Leader sincerity and empathy boost employee engagement, inclusion, and intent to stay

With the unprecedented workplace disruption brought on by the pandemic, many companies introduced policies to provide additional support for workers with care-giving responsibilities. But the majority of employees doubted the sincerity of their companies. **Tara Van Bommel, Kathrina Robotham, Danielle M. Jackson,** *and* **Allyson Zimmermann** *write that leader empathy played an essential role in whether employees viewed COVID-related and racial equity policies positively.*

New global research reveals the dangers of performative policies in the workplace, which can undermine engagement, inclusion, and retention.

To find out how employees view their organisation's responses to racial equity movements, as well as their treatment during the pandemic, Catalyst surveyed almost 7,000 employees in 14 countries. The survey revealed that performative policies can do more harm than good.

After the tragic murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the global uprising against racism, many organisations pledged to tackle systemic racism in the workplace. The research finds, however, that there is a big difference between putting a black square on Instagram attempting to show support for racial equity and taking real action; and workers know the difference.

The survey reveals that only one in four (25%) employees feel their organisation's racial equity policies are 'genuine'. We define genuine as those policies in line with the stated values of the organisation, show care and concern for employees, and are thoughtfully implemented. In contrast, statements without action, or action without follow-through and intentional and meaningful change can lead to employees questioning the overall ethics and values of an organisation. In other words, leaders must 'talk the talk' *and* 'walk the walk.'

Studies (here, here, and here) have shown the importance of genuineness, as well as traits such as honesty and trustworthiness, in making up what researchers call an organisation's moral character. When employees viewed their companies' policies as genuine, as opposed to performative, insincere, or shallow, they experienced many benefits including more intent to stay, engagement in their work and a feeling of respect and value for their life circumstances.

The need to retain a talented workforce has been brought into sharp focus by the Great Resignation, and research has found that job seekers who do not feel that an organisation's values match their own will look elsewhere.

As well as global social movements, the workplace has faced unprecedented disruption due to the pandemic. When office workers were told to stay at home, organisations were forced to establish remote working options and safety measures for frontline workers. Some went further and introduced new policies to provide additional support for workers with children or other care-giving responsibilities including extending parental leave policies and providing financial aid to cover childcare and tutoring costs.

However, our research reveals that the majority of employees doubted the sincerity of their companies' response to the coronavirus pandemic, with two out of three employees (68%) describing pandemic-related policies, for the care and safety of their workers, as not genuine. The policies considered insincere included introducing a 'wellness programme' to mitigate burnout, while ignoring unmanageable workloads and an 'always-on' culture.

We found that leader empathy played an essential role in whether employees viewed COVID-related and racial equity policies positively. Leaders using empathy skills are able to bring employees along with them in their vision of an equitable future and so reap the employee and organisational rewards. For instance, when employees from marginalised racial and ethnic groups saw greater empathy from senior leaders, this was associated with a greater likelihood that they would find their organisation's racial equity policies genuine and lead to increased experiences of inclusion.

Furthermore, senior leader empathy can help mitigate burnout. The findings show that employees who perceived their organisation's COVID-19 policies as genuine *and* had empathic senior leaders experienced less burnout than others.

When employees feel that their organisation is inauthentic, trust in the organisation and employee productivity decline, ultimately impacting the overall success and reputation of an organisation.

Meanwhile, genuine policies create many positive work experiences including better life-work integration and increased productivity, as well as being essential for attracting and retaining talent.

The survey's findings should be a wake-up call for CEOs and senior leaders who must ensure that authentic messaging and policies, aligned with an organisation's culture and values, are at the heart of everything they do. Those who do not do this risk losing the trust and support of their employees.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the report 'Words Aren't Enough: The Risks of Performative Policies', Catalyst.*
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