



The Step-by-Step Guide to Creating Your Employee Engagement Pulse Program

Turning Insights into Action

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Introduction

Employee engagement surveys reveal valuable information. How do employees feel about your organization's culture? About relationships with their managers and teams? About their likelihood to stick around?

Surveys can also reveal important insight into how employee engagement impacts business outcomes and what the path to improvement might look like. Yet despite this valuable insight — and the implied commitment to respond — many organizations fail to take effective action on the results.

There is a significant opportunity to use these results to improve employee engagement and retention, and in turn, key business outcomes like productivity, customer satisfaction, and revenue growth. Unfortunately, the gap between an organization's understanding of employee engagement and its ability to take effective action has been significant.

The annual employee engagement survey is too often cumbersome and disconnected from the business. It doesn't foster urgency on the part of leaders and managers. A different approach can help your organization take more effective action, sooner, and turn your employee engagement survey into a powerful force for consistent, positive change.

This guide is designed to give you a more insightful and actionable approach to employee engagement. It provides a framework for designing and implementing pulse programs at your organization. We hope the result will not only give you a deeper understanding of what drives engagement in your organization, but will also empower your managers to be engagement champions. The ideas in this guide come from decades of engagement survey and organizational development (OD) experience and are designed to help you use employee feedback to improve manager accountability, communications, and ultimately, organizational change.

64%

of companies surveyed still measure employee engagement only once a year.

2017 Deloitte Human Capital Trends

A Consistent Understanding of Employee Engagement is Critical to Organizational Success

A 2017 study by Glint identifies the relationship between employee engagement and organizational success, using Glassdoor ratings and stock performance as proxies. Companies in the top quartile of Glint engagement scores show significantly higher results than those in the bottom quartile.

35%

Higher
Glassdoor Ratings

34%

Percentage Points Higher
Glassdoor
Recommendations

42%

Higher
52-Week Change
In Stock Value

5x

Higher
Market Cap Per
Employee

The Paradigm Shift: From Talent Management to People Success

Organizations today need to keep pace with their employee's engagement. Employees don't see themselves as talent needing to be managed. They see themselves as individuals seeking growth, purpose, and success in their work. Industry leaders recognize that employees can and will seek out employers who provide an environment that emphasizes their success in alignment with the organization's success. And effective HR programs start with real-time feedback that enables managers to have more frequent, high-quality conversations with their employees. These conversations help increase the likelihood that employees are aligned with strategic priorities and are in an environment where they can do their best work. To create this continuous feedback-conversations-action loop, your HR team must replace the traditional annual survey with more frequent measurement combined with more frequent, manager-led conversations.

Pulse surveys can become the catalyst for more frequent conversations and improvement across your organization.

The Past: Talent Management	The Future: People Success
Rigid Process, Annual Cycles	Agile, Real-Time, Ongoing
Compliance	Meaningful Connection
Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Backward Looking	Forward Looking
Manager as Expert	Manager as Coach and Facilitator
Individual Success	Team and Network Success

Critical Components of a Pulse Program

Making the switch from annual surveys to pulse-style surveys with real-time insights is not as difficult as it sounds — and is far more impactful than you may realize. The following chapters provide step-by-step guidance on the critical components of a pulse program, which requires effective design, technology, and training. You'll learn to create a more business-aligned pulse program, transform roles and responsibilities, interpret results with confidence, coach managers on effective conversations, and, finally, keep the momentum alive throughout the year.

“Engagement is dynamic — if you don't measure it regularly, and act upon findings promptly, it's hard to influence.”

– Richard Deal
SVP, Chief HR Officer **FICO**



5 Steps to Establishing Your Pulse Program

Step 1: Align Your Pulse Program to the Business

By definition, pulse surveys are short and frequent, with a cadence and focus that aligns to the business.

Thoughtful pulse program design leads to more actionable insights that are quickly and easily utilized by leaders, managers, and HR. Think about the key metrics in your organization. In most cases, you report on them quarterly: financial results, sales, customer satisfaction. Research shows that employee engagement can impact all of these key performance indicators. Put simply, people success is as critical to business success as other factors that you regularly track, so why only look at it once a year?

Employee engagement results should be available and reviewed as part of the regular business cadence. With this shift, your pulse results become integrated into your ongoing management practices and business processes — rather than a once a year, backward-looking event. Your ultimate goal is to make your pulse program a natural part of your business cycle, and a catalyst for continuous improvement at your organization.

Question design should follow suit. Focus the questions you ask in each pulse on your strategic priorities for the next 6-12 months. The results will help inform execution of the strategy and allow leaders to pull the right levers to optimize your organization's ability to achieve results.

By timing pulses to align with your organization's regular business cadence and centering questions on your company's objectives, you will create a more business-aligned approach.

Bonus: Collecting data more frequently also allows organizations to take advantage of analytical tools, like predictive modeling and machine learning. These tools can help reduce the time needed to extract insights and increase the effectiveness of corrective actions.

Best Practices for Impactful Pulse Surveys

- Create a short and easy user experience for employees to drive and sustain high participation rates and prevent “survey fatigue.” The typical quarterly pulse is 15-18 questions.
- Use well-researched single-item measures to keep pulses short, while maintaining predictive capacity and information. Single-item measures (i.e., one question per domain) can capture 90% of the variance and information in multiple-item measures, while reducing pulse length by 3-4x.
- Ask a core set of questions across pulses to make sure you can track trends in key areas over time, and rotate a subset of questions to stay relevant to current topics and goals. Ideally, these questions align directly to the drivers of engagement at your organization, as well as your strategic priorities.
- Allow for an optional comment field with every question to add nuance and color to numerical scores. New technology can help parse through thousands of comments quickly to identify important themes and help prescribe action.
- Time your pulses so that results can align with other business data capture processes and inform regular business planning.

“With pulse surveys, our organization is able to listen to what our employees are saying multiple times per year, and we can make the changes that are most impactful in a rapid manner. Managers can log on and see results for their team as soon as the survey closes. The immediacy of this program helps to ensure that our talent is getting what they need from our organization.”

– **Melissa Barry**

Senior Consultant, Organizational Effectiveness Ketchum

Case Study: Building A Pulse Program Around the Needs of the Business



Vox Media is an organization that values feedback. Like many companies, Vox had relied on the annual employee survey to help them evaluate workforce happiness. However, after completing the 2015 survey, it became clear to company leaders that the slow, cumbersome process was hindering the organization from moving fast and changing quickly.

For employees, the survey itself was long and unwieldy to complete, and many expressed they had little faith that the company would act on the results. For the HR team, analytics were messy and complicated, requiring weeks of manual processing. For leadership, the long period of time between surveys meant that the process couldn't account for rapid business changes.

Vox needed a feedback program that was more frequent, more engaging, and more easily available to managers. The organization wanted a solution that would help them live their mission to “thrive on change.”

Vox replaced its annual process with quarterly pulse surveys. A simple, engaging pulse format made it easier for employees to participate, which increased response rates. Because

results were available to all managers immediately, managers were empowered to take quick action to improve areas of opportunity. Leaders became more open to communicating about their team dynamics. Now, results are shared at both the company and team level shortly after the pulse closes.

Vox has transformed employee feedback into a culture of transparency and trust across the organization.

“We’ve seen a shift in how transparent leaders are about what’s going well and what’s not within their departments. They’re talking about these things openly, which has helped to build trust among their teams.”

– Erin Bakst

Senior Director of People Operations **VOX MEDIA** 

Step 2: Transform Roles and Responsibilities

Who powers your pulse programs?
Hint: it's not HR.

Shifting from an annual to a more frequent pulse-style process requires new program roles and responsibilities for HR teams, leaders, and managers.

In the annual process, much of the activity is run by the HR team. They create and manage survey questions, analyze the data, derive and communicate insights, and prescribe the most impactful actions to leaders and managers. Results are shared with senior leadership, and it either stops there, or it is cascaded by level (often slowly) to managers.

In an effective pulse program, HR becomes the facilitator of change — rather than the administrator and enforcer — while managers are able to take the reigns to drive engagement on their teams. This transformation becomes possible only with the right design, technology, and training.



HR as Facilitator of Behavior Change

With the right pulse programs, technology platform, and training, managers are now positioned to receive real-time results and algorithmically-derived recommendations so they can begin talking with their teams about actions to take within days of pulse close. The role of HR then shifts from compliance officer and administrator to facilitator of behavior change. They focus on building manager capability to interpret results with confidence and hold focused, high-quality feedback conversations with their teams.

HR partners can further support managers by creating opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing of pulse program experiences. Regular meetings allow managers to share ideas, troubleshoot problems, and uncover surprising or common themes across teams. In addition, they can collaborate and discover opportunities to help one another and maximize the impact of their actions.

Managers as Coaches and People Success Leaders

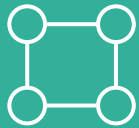
Pulse programs can turn managers into better leaders, as they come to see engagement as integral to achieving business goals. Managers get team-specific engagement insights in real time, so they can immediately begin to have more focused, meaningful conversations with their teams — conversations that lead to action. True to the paradigm shift outlined above, these ongoing insights allow managers to begin to integrate engagement into management practices, shifting from a one-way, backward-looking approach to one that's two-way and forward-looking. Managers can forge more meaningful connections with team members and make incremental changes to influence team engagement and performance.

According to a Bain & Co. study in 2013, the most impactful engagement programs are the ones in which managers lead the charge.

Bain & Co.

"Who's Responsible for Employee Engagement?" Dec 11, 2013.

Transitioning HR's Role: Give Managers the Keys to Engagement



Provide managers with **tools and resources** to help them identify issues and opportunities, predict trends, and determine the most effective actions to improve engagement.



Train managers to **own the process**, so they can interpret the results, facilitate conversations, and understand the impact on team and company goals.



Coach managers to **create a positive environment** that encourages open discussion with their teams. Help them learn to transparently share survey results and effectively lead change.



Help senior leaders **reinforce the value of engagement** to business success. Coach them to model accountability, personalize communications, and focus on behaviors that drive trust.

"A single quarter is enough time to see meaningful change. When managers take action, scores increase across teams of varying sizes and initial score levels. In the specific area where action was taken, teams reported scores that were 7% higher than the previous quarter."

– **Justin Black**

Head of Organizational Development Science, Glint



82%

of managers rate employee engagement as "somewhat or very important"



10%

yet most spend less than 10% of their time on engagement activities

82% of managers rate employee engagement as "somewhat or very important," yet most spend less than 10% of their time on engagement activities.

GLINT MANAGER SURVEY CONDUCTED IN 2016

Step 3: Interpret Results with Confidence

With results in hand, it's often challenging for managers to determine which area to work on first.

Post-pulse, a plethora of issues compete for a manager's attention. When ideas for improvement start to flow, the list can quickly become long — and everything feels equally important.

Ideally, managers narrow their focus to one area that represents a systemic issue across their team. They choose to work on an issue that has the greatest impact on their team's engagement and business goals. This doesn't mean that they stop championing the business unit and company-level focus areas. But focusing on one team-specific issue at a time leads to more sustainable improvement. Managers can then measure the effectiveness of their actions in subsequent pulses and see the change reflected in new team scores and comments.

Three Guiding Questions for Managers

HR teams can help managers focus on the right area for improvement by encouraging them to ask themselves the following questions:

1. What's most important? What must we achieve over the next 3 to 6 months to be successful in the long run?
2. How are we doing? What do the pulse results say about our ability to do those things?
3. What is our top improvement priority? What is the most important thing for us to work on as a team?

Combine the Numbers + the Narrative

Pulse results typically include both quantitative feedback (scores, rankings, etc.) and narrative feedback in the form of comments. In larger organizations, these comments can number in the tens or hundreds of thousands. Synthesizing such a large set of unstructured data into a story — or a set of priorities — in any reasonable timeframe may seem impossible. Many organizations just focus on the numbers, but employee comments often contain the diagnostics (the “why”) behind the scores and the prescriptions (suggestions on how to improve) that may otherwise be missed.

Note for managers: Before reviewing comments, first understand your results story based on your scores.

Comments can provide helpful context and ideas around your top strengths and weaknesses already identified in your scores. Reviewing comments before understanding your key results runs the risk of making inaccurate conclusions, particularly as comments tend to be from a smaller subset of the organization, more negative, and emotionally charged.



Provide the following tips to managers to help them analyze survey comments and extract actionable insights once they've taken the time to understand their quantitative feedback:

**Identify themes
in comments to clarify
why a score is high
or low.**

Which of your top or bottom scoring areas have the greatest energy (i.e., highest volume of comments)? What themes appear the most? Are they positively or negatively discussed? Comments can surface root causes around low scores, as well as clarify what to keep doing to maintain high scores.



**Filter comments by
different demographics
to understand
key populations.**

What are different groups, such as high performers, female employees, or new hires, talking about? This will help you understand how to improve the employee experience of your key populations, as well as identify systemic issues for broader action planning.



**Surface prescriptive
comments and follow
through with action.**

Employees often leave suggestions for improvement in survey comments. They're making your job easier by telling you how to fix things. Take advantage of this feedback and share proposed solutions with the team to validate them, then follow-through with the right leaders who can take action.

Technology innovations, such as artificial intelligence (AI), can help your managers interpret free-form feedback and extract actionable insights to help inform their next steps. Natural Language Processing (NLP) is a form of AI that translates language into data for more effective analysis. For large data sets, such technologies save significant time and effort when it comes to transforming hundreds or thousands of comments into topics, sentiments, and keywords — data points that create actionable insights.

Focusing action on one area at a time maximizes a manager's ability to achieve improvement over time.

80% of employees leave at least one comment in a quarterly survey over the course of a year.

Glint customer data



Step 4: Coach Leaders and Managers on High-Quality Conversations

Got survey results and insights? It's time for managers to share the findings with their teams and start a conversation.

Armed with frequent insights from pulses and an understanding of what's important to their teams, managers are ready to have effective conversations with them — and HR can help.

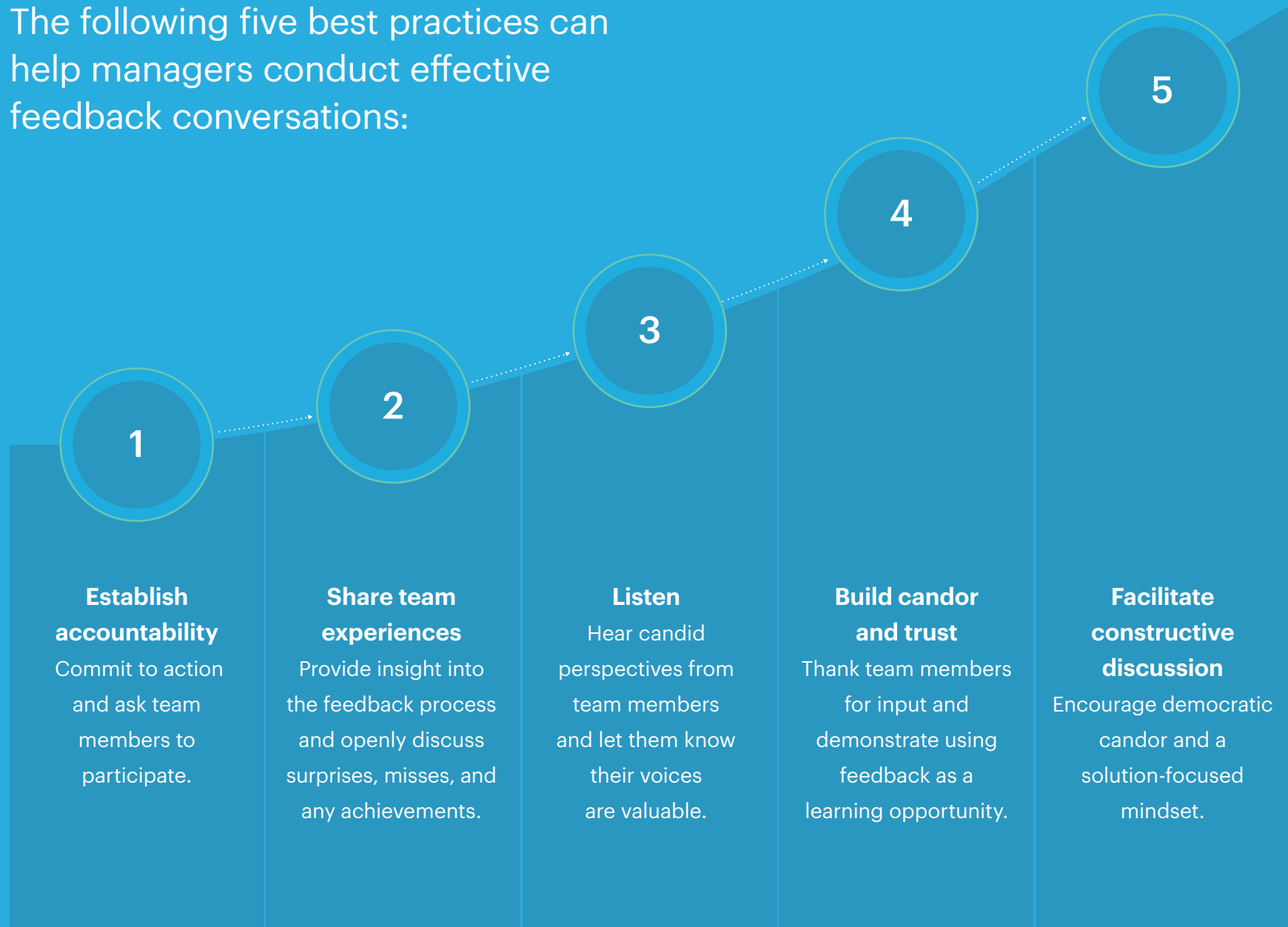
“We believe deeply in understanding people and helping them enjoy work — it's the difference between a successful company and one that fails.”

– Amy Errett

CEO and Co-Founder MADISONREED®



The following five best practices can help managers conduct effective feedback conversations:



HR can support managers in this process by steering them away from common pitfalls, including, but not limited to:

- Rushing to action without checking in with the team
- Taking results personally
- Getting lost in the negative
- Failing to celebrate the positive or explore the neutral
- Trying to identify who said what
- Discounting low scores due to situational factors

HR can also offer a framework for working sessions that managers can use with teams. A solid framework includes: team brainstorming, impact and actionability assessment of improvement ideas, assignments of accountability, and next steps for communication.



Teams that believe action will be taken on survey results are significantly more engaged, reporting 25% higher engagement scores.

GLINT CUSTOMER DATA

Step 5: Keep the Momentum Alive Throughout the Year

A successful approach to measuring and improving engagement is not about a program or event. It is about integrating engagement into ongoing conversations and practices throughout the year.

The real transformation occurs when the organization makes the process a natural part of the business cycle. When your organization is able to achieve the four steps outlined above, you will be well on your way to harnessing engagement as a driver of people success and business success.



Once the pulse program is implemented, several significant changes occur:



Senior Leadership is transparent about company results and committed to action. They become role models of communication, accountability, and feedback.



Managers take ownership of the process and see their results as a catalyst, not a replacement, for ongoing dialogue with their teams. They have an understanding of what matters to them both as a team and individually, and view engagement as vital to performance.



Employees feel heard and trust senior leaders and their managers to take action in response to their feedback. They feel empowered to actively participate in and influence change. The genuine care shown by management around their experience energizes employees to participate in future pulses.



HR becomes the true enabler of behavior change. Rather than serving as compliance officers, they build manager capability and ownership for integrating engagement into the fabric of the organization.

Put Engagement at the Heart of Business: 5 Transformational Behaviors to Maximize Pulse Value

1. Champion engagement as a critical element of strategy execution and team performance. Show the correlation between engagement and key business outcomes.
2. Integrate ongoing employee feedback into the business cycle, leadership practices, and as an ongoing agenda item in staff meetings. Report on people metrics along with business metrics.
3. Celebrate achievements and prioritize engagement improvement areas in the same way you celebrate goal achievement and prioritize strategic business initiatives.
4. Foster ongoing dialogue with individual team members about what matters to them and where and how to improve.
5. Regularly discuss results and progress to ensure improvements are being made and progress is evident to employees.

Pulse Program Checklist

Follow these basic steps to transition your organization's feedback program from an annual event to an ongoing catalyst for continuous improvement.

Are You Ready to Pulse?

- ☐ Is my organization ready to move toward a culture of continuous improvement?
- ☐ Is my organization open to frequent, transparent, honest feedback?
- ☐ Will my organization support increasing the attention paid to employee voice?
- ☐ Will managers be open to frequent, development-oriented conversations with their team?
- ☐ Will senior leadership champion (or at least support) the value of continuous improvement?

Create Pulse Surveys

- ☐ Pare down the question set, shorten questions, maximum one per engagement driver.
- ☐ Design a simple, quick, and easy user experience.
- ☐ Include a free-form comment box for each question to capture narrative feedback.
- ☐ Plan your pulse cadence to inform regular business planning.
- ☐ Roll out your first pulse!

Define Roles & Responsibilities

- ☐ Create a manager coaching plan.
- ☐ Conduct trainings for managers on the new pulse program and their responsibilities.
- ☐ Educate senior leaders on pulse program outcomes and expectations.
- ☐ Train senior leaders to act as role models and champions of a continuous improvement culture.
- ☐ Facilitate peer-to-peer sharing between managers.
- ☐ Encourage peer mentoring, brainstorming, and problem-solving.

Interpret Results with Confidence

- ☐ Meet with managers to review survey results and clarify next steps.
- ☐ Arm managers with three guiding questions:
 - What is most important?
 - How are we doing?
 - What is my top improvement priority?
- ☐ Help managers extract key themes from comments.
- ☐ Coach managers to focus on one area of improvement for the next pulse period, or until the team agrees it no longer needs attention.

Coach Leaders to Take Action

- ☐ Remind managers to share pulse results and actions with their team.
- ☐ Identify which managers need coaching support to lead team conversations.
- ☐ Coach managers on how to facilitate constructive conversations.
- ☐ Encourage managers to follow up with their team to report back on actions taken, reminding them that these are the result of their feedback.

Maximize Impact/Keep the Momentum Alive All Year

- ☐ Celebrate team successes.
- ☐ Work with senior leaders to integrate pulse program results into business planning.
- ☐ Champion engagement as a critical business strategy.
- ☐ Integrate ongoing employee feedback into the regular cycle of business metrics reporting.
- ☐ Continue the pulse cadence, tailor new surveys to suit current engagement needs.



From Pulses to People Success

Introducing Glint

Going beyond the pulse — a full-featured platform to drive a culture of continuous improvement.

Glint gives you real-time visibility into the health of your organization. Our platform collects and analyzes data from employees, applies organizational development science, and delivers insights and action plans that can significantly increase engagement, retention, and performance.

Learn more at **glintinc.com**.

REQUEST A DEMO

“The data that’s provided from Glint and our people survey is absolutely invaluable. It’s the only empirical evidence we have of our return on investment.”

– Sonia Stocker

Head of Planning and Insight for the Property Team **sky**