

TOP SECRET

THE SECRET TO AN ENGAGED WORKFORCE

(THAT SHOULDN'T BE SO SECRET)

Aron Ain

Do you want your employees to absolutely love coming to work?

You should. Employees who love their work put in their best effort and perform better. They work better in teams. They feel more loyalty toward the company. They stay in their jobs longer. They help you recruit top talent. They come to you with new ideas. And, they make your company stronger.

You know all this, which is why you're already working hard to pump up that all-important employee engagement metric. You're paying competitive salaries and benefits. You're offering attractive career paths. You're providing a whole array of attractive perks—social outings, free food, yoga classes, a swank office, flexible hours, the latest technology, maybe even a masseuse on premises. With all this, you think, why would talented employees possibly wish to go anywhere else? There is a reason, one that you might have overlooked. Are you giving your people amazing managers? Or are your managers so-so—or worse?

Everyone deserves a great manager—a boss who will inspire, support, and empower them to do their best work. Great managers are a practical necessity. You see, employees might join companies because of the money or the company's brand, but they leave companies because of bad managers. If you've ever had a bad boss, you know that your manager can singlehandedly take a wonderfully rewarding job and turn it into a real-life episode of *The Office* on continual replay.



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Companies don't usually connect employee engagement with the quality of an organization's managerial corps. As they see it, competent managers might affect performance, but not the underlying affection employees have for their jobs. Most companies offer manager training, but it's usually a "check the box" type of exercise. Meanwhile, most managers don't work very hard or long on their skills—they're just too busy. And sadly, it shows. As surveys have found, managers are treating employees poorly, taking them for granted, failing to mentor them in their careers, failing to communicate well, and failing to solicit and listen to their opinions. No surprise that employee engagement is so low at most companies and in many industries generally, despite all of the expensive perks.

At Kronos, we've dramatically improved the quality of our 800+ managers, boosting engagement and organizational performance in the process. We've done it by deploying a six-part approach that establishes managerial quality as a top priority, creates new mechanisms for driving managerial improvement, and reinforces culturally how we want our managers to behave. No matter what size team or organization you lead, you can deploy this framework to boost managerial quality, and to deepen the love your employees have for their jobs and your company.

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Action #1: Become a Great Manager Yourself

A great managerial corps starts with you. After all, you can't ask others to manage more effectively unless you're doing it, too. So, how good are you, really? Ask your team members what they think, and listen hard when they offer you critical feedback. Always strive to get better as a manager. Pay attention to your daily habits—the many small steps you can take to care for your people, inspire them, motivate them, and support them. Modeling a commitment to becoming a great manager will inspire other managers around you to focus on their management skills, too.

I admit, at the beginning of my career, I wasn't always the best manager. Yes, I did many things right: I cared about my team members and their careers, and I did my best to help them succeed. But I didn't always understand the needs of individual team members. In particular, I worked many of them too hard. Since I didn't have children then, and focused on advancing my career as a top priority, I didn't hesitate to work ungodly hours, and I took it for granted that my team members would do the same. One day an employee called me on it, explaining that people have different needs, and that not everyone wanted to make their job their life, like I was. It was a wakeup call, and it prompted me to pay much more attention to my team members' needs. I realized that to become a great leader, I had to start acting like one, including focusing not just on my needs, but also the needs of my team.

Action #2: Define “Great” for your managers on your team or organization

If you have a training program for managers in place at your organization, how thoughtful is it? Have you taken the time to develop a clear, cogent behavioral model defining what makes for managerial greatness?

At Kronos, we built our successful Courage to Lead leadership course—mandatory for all our managers—around a three-part model. We expected managers to “Be Bold and Humble”; “Challenge and Support” their team members; and “Disrupt and Connect” in interactions with team members. We further specified the behaviors we wanted under each plank. Being bold and humble, for instance, was about trusting employees, assuming their competence, speaking honestly and openly with them, and making the difficult decisions required to tackle problems head-on.

What do you think makes for a great manager? How should your managers behave in your team or organization, given the specific kind of workplace culture you want to create? How do your employees want their bosses to behave? Keep these questions in mind, knowing that there is no “right” answer—you and your team or organization have to figure it out for yourselves.

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Action #3: Measure Managers' Performance

Training doesn't count for much if you can't establish how good your managers currently are and whether they're improving over time. So, how do you track managers' performance?

Simple: Ask employees. Most companies field annual engagement surveys, querying employees about their feelings about the company and their work conditions. But very few firms think to ask employees how they feel about their managers. What a wasted opportunity!

In 2016, Kronos launched its Manager Effectiveness Index (MEI), a battery of questions fielded to employees as a part of our bi-annual employee engagement survey. In compiling questions for MEI, we started with our three-part behavioral model and performed some further research about what constitutes an outstanding manager. We wound up fielding questions about four kinds of managerial behavior, asking employees how well their managers communicate with them, develop them and their careers, empower them to do great work, and support their progress.

MEI affords individual managers a clear picture of how they're doing in the eyes of employees, and whether their efforts to improve are bearing fruit over time. At the corporate level, it allows us to review patterns across teams, identifying and addressing problem areas. It also allows us to better understand the impact of managers on engagement and retention. When we introduced MEI, we found clear links between the skillfulness of managers and employee engagement and retention. Our strongest managers saw far higher levels of engagement among their team members, and they retained more of those employees. Managers really do make a huge difference!

You, too, can create an MEI for your team or organization. Borrow some of our questions, or craft your own to match your own conception of managerial greatness. Field these surveys regularly, analyzing the data with the same rigor you'd apply to other critical metrics in your business.

Action #4: Hold Managers Accountable

Once you have a tool like MEI at your disposal, deploy it with teams and managers at all levels of the organization to drive improvement. When we introduced MEI, we sent our managers their personal scores, asking them to discuss the scores with their team members and craft development plans for themselves. We trained managers on MEI, explaining the tool to them and how to discuss their scores with team, and we also provided them with coaching and skill-building materials (this was all in addition to our standard managerial training programs).

As our managers knew, we'd be repeating the MEI survey regularly, and holding them accountable for making progress. We expected them to take this exercise seriously, and to work hard to get better. Although some managers resented the extra burden we were placing on them, most jumped at the chance to improve their skills, agreeing with our philosophical commitment to managerial excellence. Happily, a great many of these managers did improve within just the first year. More generally, a spirit of excellence has arisen within our manager corps that continues to this day, with managers competing with one another to improve. Collectively, our managers are much better than they were just a few years ago, and employees notice it. Our engagement scores, already extremely high, have soared higher still.

Action #5: Celebrate Great Managers

Like many organizations, we have programs in place to recognize great employee performance. But what about an awards program for great managers? We've got one of those, too! Every year, we ask employees to nominate managers for our Courage to Lead award program. Out of approximately 800 managers in our organization, we pick 25 to attend a special awards ceremony, giving each a free vacation as a thank-you. These awards, coupled with my own practice of publicly recognizing great managers in my speeches, send a clear message to the organization: We value great managers. We're also demonstrating a cultural value that we want all of our managers to display: gratitude. As we see it, a great manager is a grateful one. And so is a great company.

Action #6: Create A Broader Culture Consistent with Managerial Greatness

If you really want great managers, you have to think big and craft a culture that supports the desired managerial behaviors. This doesn't happen over a quarter, or even two. It takes years, and in our experience, requires a constant and open-ended effort. Here are a few of the key values (aside from gratitude) that we've found especially important for managers, and that we've worked hard to inculcate throughout the organization:

Humility: No employee likes arrogant or egotistical bosses, yet organizations are full of them. These big-shots talk a lot and fail to listen to employees. They micromanage and dictate solutions. They cultivate distance between themselves and employees. They revel in their special perks—the corner office, the first-class airline ticket.

At Kronos, we not only train managers to show humility—we create a culture of humility through our policies and leadership actions. We work hard to screen out egotistical managers when hiring. We forego corner offices (in our corporate headquarters, senior leaders have their offices in the interior of each floor). As an organization, we admit it when we don't know something (and find the experts that do). We solicit feedback from employees, and listen to what they have to say. All of this creates an environment in which humility is the norm, not the exception. As a result, when we ask managers to put employees first, not themselves, and to show humility in a wide variety of ways, this doesn't seem foreign or unusual to them. The broader culture supports it.

Trust: Managers who don't trust their subordinates will dictate solutions and micromanage, assuming that they alone are competent. They'll also fail to communicate openly or transparently. Do you think their team members will show trust in return? Not likely.

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We set formal expectations around trust, defining it as a behavior we want from everyone, and pegging a portion of employees' and managers' compensation to how well they demonstrate this behavior. We also build trust into our policies. Only about 5 percent of companies have open time-off policies. We're one of them. Our MyTime policy trusts employees to take the time off they need, while also getting their work done.

Open and Honest Communication: How successful would we be at getting our managers to communicate openly and honestly if our organization didn't do that, and if I as the CEO didn't do it myself? Not very. Fortunately, we (and I) make a practice of over-communicating, keeping the channels of communications open and flowing, even when tough messages need to be delivered. As a global company, we put out a wide variety of communications that allows HQ to stay linked to our far-flung offices. I send out emails and put out unscripted video messages that let employees in on important news. I and other leaders and managers also communicate causally with employees both in person and via our internal social collaboration platform. Finally, we offer formal training on communication skills to employees. We care about the quality and quantity of communication in our organization, so it only makes sense that we expect our managers to do so as well.

Caring: Great managers care about their employees' welfare. Great companies do, too. We've worked for years to create a culture built around caring for others. When employees or their family members fall ill or suffer some other setback, our workforce and the company rush in to help via informal protocols we have in place. We also show care institutionally through policies that recognize the importance of work-life balance and by providing an array of benefits that care for the whole person. When a manager or employee doesn't treat others with kindness, we notice and take quick action. As an organization, we support employees' career development even though we know that our best employees might sometimes wish to go elsewhere—because we genuinely care about them and their success. With caring as a cultural norm,

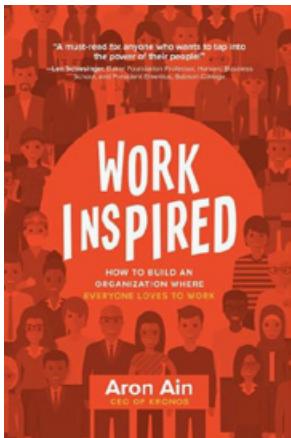
individual managers are much more likely to show kindness and compassion to their team members. And as our employees tell us, so many of our managers do!

Building a corps of great managers isn't rocket science, but it does require dedication of time and resources. Follow our six-step approach: Strive to become a great manager yourself, set clear and thoughtful expectations, measure managers' performance, hold them accountable for improving, provide the necessary training, celebrate managers when they achieve greatness, and build a broader culture that supports and brings out the best in managers. Before long, you'll see a real improvement in the quality of your managers. And if our experience is any indication, you'll see engagement scores and organizational performance rising, too.

Managers are the secret to an engaged workforce. They impact the quality of work experience far more profoundly than ping-pong tables and perks do. **Provide your people with bosses who support, nurture, and inspire them, and they'll not merely feel happy about where and how they work—they'll love it.** ☑



Info



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About the author

Aron Ain is the CEO of Kronos, a global provider of workforce management and human capital management cloud solutions, which are used by more than 40 million people every day within more than 35,000 organizations in more than 100 countries. Ain has spent his entire career at Kronos, playing a role in nearly every functional department. He is a multiyear recipient of Glassdoor's Highest Rated CEO honor, and has earned Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year award, the Mass Technology Leadership Council's CEO of the Year award, and the inaugural Ray Stata Leadership and Innovation award by the Massachusetts High Technology Council. During his tenure as CEO, Kronos has been recognized for its innovative product offerings, and has been named a "Top Place to Work" in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, India, and China. Ain speaks often on engagement and people strategy, as well as on entrepreneurship and leading global organizations.