

Red Sky Thinking

A Whole New World of **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

5 Internal Comms Trends in 2021

Farewell to Internal Communications as We Knew Them

When COVID-19 struck, offices around the world grew dark and quiet. Employers faced the extraordinary challenge of making sure that silence didn't become deafening for employees.

For emergency assistance, they called on internal communicators or external partners—often both. No matter what angle they approached the conundrum from, communicators instinctually knew it was time to get real. Overnight, corporate emails and other communications to employees began sounding like they'd been written by, well, a human. They were more inclusive, empathetic and purpose-oriented. Less bloated with jargon, more sincere.

“Employees were raising questions and looking for answers sooner rather than later,” recalls a global communications executive from a leading cloud platform and solutions company. “We had to remove some of the formality of our communications and adapt a more direct, informal Q&A style. That gave us the opportunity to focus on what was top of mind for our employees.”

To take a more employee-centric approach, companies also began addressing areas of employees' lives they hadn't before. Moreover, they adopted a degree of responsibility for it—everything from their mental health concerns to childcare challenges. And they were more likely to invest in the employee experience—one that's holistic and centered around an employee's full, authentic self as well as adaptable to their changing needs.

This rebalancing of the employment contract came at a time of heightened public expectations. Corporate behavior was being scrutinized, and employees recognized the power of their voice—internally and externally—and used it.

As a former VP of public relations and communications for a U.S.-based jewelry retailer told us, “[During the pandemic], internal communication was the vehicle to explain everything from how the company strategy was evolving and what the impact would be on people and their lives, careers and families. It was central to establishing trust, demonstrating that we have your back and will do what we can for you. The end result was amazing; we saw such gratitude from employees, even from those who were furloughed.”



About This White Paper

At Red Havas, our passion for employee engagement is plain to see. Every day our agency partners with clients to develop campaigns and communications that engage employees more deeply with one another, their jobs and their company's culture. It's among the most meaningful work we get to do.

Last year, it took on fresh urgency, required more ingenuity. With in-person and happenstance interactions between colleagues an impossibility, we were challenged to devise new ways to unite and inspire people who worked remotely and in a time of heightened anxiety.

Like most corporate communications over the past two tumultuous years, we aimed to get to the point in this report. We went directly to the source, interviewing top internal communicators from around the world. As much as possible, we've shared their candid perspectives with you word for word.

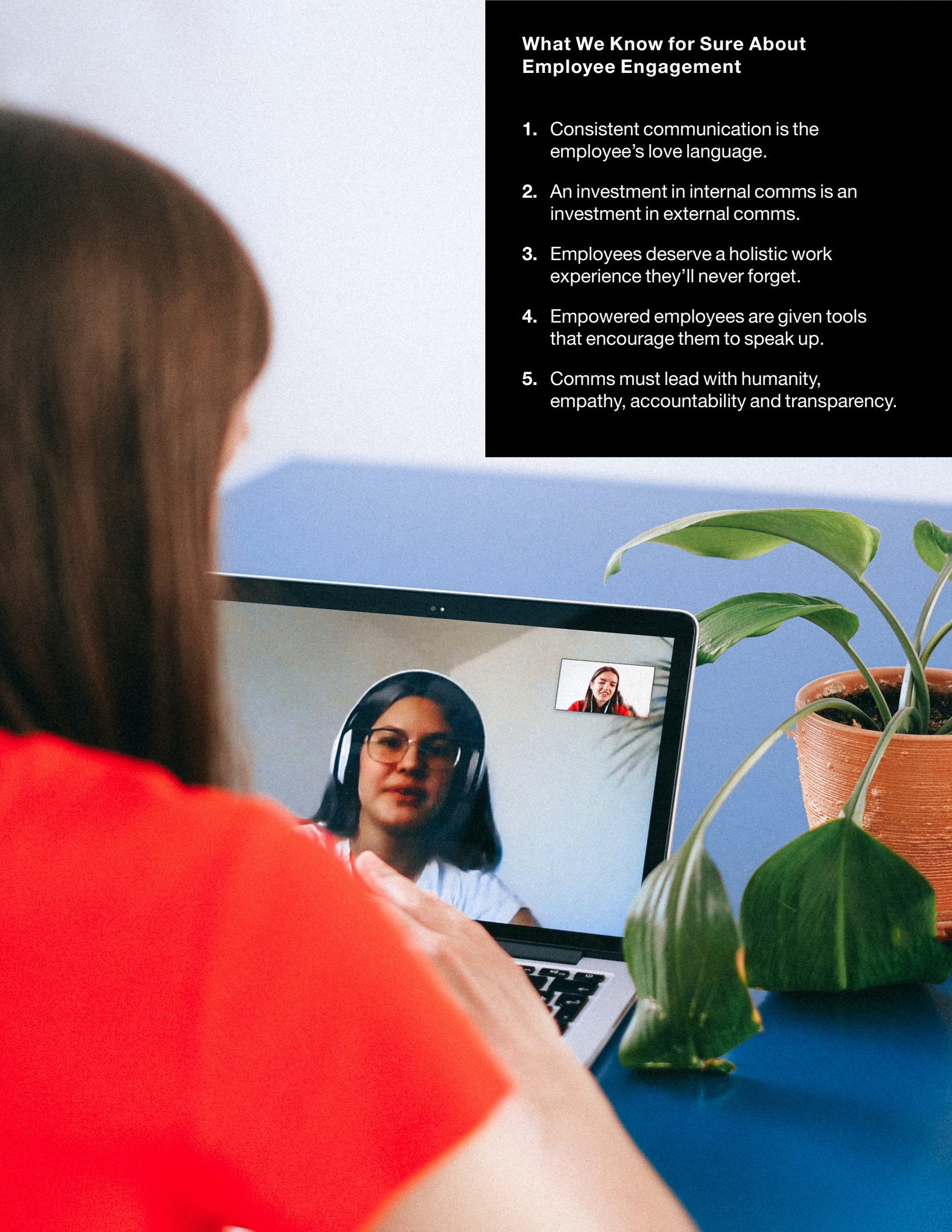
The pandemic has invited us, and every other internal communications pro on the planet, to forget what we thought we knew about internal communications. We've examined this in the **Leading Through Crisis white paper, Person-to-Person Communications** report and the Empowered Employee trend in our **2021 Red Sky Predictions**.

For this white paper, we've pulled out our five most salient learnings and the best practices emerging from them.

Researched and written by Red Havas' James Wright, Global CEO; Linda Descano, CFA, executive vice president; Ellen Mallernee Barnes, vice president; Heather Konyk, account director; Ashley Jones, content manager; and Dana Wohlfarth, assistant account executive.

What We Know for Sure About Employee Engagement

1. Consistent communication is the employee's love language.
2. An investment in internal comms is an investment in external comms.
3. Employees deserve a holistic work experience they'll never forget.
4. Empowered employees are given tools that encourage them to speak up.
5. Comms must lead with humanity, empathy, accountability and transparency.



1.

More Is More

Consistency is the employee's love language.

Employees are hungry for information about the state of the company, post-pandemic work arrangements and their positions on societal issues. Their appetite for more transparency and clarity is not waning, and neither is employers' desire to dish it up. Companies now understand that a clear vision—and consistent communications about that vision—is the best way to alleviate employees' concerns and anxiety. It's also a complement to the resources that many employers are putting against mental health and well-being.

When it comes to content, among those we interviewed there was universal agreement that more is more, but also, shorter is better:

- Get the point across visually or with fewer words via brief emails and TikTok- and Instagram-like videos and infographics
- Serialize more complex communications to make them less dense and more digestible.
- Follow a “one story, many shapes” approach by bringing a communication to life in various formats so employees have more options for how to engage with that content.
- Tailor comms and thematic content series to audience, work style and message. If employees can self-select what they're truly interested in (i.e., wellbeing, general company news, or topics based on interests, locations and roles), they will be better able to “see themselves” in the content and the company.



“People want internal communications to be like what they read, watch and listen to when they aren’t at work—short, sweet, to the point, and relevant.”

—Kathryn Reichert, Strategic Communications Leader and Former Head of Internal Communications for The Federal Reserve Bank of New York

Teva Pharmaceuticals, for instance, recognized that most employees prefer to consume short, snack-size content. The global healthcare company decided to take its executive town hall webcasts and turn them into a series of “microvideos,” with each video released on a Monday morning as a dose of weekly inspiration. Employee engagement was much higher than with the full webcast replays—and, anecdotally, they are seeing key messages break-through. To complement this series, they plan to introduce a second series that spotlights employees talking about key themes and pillars that underpin their business strategy.

“Content series really weren’t part of our ongoing content repertoire pre-COVID,” says **Sheryl Kornfeld**, director of corporate affairs for Teva Pharmaceuticals. “We introduced several—such as a Monday Motivation video series featuring short clips from our town halls and a newsletter focused on health and wellbeing—to provide employees with relevant, timely information about our business and practical tips to help them navigate new ways of working. These helped us move beyond just crisis communications and were well received. So now we are looking at a few others to build on that success.”

2. Messaging from the Inside Out

An investment in internal comms is an investment in external comms.

Internal comms is like therapy. Put in the effort to show up, and it's not just you who benefits—everyone around you does, too. A greater emphasis on internal comms fortifies the way a company presents its values, identity, strengths and strategy to its employees but also to the public.

People-first companies are taking an inside-out approach to message development, considering how employees will react before going “public.” They tell employees the news first and fast, and share more of it than they do with the public. As Cheer Partners Founder **Cat Colella-Graham** told **Ragan.com**, “If they're really going to be brand advocates, they need to know at least 25% more than ‘the street’ in advance of [news] going out. That is how you get them to get excited about the news—and also to test how the street will take it.”

Internal comms executives we interviewed said they expect employees to continue to take center stage in message development—working hand-in-hand with external comms to shape corporate positions from the get-go versus being handed pre-packaged positions to sell internally. This shift is being driven by two factors: greater prominence of employees as a stakeholder group and the rise of the empowered employee.

“What we do internally matters externally,” says **Lisa Reddy**, a senior manager of executive and internal communications at Skillsoft. “A great example of that is when running an external campaign sharing the perspective of employees. When you're tapping into your own talent pool and harnessing their stories, the inspiration is limitless. It's also bound to resonate with other employees and to be a springboard for employee advocacy.”

Employees can quickly see when a company is only checking a box. Rather than expecting perfection from an employer, they want decisive action such as what was seen from Johnson & Johnson in 2020. One of the largest employers in the world, the company committed \$10 million over the next three years “to fighting racism and injustice in America.” The following day, CEO Alex Gorsky backed that action with words, telling CNBC “white men need to do more listening.”

It’s not just that more employees are speaking out about disconnects between what their employer is saying versus doing on topics ranging from diversity and inclusion to social equity to immigration to voting rights. It’s also that the public is listening: Only **3%** of employees share content about their company, but those shares are responsible for driving a 30% increase in the total engagement a company sees.

That’s why happy employees are being encouraged to express their satisfaction with their companies, whether with a fun hashtag or an entire social program designed to encourage employee-generated content (EGC). Starbucks, for example, runs an **Instagram page** for its employees (whom it calls “Partners”), where it shares stories and photos about what it means #ToBeAPartner. The handle has 139,000 followers.

Companies like this who have socially engaged employees are **58%** more likely to attract top talent and 20% more likely to retain them.

“We are seeing a shift in company mindsets from treating employees as an audience to a key stakeholder, with greater respect for their frustrations and expectations and greater realization that without them there wouldn’t be customers or revenues.”

— Gary Grates, Principal, Real Chemistry and Adjunct Professor and Co-Director, W2O Newhouse Center for Social Commerce, Syracuse University



3. Experience Is Everything

Employees deserve a holistic work experience they'll never forget.

Employee experience was identified as the most popular trend among internal communicators in 2020, and it continues to be a huge focus in 2021. The executives we spoke with are treating experiences holistically—they say it's as much about creating an experience around communicating business results as it is about creating experiences that inject fun into the workday.

For instance, **Philip Morris International** created a series of employee-led edutainment programs that tapped into employees' passion for food and their artistic talents. The programs were delivered through existing digital platforms and made available around the clock for all employees via the web or mobile. They can be enjoyed live or on demand.

“There is no going back. Our employees will be more spread out going forward. So, our focus has shifted to ways we can ‘democratize’ employee communications and create more ways to reach employees, more ways to enable employees to connect with each other, and more ways to inject ‘fun’ into the employee experience.”

—Kathryn Reichert, Strategic Communications Leader and Former Head of Internal Communications for The Federal Reserve Bank of New York



Companies are also enabling employees to curate their own experiences (think virtual book clubs or meditation classes). Some are even creating experiences for employees’ children: Twitter debuted its **“Camp Twitter”** program, an eight-week offering of live and on-demand activities and classes to keep kids busy and happy. It also invited parents to attend livestream webinars led by psychologists and health experts. And in lieu of its annual “Bring Your Kids to Work Day,” **Salesforce** rolled out an online edition it called the Salesforce Adventures Club, made for its

more distributed and hybrid workforce. Employees co-created the program design and execution, which Salesforce later turned into a blog to share with customers and the public.

While these types of programs were initially planned to be temporary, every executive we spoke with expects to continue offering a suite of experiences going forward. Their commitment is to creating hybrid offerings with physical and virtual components that meet the needs of their increasingly distributed workforce.

4. From Dialogue to Multilogue

Empowered employees are given tools that encourage them to speak up.

Now that internal comms are more valued by senior leaders, we're also tracking their newfound willingness to participate in these comms and to be more accessible to employees overall. Most of the companies we spoke with expect their executives to continue the shift away from formal, presentation-style town halls. Rather, informal employee-led Q&A and Ask Me Anything (AMA) sessions are favored to build trust, demonstrate transparency and emphasize a "we're all in this together" mindset.

Virtually all the executives we interviewed also accelerated the roll-out of community bulletin boards, IM, and other collaboration tools to foster community during COVID-19. Now, no one expects to return to the pre-pandemic "heyday" of presentations and formality. Instead, they're leaning into Slack, Teams, Yammer and similar tools

as key vehicles for connecting with employees, creating bespoke content and experiences tailored to those channels.

By giving employees more dedicated places to share, both formally and informally, companies are creating safety for their employees to express ideas. As a result, trust levels rise. **Studies** show that people at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement and 40% less burnout.

Employers' efforts to replicate a workplace experience and create belonging via digital tools have enabled more frequent real-time communications with employees and more direct employee-to-employee connectivity. The benefits of those changes will endure long after the pandemic is over.



“Higher visibility by our executive team has been well received, and employees want to see it continue. But what’s been key for us is not just focusing on having our leaders communicative, but to ensure we are listening to what’s on our people’s mind. And, of course, it’s then ‘mining’ what you are hearing to shape your internal and external messages.”

— Linda Gharib,
Director of Brand
and Corporate
Communications,
Wolters Kluwer

5. Turning up the Heat

Comms must lead with humanity, empathy, accountability and transparency.

The overwhelming adversity we experienced during the pandemic reintroduced us all to our shared humanity. This proved to be extremely clarifying for many employers who made their employees the top priority for the first time.

“Our executive communications are not as traditional and formal as they used to be,” one global comms executive told us. “The human element is being injected in how we communicate and cascade information. To put people first, you have to bring humanity in.”

However, it was trial by fire to understand how, where and when to communicate with employees during the COVID-19 crisis. Not only were most working from home, but some did so with young children tugging at their hems, while others worked in complete isolation. The unmet needs were many and unique to each worker.

As writer Anne Helen Peterson **says** on “The Marketplace”

podcast, “The best way to show that you are actually empathetic is to create policies that make it easier for people to have lives: back-to-the-office plans that don’t require all workers to be in the office at an arbitrary time, plans that don’t have any room to acknowledge that people are mothers or caretakers or have disabilities that make it difficult. I think that what we come back to again and again is that a lot of this messaging that I think people are learning or are receiving is, ‘I feel broken, you feel broken. I’m empathetic about you feeling broken, but also could you please do your job?’”

To understand the depth and breadth of employees’ needs, employers had to ask, listen and respond with HEAT—humanity, empathy, accountability and transparency. While this shift came naturally to some CEOs and senior executives, others felt uncomfortable showing vulnerability or even talking about their company’s position on some societal issues.



“We are seeing greater demand for transparency and visibility from senior leaders. Accountability is really high. The new generation of employees want change and want it now. They are demanding it from peers and from senior leaders.”

—Global DE&I Strategy and Program Counsel and Communications Executive

Executives told us that understanding the following encouraged them to demonstrate HEAT:

- While facts, stats and numbers speak volumes, storytelling via personal anecdotes allows leaders to use their own **humanity** to cut through numbers and reveal vulnerability.
- Those who lead with **authenticity** openly acknowledge their fears, stresses and negative emotions; they are also more likely to head up resilient and high-performing teams.
- **Empathy** tends to get paid forward—employees who believe their leaders have empathy for them are more likely to show empathy themselves.
- **Transparency** indicates that a leader respects their employees enough to tell them the whole truth, whether that’s **publishing the salary** of all employees or doggedly reporting on everything from sustainability to supply chain and sourcing.

We tracked universal agreement that HEAT will continue to guide internal—and external—communications going forward. If anything, employees will be looking for more HEAT versus less.

Conclusion

As a result of the innovative work of pandemic-era internal communicators, companies everywhere can be expected to be more intentional about how they engage with their employees and external stakeholders, and meaningfully invest in it.

Consider the bar officially raised for internal communicators. We have a responsibility to stay aware of everything from racial justice to climate change, so we can create an environment for leaders and employees to hold conversations on these important external issues. We also have a responsibility to make sure employees feel cared for, included, empowered and reflected in the kind of programs and experiences a company provides, the decisions it makes and the public positions it takes.

“Many companies now say their workforce is the No. 1 priority, recognizing that they won’t have customers and prospects without their people,” says Grates. “As a result, empathy, commitment, transparency came into focus. Employers would be wise to continue.”

When employees feel heard, supported and trusted, employers see success shine through in every other facet of the business.