2024 WORKHUMAN IQ SURVEY FINDINGS

Senior Leaders vs. Employees: Two Worlds, One Workplace

workhuman

Contents

“How was work today?”

Ask every employee in a company that question and you’re going to get a lot of answers. Some perfunctory, some pleasant, some colorful, some might just be a big sigh.

So much influences that answer.

Your day at work is affected by how you get along with the people you work with and for, whether you feel comfortable at work and appreciated for the work you do, and whether you feel like you’re building to something. They’re invisible benefits that shape your day-to-day reality and, in theory, these benefits can be enjoyed by everyone in an organization at no cost.

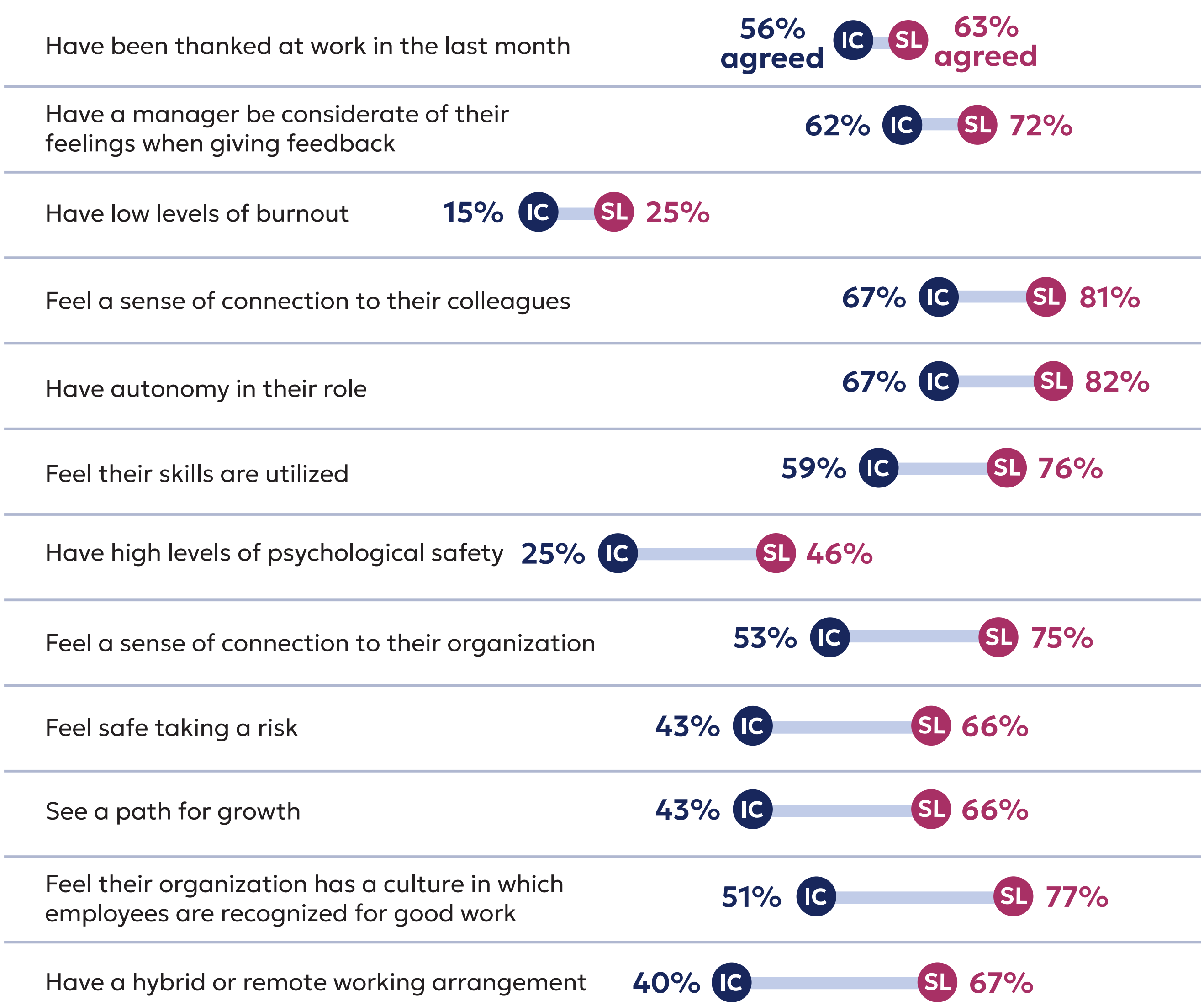
But they’re not.

This year’s Workhuman® iQ survey reveals that no one is more likely to be connected to their colleagues and organization, feel valued, have more autonomy and flexibility in their work arrangement, have high levels of psychological safety, have a positive relationship with their manager, and see a path for growth in their organization than … senior leaders.

We are not saying every senior leader has it easy. They don't. They face loneliness, burnout, and stress, too. They juggle the demands of parenting and caretaking just as their employees do — and they do so alongside the stresses of leading and managing teams.

What we're saying (and the data is showing) is that senior leaders enjoy invisible benefits like psychological safety, financial security, connection to colleagues, and flexible work arrangements more than anyone else. In some cases, by a substantial margin. A human workplace starts by, at the very least, narrowing those margins.

Compared to individual contributors, senior leaders are more likely to:



Leaders have acknowledged that change is necessary. In their own workplace survey, HP found 68% of leaders believe that today's ways of working need new leadership styles.

Workhuman® and Gallup's joint research on building organizational cultures that thrive puts a fine point on it: "A 21st century world of work cannot operate with 20th century practices."

However, that change hasn't borne out. In HP's workplace survey, just one in five knowledge workers agree senior leaders have evolved their leadership style in the last two to three years, and just as few agreed their company demonstrates emotional intelligence on a consistent basis.

Leaders, consider this report for you. Why? Because you are in a unique position to act on these data-driven findings. We're willing to bet that evolving management practices, creating opportunities for learning and growth, and making your workplace less stressful will bring about the improvements to engagement, performance, and productivity you want from your employees.

Are you ready for some 360-degree feedback?

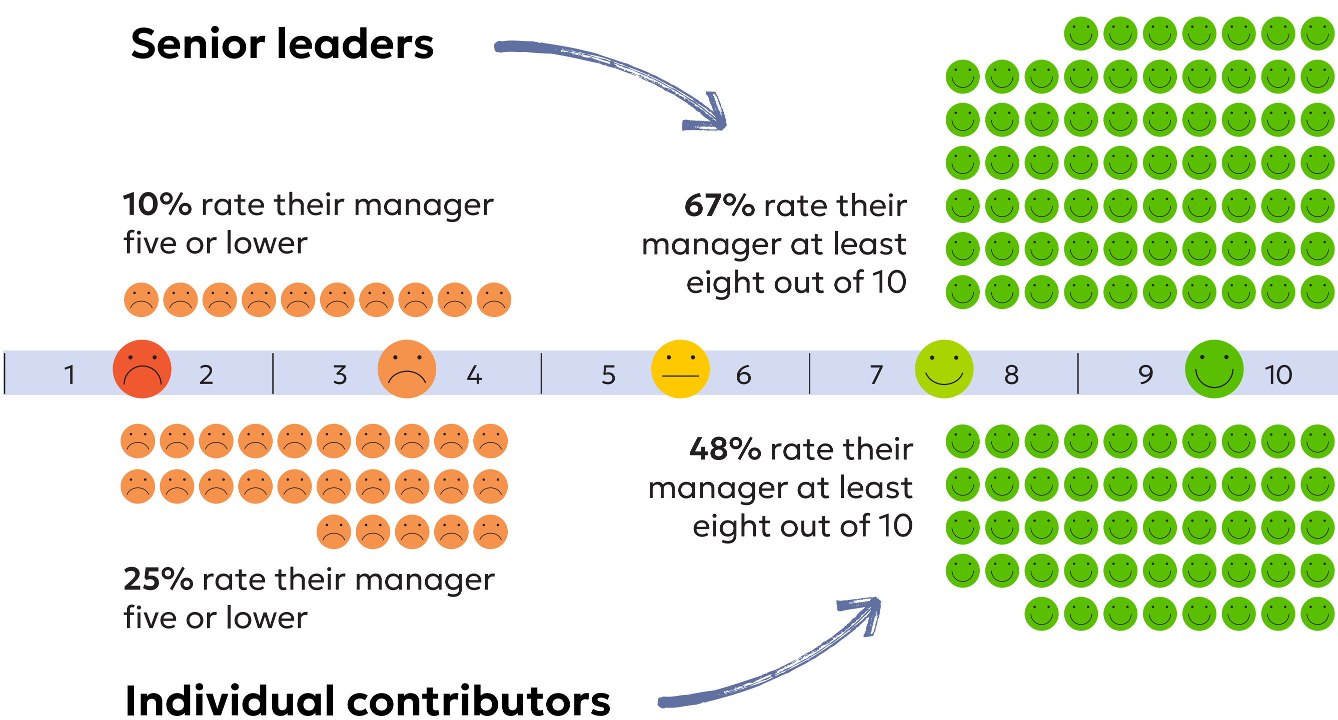
Feedback has fallen behind

The manager-employee relationship is one of the most critical in the workplace. It's so critical, it might make the difference between an employee looking for a new job or not.

We've reported extensively about the power of quality check-ins. They are an impactful coaching tool and a perfect arena to support and recognize employee efforts and accomplishments.

Senior leaders and individual contributors have very different experiences in this arena.

Let's start here: **67% of senior leaders rate their manager eight to 10 out of 10. Just 48% of individual contributors do the same.** One in four employees rates their manager a five or lower.



Senior leaders are more likely to have weekly check-ins, a key component of a positive employee experience. They are also more likely to say that those check-ins are always or often time well spent, that items of importance to them are always discussed, and that their manager always shows up prepared and willing to support. Senior leaders are also more likely to report that their manager is focused on paths for growth and advancement, problem-solving, and goal setting.

This positive experience might be influencing how they view their own performance. Ninety-four percent of senior leaders and 90% of managers and supervisors agree they know how to conduct a productive, supportive, and meaningful check-in with their direct reports.

However, just 18% of individual contributors think a check-in with their manager is always time well spent. Just as troubling, 50% of employees think that time is, at best, sometimes well spent.

The truth is: **Managers think they're doing a better job than they actually are.**

Harvard professor and Workhuman® Live speaker Raffaella Sadun has observed this phenomenon in her own research, prompting her to ask: Why do we undervalue competent management? Steven Rogelberg, author of “Glad We Met: The Art and Science of 1:1 Meetings,” started researching how to conduct effective check-ins and found he was one of the few looking into it.

Such a fundamental piece of the employee experience can’t be neglected if the goal is to get the best out of an employee. Investing in management training to make sure check-ins are an effective use of time isn’t just something that will help once per week – it helps create a better everyday environment.

And it’s not just going to help you today; it’s going to help you in the future when individual contributors are ready to step into leadership roles and they do so as the beneficiaries of good management.

Competing realities

In our research, we measured psychological safety with seven questions designed to gauge how employees experience the workplace. That measurement falls on a scale of one to five, where the high end is marked by confidence, support, and a sense of belonging, and the low end by apprehension, isolation, and even fear.

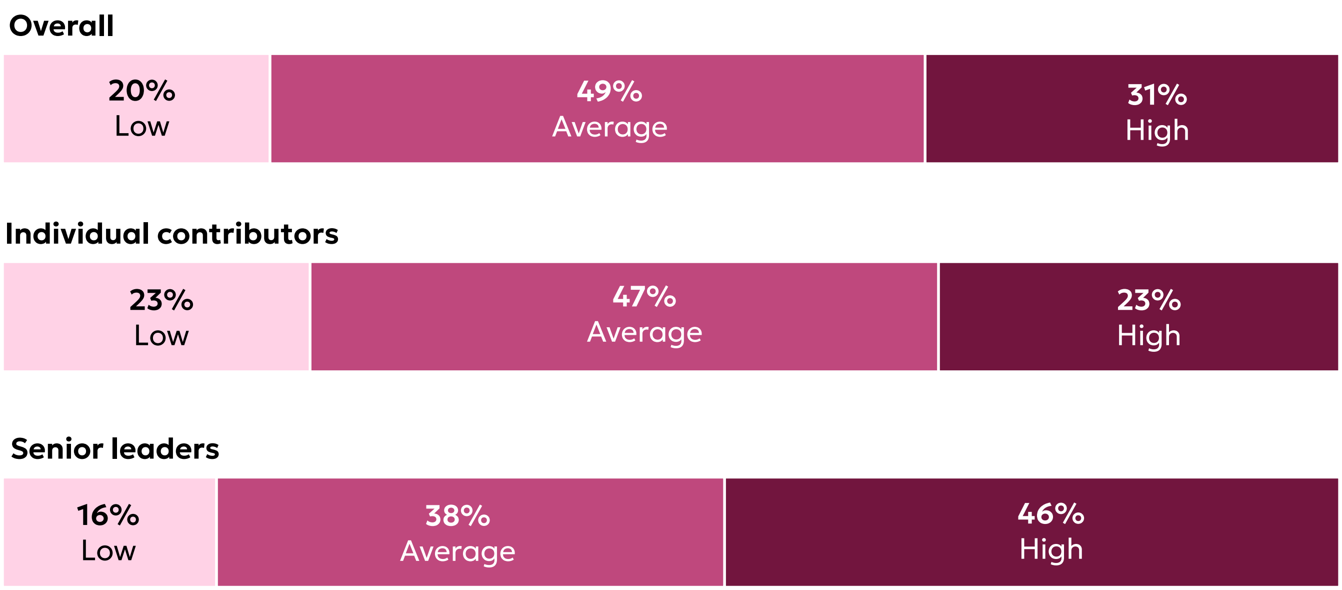
We asked respondents to rate how strongly they agree or disagree with statements like "I feel safe to take a risk in this organization." Compiling those, we got a sense of whether employees have high, average, or low psychological safety.

The goal for any organization is to have high rates of high psychological safety. The reality is more than half of respondents, regardless of role, land on the average-to-low end of the spectrum.

High psychological safety is a necessity for a high-performing culture. It is an omnipresent aspect of work. It affects meetings, projects, collaboration, Slack messages. It's everywhere. It is not an exaggeration to say your psychological safety affects every hour of your workday.

When people feel psychologically safe, it unleashes a cascade of positive effects. Open, honest conversations flourish, innovation sparks, and teams reach new heights. But if people don't feel safe taking risks and bringing up difficult issues, if they think it's possible someone might undermine their efforts or reject them for being different, you have a problem.

2024 psychological safety levels



Senior leaders are much more likely than individual contributors to experience high psychological safety. And they're less likely to experience low psychological safety.

Specifically, senior leaders are more likely to disagree people are rejected for being different (63% vs. 57%) and agree that no one would undermine the efforts of another (61% vs. 52%).

Senior leaders are also more likely to agree that they can bring up difficult issues (65% vs. 56%). **This gap creates what Workhuman CHXO KeyAnna Schmiedl has deemed "psychological bravery,"** where an employee needs to summon the courage to speak up when they don't feel safe.

The biggest differences in responses are directly related to employee development. Senior leaders are significantly more likely to feel safe taking a risk at work (66% vs. 43%) and agree their skills are properly utilized (76% vs. 59%).

Taking a risk at work often means exploring unfamiliar terrain. Workhuman and Gallup research finds senior leaders, in particular, are enthused by the future of AI in their organizations, with the hope it will boost efficiency, innovation, and decision-making.

These kinds of gaps stifle innovation and growth and are especially troubling to see at a time in which upskilling and learning new technologies is top of mind for leaders.

The ramifications extend all the way to frontline and customer-facing workers. If a sales rep or someone on a manufacturing line doesn't have the psychological safety to suggest how to improve efficiency or innovation, organizations are robbing themselves of opportunities to improve their business operations.

Caught in the middle

While the gaps are starkest between senior leaders and individual contributors, managers and supervisors – often called the mighty middle – find themselves, well, caught in the middle.

Managers share some of the **same positive outcomes as senior leaders** – they are:

	Percentage point differences
More likely to report having a **stronger connection to colleagues**	SL ↔ 5 ↔ M ↔ 9 ↔ IC
More likely to report having a **stronger connection to their organization**	SL ↔ 7 ↔ M ↔ 13 ↔ IC
More likely to always, often, or usually **discuss tasks they're working on** in 1:1s	SL ↔ 4 ↔ M ↔ 8 ↔ IC
More likely to always or often discuss **paths for growth/advancement**	SL ↔ 6 ↔ M ↔ 9 ↔ IC
More likely to have **celebrated life events**	SL ↔ 5 ↔ M ↔ 12 ↔ IC
More likely to be **recognized for upskilling**	SL ↔ 7 ↔ M ↔ 13 ↔ IC
Less likely to **experience loneliness**	SL 2 M ↔ 5 ↔ IC

But managers also **share negative outcomes with individual contributors** – they are:

	Percentage point differences
Less likely to agree their manager is considerate of their feelings when giving feedback	IC ↔ 3 ↔ M ↔ 7 ↔ SL
Less likely to agree their organization has a culture in which employees are recognized	IC ↔ 9 ↔ M ↔ 15 ↔ SL
Less likely to have autonomy over how their work gets done	IC ↔ 5 ↔ M ↔ 10 ↔ SL
More likely to work mostly or 100% on-site	IC 1 M ↔ 6 ↔ SL
Less likely to have been thanked for their contributions in the last month	0 M ↔ 7 ↔ SL
Less likely to strongly recommend (8+/10) their company to a friend or colleague	IC ↔ 6 ↔ M ↔ 11 ↔ SL
Less likely to be highly engaged	IC ↔ 8 ↔ M ↔ 9 ↔ SL

Plus, managers are less likely than senior leaders to agree they have insight into the skills of their direct reports. Workhuman iQ and the AI Assistant can help with that – more on that in our Upskill or Stand Still report from the 2024 Workhuman iQ survey.

Middle managers are often asked to somehow bridge an ever-widening gap between senior leaders and individual contributors. It's a similar gap HR professionals experience as well. The question is: How can you connect the gaps when they exist across all levels of the organization?

A narrowing growth mindset

One of the more troubling findings in the research is this: Senior leaders are more than 2x as likely as managers, project managers, and all other individual contributors to strongly agree that they see a path to grow within their organization.

Senior leaders can't be the only ones with the confidence to try new things and sharpen their skills. But, right now, they are.

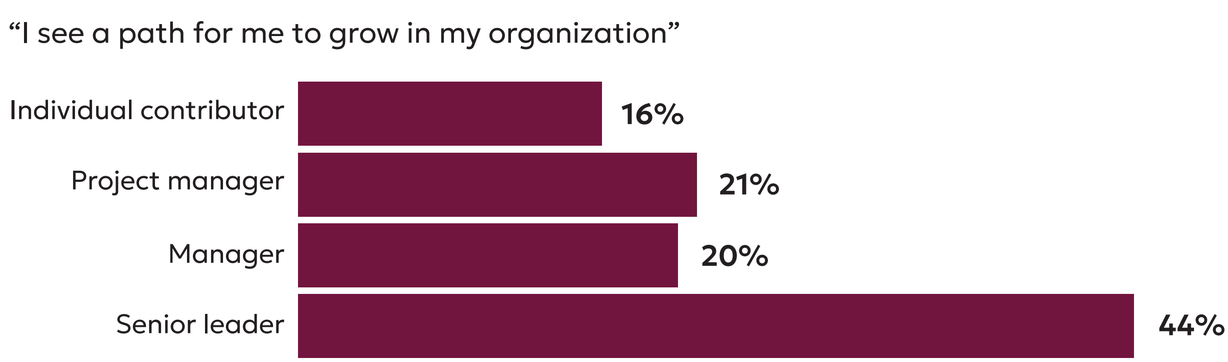
Most employees have, at most, dabbled with AI. Right now, 30% of senior leaders frequently use or have already built AI into their workflow. Just 9% of individual contributors say the same. Learning gaps are present beyond AI, too. Three in 10 employees report having learned a skill in their current role either one to two years ago or not at all. In our research with Gallup, 23% of individual contributors agreed their organization even encouraged them to learn a new skill vs. 46% of senior leaders.

That report goes on to find a clear appetite amongst employees to learn new skills that will help them get better in their roles. Leaders would be wise to take advantage.

One of the ways they can do this is by recognizing when employees level up their skills. It signals encouragement and makes it clear that personal growth and improvement are valued at the organization.

When employees get this signal, they feel like the organization is a place to grow. Research with Gallup, which tracked the career paths of 3,447 employees from 2022 to 2024, finds well-recognized employees were 45% less likely to have turned over two years later.

When organizations do not create or promote opportunities for their workforce to develop, they sabotage their own growth and agility.



Frayed connection and undervaluation

Feeling valued and connected, while two different aspects of the employee experience, are inextricably linked. Valuing others creates stronger connection, and stronger connection creates more opportunities to recognize the value of others and on and on we go.

Far more likely than individual contributors, senior leaders:

- Agree their organization has a **culture where people are thanked** (77% vs. 53%)
- Are **motivated by a recognition program** (82% vs. 59%)
- Are **recognized for their upskilling** or acquiring new skills (59% vs. 39%)

Senior leaders make up the smallest part of employee resource group (ERG) participation. Yet they are the most likely to be thanked for that participation and have those efforts visible to the company. They are also less likely to feel unfairly treated for their participation.

Right now, leaders can take steps to narrow the gaps in connection. One way is by ensuring high-quality check-ins are happening for everyone. The connection between manager and employee makes a positive difference in both experiences.

Celebrating life events, such as weddings, having kids, new homes, and personal achievements outside of work, can make the relationship among leaders, the organization, and employees feel less transactional while positively impacting connection. Forty-seven percent of senior leaders had three or more life events celebrated by the organization in the last year. No other group cracked 40%.

Previous Workhuman-Gallup research finds that employees who lack a strong sense of belonging are up to 12x as likely to be disengaged and 5x as likely to be looking for another job. Leaders have the power to strengthen the connection at their company and it starts, as always, with people.

Metlife surveyed both employees and employers in their 2023 U.S. Employee Benefit Trends Study to gauge employers' estimates of employee health. Differences ranged from 19 to 28 percentage points. The largest gap related to financial health. Employers estimated that 83% of their employees were financially healthy. Just 55% of employees agreed they were. The survey also found 88% of employers agreed it's important to demonstrate care for their employees. But only 58% of employees felt that care was demonstrated. Further, 75% of business leaders think their employees trust senior leadership. Just 45% actually do.

In closing

It would appear senior leaders are seeing the workplace through rose-tinted glasses. Overall, they have a more positive experience than their employees do and that is coloring how they view the general employee experience.

If you don't like the fact that, broadly speaking, your employees are struggling in areas that negatively affect their overall work experience and that there is a sense of distrust in your organization, you have the power and influence to meaningfully change that.

Helping your employees build **new skills**, and putting them in the best financial, social, and emotional position you can, **makes them and your business better.**

Like with recognition, saying you value the employee experience and actually valuing it are not the same. Our 2024 research with Gallup reveals that 42% of senior leaders say their organization's senior leadership valued employee recognition, up 14% from 2022. But only 20% of managers and 22% of individual contributors strongly agree that leaders actually do. And as this report highlights, that's happening in a host of different areas.

These initiatives must be implemented with intention and backing from the whole organization. It starts with buy-in from leadership and then employees, but that buy-in dies on the vine without follow-through.

How do you bring up the experience of employees, namely individual contributors, at scale? Especially when in some cases there are hundreds of thousands more of them.

For workplaces to evolve in new eras of work, organizations need to extend the reach of every scientifically backed practice available. Frequent check-ins, opportunities for growth and development, and, yes, recognition make cultural transformation a habit. These things work.

Employee recognition, when done right, reaches every corner of the organization. We are in the employee recognition business, and we are telling you that can't be the only aspect of work that reaches everyone in an organization. **There are too many important levers left unpulled if a company relies on recognition alone to improve the wellbeing of employees and company culture.**

For senior leaders, the message is clear: Your employees are more likely to be engaged and recommend your company, and are less likely to be stressed and exhausted, if you value them. You experience the difference these workplace phenomena have in your day-to-day lives; the data says you ought to start sharing the wealth.

To learn more about how we can help you build a human workplace, visit workhuman.com.

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