

Re-Engaging Your Workforce: U.S. Workers Report a Sharp Drop in Perception of Managers and Leaders

International Study:
6,800 employees surveyed in 11 countries

U.S. workers reported a 39% drop in ‘very good’ opinions of direct managers between 2007 and 2011.

The BPI group Institute for Leadership – the research and innovation arm of BPI group – recently conducted an international survey to assess workers’ perceptions and expectations of their direct managers and leaders¹. The survey was a follow-up to a similar survey conducted by BPI group in 2007, allowing for a unique comparison of employees’ perceptions pre- and post-economic crisis.

The results were sobering. While a certain decrease in employees’ perceptions of their managers was expected due to the stresses of the economic crisis, the magnitude of the drop was surprising. In 2007, 53% of employees reported a “very good” opinion of their direct managers, versus only 32% in 2011 - a 39% drop.

Other key U.S. results from the survey include:

- In contrast with direct managers, other leaders within the organization fared somewhat better in terms of employee perception, but still worse than 2007 levels. In 2007, 41% of employees reported a “very good” opinion of their organization’s leaders overall, compared with only 28% in 2011 - a 32% drop.
- Even given these decreases from 2007 to 2011, U.S. employees still tend to think more highly of their direct managers and organization’s leaders than employees in other countries. Only the UK (42% drop) and Poland (60% drop) show a bigger decrease in employee perceptions of their direct managers.

These findings have clear implications for talent engagement and employee retention, as the survey results also strongly support the importance of the role of the direct manager as a source of connection between the employee and the organization:

- In response to the question, “What impact does your immediate manager/supervisor have on the connection you feel towards your company?” 78% of U.S. workers reported that managers had a very strong or strong impact on their connection. Only 6% of US workers said their manager was “not important” to the connection.
- Of the 11 countries survey, only Italy ranked higher than the U.S. in this respect, with 79% of employees reporting that managers had a very strong or strong impact on their connection to the organization.

¹ Study conducted in partnership with BVA (<http://www.bva.fr/en/home/>) in 11 countries in early 2011 on representative samples of employees of all genders, ages and professions working in the private and public sector. The surveys were administered to panels of employees who were questioned regularly over the internet. The countries surveyed were: Germany, Belgium, Canada, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland, Romania, Russia and the United States. Around 500 interviews were conducted per country, except for Belgium and Romania (300), and the United States and Russia (1,000).

What can managers do to improve their performance, and re-engage their disillusioned workers?

The survey also provides insight into what managers can do to improve employees' perceptions. Respondents identified the top 5 practices of leaders and managers that they value as employees. Interestingly, these top 5 practices were highly consistent across country, age, gender and level of position.

According to U.S. employees, the five most important people management skills of the ideal manager are:

1. The ability to communicate and explain one's decisions
2. The ability to listen and to take into account different points of view and suggestions
3. The ability to create a sense of team and collaboration
4. Ability to create trusting relationships
5. Providing consistent formal and informal recognition/feedback on daily work

Given the significant drop in employees' perceptions of their managers over the last four years, it's clear that many managers are having a hard time with these "soft" skills. To improve performance – and employee opinion – managers must focus on developing these five critical competencies.

How can HR leaders help managers to improve?

The HR mandate is clear. As the economy improves, talent retention will once again become a pressing business issue. As you think about potential solutions, consider these key takeaways:

- Workers indeed do think much less of their managers and leaders after the economic crisis versus before the crisis.
- The manager has a very strong impact on an employee's feeling of connection to the company.
- Managers have likely not performed effectively in key areas important to employees, including explaining decisions, listening, considering different points of view, building teamwork and collaboration, building trust, and providing individual recognition.
- Any solution for retention and engagement must address the immediate manager's performance in these critical areas.

Based on these takeaways, we believe that employee retention and engagement solutions are not about surveys and measurement, or about engagement solutions 'du jour,' but rather more about simply improving the relationship between employees and their managers. To learn more about BPI group's approach to employee engagement and retention, check out our whitepaper on the subject: [Organic Commitment: Grass Roots Employee Engagement](#).

For more information on our employee engagement and retention solutions, contact Robyn Clark, Managing Director, Leadership & Team Development at rclark@bpigroupus.com, or Carol Fitzgibbons, Director, Organization & Talent Solutions at cfitzgibbons@bpigroupus.com.

About BPI group

We are the global management and HR consultants that leading organizations rely on for custom solutions that accelerate performance by balancing the goals of the enterprise with the needs of the individual.

BPI group has over 25 years of experience in providing solutions that span the entire talent management lifecycle, including: Talent Acquisition, Leadership & Team Development, Executive Coaching & Advisory Services, Organizational Effectiveness and Outplacement.