



REPORT

Bridging the HR gap

How HR teams are delivering on company goals while supporting employee wants and wellbeing

Introduction

Over the past five years, HR professionals have played an active role in decisions that have reshaped the workplace. After navigating a rough economy, layoffs, and a complicated return to work, people teams are increasingly seen as vital stakeholders in strategic company decisions.

That's both great news and a pressure cooker. At the same time they're given a seat at the table, HR pros are dealing with the most diverse, multi-generational, and potentially polarized workforce in history with a broad set of demands that fall squarely on the shoulders of HR.

Should companies focus on recruiting locally, or are they more successful recruiting from a national (or worldwide) talent pool? Is compensation king, or are new benefits—like four-day work weeks and mental healthcare—more compelling?

Employees have their own set of expectations—and those expectations can be all over the map. The differences might be generational or geographical; driven by identity, race, educational, or parental status. Anyway you slice it, there's a lot of asks and the buck stops with HR.



To better understand the dynamics of today's workforce, we conducted two studies; the first amongst 304 HR professionals, the second amongst 2,593 U.S. adult workers. We asked about company culture, leadership, HR teams and the impact those teams had on the workplace. We asked HR pros some of the same questions and compared results.

What we uncovered was a gap in perception between what HR was prioritizing and what employees felt was important. This gap was even more pronounced in companies where feedback, advocacy, and understanding was lacking. Read on to learn more.



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CHAPTER ONE

Empowerment

STRATEGY ONE

Balancing traditional responsibilities with a more strategic role

HR strives to be a trusted partner but faces obstacles

Most people go into HR because of a sincere desire to have a positive impact. In our study, 44% of HR pros say they want to help others succeed, 40% hope to improve the workplace culture, and 35% say they enjoy building relationships.

And in some ways, things are looking up. Eight out of ten (81%) of HR pros are optimistic about the future of HR, and almost three quarters (71%) say their job satisfaction has improved over the year.

When asked why, over half of HR pros believe companies are shifting from focusing on costs to investing in their employees.



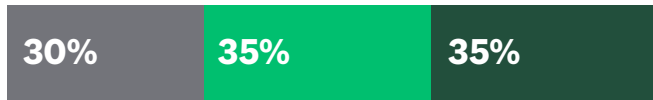
53%

of HR pros say companies are increasing their focus on the employee experience vs. the bottom line



HR pros rank what drives the employee experience

- Business decisions from higher up
- Feedback from employees
- Employee managers



In addition, the employee experience finally seems to be getting the attention it deserves. HR pros believe employee voices carry equal—or slightly greater—weight than leadership or management when it comes to decisions about the employee experience.

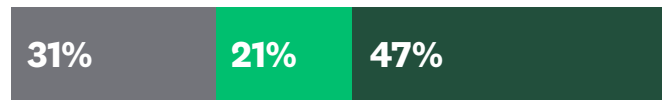
What workers think

There is a flipside. While HR pros may have the best intentions, the reality is that the employee point of view isn't always aligned. Our research uncovered significant gaps in how HR professionals view the role compared to worker perceptions.

For example, when we asked workers the same employee experience question, only 21% said they have a voice, and almost half of workers believe leadership has the biggest say in employee decisions.

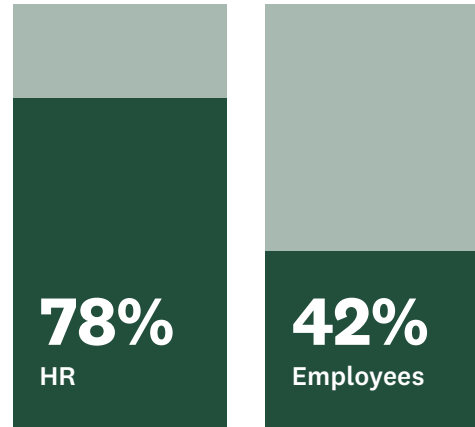
Workers rank what drives the employee experience

- Business decisions from higher up
- Feedback from employees
- Employee managers



In another example of the gap, we asked both groups about proactive vs. reactive responses to employee needs. HR pros are almost 2x as likely to believe they are proactive, compared to what employees think.

How proactive is HR to employees needs?



Employees view of HR

An advocate for company or employees?



We also asked both groups whether HR was primarily an advocate for the company or for employees. Again, employees were almost 2x as likely to believe that HR was there to promote company needs over employees.



That’s tough to hear, but is this a case where perception is reality? Possibly not. It might just be that HR isn’t getting honest feedback from employees on important issues. Four out of ten (39%) employees say they are uncomfortable sharing feedback about work experiences with HR, and another 30% say they are only somewhat comfortable.

The reasons are varied, but the top response is simple—44% of employees don’t think their feedback will lead to meaningful change. Another 29% say they fear their feedback will not be anonymous and 24% say their company doesn’t support a culture of feedback.

Our research bears this out. Nearly one in three HR professionals (31%) and 36% of workers say their organization’s workplace culture does more to inhibit open and honest feedback than promote it. And workers in

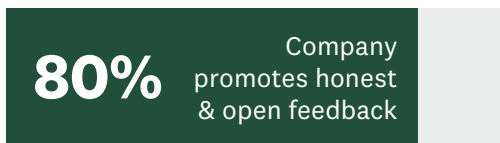
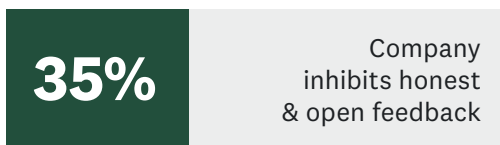
these inhibited companies are more than twice as likely to feel uncomfortable sharing such feedback compared to those who say their workplace promotes feedback.

In almost all ways, a culture of listening contributes to HR success. In our study, companies who support open and honest feedback from employees are two to four times as likely to view HR in a favorable light. And, the inverse is true.

The real insight here might be that HR’s success is inextricably linked to their company’s willingness to foster an open environment that supports honesty and advocacy. HR teams are only as effective as their ability to collect authentic feedback from their employees.

Employees rank HR effectiveness

based on whether culture inhibits or promotes feedback



How employees view HR based on company dynamics

	Inhibits feedback	Promotes feedback
Confident	12%	31%
Motivated	11%	27%
Empowered	12%	18%
Frustrated	27%	7%
Helpless	23%	6%
Burned out	20%	7%

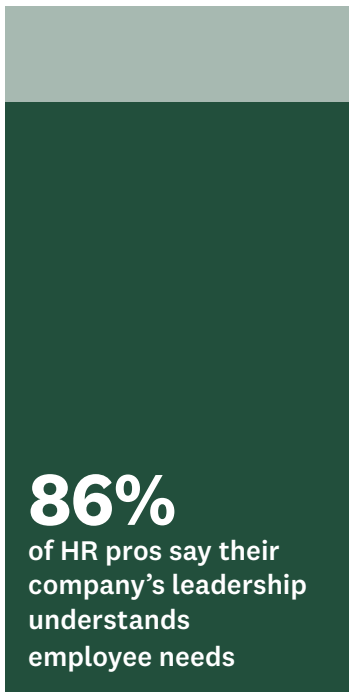
● More negative perceptions ● More positive perceptions



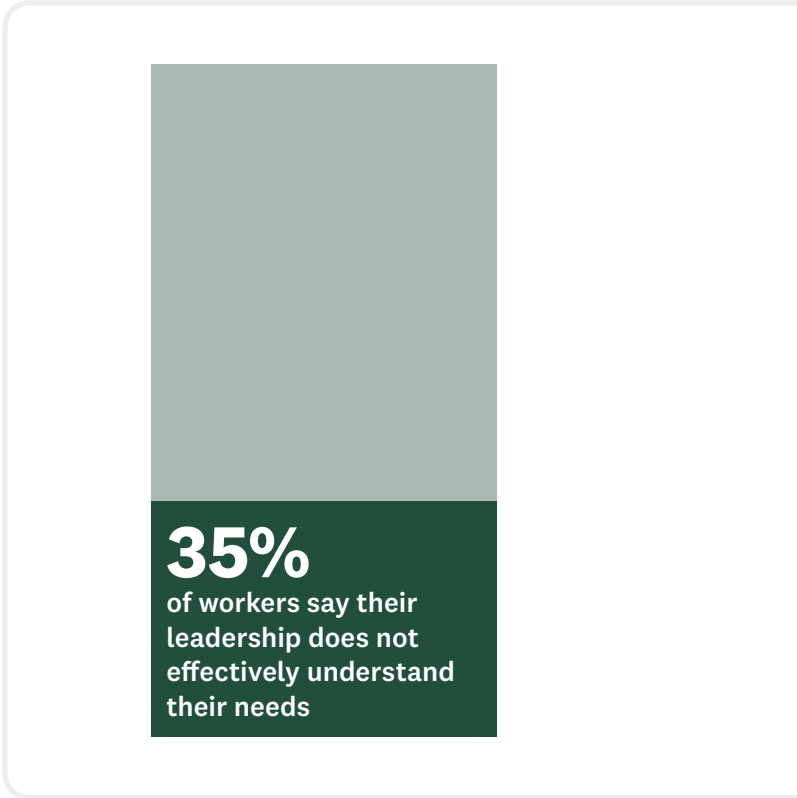
Why support from leadership is a make-or-break issue

This is why leadership’s support of HR is so critical to overall workplace wellbeing. HR has become more strategic over the past few years—almost half (46%) of HR pros say they play a leading role in driving their company’s HR strategy, and 48% say they have some influence.

HR has made an effort to better understand the employee point of view and bring their perspective to management. In most companies, employee issues have gotten the attention of leadership, who increasingly value the strategic importance of nurturing a top-notch workforce.



However, It’s not a perfect world. Employees have a slightly less favorable point of view of leadership; almost two thirds (63%) say leadership effectively understands their needs, and third believe they don’t.



The bottom line is that the report card HR gets from employees is shared by leadership, who has the power to make a positive impact on workplace dynamics. In organizations that promote open and honest feedback the number of employees that say their leadership understands their needs jumps to 80%.



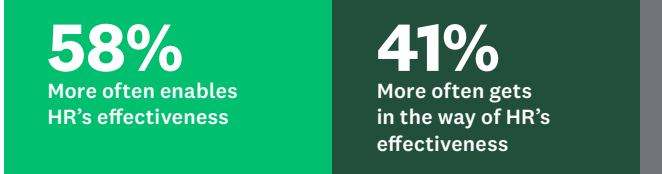
What HR needs from leadership

The good news is that HR has already established the groundwork for positive change. In our study, 98% of HR pros say they trust their leadership to build a healthy workplace environment.

The channels of communications are also open. Eight out of ten (81%) of HR pros say they feel comfortable giving open and honest feedback to leadership.

That said, HR pros are sometimes hampered by business decisions that don't necessarily align with their priorities. While 58% of HR pros say leadership enables HR's effectiveness, four in ten say leadership more often gets in the way of HR's effectiveness than enables it.

How leadership impacts HR effectiveness



We asked HR pros to choose the one thing their organizations could do to support their efforts. While all answers received response, the top three were resources, autonomy in decision-making, and support from leadership.

The HR wish list

How companies can better support HR

22%

Provide more resources and tools

17%

Increased communication between HR and leadership

17%

More autonomy for HR initiatives

To be a champion for workers, HR professionals need more than the backing of leadership on specific strategies. They need support to establish a culture of employee advocacy, where feedback is the foundation that leads to greater employee well-being and retention.





CHAPTER TWO

Alignment

STRATEGY TWO

HR priorities vs. worker wants

Competing priorities sometimes cause a disconnect with worker needs



71%

of employees say they trust HR

When it comes to company vs. employee priorities, HR is often caught in the middle. Between advocating for employee needs, and meeting leading goals for recruiting, retaining, and engaging top talent, it's no wonder they feel the need to "do it all."

The good news is that workers largely have a favorable impression of HR. Seven out of ten are trusting of HR, and most workers believe HR has a mixed (42%) or mostly positive (44%) impact on workplace experience.

This lines up with what HR thinks. Three-quarters (74%) of HR pros believe employees are trusting of HR. That number jumps to 87% in companies where feedback is promoted, and drops to 48% in companies where feedback is inhibited.

HR has earned that trust by diving into what employees want. Our research shows that almost seven out of ten (64%) of workers think HR understands their needs. However, they don't always see eye-to-eye on what's actually being worked on or accomplished.



We've identified several areas where the gap between HR and employees emerges. The first one is HR priorities.

Employees believe HR's top job is to keep them satisfied, while disregarding some of the very things that will support employee success. Strong recruiting and learning and development might be overlooked by workers, but are important deliverables for HR.

HR pros vs. worker gap #1 Top HR priorities

	HR pros	Workers	Difference
Keeping employees engaged and satisfied	28%	44%	-16pp
Compensation and benefits packages	27%	23%	+4pp
Learning, development, and onboarding programs	20%	17%	+3pp
Recruiting top-tier candidates	25%	10%	+15pp

● Bigger gap ● Smaller gap



Another gap exists in terms of where companies should focus their people efforts.

There's a ten percentage point difference in employee wellbeing as a priority, with 53% of workers believing it should be the top focus compared to 43% of HR. Other notable gaps are in cost cutting, AI and technology, and DEI and metrics, which have a 16 to 23 percentage point gap.

HR pros vs. worker gap #2 Where companies should focus

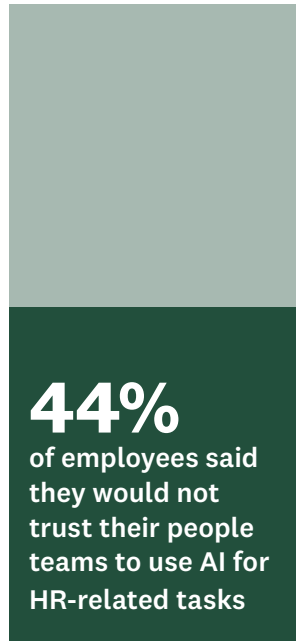
	HR	Workers	Difference
Employee wellbeing	43%	53%	-10pp
Employee retention	39%	48%	-9pp
Work flexibility	38%	33%	+5pp
AI, technology, and tools	36%	16%	+20pp
Cost-cutting measures	32%	9%	+23pp
Employee KPIs and metrics	25%	9%	+16pp
DEI initiatives	23%	7%	+16pp

● Bigger gap ● Smaller gap



The one area of alignment? Workplace flexibility which both employees and HR pros agree should be a top priority.

AI in particular seems to be a slightly contentious topic. In our comparison, AI registered a 20 percentage point gap between HR vs. workers. When asked directly, almost half of employees said they would not trust their HR team to use AI.

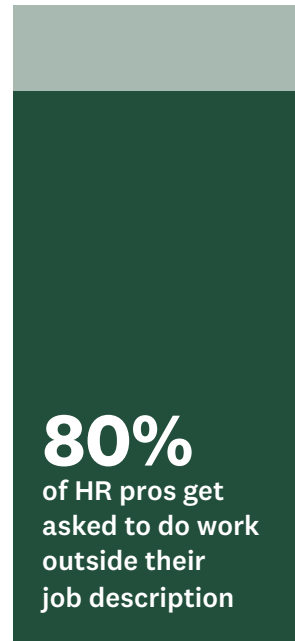


Identity crisis: What is the job?

HR pros are spread thin

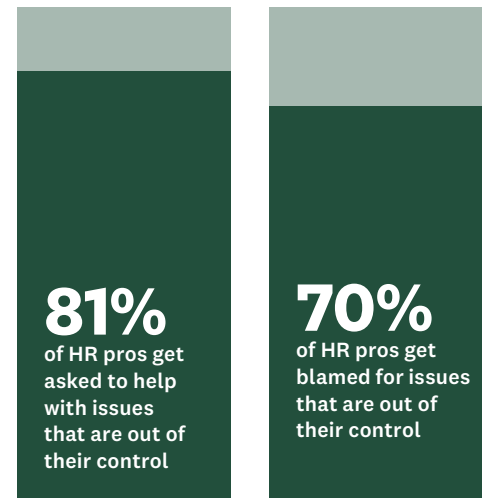
HR pros are juggling a lot in their official capacity. What's often not discussed are the areas of responsibility outside their authority and skill set.

The inquiries are varied and endless. HR is asked to handle sensitive employee information, plus choose a coffee maker for the office and swag for the offsite. They're part of making strategic decisions while playing detective on whether an employee is napping at the office.

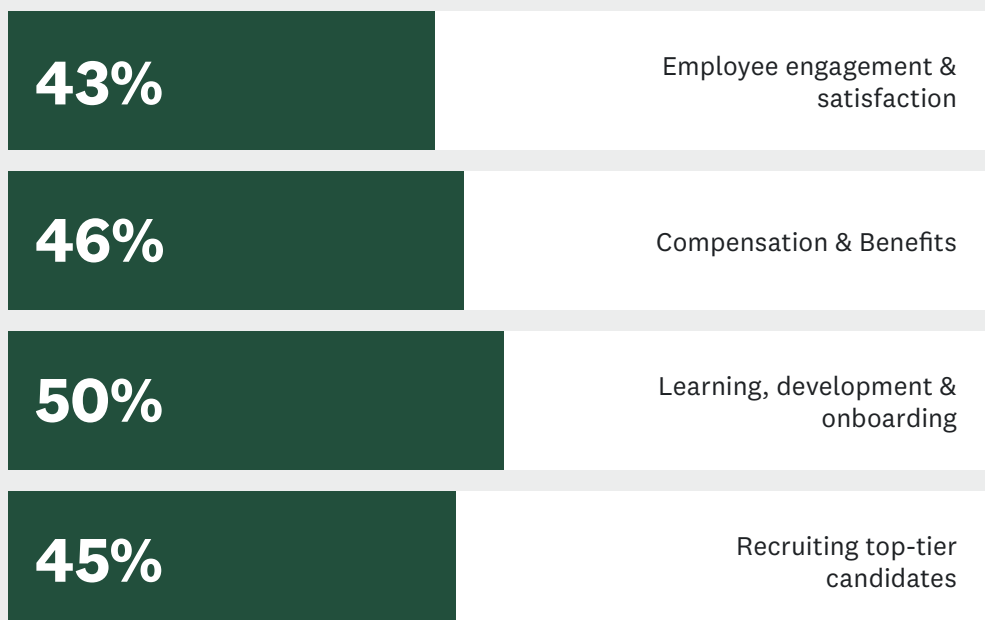


The fact is, employees and leadership are often out of sync with what HR is chartered to do. Even more troubling—HR is often asked to help with problems they are ill-equipped to solve or take responsibility for something that is not within their authority.

That identity crisis might be what unfairly leads to some lower-than-expected scores from workers. While HR pros believe their efforts are appreciated by leadership, workers are less effusive in their praise.



Employees HR performance in key areas





CHAPTER THREE

Getting personal

STRATEGY THREE

The importance of understanding the unique attributes of your workforce

Generational, level, and demographic differences matter

People teams got their name for good reason—it takes a village of HR pros to sort through the unique and individual nature of a company workforce. Today's HR teams are dealing with the most diverse workforce ever, in terms of age, gender identity, ethnicity, and educational experience.

For the first time, companies will soon have a workforce that spans six generations—from teen-aged Gen Alpha and Gen Z, who are either fresh out of college or debating higher education, to the Silent Generation who have pushed back retirement or re-entered the workforce.



Age-related preferences are surprisingly divergent and will likely require HR to expand company offerings. Benefits teams need to consider both retirement and fertility planning as well as anticipate benefits for life-long learning. L&D teams are evaluating opportunities like reverse mentoring, where younger employees help companies keep up with an increasingly youth-driven culture.

What employees think HR should prioritize by generation

	Gen Z: 27 & under	Millennial: 28-43	Gen X: 44-59	Boomers 60+
Employee wellbeing	51%	55%	55%	43%
Employee retention	41%	46%	54%	42%
Work flexibility	41%	38%	29%	23%
AI, technology, and tools	20%	17%	15%	15%
Cost-cutting measures	9%	11%	7%	10%
Employee KPIs and metrics	10%	11%	8%	8%
DEI initiatives	12%	7%	5%	6%

● High priority ● Low priority



We also looked at challenges facing HR teams by generation. Turns out, they have their hands full. Gone are the days where a generous salary or stock options could overcome all—today’s teams are navigating challenges from a multi-generational workforce that is a moving target.

HR challenges with employees by generation

	Gen Z: 27 & under	Millennial: 28-43	Gen X: 44-59	Boomers 60+
Expectations on timeliness	47%	29%	18%	14%
Communication styles	34%	29%	35%	30%
Work flexibility	24%	23%	17%	16%
Expectations for job responsibilities	17%	24%	31%	31%
Engagement with work	12%	13%	9%	11%
Mental health and wellbeing	12%	19%	16%	27%
Compensation and benefit package	5%	9%	14%	14%

● Bigger challenge ● Smaller challenge

Not only are the challenges different by generation, they are somewhat polarized. GenX and Boomers create challenges 2-3X as much about compensation, mental health, and job expectations as younger generations. GenZ, arguably the largest and most consequential generation, is hyper-focused on HR expectations of timeliness and communications styles, and doesn’t seem to care as much about compensation. Millennials seem to ride the middle ground, challenging HR in small but significant ways on almost all fronts.



Understanding the impact of gender and ethnicity

There are many other factors that impact how employee’s feel about HR initiatives. As definitions of ethnicity and gender identity become more granular, distinctions in how people feel come to the forefront.

We asked employees how they felt about different HR priorities and saw surprising similarities and distinctions.



Employee priorities based on gender and ethnicity

	Male	Female	Non-binary	Hispanic	White	Black	Asian Pac Island	Average
Employee wellbeing	51%	57%	41%	50%	54%	52%	56%	52%
Employee retention	47%	50%	51%	39%	53%	40%	44%	46%
Work flexibility	31%	36%	35%	38%	29%	39%	47%	36%
AI, technology, & tools	17%	16%	14%	21%	15%	15%	14%	16%
Cost-cutting measures	9%	9%	17%	10%	8%	12%	12%	11%
Employee KPIs & metrics	10%	7%	8%	12%	8%	10%	12%	10%
DEI initiatives	6%	6%	17%	9%	5%	11%	5%	8%

● Higher than avg priority ● Lower than avg priority



Culture is everything

HR has come a long way in how they are perceived by leadership. Today, almost six out of ten HR pros say their leadership believes their role is vital to building a successful workplace.

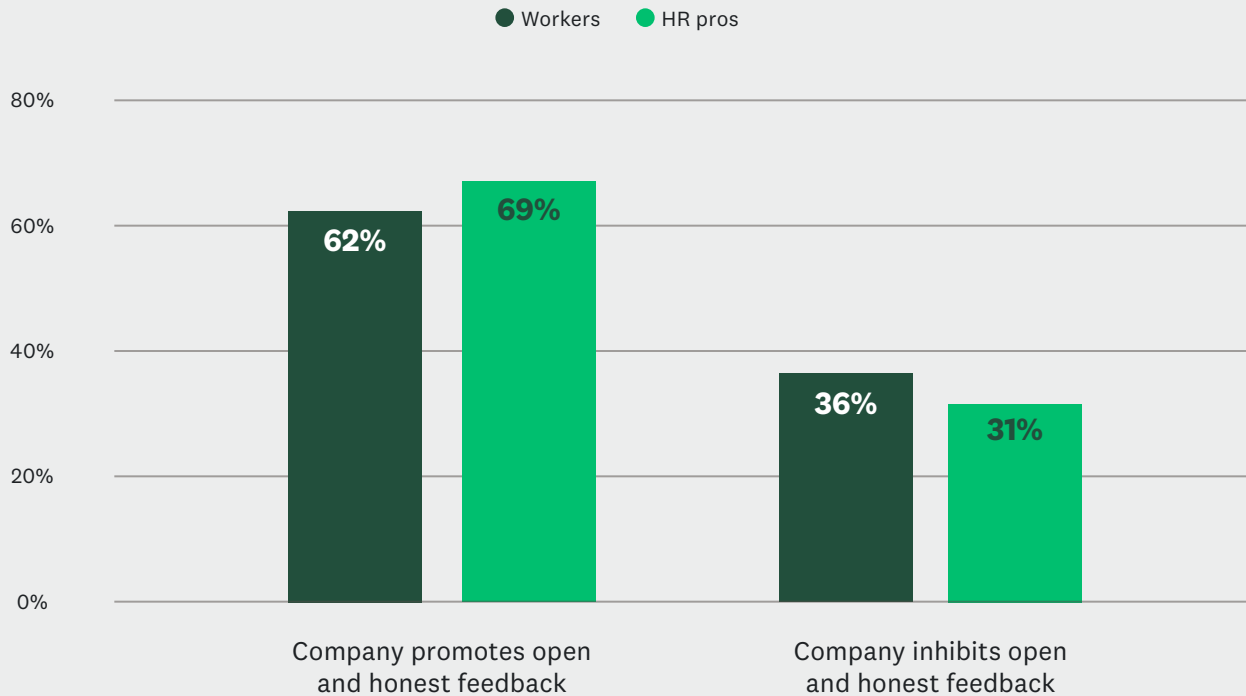
How company leaders perceive HR

- HR is vital to creating a culture of success
- HR is mainly there to protect and help the company



HR and workers are also in agreement that HR exists to support employees. Almost seven out of ten (69%) of HR pros say their company has a culture of promoting open and honest feedback. Employee perceptions were about the same.

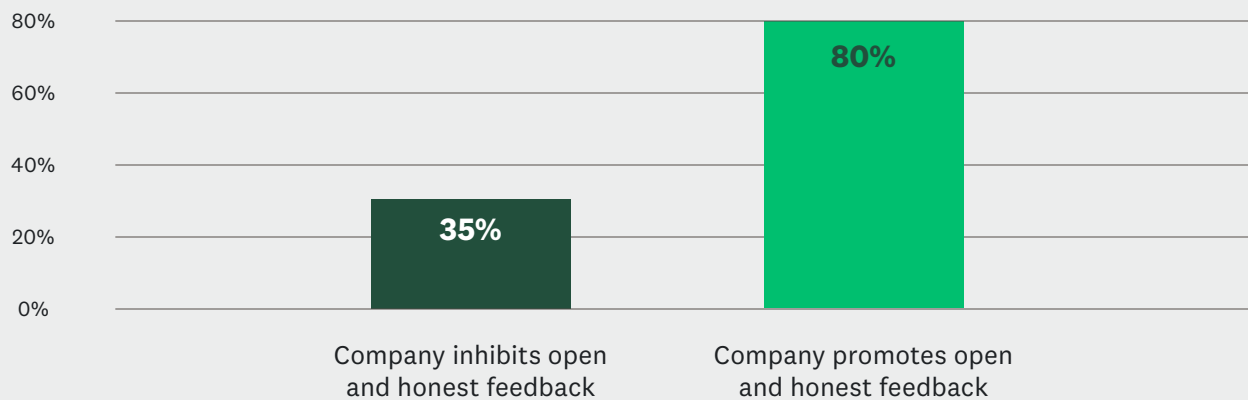
HR pros and employees are aligned on their company culture



We used these same culture attributes to segment how workers felt about HR in key areas. Across the board, we found that a culture of feedback increases the success of almost all HR outcomes—from how employees feel heard, to how much they are engaged, to their perceptions of HR and their leadership.

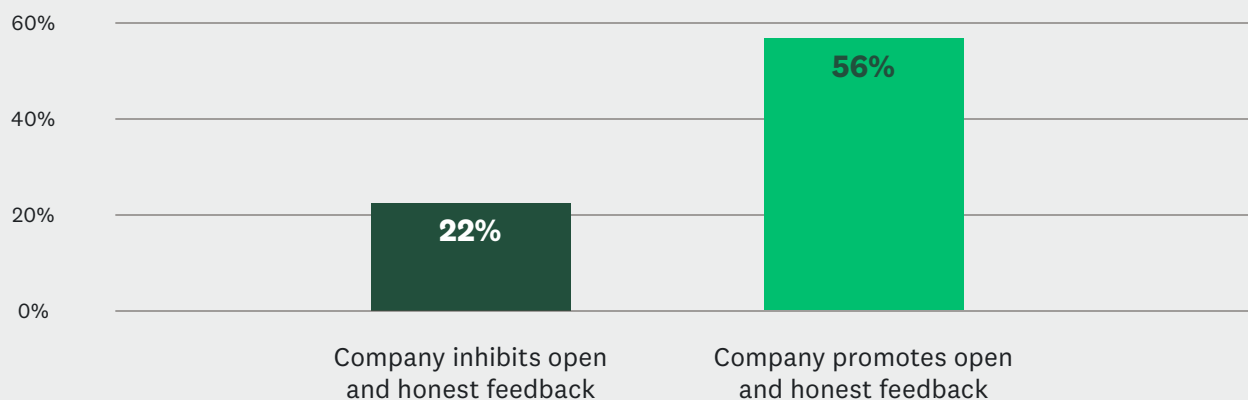
How well employees think leadership understands their needs

based on company culture



Employees rate HR's ability to keep them engaged and satisfied

based on company culture



These insights about culture can act as a roadmap for HR teams that are trying to improve their impact and elevate the employee experience. Establishing a framework for feedback is important, but so is the need to put those findings into action.



Final thoughts

Employees and HR pros are in agreement on a very important issue: both groups understand the value of including employee voices in company decisions. That said, a perception gap does exist, particularly in companies where the culture does not promote open feedback and advocacy. HR teams need to make sure that they are collecting accurate feedback that gets put into action; and leadership needs to step up to support these efforts.

Here's a roadmap for closing the HR gap.



Listen with intention

Be open to what employees are saying, even if that means you need to change course. Also, listen to what's not being said—low survey response rates might be a sign that employees are not engaged. It could also point to issues that you can easily solve—such as reassuring employees their responses are anonymous, or that an action plan will be formed from their feedback.



Challenge assumptions

Ask for feedback even if the answer may not be what you want to hear. Regular employee well-being surveys are vital, but so is feedback on the little events that shape the workplace. Send a quick survey after an all-hands, on a new benefits package, or ask employees how they feel about how a layoff was handled. You might not get a lot of responses, or positive feedback, but the act of asking signals to employees that the company cares, and opens the door for more constructive conversations.



Take action with care

Sometimes its tempting to blow past feedback that's hard to hear, or is part of a bigger cultural issue that will take a lot of work to change. However, sometimes big changes are exactly what's needed to truly improve the workplace. Tackling issues sooner rather than later is how you change culture, and deliver the kind of support that's needed for employee wellbeing.

Harness employee feedback to close the HR gap

Get started

Methodology: SurveyMonkey study among 304 HR professionals was conducted on July 12, 2024. SurveyMonkey study of 2,593 U.S. workers 18+ was conducted July 12-16, 2024. Respondents for both HR professionals and employees were selected from an online non-probability panel.

