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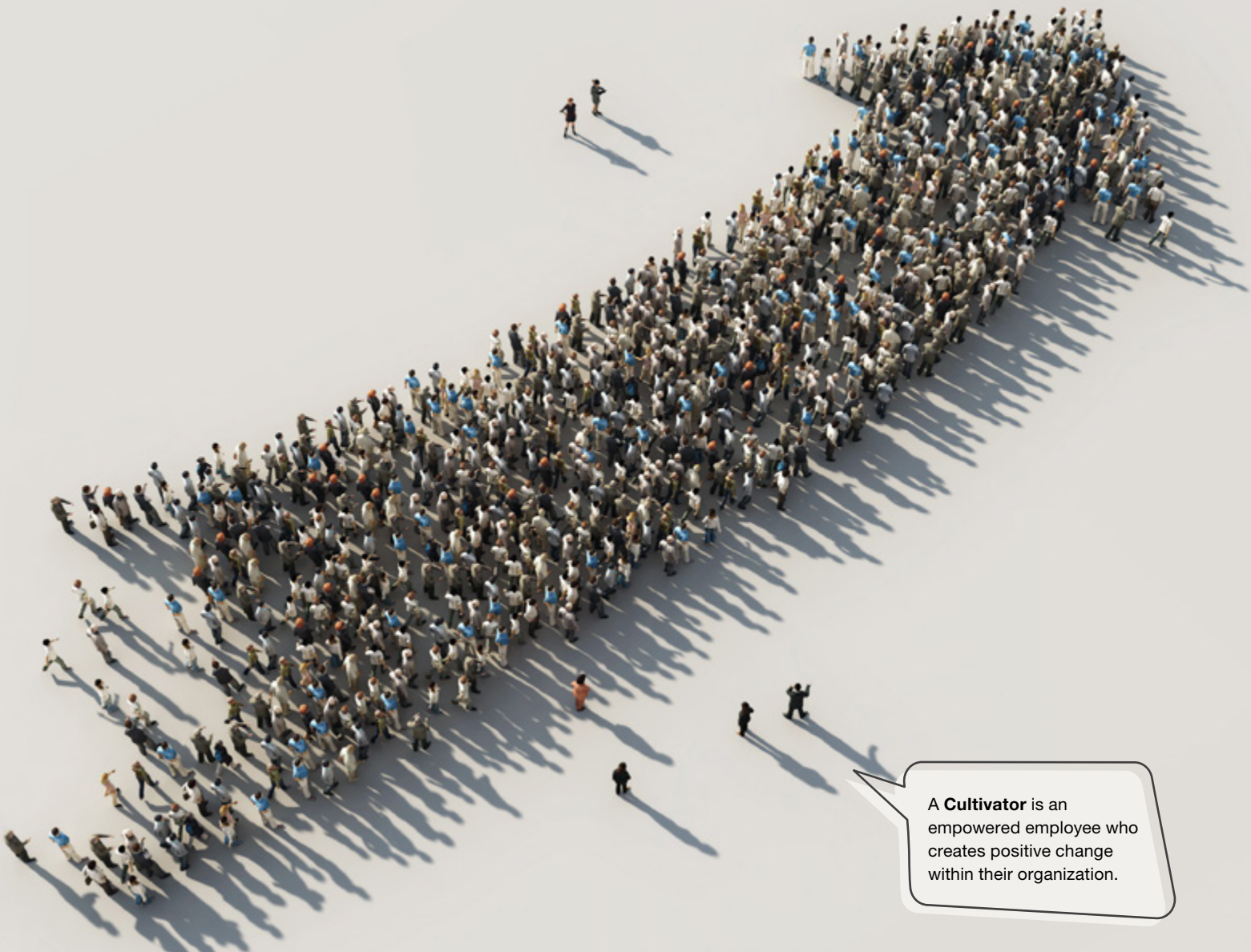
Organizational Empowerment in Action.

Introducing the five crucial dimensions of empowerment for today's high-performing organizations

A **Cultivator** is an empowered employee who creates positive change within their organization.

⌂ **cultivate**

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⌂ **cultivate**

Introduction:
How empowering
is your organization?

Talent management and development initiatives in large organizations today are often laser-focused on employee engagement, and while the benefits of highly engaged employees are clear, we've found that **people need more than just engagement to bring out their very best work; they need empowerment.**

We define employee empowerment as the experience of self-determination that arises from the fulfillment of five essential needs: the need to feel skilled and capable in their roles, the need to feel connected to the purpose of their work, the need for autonomy and agency in decision-making, the need to feel a sense of community and belonging, and the need to feel engaged and intrinsically motivated to work together.

Organizations that meet these needs are beneficial for all employees, but they are exceptional incubators for Cultivators, the people inside every company who work hard to drive positive change from within. **In the most empowering organizations, Cultivators are immersed in the conditions they need to thrive,** which also means their companies can more readily surface new ideas, leverage internal resources to drive strategic change, achieve social/community impact goals, and continually adapt to emerging business needs and conditions at every level.

Unfortunately, most companies have a long way to go when it comes to empowering their people and realizing the full benefits of those efforts. Multiple studies from the past decade have demonstrated that employees want to work in more empowering environments, but many organizations continue to struggle to meet that demand. Issues like toxic corporate cultures, feeling disrespected at work, inflexibility, and a lack of clarity or purpose show up in study after study as some of the most significant contributors to employee disengagement, turnover, and turnover intent.

What do employees want instead? Among a group of answers as diverse as the population itself, there are some clear commonalities: Employees want support for learning and career development, a clear and authentic mission that aligns with their values, flexible work arrangements and room for creativity, a sense of belonging and inclusion, and to be engaged in doing the kind of work they do best. On the surface, these wants and needs may seem unrelated, but our research shows **each one is tied to the overall experience of empowerment at work.** Organizations that invest in empowerment are delivering real value to their employees and actively differentiating themselves in the competition for top talent.

Cultivate exists to support Cultivators and the organizations that work to empower them. One of the ways we do that is by learning as much as possible, so we chose the following two questions to guide our research:
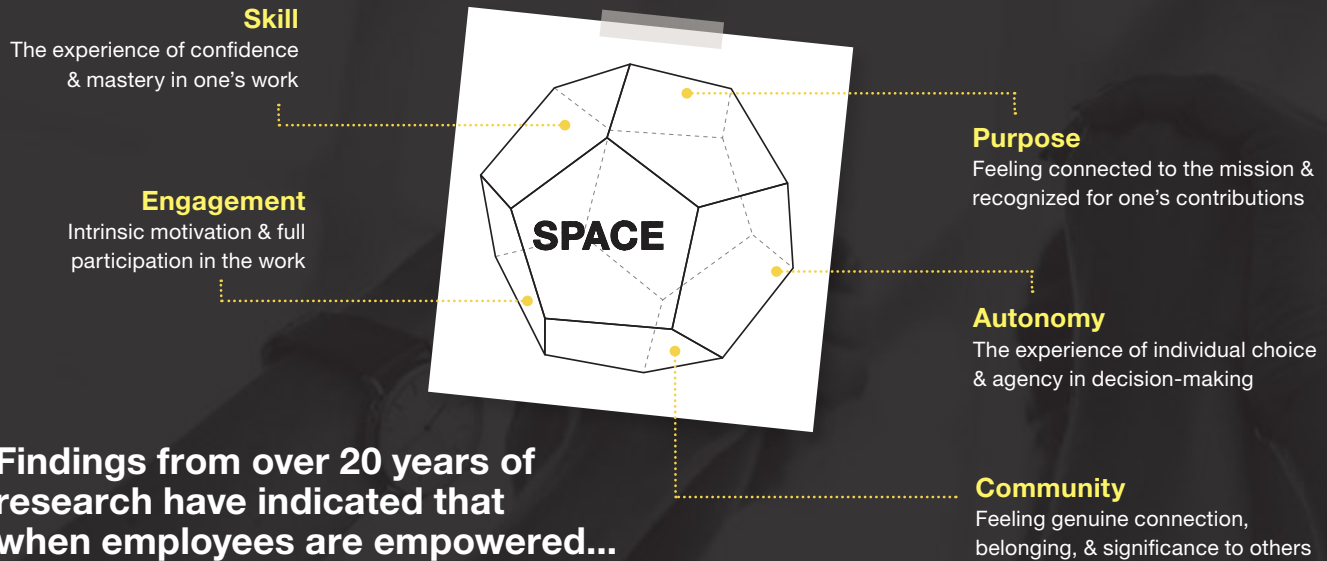
1. **CULTIVATORS:** What truly makes a Cultivator a Cultivator, and what types of experiences are shared across these otherwise exceptionally unique individuals?

2. **CONTEXT:** What organizational factors tend to support or inhibit the kind of empowerment that we think is crucial to Cultivators' success?

We embarked on two studies to explore these questions; you can read more about the first in the whitepaper, *Employee Empowerment in Action* . The second study included a detailed research synthesis, the creation of an original model of organizational empowerment, and the development of a new survey instrument to assess the conditions of empowerment within teams and organizations. Through this research, we have uncovered **a handful of crucial dimensions that collectively define what organizational empowerment means today**, and the model we've synthesized from our findings represents the core needs that all organizational leaders should be aware of as they work to develop the kinds of highly empowered and empowering teams that can continually drive innovation, performance, and positive organizational transformation from the ground up.

Let's take a look at what the research can teach us about creating space for empowerment at work…

Findings: **The Short Version**

Cultivate's comprehensive model of organizational empowerment has five crucial dimensions:

Skill
The experience of confidence & mastery in one's work

Engagement
Intrinsic motivation & full participation in the work

SPACE

Purpose
Feeling connected to the mission & recognized for one's contributions

Autonomy
The experience of individual choice & agency in decision-making

Community
Feeling genuine connection, belonging, & significance to others

Findings from over 20 years of research have indicated that when employees are empowered...

1. Their companies generate **more revenue.**[1]

2. They have higher levels of **engagement.**[2]

3. Companies are more **innovative.**[3]

4. Employees are more likely to report a **sense of belonging** at work.[4]

5. Employees are more likely to be **committed to the organization** and **motivated** to do their best work[5], which means **performance improves**[6] along with **retention.**[7]

6. **Organizational citizenship behaviors,** like voluntarily helping colleagues, are more common.[8]

Assessing organizational empowerment is possible.

Based on our results from validating and benchmarking Cultivate's Organizational Empowerment Assessment, we've learned that assessing empowerment requires measures of both empowering and disempowering factors to create an overall empowerment ratio.

2:1
Empowerment ratio

The **top 20%** of organizations have an empowerment ratio of at least **2:1**, indicating there are twice as many empowering factors present vs. disempowering ones.[9]

Current trends in the workforce and the larger world indicate that prioritizing empowerment is as crucial as ever.

Multiple large-scale survey studies have found that right now, **turnover is impacted significantly more by culture than compensation (10.4X more).** The findings also show that broadly, employees "want acknowledgment, growth opportunities, and to feel valued, trusted, and empowered."[10]

A multidimensional approach to empowerment has also shown up as an essential element of promoting employee wellbeing in the face of growing mental health concerns, especially among those who are already impacted by racism, heterosexism, and other forms of marginalization.[11] Negative mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been reported by a majority of employees, with a recent global study finding that:

As many as 53% of employees currently believe their work is suffering as a result of poor mental health.[12]

53%
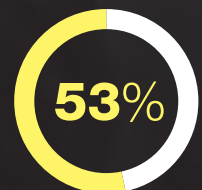
What it means to be an empowering organization

Based on an extensive literature review and collaboration with partners like **Penn State University's Farrell Center for Corporate Innovation and Entrepreneurship,** we developed an original, multi-dimensional model of organizational empowerment.

SKILL
The experience of confidence & mastery in one's work

PURPOSE
Feeling connected to the mission & recognized for one's contributions

ENGAGEMENT
Intrinsic motivation & full participation in the work

SPACE

AUTONOMY
The experience of individual choice & agency in decision-making

COMMUNITY
Feeling genuine connection, belonging, & significance to others
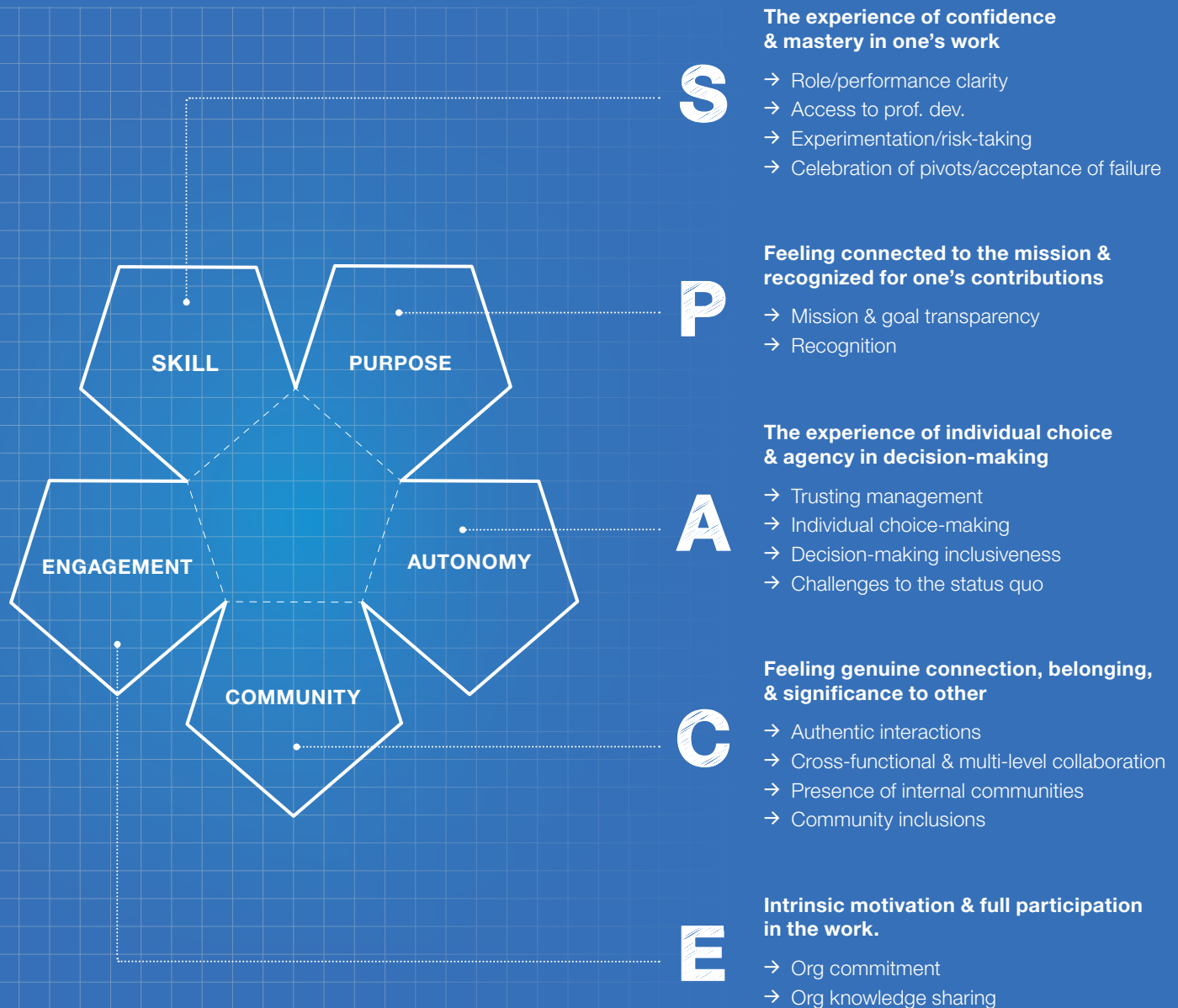
Source:
Cultivate Internal Research, 2022

The five dimensions of Cultivate's **SPACE model of organizational empowerment** collectively represent the crucial structural elements of an empowering work environment (or "space") where Cultivators can thrive. An empowering organization is one that meets its employees' five essential empowerment needs, supporting their overall self-determination: the need to feel **skilled** and capable in their roles, the need to feel connected to the **purpose** of their work, the need for **autonomy** and agency in decision-making, the need to feel a sense of **community** and belonging, and the need to feel **engaged** and intrinsically motivated to work together.

Reading the Signs

Cultivate's SPACE model includes a set of concrete, observable indicators of empowerment that help to describe what each dimension can look like in the context of employees' actual work experiences. Every member of an organization can use this model as a lens through which to examine nearly any work experience for signs of organizational empowerment and disempowerment, identifying areas where needs are being met while targeting specific dimensions where advocacy and effort may be required to challenge the status quo.

The experience of confidence & mastery in one's work

S
→ Role/performance clarity
→ Access to prof. dev.
→ Experimentation/risk-taking
→ Celebration of pivots/acceptance of failure

Feeling connected to the mission & recognized for one's contributions

P
→ Mission & goal transparency
→ Recognition

The experience of individual choice & agency in decision-making

A
→ Trusting management
→ Individual choice-making
→ Decision-making inclusiveness
→ Challenges to the status quo

Feeling genuine connection, belonging, & significance to other

C
→ Authentic interactions
→ Cross-functional & multi-level collaboration
→ Presence of internal communities
→ Community inclusions

Intrinsic motivation & full participation in the work.

E
→ Org commitment
→ Org knowledge sharing

SKILL   PURPOSE

ENGAGEMENT   AUTONOMY

COMMUNITY

Cultivate developed this model through an extensive review and synthesis of academic and industry research on empowerment, self-determination, and related bodies of work. The next section of this report includes an overview of that research along with case studies describing some of Cultivate's recent work to increase employee empowerment inside large organizations.

Research Foundations
& Case Studies

Skill

The experience of confidence
& mastery in one's work

96%

of companies are struggling to adapt to change due to skill gaps.

76%

of Gen Z employees believe that learning is the key to career succes.

INDICATORS

→ **Role/performance clarity:** People know
what's expected of them and how they are
being evaluated; as needs change, they have
opportunities to participate in the process of
updating those expectations.

→ **Access to professional development:**
The organization invests in its people, in part,
by providing meaningful, effective learning
and development opportunities (from formal
learning programs, to mentorship, to stretch
assignments and more).

→ **Experimentation/risk-taking:**
Employees understand their roles, their
organizational context, and their own
capabilities well enough to take smart risks
and to experiment with new ideas in ways
that move the organization forward.

→ **Celebration of pivots & acceptance of
failures:** When an idea, initiative, or project
goes wrong, a risk ends with unfortunate
consequences, or unforeseen circumstances
require a pivot, people's instinctive response
isn't to hide their mistakes or to blame
themselves or others, but to celebrate these
moments as crucial learning opportunities.

Every year, companies spend upwards of $100 billion on L&D[13],
but many of those programs and initiatives target specific skills or
capabilities without meaningfully connecting to a larger unifying
goal or strategy. Alternatively, **investing in skill as a dimension of
empowerment can elevate the impact of talent development
initiatives**, because empowerment is about more than just
improving performance; it's about creating an environment that
meets people's essential need to be confident of their capabilities,
to understand their role and how they can contribute to their team,
and to actively learn and grow over time.

Meeting those needs results in strategic benefits for organizations as
well as individuals, contributing to positive gains in talent retention,
internal advancement, satisfaction, and more. In a recent study,
**over 2/3 of employees said they would stay at their company
longer if they could benefit more from learning and talent
development efforts.**[14] Multiple studies also tell us that when
employees *don't* feel skilled or confident in their roles, they
tend to experience anxiety and disengagement[15], failure and
helplessness[16], and poor performance.[17] Organizations that
effectively mitigate these issues often do so by developing a strong
learning culture[18] and adopting leadership and management norms
that support experimentation.[19] Companies that celebrate pivots
and promote the belief that "failure is code for learning" exemplify
this approach to empowerment, and those types of organizational
cultures tend to be more innovative and more capable of sustaining
innovation in the long term.[20]

**One of the most concrete ways companies can empower
employees is by making sure they have access to the
professional development they need** to be effective in their roles,
to adapt to change, and to advance their careers. This aspect
of empowerment is especially important when you consider a
landscape where 96% of companies are struggling adapt to change
due to skill gaps in the labor market and/or in their organization's
leadership[21], and employee upskilling/reskilling is the top priority
for nearly two thirds of L&D leaders. The positive impacts of meeting
employees' need for meaningful learning opportunities are especially
strong among Gen Z employees, 76% of whom believe that learning
is the #1 key to career success.[22]

Skill

CASE STUDY

COMPANY TYPE:
Medical Device Company

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:
24,000+

ANNUAL REVENUE:
$8 Billion

THE NEED:
A major business unit needed its leaders to develop and sustain more empowering leadership skills.

WHAT WE DID:
Cultivate designed bespoke, tool-based, collaborative learning experiences for leaders across the organization, empowering participants with new skills and growing their confidence to use them.

What does it look like to empower employees by meeting their need to feel skilled and competent in their work? One of our clients, a global medical device company, has spent the past few years focusing on the **Skill** dimension of empowerment with us by investing in intentional capability-building among leaders at all levels within one of their major business units.

Traditionally, this organization had only rolled out traditional, one-and-done training programs, but they came to us with the desire for a more holistic approach. Based on survey feedback and internal discovery, the team determined that investing in a longer-term learning effort would be a more effective way to build and sustain the empowered and empowering leadership skills they needed to achieve their goals.

The target audience included people managers at all levels from throughout the organization. This scientist-laden group was ready to engage, but they would need to see content that was immediately applicable, relevant, and sticky in order to embrace the principles for the long term.

The new types of programs we designed were structured around intentional touchpoints that would roll out over time and keep the leaders coming back for more with each new topic. Every 90-minute session was also built around a specific tool, and each leader was invited to identify and discuss ways to use their collection of tools during the sessions, helping to forge connections and shared language among the leaders while reinforcing their skills over time.

This case illustrates one way companies can adapt talent development initiatives to better meet employee's need to feel skilled (confident and masterful in their work) as one aspect of their overall empowerment. We provided access to high-quality professional development across the team, and we prioritized equipping leaders with tools and strategies that enabled them to experiment within their teams rather than providing highly scripted guidance in a one-size-fits-all format. The programs' long-term format with repeated contact points also enabled the kind of relationship-building necessary for participants to share and celebrate their learnings based on their experimentation with the tools. We designed each aspect of this solution to support the key indicators of empowerment within the skill dimension of the SPACE model.

Purpose

Feeling connected to the mission
& recognized for one's contributions

P

56%

of employees share that the pandemic made them want to contribute more to society.

67%

of executives said their success metrics would be evolving over the next five years to incorporate measures related to societal goals, community involvement, well-being, and DEI.

INDICATORS

→ **Mission & goal transparency:**
Everyone knows and feels connected to the mission; current goals are communicated clearly throughout the organization, and employees can easily draw a line between their work and how it advances the mission.

→ **Recognition:** Managers, leaders, and peers consistently and meaningfully recognize and appreciate each other's efforts, contributions, and achievements.

" [An inspiring and authentic mission] can effectively drive motivation, performance, and commitment to the work where other incentives and initiatives fall flat. "

Promoting employees' sense of purpose in their work is a crucial aspect of creating an empowering environment. With a clear sense of their contributions to a meaningful mission, employees can more easily access genuine motivation for their work as well as information they need in order to contribute even more effectively to achieving shared goals.

A sense of purpose has been part of most organizations' value proposition to employees for quite some time, but right now, **employees are particularly hungry for purpose and recognition**, with 56% of respondents in one study sharing that the pandemic made them want to contribute more to society and an even higher number saying they were rethinking the place of work in their lives.[23] There are also indications that many leaders are already catching on to the need to respond to their employees' increasingly apparent desire for their work to serve a broader social good. One recent survey found that 67% of executives said their success metrics would be evolving over the next five years to incorporate measures related to societal goals, community involvement, well-being, and DEI.[24]

While compensation is the most obvious contributor to employees feeling valued and recognized for their work, recent studies consistently find that, "monetary compensation is important for surviving, but deeper relationships, a strong sense of community, and purpose-driven work are essential to thriving."[25] Similarly, recent investigations into why employees are leaving their jobs in record numbers (i.e. "the great resignation") found that **not feeling valued by their organization/manager was one of the top two factors employees cited as their motivation for leaving.**[26]

Our empowerment model includes indicators like mission and goal transparency because we know these are foundational requirements for promoting both employees' learning and their sense of meaning in their work. The mission and current goals provide a framework employees can build on for "internal sense-making" or connecting their work and their learning to specific organizational outcomes.[27] A mission and goals that are tied to impacts on the wider community can also be inspirational. As long as the message is authentic and backed up with real action (not just words), that kind **of inspiration can effectively drive motivation, performance, and commitment to the work** where other incentives and initiatives fall flat.[28]

Purpose

CASE STUDY

P :

COMPANY TYPE:

Pharmaceutical Company

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

5,000+

ANNUAL REVENUE:

$19 Billion

THE NEED:

A company's crucial R&D engine needed to reconnect employees with their core purpose and change their culture around recognition to promote their ability to learn from failures and innovate at the highest level.

WHAT WE DID:

Cultivate designed multiple interventions to disrupt employees' fear of failure and replace it with a culture of celebrating pivots, empowering everyone in R&D to reframe failures, capture learnings, and connect their pivot stories to the company's mission.

Ensuring every employee has the opportunity to work with a clear sense of purpose can be challenging, especially in large, global organizations and those that haven't historically invested a significant amount of energy in developing a meaningful and transparent organizational mission. So, what does it look like in practice to move toward a more empowering organizational culture with **Purpose** front and center?

One of our recent client projects serves as an excellent example. A large, global pharmaceutical company we work with relies on their R&D talent to drive innovation and market success for the entire organization, but they were noticing a problem with the culture of R&D: the teams weren't effectively learning from their failures, which meant that the same kinds of mistakes were being repeated over and over again. As part of a strategy to address the issue, we leaned hard into the mission of the organization as a driving force for change.

The mission of R&D is, at its core, to drive faster, more reliable delivery of effective molecules to treat conditions. Achieving that mission requires a coordinated process of constant experimentation, failure, learning, and iteration. But, failure comes with a lot of baggage, so we needed to find ways to empower the teams to view failure in a new way: as a tool for achieving the mission. To accomplish this, we implemented a multifaceted program to instill the habit of reframing failures as 'pivots' (moments when something isn't going as planned, and we need to change direction) across the organization. The program introduced the concept of celebrating pivots and sharing pivot stories through 1hr workshops designed for intact teams throughout the organization. Pivot stories from across the organization were also captured and shared throughout the year via the R&D newsletter. Additional supports included a choose-your-own-adventure style eLearning experience we developed to allow employees to put themselves into the shoes of a pivoter, make choices, and learn the implications and benefits of those choices. By engaging in hypothetical pivoting situations, employees can practice their skills and adopt a mindset that celebrates pivots as an integral part of the R&D process.

The behavior of celebrating pivots is a relevant indicator within the skill dimension of empowerment in our SPACE model, but it also touches on both of the indicators we look for within the purpose dimension. First, every pivot celebration is an opportunity for recognition that shows employees their attempts and experiments are valued, even when something doesn't work out as planned. Second, pivot celebrations are also valuable opportunities to check alignment with the mission. Individuals and teams reflect on how they realized they needed to pivot, how they changed direction, and how that change allowed them to make progress toward the mission and specific goals. As more and more teams adopt this approach, we can see R&D employees at all levels feeling more empowered, more supported, and more aligned with their shared purpose as a unit.

Learn more about our Celebrate the Pivot programs here: cultivate.com/learning

Autonomy

The experience of individual choice
& agency in decision-making

19%

more high-performing employees found in organizations with flexibility around where and when people work.

2.8 times

greater likelihood of innovation in companies that encourage employees to help shape the organization.

INDICATORS

→ **Trusting management:**
Employees don't feel micromanaged, and managers express trust in their teams' abilities. Leaders and managers treat employees like reasonable adults, and policies/procedures are flexible enough to allow people to complete their work in a variety of ways.

→ **Individual choice-making:**
People generally have the power to decide how to structure their work and achieve objectives without needing approval from a supervisor at every step.

→ **Decision-making inclusiveness:**
Employees have a real seat at the table when it comes to decisions that affect their own work and the aspects of the company they are most connected to.

→ **Challenges to the status quo:**
People at all levels are comfortable with introducing new ideas and proposing changes to the "way we do things around here" without fear of retaliation.

As the single most common aspect of empowerment across all definitions of the term, autonomy is essential, and true autonomy is rooted in individual self-determination. While trends in employee preferences for flexibility in their schedules and work locations may shift due to a variety of circumstances and differ based on region, industry, and other factors, the need to exercise agency over our work and to be involved in decisions that impact us are evergreen.

The benefits of autonomy at work are substantial. A recent study on one aspect of autonomy, flexibility around working times, found that among employees who worked in contexts with a standardized, 40hr/wk schedule, 36% were high performers, **while among those working in environments with flexibility around where and when work happens, 55% were high performers.**[29] A foundational meta-analysis of related studies found even more associations between autonomy and high-value business outcomes including retention, job satisfaction, commitment, involvement, performance, and motivation.[30]

Autonomy has also been shown to promote a culture of innovation at work[31], with overall innovation potential increasing through worker participation in organizational decision-making.[32] This is due, in part, to the psychological impact of autonomy – as employees become more autonomous, they tend to feel "less constrained" by policies or processes that would otherwise inhibit their creativity.[33] It's also a result of simply **increasing productivity by reducing the time spent on low-value tasks like micromanagement** and the perils of isolated decision-making without the buy-in of employees.

While autonomy is more than just the absence of micromanagement, the experience of having a trusting manager who isn't hyperfocused on minor details of the work is an important indicator of empowerment. A recent study of over 400 company leaders also bears out the relationship between trusting management and innovation, finding that, "leaders who proactively avoid micromanagement end up delivering more successfully" and **companies with over 20% of revenue growth during the past 18 months were 14% more likely than average to "spread ownership of innovation throughout the organization."** [34] Another found that when companies support employees' desire to act on ideas to shape the company, they are 2.8X more likely to innovate vs. companies that don't promote autonomy in these ways.[35]

Autonomy

CASE STUDY

A:

THE NEED:

The creativity of associates across the company was stifled, and many were reluctant to even try to implement innovative ideas for change due to the bureaucratic hurdles and lack of support they had experienced in the past. They needed a way to empower employees to take action and unleash their creativity.

WHAT WE DID:

Cultivate collaborated with Cultivators at the company to implement a self-directed, action-centered learning and coaching program that guided employees through the entire process of conceiving and implementing an idea for innovative change, empowering associates to challenge the status quo and participate in shaping the company.

One way many organizations approach business innovation is to give employees a forum to submit an idea and wait to see if it is approved by any number of gatekeepers. This strategy for empowering employees by giving them a voice in the organization may be implemented with good intentions, but it is prone to becoming bogged down in bureaucracy and leaves much to be desired when it comes to promoting employee autonomy. That's why one of our clients decided to take a different approach built on a simple question: "What can you get done if you have the autonomy to try?"

Cultivate's *Advance Your Idea* program asks individual contributors to take matters into their own hands and lead positive change from wherever they are. The program focuses on how to advance an idea in a complex organization regardless of positional power by taking action in ways that don't require permission. When we implemented the program with our client, we began by asking participants to focus on one idea they wanted to advance. Throughout the program, the employees empower themselves by looking at the influence they already have, finding collaborators, and exercising their autonomy to build the type of organization they want to see.

Many employees rose to the challenge in the first cohort of the program, with some taking hundreds of individual action steps to advance new ideas and others fully implementing new initiatives. In one example, an employee who wanted to improve the entire patient access journey for one specific product leveraged the hands-on support of our coaches and the content of the program to navigate regulations and a complex network of stakeholders to make those improvements a reality.

Community

Feeling of genuine connection, belonging,
& significance to others

74%

of companies say their internal communities effectively
facilitate behavior and/or culture change.

5.3 times

greater likelihood of feeling empowered among employees with
a sense of belonging.

INDICATORS

→ **Authentic interactions:** Employees
generally feel they can "bring their whole
selves" to work, so they interact with others
in ways that align with their true identities
and values.

→ **Cross-functional & multi-level
collaboration:** Siloes either don't exist or
don't get in the way of collaboration and
communication between colleagues; people
feel comfortable reaching out to each other
for information, feedback, and co-creation,
regardless of their rank, title, or position in
the formal hierarchy.

→ **Presence of internal communities:** In
addition to the general sense of community
at work, there are also formal and/or informal
community groups employees can join or
create (e.g. ERGs, communities of practice).

→ **Community inclusion:** All employees
feel welcomed and valued as members
who belong within the overall workplace
community; they tend to have colleagues
they consider friends, and they have the
time and support to participate in more
formalized community groups during
their work days.

A sense of community (also sometimes called "relatedness" or "connection" in past research) is vital to employee empowerment,[36] and the benefits of meeting that need are many. One recent study found that **employees who feel a sense of belonging at work are 5.3x more likely to report feeling empowered to perform at their best.**[37] A feeling of inclusion or belonging at work is also a significant predictor of employee motivation and organizational commitment[38] and it promotes higher levels of engagement[39] (which is a great example of the mutually reinforcing relationships between dimensions in the SPACE model of empowerment). Investing in community as a dimension of empowerment is also an excellent way to promote higher levels of collaboration across an organization, which is increasingly important for success, "in an age when almost every field changes too much, too fast for individuals to master," and complex problems require multiple perspectives to solve.[40]

In times of change, internal workplace communities have also shown their value by supporting employees' adoption of new behaviors,[41] which is necessary for both socializing new employees and for implementing strategic change among existing employees. In fact, in 2022, **74% of companies in a multi-industry study reported that their workplace communities were moderately to extremely effective at facilitating behavior/culture change,** and members report being consistently empowered through opportunities to connect, lead, ask questions, and more.[42] Cultivating a sense of community can also help make organizations more agile and resilient in the face of change, because while major changes in organizations tend to be disruptive, strong employee networks and relationships at work help offset the anxiety and stress that usually tag along with that disruption.[43]

Right now, in workplaces that are increasingly hybridizing, investing in community is also a promising strategy for **motivating employees to connect in person** and maintain a sense of group cohesion across diverging work schedules and locations. For example, a Microsoft work trends study found that younger generations in particular want to "establish themselves as part of their workplace community" and to connect with their coworkers, work friends, managers, and senior leaders in person at least some of the time.[44]

Community

CASE STUDY

COMPANY TYPE:

Manufacturing & Consumer Goods

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

140,000+

ANNUAL REVENUE:

$45 Billion

THE NEED:

A large, distributed workforce needed to foster a greater sense of community and provide more support for internal community leaders to promote social learning across the organization.

WHAT WE DID:

Cultivate's Community Accelerator program provided a platform for community leaders at the company to gather some some inspiration and tools to incorporate into their social learning initiative, and their participation in our Cultivator's Community empowered them to connect with others doing similar work across organizations for some social learning and knowledge-sharing of their own.

We know that a strong investment in community can make a huge difference for employee empowerment, and the recent efforts of two highly engaged members of our Cultivators Community are an excellent example of that fact. Their organization, a large, multinational, manufacturing and consumer goods company, needed to find new ways to support their increasingly remote workforce as stress levels, hiring challenges, and disconnection were on the rise. Fortunately, the company had a strong foundation of communities and community leaders spread throughout the organization, so the task facing our two motivated Cultivators was to empower those internal community-builders with a cohesive strategy and useful tools to better support their work.

As alumni of our Community Accelerator program and active members of our Cultivators Community, these individuals understood the value of clear tools combined with social support for learning new skills while building strong relationships. So, they set out to develop and launch the Social Learning Club, a learning community designed to support internal community leaders through cross-functional connection, opportunities to share their challenges and successes, and a growing roster of practical tools and resources. They also developed a new toolkit for community builders that guides them through getting started and provides support for every stage of their development journey, covering topics like engagement, belonging, and intentional culture creation.

An important function of these tools and initiatives is that they create opportunities for cross-functional and multi-level collaboration as well as driving the development of a shared culture that values authentic connections. By taking a distributed community leadership approach rather than centralizing the authority to build internal communities, this type of effort also promotes broader inclusion and access for employees from all parts of the organization. These are all key indicators that the initiative will help to meet employees' need for community, and they exemplify what an empowerment-focused investment in community can look like.

Engagement

Intrinsic motivation & full participation in the work

65%

of the US workforce is not engaged.

2 times

greater financial performance among companies with the highest levels of engagement.

INDICATORS

→ **Organizational commitment:** Employees feel some attachment to the organization, enjoy their membership, and plan to stay with the organization in the future, so turnover is reduced, and satisfaction is generally high.

→ **Knowledge-sharing:** People don't hoard their knowledge of the organization or their individual expertise to be meted out as a show of their power; instead, knowledge is solicited and shared freely between all members of the organization and treated as a communal resource.

" People who act out of intrinsic motivation rather than external control or incentives tend to be more interested and excited, which manifests in 'enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity,' all highly desirable outcomes with a variety of potential rewards for organizations. "

Engagement is a deeply embedded concept within talent development based on the large body of research demonstrating the impacts of higher employee engagement on organizational outcomes from turnover to revenue generation. While engagement is commonly assessed through simple metrics measuring satisfaction and commitment, as a dimension of empowerment within the SPACE model, engagement is understood as yet another important employee need: the need to feel intrinsically motivated and able to actively participate in the company. Meeting that need is an essential part of empowering employees to do their best work and to cultivate positive change within the organization.

Unfortunately, the most recent State of the Global Workplace Report from Gallup finds that **65% of the US workforce is not engaged.**[45] This is a problem worth solving within any large organization due to both its financial implications and the reality that engagement and overall empowerment are significantly related to talent retention, organizational commitment, and outcomes like faster decision-making and a "more open, innovative environment."[46] One of the ways higher levels of empowerment can result in positive impacts on business outcomes like revenue is through the dimension of engagement.[47] A recent study of over 3 million employees across 200+ organizations found that **companies with the highest levels of engagement performed twice as well (financially) as the least engaged**, with each additional point of employee engagement correlating with a +$46K difference in portfolio value per employee on average.[48]

While there are many ways to observe engagement among employees, including through common measures of satisfaction, intrinsic motivation is an equally important element of engagement and a central focus of self-determination research (which is the foundation of most empowerment research). People who act out of intrinsic motivation rather than external control or incentives tend to be more interested and excited, which manifests in "enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity,"[49] all highly desirable outcomes with a variety of potential rewards for organizations.

Knowledge sharing is another specific signal we look for because it is a highly valuable form of engagement in its own right, especially within large, complex organizations.[50] **When knowledge sharing behaviors are absent in an organization, researchers have found that the benefits of other important dimensions of empowerment can be inhibited.** For example, one study found that psychological safety at work had a positive impact on employees' creativity, but only when knowledge sharing was also present.[51]

Engagement

CASE STUDY

E

COMPANY TYPE:

Health Insurance Company

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

4,000+

ANNUAL REVENUE:

$10 Billion

THE NEED:

A growing company needed ways to maximize employee engagement while advancing their DEI goals through their ERGs.

WHAT WE DID:

Cultivate partnered to design and deliver a unique leadership summit and a series of engaging quarterly events bringing together ERG leaders and executive sponsors across the company and empowering them to learn from each other, develop meaningful ERG goals, and promote all ERG members' intrinsic motivation to fully participate in the organization.

Meeting employee's need for engagement is, at least in part, about nurturing their intrinsic motivation to do their best work as well as creating an environment that enables and rewards proactive collaboration and knowledge sharing within and across teams. One of our clients recently worked with us to launch an initiative with the potential to tackle the challenges of all of the above while simultaneously advancing their broader DEI goals.

The client, a growing health insurance company, has already achieved a variety of positive benefits from past investments into the development of a diverse set of ERGs. They also had the advantage of a group of highly involved executive champions supporting those ERGs, and they wanted to leverage that strength to achieve even higher levels of employee engagement across the company.

To accomplish that goal, they partnered with us on the development of a multi-day, hybrid summit for ERG leaders and sponsors across the organization followed by quarterly sessions to support ongoing connections and to track progress toward their shared objectives. One aspect of these meetings is an emphasis on bringing one's whole self to work, including by raising and addressing social issues that people are impacted by and that they believe the organization should help to address in some way. Participants are supported in sharing their experiences with one another as well as their knowledge regarding potential impacts of these issues on the business. Creating this type of space to share and discuss core values and their relationship to their work is an inspired example of promoting intrinsic motivation, which hinges upon the perceived alignment between our values and our work.

An equally powerful element of this initiative was the emphasis on these ERG leaders' power to set their own goals and their strategies and tactics to achieve them. While external mandates and imposed goals, no matter how thoughtful, undermine engagement, encouraging leaders to collaborate, learn from one another, and deeply consider the needs of those they served in order to generate their goals was a truly empowerment-centered way to promote their engagement in the work. It was also a way to model an approach that leaders could apply within their ERGs to enhance the engagement of their own community members.

Engagement may be the most complex of the five dimensions in the SPACE model of organizational empowerment because investing in engagement almost always entails touching on at least one of the other dimensions. This case shows how bringing together a combination of factors including community building, knowledge sharing, values alignment, and more can enhance an organization's effort to increase employee engagement, because all of these elements support intrinsic motivation and meaningful participation.

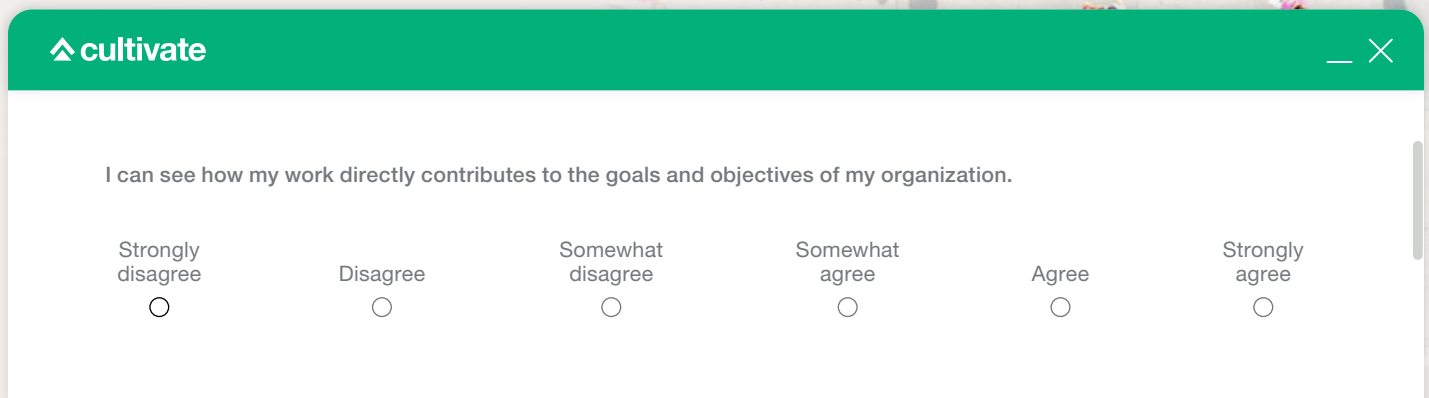# Assessing the Conditions of Empowerment

Developing the Organizational Empowerment Assessment

We built our SPACE model on a strong foundation of industry and academic research, but for clients who were committed to understanding and improving the state of empowerment within their own organizations, we needed more. That's why the next stage of our research involved developing, piloting, and validating a new tool we call the **Organizational Empowerment Assessment.**

The resulting 30+ item survey instrument we developed is a streamlined, validated way to collect self-reported data from the employees within any organization and aggregate it into an overall empowerment ratio. The results of the assessment serve as a strengths-based diagnostic and a starting point for collective efforts to promote the five dimensions of empowerment within specific teams or entire organizations.

EXAMPLE SURVEY QUESTION

⌂ **cultivate**   — ✕

I can see how my work directly contributes to the goals and objectives of my organization.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○	○

Connect with us to learn more about the design of the Organizational Empowerment Assessment by visiting: cultivateall.com/organizational-empowerment-assessment

Validation & Benchmarking Results

The validation and benchmarking process included collecting survey responses from 400+ employees in a variety of industries, locations, and organizational roles. We know that no organization is entirely empowering or disempowering, so we designed our instrument to measure both **factors supporting empowerment** and **barriers to empowerment** within organizations. Scores for empowerment and disempowerment were tallied and used to calculate the organizational empowerment ratio (total empowerment score/total disempowerment score).

80th percentile
Empowerment
Ratio of 2.0
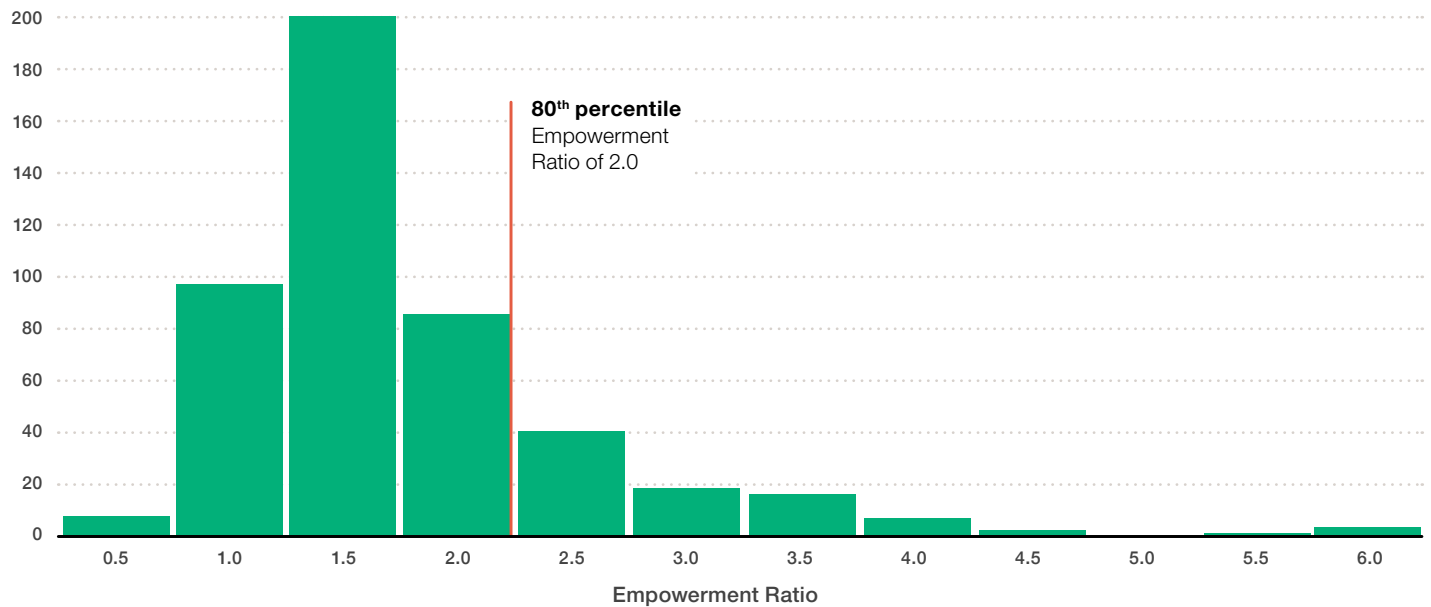
Empowerment Ratio

Empowerment Ratio Benchmarking

We found that 80% of organizations had an empowerment ratio of 2:1 or less. Among these organizations, the most common empowerment ratio was 1.5:1. This means that in those organizations, employees report slightly more empowering factors than disempowering ones. On the other hand, **the top 20% of organizations had ratios of greater than 2:1**, meaning that employees reported over twice as many empowering factors as disempowering ones.

Insights
From the
Data

Highlights

We're continuing to build the largest organizational dataset on employee empowerment with every implementation of the Organizational Empowerment Assessment, but even the initial data collected for validation purposes was enough to glean some insights about the current state of workplace empowerment. Here are a few of the highlights worth sharing from our exploratory analyses of over 400 collected responses to the OEA.

39% of respondents said that they would expect negative consequences if they suggested a change to a policy or practice at their organization, a red flag for any company trying to promote innovation across the organization.

Most (62%) said they had at least some control over when to work on various aspects of their job (a positive indicator of autonomy).

But almost half (46%) also said their direct supervisors were hyper-focused on minor details of their work (a major sign of micromanagement, which undermines autonomy).

46% **62**%

49%

83%
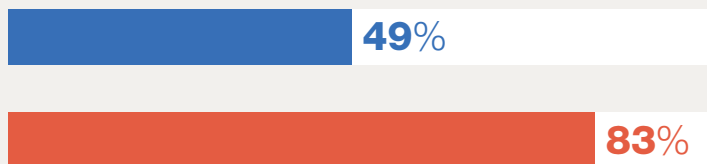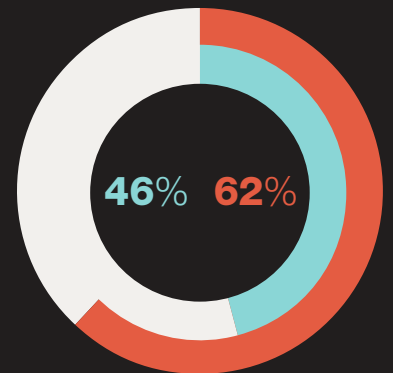
49% said they have to hide their true feelings from others at work, a sign that almost half of workplaces may be lacking important components of a sense of community, but almost everyone (83%) had colleagues they considered friends, which is a strength those organizations can certainly build on.

Respondents also frequently reported disempowering experiences around failure, like people tending to assign blame when things go wrong at work (56%), or avoiding talking about it at all (42%).
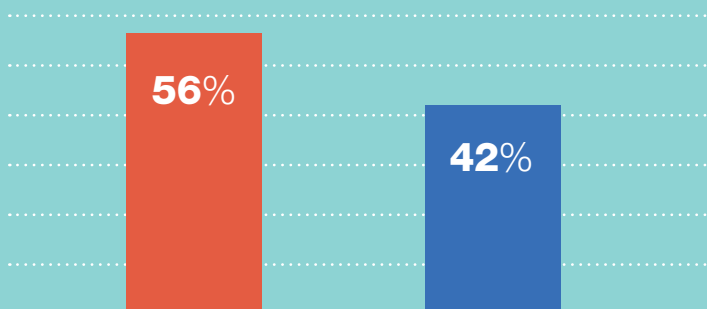
The majority of respondents were also disengaged, and many may be lacking in a sense of purpose at work, with 65% reporting that they are just "going through the motions" most days.
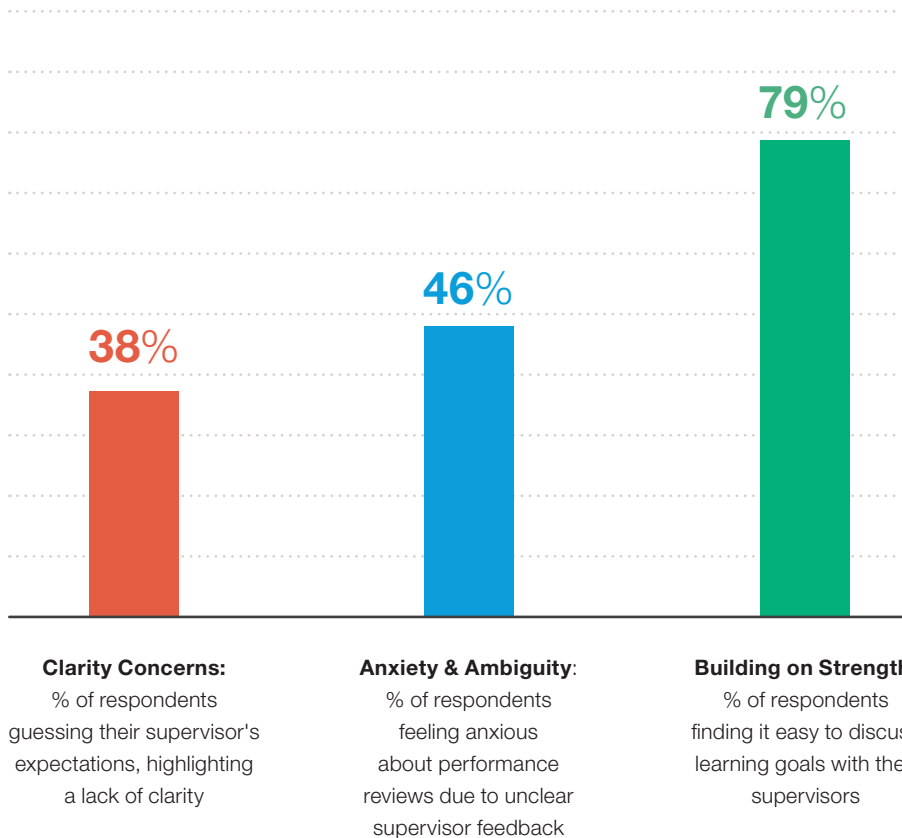
56%

42%

65%
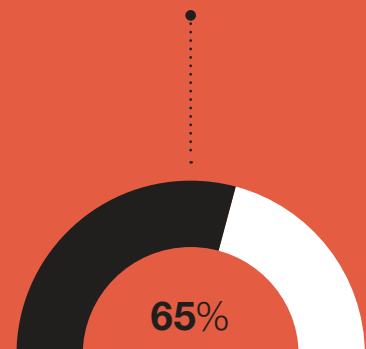
Skill

The experience of confidence
& mastery in one's work

Clarity, Communication, and Empowerment

One of the most significant pain points we saw in our survey results was around clarity of expectations, a foundational requirement for empowerment in any organization. 38% of respondents said they were usually just guessing at what their direct supervisor wants from them, and 46% expressed some anxiety about performance reviews due to a lack of transparency into their supervisor's opinion of their work.

On a positive note, 79% of our respondents said it's easy for them to talk to their supervisors about their learning and development goals, which is a strength that managers and leaders can certainly build on, especially considering the impacts of employees' access to professional development on important organizational priorities including retention.

79%

46%

38%

Clarity Concerns:
% of respondents
guessing their supervisor's
expectations, highlighting
a lack of clarity

Anxiety & Ambiguity:
% of respondents
feeling anxious
about performance
reviews due to unclear
supervisor feedback

Building on Strength:
% of respondents
finding it easy to discuss
learning goals with their
supervisors

Purpose

Feeling connected to the mission
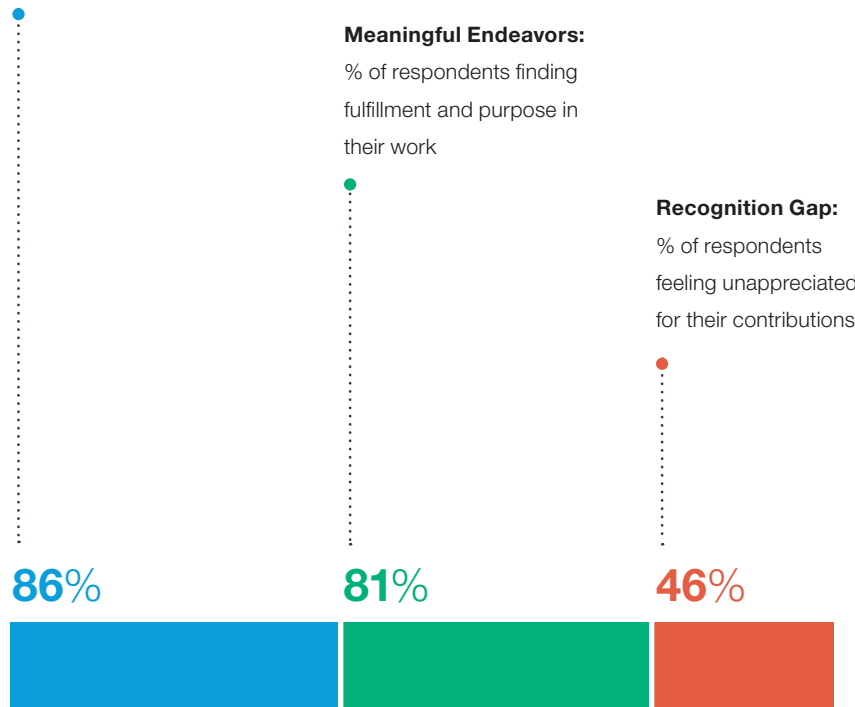& recognized for one's contributions

Purpose, Recognition, and Employee Perceptions

Our data shows largely positive results around the dimension of purpose, with 86% of respondents saying they can see how their work contributes to the organization's goals, and 81% finding that their work is full of meaning and purpose.

However, one important indicator to watch out for is a gap in employee recognition. Nearly half of our respondents (46%) feel like no one at their organization recognizes or appreciates their contributions, which can be a significant barrier to maintaining a strong sense of purpose over time.

Aligning With Purpose:

% of respondents positively perceiving their work's contribution to the organization's goals

Meaningful Endeavors:

% of respondents finding fulfillment and purpose in their work

Recognition Gap:

% of respondents feeling unappreciated for their contributions
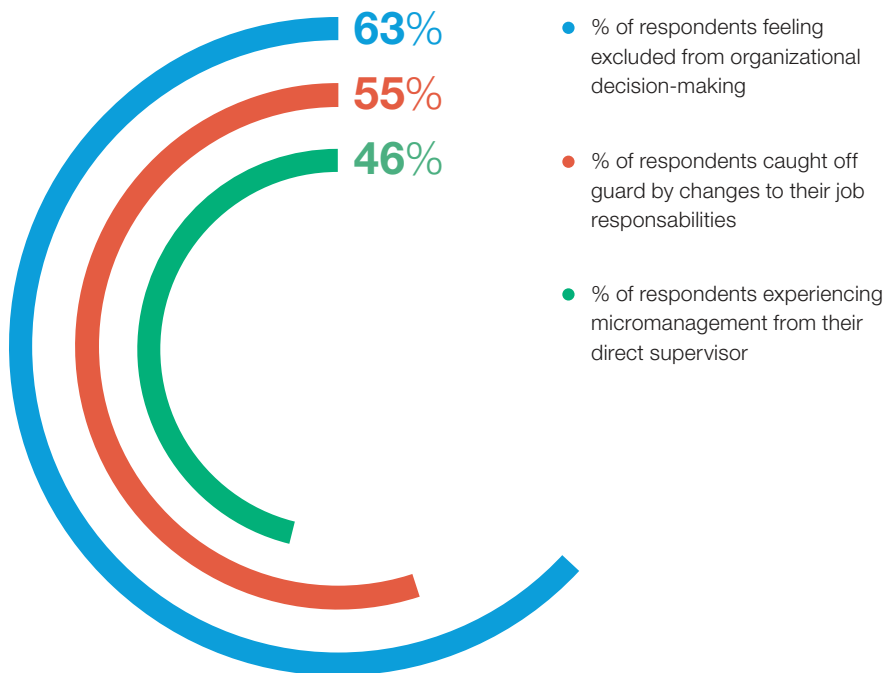
86%

81%

46%

Autonomy

The experience of individua choice
& agency in decision-making

Disempowerment and Supportive Experiences

Our survey results showed that some indicators of disempowerment related to autonomy were more common than others. More than half of respondents reported disempowering experiences like organizational decisions being made behind closed doors (63%) and being surprised by changes to their job responsibilities that were made without their input (55%).

Respondents also indicated that one barrier to autonomy – micromanagement – is alive and well in many organizations, with 46% of respondents reporting that their direct supervisor is hyper-focused on minor details of their work. However, well over half of respondents also reported empowering experiences related to autonomy, including having colleagues who they say would support them in trying to change their organization (78%), an indicator that is particularly important for supporting Cultivators within the organization.

63%

55%

46%

● % of respondents feeling excluded from organizational decision-making

● % of respondents caught off guard by changes to their job responsabilities

● % of respondents experiencing micromanagement from their direct supervisor

Community

Feeling of genuine connection, belonging,
& significance to others

Collaboration and Community Engagement

We found a 50/50 split between respondents reporting opportunities to collaborate with members of other departments or work groups. Siloes that limit collaboration also appear to be persistent in many organizations, with 45% of respondents reporting that people seem more interested in maintaining separate territories than in working together.

In terms of more formal workplace community connections, 36% of respondents also said they do not have regular opportunities to participate in community events or other activities at work. While a larger proportion of respondents did have access to those opportunities, these results indicate that despite the major growth in workplace communities like ERGs and communities of practice over the past few years, many employees may be unable to access or take advantage of those opportunities to connect with peers/mentors or build a stronger sense of belonging within their organizations.
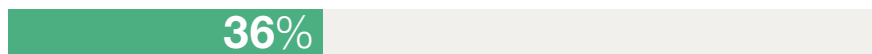
Barriers to Collaboration:

% of respondents reporting colleagues are more territorial than collaborative

45%
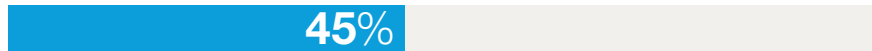
Lack of Opportunities:

% of respondents without opportunities to engage in community events/activities at work

36%

Engagement

Intrinsic motivation & full participation in the work

Participation and Knowledge Sharing

Consistent with other studies that find low levels of engagement among today's workforce, 65% of our respondents report that they are just "going through the motions" at work, a strong indicator that engagement is suffering.

When it comes to knowledge sharing as an indicator of engagement, results are more mixed, with 86% reporting that they regularly learn from their colleagues (a positive indicator that knowledge is being shared freely between employees), while 38% report seeing at least some degree of knowledge hoarding among their colleagues.

65%
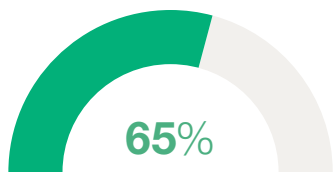
Disengaged at Work:
% of respondents expressing they are merely "going through the motions" at work

86%
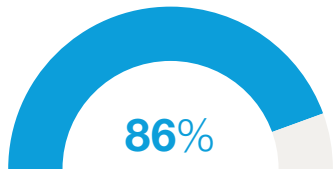
Social Learning:
% of respondents regularly learning from colleagues, indicating open knowledge sharing

38%

Lack of Knowledge Sharing:
% of respondents observing some degree of knowledge hoarding among colleagues

Appendix

Our Methodology

## Assessment Validation

Data Collection

We delivered the Organizational Empowerment Assessment as an online survey to over 400 individuals employed at organizations with 1000+ employees. Participants represented a variety of industries, roles (management vs. non-management), and demographics. However, an important limitation of this dataset is that it is not a fully representative sample of the global or US employee population. While the data was sufficient for validation purposes, insights based on correlational analyses or predictive analytics were limited due to this limitation of sample diversity.

Number of Factors & Items Removed

All 40 items from the Organizational Empowerment Assessment were included in the original model. In exploratory factor analysis, only factors where the eigenvalue > 1 are chosen for the model. Initial analysis indicated that two items should be removed from the model as they did not load well onto their respective factors (X < .40).

The analysis was rerun with the remaining 38 items. The scree plot below indicates that the best-fitting model has two factors. A third relatively weak factor was potentially present; however, the third factor only included two items that were highly correlated with another factor. For this reason, the decision was made to work with two factors that had eigenvalues > 1.

Scree Plot
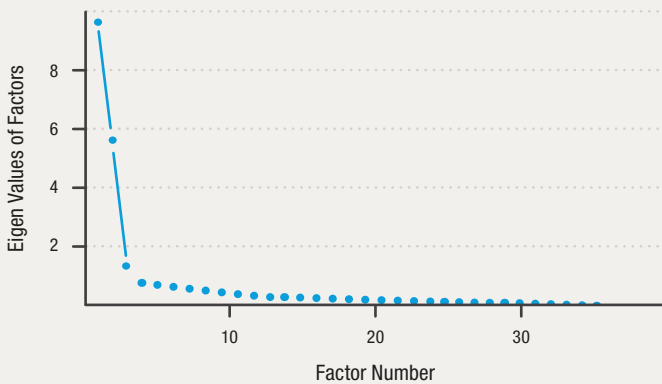
Rotation

Oblique rotation was chosen because the underlying theory does not assume that the factors are unrelated. The "promax" method was used as the sample size was large and there was no strong reason to use another method.

Factors

High Chronbach's alpha values indicate that the variables are highly consistent within each factor. Alphas > .80 are considered "good"; alphas > .90 are excellent.

> *Factor 1: Empowerment*
> This factor consists of 19 items that describe indicators of empowering behaviors and working conditions in an organization. Chronbach's alpha = .92
>
> *Factor 2: Disempowerment*
> This factor consists of 19 items that describe indicators of disempowering behaviors and working conditions in an organization. Chronbach's alpha = .92

Scoring

Add the empowered and the disempowered scores for all individuals. Calculate the ratio of empowering to disempowering scores: Empowered/Disempowered.

The top 20% of orgs have approximately a 2:1 ratio of empowering to disempowering scores. These overall ratios will be used as benchmarks for comparison with future organization's assessment results. Within a given organization's dataset, ratios can also be compared across different subgroups (departments, demographics, locations, etc.) to determine the impact each group may have on the average.

10%	0.99
20%	0.98
30%	1.06
40%	1.16
50%	1.28
60%	1.43
70%	1.62
80%	1.94
90%	2.49
100%	5.95

Notes

[1] Bechtel et al., 2021; Harter et al., 2002

[2] Sergio & Rylova, 2018; Thibault-Landry et al., 2018; Wörtler et al., 2020

[3] Ramirez et al., 2020; Vey et al., 2017; Wynen et al., 2014; Cekmecelioglu & Gunsel, 2013; Yang & Konrad, 2011

[4] Salesforce – *Impact of equality & values driven business,* 2017

[5] Wang et al., 2019

[6] Ramirez et al., 2020; Eylon, 1998

[7] Sergio & Rylova, 2018

[8] Wörtler et al., 2020.

[9] Cultivate original research, 2022

[10] Cantrell et al., 2023 (Deloitte); Parker & Horowitz, 2022 (Pew); Wiles, 2022 (Gartner)

[11] Wörtler et al., 2020

[12] Richardson & Antonello, 2022

[13] Freifeld, 2022

[14] Microsoft Work Trend Index, 2022

[15] Waterschoot et al., 2020

[16] Vansteenkiste et al., 2020

[17] Ramirez et al., 2020

[18] Eilström & Kock, 2008

[19] Freiling & Fichtner, 2010

[20] Bechtel et al., 2021

[21] World Economic Forum – Future of Jobs Report, 2020

[22] LinkedIn Learning – Workplace Learning Report, 2021

[23] Wiles, 2022

[24] Schwartz et al., 2021

[25] Wiles, 2022

[26] Allas & Weddle, 2022

[27] Freiling & Fichtner, 2010

[28] Quinn & Thakor, 2018

[29] Barker, 2020

[30] Spector, 1986

[31] Wynen et al., 2014

[32] Cai et al., 2017; Yang & Konrad, 2011

[33] Spreitzer, 1995

[34] Bechtel et al., 2021

[35] Cantrell et al., 2023

[36] Vansteenkiste et al., 2020

[37] Salesforce – *Impact of equality & values driven business,* 2017

[38] Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002

[39] Wörtler et al., 2020

[40] Wenger et al., 2010

[41] Ryan & Deci, 2000

[42] The State of Community Management, 2022

[43] Bushe & Marshak, 2015

[44] Microsoft Work Trend Index, 2022

[45] Harter, 2022

[46] Gabriel & Bennett, 2015; Sergio & Rylova, 2018

[47] Allas & Weddle, 2022; Harter, 2022; Gabriel & Bennett, 2015

[48] Microsoft Work Index, 2023

[49] Ryan & Deci, 2000

[50] Mir et al., 2008

[51] Wang et al., 2019

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About
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Kris Bell

HEAD OF RESEARCH

Educator. Seeker. Fighter.

Claim to Fame

One of Cultivate's first employees, Kris developed the SPACE model of organizational empowerment and conducts ongoing research that advances the cause of empowerment within organizations and in the broader fields of education and professional learning.

Professional Highlights

A career educator with over a decade of experience in corporate, higher education, and secondary education contexts, they are currently earning their Ph.D. in Education & Social Justice.

What Brings Joy

When teaching and they're able to see the flash in someone's eyes the moment they 'get it' (and the sounds of their two pups snoring quietly).

Maureen Gillespie

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Professor. Researcher. Ultra-talented.

Claim to Fame

Designed and validated our Organizational Empowerment Assessment that offers a unique look into ways that an organization empowers their employees (or doesn't) and provides actionable, research-based insights for supporting current and future Cultivators in the organization.

Professional Highlights

10+ years teaching research methods and statistics at the University-level and a Ph.D. in experimental psychology.

What Brings Joy

An avid traveler, she's hiked in 13 National Parks and 32 states with her two rescue dogs, Tulah and Zorro. She also enjoys running ultramarathons and mountain trail races.

We make big companies more ==empowering== places to work.

No outside firm or consultancy knows your business the way your employees do. If you aren't actively investing in the empowerment of your employees, you're allowing their **unique points of view and ideas** to go unheard and undiscovered.

We know that the future of work is **human-centered,** and that the companies who embrace this change of tide will thrive. Our work is focused on helping the makers of that change — we call them **Cultivators** — to collaborate with each other and their leadership in effective and long-lasting ways.

We partner with our clients to conduct research that matters.

We use both qualitative and quantitative approaches to discover insights together about **Empowerment, Cultivators,** and **the effectiveness and impacts of our work.** Our inquiries may be structured as simple pre- and post-program comparative studies, longitudinal studies (stretching over multiple months or years with repeated data collections), case studies, and more depending on the specific research questions and context.

Our Research Methods Toolbox:

• Pre- and Post Program Data Collection and Comparison
• Surveys and Assessments
• Interviews and Focus Groups
• Observations
• In-situ Program Data
• Client Data Discovery
• Participant Action-Research Models
• Experimental and Pseudo-Experimental Models

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