



Employee Engagement in 3 simple (but hard) Questions

1. Do your employees *believe* in your purpose?
2. Do they feel they *belong* to a supportive community?
3. Do they know how they *matter* to your success?

UPDATED AND EXPANDED WITH 10 WORKSHEETS

Introduction:

The Power of 3 Questions

Leaders have always had plenty to worry about, and each era's leaders tend to feel that "today's pressing questions" are more pressing than those of times past. The coronavirus pandemic has ensured that 2020 (and undoubtedly most of 2021) will be remembered. But there are also other reasons to feel compassion for today's leaders: their 21st-century worries include skills, talent, diversity, artificial intelligence, trade, class, climate, trust—in addition to the enduring stressors of product strength, market share, and profit.

These challenge-opportunity items are far from academic, because they involve the organization's humans—each person a striving-worrying multiplier of scale and complexity.

How can a leader know she's giving those humans what they need to thrive, for the organization and for themselves? Every single day, she can ask herself three questions:

- Do our employees *believe* in the organization's purpose?
- Do they feel that they *belong* to a community of mutual support?
- Do they know that they *matter* to our success?

When every employee can truly say, "I believe in our purpose, I belong to this community, and I matter to our success," then that organization is prepared to deliver big—and to sustain the effort.

It's not easy, because it calls for every leader and communicator to ask every day, "Are we doing all we can to help our employees believe, belong and matter?" And then answering—with the dialogue, conversations, policies, and programs that bring this spirit to the particular goals and challenges of your organization.

Real Answers— Not Happy Talk

The answers don't have to be pleasant ones. Life and work are full of difficult decisions with tough actions that aren't comfortable. The "believe, belong, matter" framework isn't about happy talk or false paradises. It's about recognizing

Make the most of the worksheets.

My work is protected by copyright—this toolkit, my writings, my websites. But within the bounds of fair use, I hope you will adopt the "believe, belong, matter" philosophy and language in your thinking and your communications and use the worksheets to advance your progress. May these ideas help you, and your organization, thrive.

that organizational strength and business momentum depend on employees who understand and commit to the company's goals, trust their leaders and colleagues, and know how their contribution makes a difference.

It's less about mission statements than the missions themselves.

For example, if the organization is about to enter a new market segment to pursue more growth, create a new product line, or purchase another company, the leaders should ask themselves:

- Will this move be easy or hard to understand in terms of our goals?
- Are we asking employees to do new things, or simply to direct their current skills in new directions?
- Will this step make employees instinctively prouder of the company, or less proud?
- After the transition, will the organization be different?
- Is the company making this move from strength, or to protect against a current weakness?
- Are leaders and managers prepared to help every single employee understand how her role will help the new approach succeed?

Each answer will affect how employees—the organization's humans—will believe in the organization's purpose, feel they belong to a mutually supportive community, and matter to the successful outcome.

It's important to recognize that "belief" isn't only about business strategy, "belong" isn't just about trust and familiarity,

Every single day, are you helping your employees...

...**Believe** in your mission?

...**Belong** to your community?

...**Matter** to your success?

and “matter” isn’t just about job role. To believe in a company I also have to sense that it treats employees fairly. To feel I belong here, I have to believe in the company’s strategy. To matter, I have to trust my manager as she guides and recognizes my work.

Know also that the “believe, belong, matter” framework isn’t intended to be a “messaging house” (though it can greatly inform your messaging). Just as declaring that you’re a “trustworthy” person doesn’t inspire confidence, in my experience talking with employees explicitly about “believe, belong and matter” isn’t the best approach. (It can be done, but it requires really careful navigation not to come off as preachy.) The “believe, belong, matter” framework works best as a set of prompting questions to inform strategy, policy, action and messaging.

These will always be tough questions. Doing the hard work of asking and answering them will help leaders lead, help managers guide, and help employees thrive.

What to Actually Do? Leverage Everything.

How do you implement the “believe, belong, matter” framework in your organization? What do you actually do?

Whether you’re a leader, a manager, or a communications professional, the most important action is to begin thinking in terms of “believe, belong and matter.”

Consider everything

In everything you communicate, from the CEO’s strategy presentation to the vacation policies to the fire drills and

cleaning schedules, think about how words and actions can reinforce, or weaken, an environment of “believe, belong and matter.” Use it as a filter, a lens. Watch for opportunities to reinforce the environment in positive ways. Watch for disconnects that risk negative effects.

This framing doesn’t have to take you much time. Then you can decide where upside opportunities or downside risks warrant more time—for greater clarity, for addressing natural questions, or for reconsidering the policy or business step itself.

The good news and the bad news is that nearly everything is connected. Employee strength depends on the strength and clarity of business strategy, on the experienced integrity of leaders and managers, on fair pay and benefits, on the ability of managers to make every employee’s role and contribution clear and recognized.

All of these cross-influences make things more complex, but they also increase the number of opportunities for positive momentum.

Partner well

Appreciate the limits of any individual role—and regardless of your role, become close partners with human resource professionals and business leaders. Each on her own can do a lot, but not nearly as much as you can do together.

And the most important aspirations—the higher aims of “believe, belong and matter”—can’t be reached without coordinated and mutually supportive efforts to plan, to execute, to measure, to adjust, and to plan and execute again and again.

To be a great partner means to listen closely, to support fully, and to request support clearly. It also means (in this



You can start anywhere in the “believe, belong, matter” way of thinking. Each notion feeds and strengthens the others. (See Worksheet 3 for some examples.)

context) not being preachy and absolute about “believe, belong, matter.” The last thing another partner needs to hear is, “your policy is hurting my ‘matter’ goal.”

But talking through the framework, pointing out the ways in which your own work fell short of your goals, seeking to understand the partner’s goals, and exploring ways that your work can help them—these are powerful steps toward strong and beneficial partnering.

Don’t talk about it—live it

In my experience (as I mentioned above), talking publicly about “believe, belong and matter” isn’t a good idea, just as declaring that you’re a trustworthy person doesn’t inspire confidence. It’s better if the “believe, belong, matter” framework is kept inside the communications and leadership teams, as the framing for other action and communication.

It’s not that the framework needs to be a big secret. The principles aren’t embarrassing and they’re not strategically sensitive. It’s just that without the right context they sound hollow. Or like someone protesting too much.

In addition, the phrase can feel preachy or misty-eyed. “So, you’re trying to make me a true believer?” an employee might ask in an open forum. And I’d have no trouble answering: “Not at all. I want to make sure we’re pursuing and explaining strategies that you can believe in.” But it would be an unnecessary distraction.

Much better if those employees simply benefit from actions and words that truly foster an environment of “believe, belong and matter.”

Allocate leaders’ different strengths

Just as there are multi-dimensional relationships between “believe, belong, and matter” and the stuff of work life (business strategy, HR policies, organizational culture), there are many opportunities offered by the differing strengths of executives and leaders in your organization.

Some executives and managers are terrific presenters and speech-makers on a big stage. Some are much more effective in small groups where quiet dialogue happens.

They also have different experiences and stories, and stories—examples—are your friend.

Make good use of those diverse strengths and stories. Build matrices (on whiteboards or in your head) of how those human leaders can best connect with your human employees in various settings, situations, timings, and communication modes. Invite leaders into your thinking, and leverage their suggestions. Wherever they are suggesting they help, they are likely to be energetic helpers in your mission.

In the meantime, you’ll be giving your employees the kind of diverse messages that will build strong foundations of “believe, belong and matter.”

Strengthening Other Models of Leadership & Engagement

This leadership and communications framework—“I believe, I belong, I matter”—can be used with any engagement system, change model or cultural approach you’re now using, to focus and strengthen that effort’s goals, messaging and execution.

The lens of “believe, belong and matter” is a way of looking at the opportunity—the obligation—to help employees thrive.

There are many philosophies of leadership, many modes of communications excellence. Every approach can benefit from this framework.

Professionals, scientists, researchers and authors of all kinds offer blueprints, practices and disciplines that may resonate with you and help propel your momentum. Training and development models, the organizational application of scientific research in physiology, psychology and neurology, the intersections of societal changes and business strategies—all offer riches to be harvested.

Use them all. I don’t suggest the “believe, belong, matter” framework should displace them. But my experience tells me it can help focus and fuel any other system designed to build employee strength in organizations of any size, industry or culture (even if you’re trying to change your culture).

All leaders and communicators, from executives and managers to communications professionals, from business group leaders to HR practitioners, have the opportunity—the obligation—to step up to help employees thrive.

It’s a wonderful opportunity—and a serious obligation. But who wouldn’t want to give every employee this source of strength and power?

Worksheets

- 1** [The 5-minute Inventory](#)
- 2** [Who Are We?](#)
- 3** [Starting Where You Are](#)
- 4** [The Riches of Our Team](#)
- 5** [Differences & Opportunities](#)
- 6** [Questions Behind Questions](#)
- 7** [Preparing for Big Moves](#)
- 8** [Engaging to See](#)
- 9** [Leveraging Leaders' Talents](#)
- 10** [We Don't Have Much Time](#)

[Staying in Touch](#)

The 5-Minute Inventory

There's never enough time, it seems. (Ignore for a moment the good wisdom that we give what matters the time it deserves.) So, if you have ONLY 5 minutes to invest in this effort, this worksheet is for you.

There are two benefits to the "5-minute inventory" exercise:

- It can help you get un-stuck if you're having trouble beginning. After all, we can do anything for just 5 minutes.
- It can give you a starting sense of what you might develop with more time—or even provide you with a "minimum viable plan" to begin with.

Set a timer on your phone for 5 minutes. Then answer these questions:

Do our employees or colleagues believe in our organization or team? Do they feel that what we're doing is worth doing, for our customers or clients? Why or why not?

Do our employees or colleagues feel that they belong to a community of people who support one another? Why—or why not?

Do our employees or colleagues feel that they matter to our success? Why—or why not?

Who are we now? And who do we wish to become? The same questions that we might ask ourselves as humans are useful to ask about our organization. The answers will inform what we do and say.

	Who are we now? The way things are today	Who do we want to become? How we want things to be in the future
<p><i>I believe:</i> What about our organization helps our people believe in our mission and purpose? What diminishes belief?</p>		
<p><i>I belong:</i> What helps our people feel they belong to a mutually supportive organization? What reduces that sense?</p>		
<p><i>I matter:</i> What helps our people know how and why their contributions make a difference to our success? What confuses that clarity?</p>		

Every organization is unique when it comes to how and why their people believe, belong, and matter—or don't. The relative strengths of these states will even vary over time, as things change inside and outside the organization. But when you are working to increase the overall sense of “I believe, I belong, and I matter,” you can begin anywhere you like, from building upon a strength or repairing a weakness.

For example, if you have a strong sense of community (belonging) but you're less clear about your mission and the contribution of each person, you can take advantage of your strong sense of belonging to bring people together to define your own “north star” and clarify each person's role.

If, instead, most people are energized about your purpose and mission, but struggle with teamwork, you can ask individuals to share (in written inputs or live discussion) what they want or need from another person or team, and how that will help. (See also Worksheet 4, “The Riches of Our Team.”)



	I Believe	I Belong	I Matter
Rank their relative strengths (1, 2, 3)			
Which ONE characteristic do you need to be strongest for your immediate needs? Why?			
Which ONE characteristic do you need to be strongest for your long-term needs? Why?			

What if we could know each other better—and help each other more? Part of getting to “I believe, I belong, and I matter” is knowing our relative talents and other resources, appreciating them, and applying them to accomplish big things. What if we had unlimited access to infinite resources of talent, money, and time?

Infinite riches are unlikely, but what’s certain is that we don’t know just how rich we actually are—all the strengths and talents of our colleagues, whether we’re a 5-person workgroup, a 5000-person organization, or a virtual network. And that means we’re not sufficiently applying those “riches” to solve current problems or create new opportunities.

This exercise can begin to change that. It’s called “The Riches of Our Team” and it’s simple. We ask ourselves and each other three questions—and we answer them in candid ways that go beyond the usual work conversation or knowledge repository:

- **What do I have?** What’s my superpower that you might not know about? For example: Securing more resources from our bosses. Helping another superstar know how appreciated she is. Identifying the root cause of a longtime problem.
- **What do I need?** What capability would solve a painful problem I’ve got right now? For example: Understanding an angry customer’s true need. Assembling and analyzing a year of unstructured performance data. Or rewriting Monday’s presentation this weekend.
- **Who do I know?** For example: Is our industry’s expert on tech trends my second cousin (could I get her to meet with us)? Is my neighbor a PowerPoint guru who moonlights on weekends (and would love to redo your presentation)?

Use this table (and next page) as a guideline for your larger (or many) worksheets. Record the answers, share the completed document with everyone involved, and make it a living document with continual expansion, refinement—and conversation. *Because conversations are magic.*

	What do I have?	What do I need?	Who do I know?
[Name]			

The Riches of Our Team (continued)

	What do I have?	What do I need?	Who do I know?
[Name]			

We use categories and labels to quickly describe groups of people—employees, leaders, managers—but of course each human thinks and feels in her own way, wants and needs different things, sees and hears uniquely. How each person does or doesn't believe, belong, and matter will be unique, too. People value different elements of pay and benefits differently. Some enjoy broad conversations about industry and market trends and business strategy, while others prefer looking hard at the priorities of today, this month, and this year. I like working alone; you're energized by teams. One colleague wants to be appreciated for her dedication, another for her imagination.

In our quest, then, to help employees believe, belong, and matter in our organization, we need to factor in these differences, at least in our awareness, and ideally in how we approach and develop our policies, communications, priorities—culture.

So, remembering that every generalization will be wrong, let's generalize. Think about a particular colleague, or focus on yourself, and ask: Does this person care most about believing in the mission, belonging to a community, or mattering to the outcome? (Most of us care about all three, but play along with the prioritization exercise.) And what will that top priority mean?

Put yourself in brainstorm mode: every answer is right, and every idea tells you something.

If I care most about this...	Then I'm going to be motivated by:	And I'll be demotivated by:
<p><i>Believing in our company's purpose and mission</i></p>		
<p><i>Feeling that I belong to a community of mutually supportive people</i></p>		
<p><i>Knowing that I matter to our success</i></p>		

In stereotyped politics, a candidate for office avoids answering a journalist’s difficult questions and instead smoothly offer responses to the questions she’d rather be answering (and pretends to be hearing). In conversations with employees, we ideally want to practice the opposite: listening for the more difficult questions behind the questions an employee is asking—and then embracing the difficulty and making the most of an opportunity for honest connections.

For example:

- An employee asking, “Will there be layoffs?” is probably wondering “Will I be fired?” or “Will my pay be cut?” or “Will I have to start working even harder?”
- An employee asking, “Is it true that Product X is going to be late?” may be asking “Will we lose more business?” or “Are we telling our customers the truth about schedules?” or “Will the head of that organization be fired?”
- An employee asking any question is often wondering some form of, “Can I believe in our plans?” or “Can I trust you?” or “Do you value me?”

This is the difference between saying, “I can’t address that specifically, but what I can tell you is....” and responding with, “I think you’re really asking whether you can trust me?”

These situations are big opportunities for increasing trust, clarity, and commitment—with honest answers that address tough topics directly, offer what you’re planning to do about it, and invite the insights and efforts of colleagues to become stronger together. (NOTE: I care about honesty here, and I don’t care for the term “transparent.” There are always confidences that must be held and sensitive information that can’t be shared, but we can talk about what we’re not sharing and why.)

What questions are you hearing—and what are the tougher questions behind them?

Questions we’re hearing	Questions behind those questions

Whenever your company or organization is making a big move, internally or externally, ask yourself how that move will affect your colleagues in the context of “I believe, I belong, and I matter.”

Ask yourself a series of questions and see how each answer will affect how employees—the organization’s humans—will believe in the organization’s purpose, feel they belong to a mutually supportive community, and know how they matter to the successful outcome.

For example, if the organization is about to enter a new market segment to pursue more growth, create a new product line, or purchase another company, ask:

Questions	Answers
Will this move be easy or hard to understand in terms of our goals?	
Are we asking employees to do new things, or simply to direct their current skills in new directions?	
Will this step make employees instinctively prouder of the company, or less proud?	
Is the company making this move from strength, or to protect against a current weakness?	
Are leaders and managers prepared to help every single employee understand how her role will help the new approach succeed?	

“Every boxer has a strategy until he gets punched in the face.” “No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy.” “Plans are useless; planning is essential.”

These are wonderful reminders that beautifully constructed plans don’t deliver results. It’s the messy work of constant effort, day after day, that matters. And that’s nowhere more true than in the leadership and communications work needed to cultivate and maintain a working environment of “I believe, I belong, and I matter.”

My favorite advice in this arena comes from Robert Burgelman*, the venerated Stanford professor and author. Regarding Napoleon’s quote about approaching major battles—“We engage, and then we see.”—Burgelman says he prefers an alternate translation: *We engage so that we may see.*

No matter what we expect to result from a business strategy, a company policy, or a leader’s town hall meeting, the most important results are the actual reactions and feedback from employees. Not only should we be unafraid of employee reactions and responses; we should prompt them, seek them out, so that we may better understand our employees and our organization—and then adjust, and adjust again.

Reflect on current or past efforts and how employees responded. What are we learning?

Action or communication	How employees responded	How we adjusted (or will adjust)

*Professor Burgelman offers the original Napoleon quote in *Strategy is Destiny: How Strategy-Making Shapes a Company’s Future*, Free Press, 2002, page 22 (in the section “Strategic Leadership”). He offered his alternate translation in a seminar at Intel.

Time is a painful constraint. Time is a wonderful gift. Both statements are true. Circumstance brings one feeling or the other at different, er, times.

How smart can we be about calling forth the right one of those two feelings, to help us make the most of a given moment, task, or opportunity?

First, we remind ourselves of one side of the paradox: In many situations we need to deliver something fast: there won't be time for perfect, and the only way to survive is to quickly deliver a reasonably acceptable first effort. And often that will suffice. We can rough it out completely and quickly, then fine-tune and finish it incrementally. I like to think of this as the "draft I could submit if time ran out now," or in agile practices (loosely speaking) the "minimum viable product."

If it's the kind of work you cannot incrementally improve later—like pouring the concrete for a retaining wall, or performing brain surgery—then of course you need to do the "fast and merely acceptable" job virtually: think quickly through every step you'll be doing, fast; then take the first steps, whatever the project and your practice dictate.

But here's the other side of the paradox: We're going to be dead a long time. Is that meeting I'm rushing to be ready for really all that important if I miss it? Does this plan really need to be done tonight? Which things are really worth the hurry? What can I skip altogether, without harm? And what truly must be executed beautifully?

When you really DO need to hurry, keep "acceptable" front of mind, and don't second-guess yourself. When you really DON'T need to hurry, breathe slowly, and do the task or project exactly how you want.

To help our employees	Things I really DO need to deliver quickly and soon.	Things I really DON'T need to do quickly (or at all)
Believe		
Belong		
Matter		

Staying in Touch

This toolkit is continually evolving. Check back from time to time at www.michaelgreencommunications.com to see what's new. Or send me an email to get updates as they emerge.

I'd like to learn how the toolkit is helping you. Where are you applying it? What additional worksheets and approaches would you like to see? Send your input.

And if you'd like my help to increase the power of "I believe, I belong, I matter" in your organization, please write or call.

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