

Manager Reference Guide

Employee Engagement Best Practices

A practical reference for people leaders in the State of California

Based on Gallup's Q12 Engagement Framework

Includes RTO guidance on every question

FOR MANAGERS - ALL LEVELS

What Is Employee Engagement?

Engagement is the emotional commitment an employee has to their work, team and organization. Engaged employees put more energy, care and initiative into their work.

70%

of engagement is driven by the manager. During times of change, engagement matters even more. Employees are deciding whether they still feel connected, supported and valued.

How to Use This Guide

You don't need a formal survey to use this framework. Read each Q12 section as a reflection prompt: how well am I creating this condition for my team? Start with the basics of engagement: clear expectations and having what people need to do their work. Build from there.

Q01 *"I know what is expected of me at work."*

Clear expectations are the single most predictive element in the engagement framework. This isn't about job descriptions. It's about real-time clarity: what does success look like this week, this project or this quarter?

Manager Actions

- Be specific about priorities, schedules and what success looks like over the next 30 to 60 days.
- After any policy change, re-clarify expectations directly with your team.
- Ask: "What feels unclear about your role or priorities right now?"

RTO Lens

After an RTO transition, expectations around schedules, in-person norms, meeting practices and availability often go unstated. Don't assume old clarity still holds. Name what the return actually looks like for your team day-to-day.

Q02 *“I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.”*

Resources include physical tools as well as information, systems, decision-making authority and the right people. Small barriers create daily frustration. Address them before they become morale issues.

Manager Actions

- Ask: "Do you have what you need to do your job well right now?"
- Remove blockers quickly. Slow follow-through damages trust more than the gap itself.
- Anticipate new resource needs before transitions happen.

RTO Lens

Returning to the office can surface new gaps: workstation setup, commute time reducing focus hours or access to tools previously managed from home. Check in with your team and anticipate needs before they become frustrations.

Q03 *“At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.”*

People who use their strengths daily are more engaged, more productive and less likely to leave. When you align assignments with what employees naturally do well, you get better work and stronger commitment.

Manager Actions

- Know each person's strengths and what work energizes them.
- Assign work with those strengths in mind whenever you can.
- Ask: "What part of your work feels most natural and energizing?"

RTO Lens

RTO transitions can compress schedules and reduce autonomy over how time is spent. Be deliberate about protecting each person's opportunity to do the work they do best.

Q04 *“In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.”*

The seven-day window is intentional. Recognition should be frequent, specific and timely — that's what tells employees they're on the right track. Think beyond project milestones: recognize people for helping teammates, adapting during change or improving a process.

Manager Actions

- Go beyond 'good job'. Name the specific behavior or outcome.
- Match the form of recognition to the person. Some prefer public acknowledgment; others prefer private.
- Ask yourself: "Who on my team deserves acknowledgment this week?"

RTO Lens

In the early months of an RTO transition, people are absorbing real costs. Catching someone doing something well during a challenging time can go a long way.

Q05 *"My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person."*

Employees who feel seen as whole people, not just workers, are more resilient during change. This is one of the clearest differentiators between leaders during difficult periods.

Manager Actions

- Ask about life outside work in check-ins and remember what people share.
- Notice when someone seems off and say something, even briefly.
- If you make a commitment in a personal conversation, follow through.

RTO Lens

An RTO transition creates real adjustments: commutes, childcare, changed routines. Showing empathy doesn't mean changing the policy. It means acknowledging that the transition may be hard for some people.

Q06 *"There is someone at work who encourages my development."*

Development means new skills, stretch assignments, coaching through challenges and having someone actively thinking about where you're headed. Employees stay when they believe someone is invested in their future.

Manager Actions

- Ask: "Where do you want to grow in the next year?"
- Connect employees with formal and informal learning opportunities.
- Follow up on development conversations. One conversation isn't enough.

RTO Lens

Career development often goes quiet during transitions. An RTO change is exactly when employees re-evaluate whether this organization is invested in them. A simple check-in keeps that door open.

Q07 *“At work, my opinions seem to count.”*

Employees need to feel heard. You don't have to act on every idea, but you do need to close the feedback loop and explain the thinking behind decisions. Employees don't expect every suggestion to be accepted. They expect to be heard.

Manager Actions

- Tell employees what happened with their input, even when the answer is no.
- Create easy ways to surface concerns, especially during transitions.
- Ask: "What would make in-office time most valuable to you?"

RTO Lens

RTO may be a top-down mandate, but whether employees feel heard about what they need to make it work is fully in your control. Soliciting input on how the team uses in-office time and acting on it is one of the highest-leverage moves available right now.

Q08 *“The mission or purpose of my organization makes me feel my job is important.”*

People can tolerate hard things when they believe the work matters. Many state employees already feel a strong connection to public service. Your job is to keep that connection visible, especially when things are difficult.

Manager Actions

- Regularly connect individual work to team purpose and the department's mission.
- Tell stories about who is impacted by your team's work.
- Ask: "How does what we did this week connect to why our department exists?"

RTO Lens

During an RTO transition, employees naturally ask 'why are we doing this?' Managers who answer that question beyond policy compliance. Connect being together to what the team builds, decides or serves. That connection creates engagement that lasts.

Q09 *“My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.”*

This is the only engagement element that's about how employees perceive each other. Employees watch whether their manager holds the standard for everyone. When standards are consistent, people feel pride in the work.

Manager Actions

- Hold everyone accountable to the same quality standards.
- Address low-quality work privately, directly and with a clear picture of what good looks like.
- Create team rituals that celebrate shared wins and reinforce shared standards.

RTO Lens

Teams working remotely for extended periods can drift in shared standards without noticing. Returning to the office is a natural reset point. Use early in-person time to name what quality looks like on your team and reinforce the collective commitment.

Q10 *“I have a best friend at work.”*

The wording may feel strong, but the research is consistent: having at least one colleague you trust and can be honest with is one of the strongest predictors of whether someone stays. These connections don't form in meetings. They form in the spaces between them.

Manager Actions

- Protect informal time: before meetings, shared meals and unstructured conversations.
- Introduce new team members thoughtfully so they can build real relationships with tenured employees.
- Ask: "Who on the team do you feel like you can really be honest with?"

RTO Lens

In-person time creates proximity, and proximity creates the conditions for workplace friendships to grow. This is one of the clearest cases for why being together has value beyond what a meeting agenda can capture.

Q11 *“In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.”*

Progress conversations are different from performance reviews. They're about reflecting on what the employee has done well, where there's room to grow and what to focus on next. Employees need to know how they're doing, not just once a year.

Manager Actions

- Schedule regular progress conversations so employees know where they stand.
- Be specific about what you've seen. Name the growth, not just the effort.
- Ask: "What feels different or better about how you work compared to six months ago?"

RTO Lens

Employees weighing their options during an RTO transition need to hear that their manager still sees their progress. A progress conversation in the early weeks of a transition signals that they're visible and that their work matters.

Q12 *“This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.”*

Employees of all generations, tenures and experience levels need chances to learn something new. This element asks whether working on your team leaves someone more capable than before. Teams where people are learning attract and keep talent.

Manager Actions

- Offer stretch assignments and name them explicitly as development opportunities.
- Frame challenges in terms of what can be learned, not just what needs to get done.
- Ask: "What have you learned in the last year that you didn't expect?"

RTO Lens

Talk to your team about what the RTO transition represents for their learning and growth. Help them identify opportunities for collaboration, visibility and skill-building that may come with more in-person time.

Your RTO Transition Checklist

Use this as an ongoing reference, not a one-time list. If you can't check something off yet, that's a signal, not a failure. Ask your team for their perspective on anything you're unsure about.

- Clarified schedules, availability and in-office expectations
 - Confirmed employees have the equipment and workspace access they need
 - Held a 1:1 check-in with each employee
 - Asked employees what would make in-office time valuable
 - Recognized employees who are adapting well during the transition
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Thinking About Measuring Engagement?

If you or your department would like to survey your team using this framework, please reach out directly to:

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