identified 12 elements of employee engagement that are linked to crucial performance outcomes such as retention, safety and productivity. While the 12 elements, which comprise the core of Gallup's Q<sup>12</sup>, may seem simple, Gallup's research has found that only a small percentage of employees strongly agree that their employer or manager delivers on them.

- Q01** I know what is expected of me at work.
- Q02** I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
- Q03** At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- Q04** In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
- Q05** My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- Q06** There is someone at work who encourages my development.
- Q07** At work, my opinions seem to count.
- Q08** The mission or purpose of my organization makes me feel my job is important.
- Q09** My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
- Q10** I have a best friend at work.
- Q11** In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
- Q12** This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.



Gallup's employee engagement framework is based on a hierarchy of employees' development needs, and each of the 12 employee engagement survey questions fits into one of the four levels within that hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

Meeting the needs in the three foundational levels creates an environment of trust and support that enables managers and employees to get the most out of the top level — personal growth. These levels provide a road map for managers to motivate and develop their team members and improve their team's performance, with each level building on the previous one. Most importantly, each item was selected so that when a need is not met, it's clear what a team leader can do to address it.

### Introducing the Q<sup>12</sup> Plus

Employees' desires and demands for their workplace are changing. For organizations to thrive, they must adapt to meet the needs of this new workforce.

The Q<sup>12</sup> Plus consists of four questions that expand on the core Q<sup>12</sup> to include the topics of respect, wellbeing, coaching habits and customer retention.

- At work, I am treated with respect.
- My organization cares about my overall wellbeing.
- I have received meaningful feedback in the last week.
- My organization always delivers on the promise we make to customers.

Contact Gallup today to learn more about the Q<sup>12</sup> Plus and how it can support your agency's goals.

<sup>7</sup> [Click here](#) to learn more about the science behind Gallup's Q<sup>12</sup> measurement.

# Use Employee Engagement Data to Lead Conversations and Take Action

Workplace culture is complex. There are no quick fixes when it comes to human relationships. Simple, one-off team engagement activities or staff engagement exercises won't transform your culture. But focusing on the fundamental psychological requirements for high performance can make interactions more meaningful and insightful.

This is where the Q<sup>12</sup> framework shows its true value — its practical application to real workplace issues. Each item works as a topic for conversation. Managers can clarify expectations, offer recognition or discuss an employee's progress. In other words, the items guide managers to more meaningful coaching conversations on the job.

But leaders can also use the Q<sup>12</sup> items to advance specific agency initiatives and solve difficult organizational challenges. Here are a few examples of how Q<sup>12</sup> concepts can help address common workplace problems in your agency.

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## Preventing Employee Burnout

Recent declines in productivity and increases in absenteeism and turnover have agency leaders suspecting that a large portion of the agency's workforce is experiencing burnout. How can managers take action to support their team and reduce burnout throughout the agency?

### Engagement Areas for Managers

- Q01 Clear expectations:** When expectations are a moving target, employees can exhaust themselves trying to figure out what they are supposed to be doing. Take time to discuss responsibilities and performance goals with employees and collaborate with them to ensure that expectations are clear.
- Q02 Materials and equipment:** Prevent burnout by providing employees with the resources they need to be successful. If an employee's workload has already become unmanageable, managers should step in as an advocate to get them what they need.
- Q05 Someone cares about me:** Employees want to know that their manager has their back. Managers can support employees by being present, listening to their needs, and encouraging them and their development.

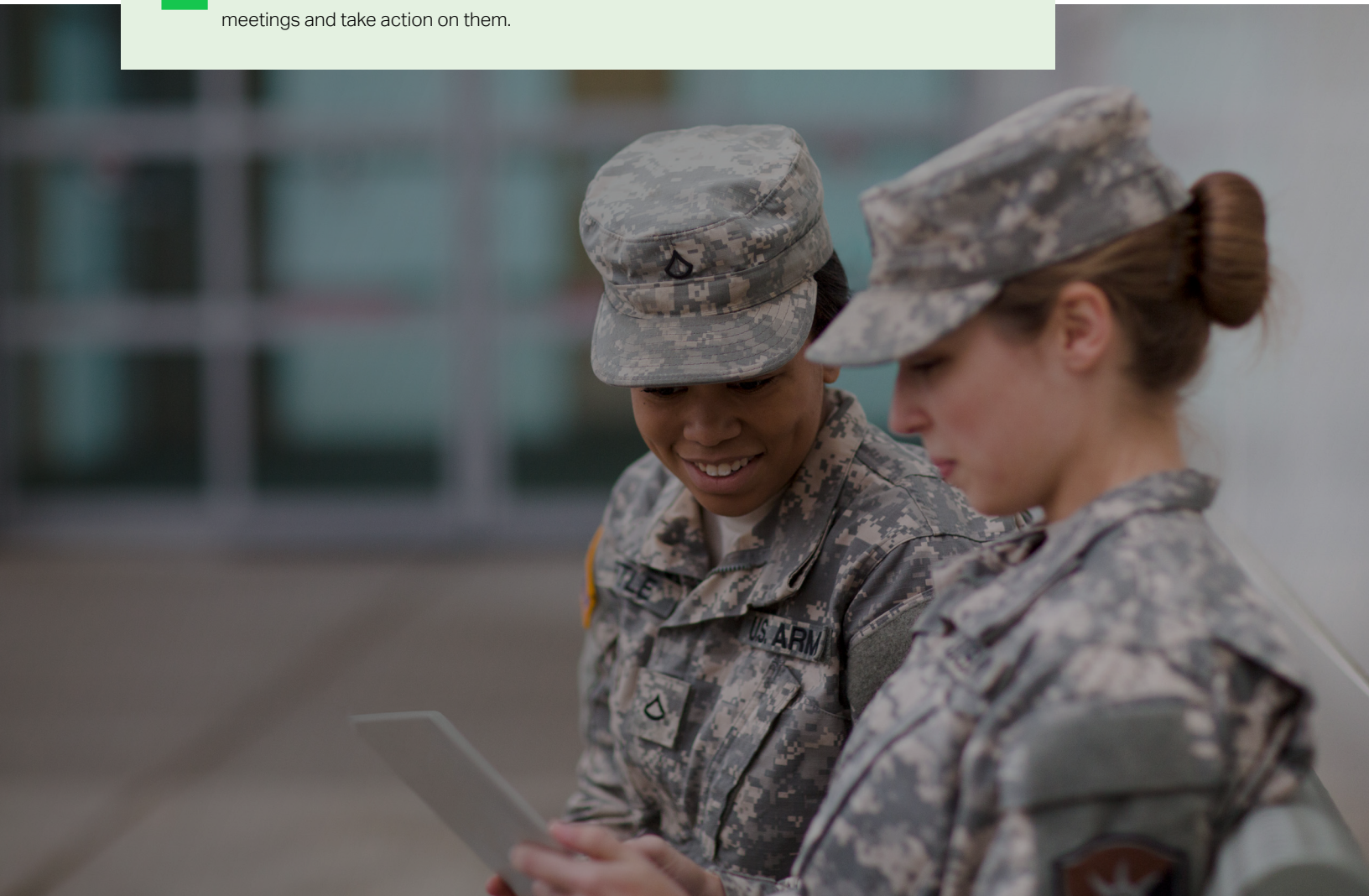


## Addressing Diversity and Inclusion

A new manager has inherited a low-performing team with diverse ages, genders, cultures and personalities. After a few months of private conversations and tense team meetings, she can tell that a lack of cooperation and disunity are at the heart of the team's low collaboration and performance outcomes. What can this manager do to promote inclusion and collaboration within her team?

### Engagement Areas for Managers

- Q04 Receiving frequent recognition:** Make recognition a regular agenda item to demonstrate appreciation for individuals' different contributions to the team and organization.
- Q05 Someone cares about me:** Ask employees: What would make you feel like a valued member of this team? Individualize the approach to leading team members based on how they say they want to be treated.
- Q07 My opinions count:** Become an advocate for employees' ideas. Solicit them during meetings and take action on them.

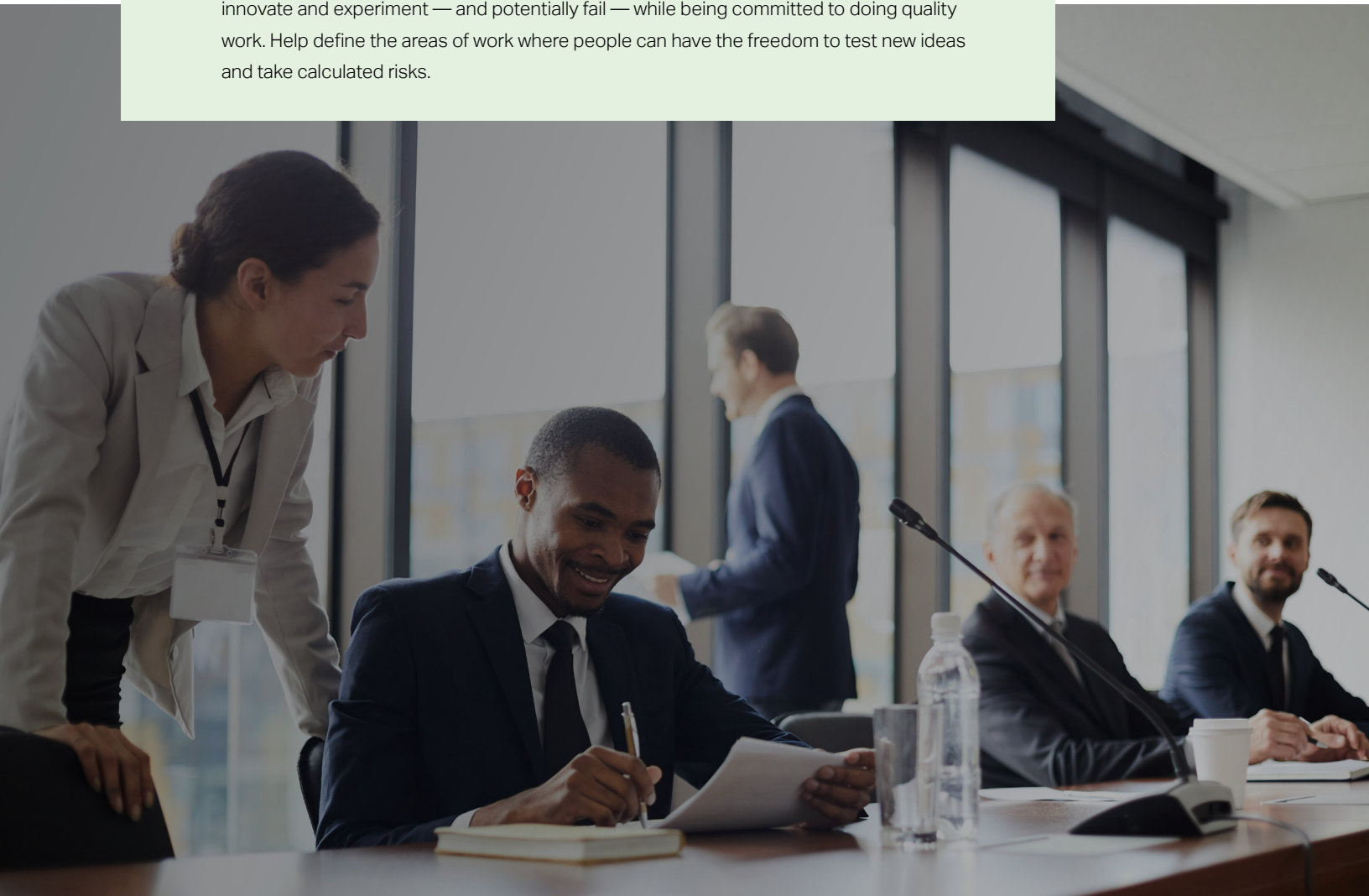


## Transitioning to an Agile and Innovative Culture

An agency is suffering from low morale due to increasing competition from innovators in the private sector. Agency leaders want to change the culture from slow and stagnant to lean, agile and creative. What steps can managers take to help agency leaders reach their goals of becoming a more agile organization?

### Engagement Areas for Managers

- Q01 Clear expectations:** Employees do not feel free to innovate if they are afraid of working on the “wrong” thing. Managers should check in frequently to clarify which duties employees should prioritize as conditions change.
- Q02 Materials and equipment:** Managers should brainstorm with their team about the tools and equipment that would significantly enhance their productivity. Their needs may include rearranging workspaces, simplifying processes or redefining roles.
- Q09 Coworkers committed to quality:** Start a group conversation about the team’s ability to innovate and experiment — and potentially fail — while being committed to doing quality work. Help define the areas of work where people can have the freedom to test new ideas and take calculated risks.



Simply surveying your workforce on their engagement once a year is not enough. Action is necessary. The value of Q<sup>12</sup> — when used exclusively or in tandem with other engagement tools like the FEVS — is in helping managers and teams start conversations and approach workforce engagement issues authentically, meaningfully and in a timely manner.

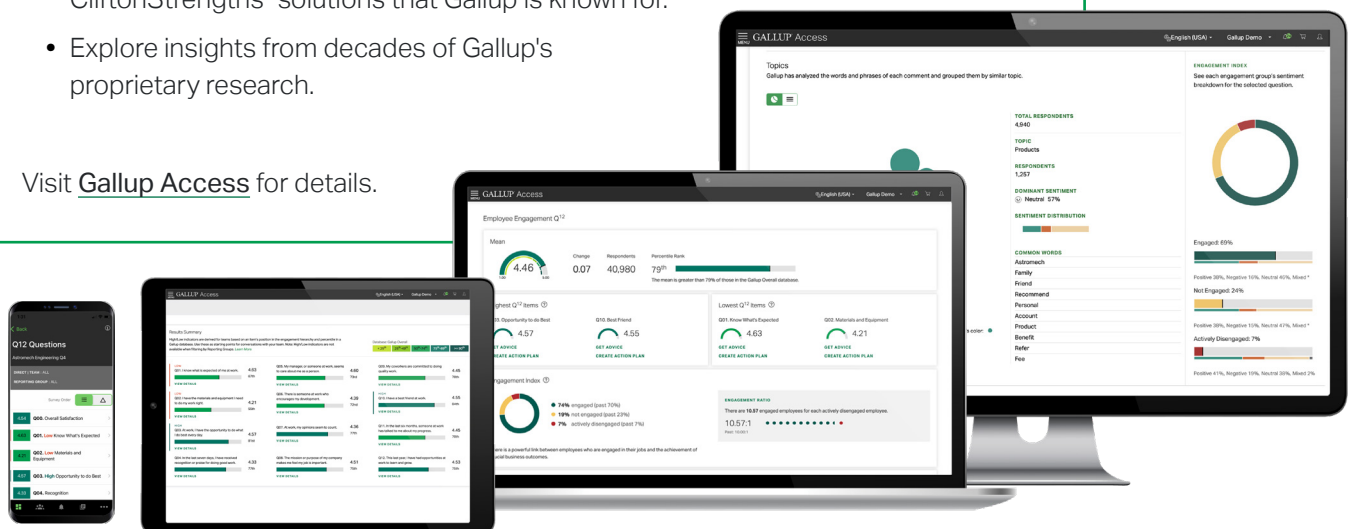
With Gallup's Q<sup>12</sup> framework, managers have the knowledge and tools they need to engage and strengthen their teams.

## Gallup Access: Addressing Engagement Beyond the Q<sup>12</sup>

Most online organizational platforms only allow leaders to collect employee feedback. But in Gallup Access, leaders and managers can do much more:

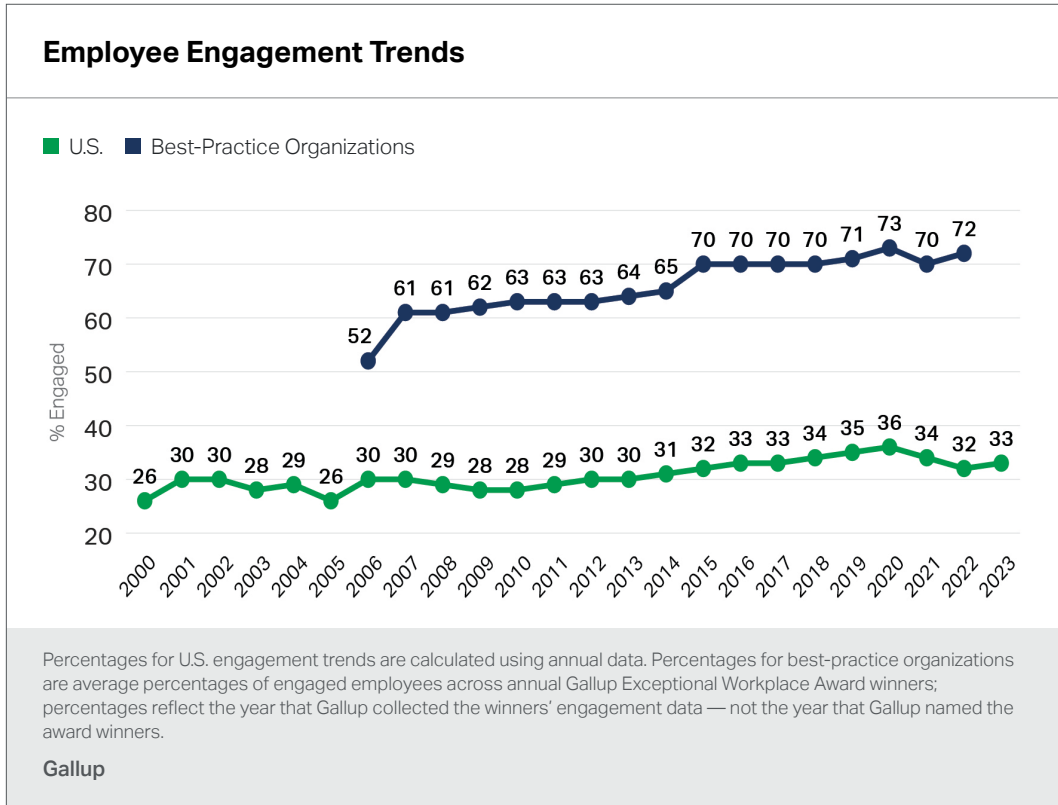
- Gain advice for managers that fits their specific Q<sup>12</sup> results.
- Access action planning tools and tracking to help engage and lead a high-development, high-performing workplace.
- Discover the employee engagement, employee experience and CliftonStrengths® solutions that Gallup is known for.
- Explore insights from decades of Gallup's proprietary research.

Visit [Gallup Access](#) for details.



# How Gallup Can Strengthen the Federal Workforce

Using the best practices found in this report, Gallup's clients have achieved significantly higher levels of employee engagement than the national average. This year's Gallup Exceptional Workplace Award winners report an average of 72% of employees who are engaged and an 18-to-1 average ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees.



Some of Gallup's Exceptional Workplace Award winners and best-practice organizations began their journey with below-average or declining levels of engagement. However, through long-term commitment from leaders and a partnership with Gallup, they have transformed their workplace.

Gallup's Q<sup>12</sup>, the Gallup Access platform, learning programs for leaders and managers, and expert consulting services work together to provide leaders with the tools they need to engage their workforce, better their culture, and achieve remarkable outcomes.

The strength of the Federal Government lies in its workforce. [Contact Gallup today](#) to learn how we can support your agency in creating thriving workplaces filled with strong, engaged and empowered employees.



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