

TECH-2-TECH

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The ripple effect of engagement on wellbeing and a Culture of Care

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Abstract

Employee engagement is a cornerstone of high-performing, resilient organisations. Recent industry polls and cross-sectional longitudinal studies of lab animal professionals have explored the connections between employee experiences that increase their engagement with colleagues, employers and their wellbeing, finding that engaged employees experience greater job satisfaction, report healthier coping strategies, lower levels of burnout and demonstrate improved resiliency.

In contrast, disengagement is strongly correlated with decreased morale, turnover and risks to both Animal Welfare and research quality. Organisations that value

knowledge, skills and individual contributions see improvements in job satisfaction, greater resilience and improved retention rates. Training and development, recognition programmes, mechanisms to voice concerns and share ideas for continuous improvement are important ways that institutions increase engagement with employees. People that are empowered to contribute ideas, influence refinements and speak authentically about their work, contribute to the institution's larger culture.

We will explore Charles River's experience implementing multiple engagement initiatives and how these programmes have had a demonstrably positive impact on

the Culture of Care at around 70 sites, across multiple regions and cultures. For instance, one initiative focussed on employee recognition. Through two formal Animal Welfare focussed award programmes, global animal welfare has recognised over 2500 individuals and groups at Charles River over the past decade for their actions, innovative projects and ideas resulting in beneficial impact to millions of animals across geographic regions. Whether leading efforts within a single facility or across multiple organisations, attendees will leave with actionable insights into how we gained buy-in for engagement activities, worked through the logistics of recognition programmes, addressed multiple challenges through collaboration with site leaders and determined measures of success. Through small daily practices to ideas for collaboration with management in support of engagement initiatives we can create ripple effects that increase employee engagement, improve employee and animal wellbeing and support a strong Culture of Care.

Introduction

Small daily interactions can create powerful ripple effects that support employee engagement, the emotional connection and commitment employees have to their work and institution's mission. Engagement can take many forms, a concern that is heard, a contribution that is recognised, or a training opportunity that builds confidence. While these may seem modest in the moment, over time these experiences shape how people feel about their work, how willing they are to contribute and how connected they feel to the mission of the organisation. In biomedical research environments, those effects extend beyond the individual to influence an institution's Culture of Care. When people feel that they matter, they are more likely to care, speak up, grow and contribute. This supports continuous improvement for the organisation and strengthens all four pillars of a Culture of Care, Animal Welfare, employee wellbeing, scientific quality and openness and transparency.

Organisations thrive when employees feel valued, supported and able to make a difference. "A group of people get together...to accomplish something collectively...they make a contribution to society a phrase which sounds trite but is fundamental."¹ Viewed this way, employee engagement is not simply about morale. It is how organisations put their values into practice. This is especially important in environments where the work is emotionally and physically demanding. Engagement influences whether people raise concerns, share ideas to enhance the 3Rs (Replacement, Reduction and Refinement), feel recognised and believe the organisation is invested in their success. These are foundational elements of a strong Culture of Care.

Why engagement matters

Research consistently shows that engagement and wellbeing are closely linked. Studies of lab animal professionals indicate that engaged employees experience greater job satisfaction, healthier coping strategies, lower burnout and improved resilience.² In contrast, disengagement is associated with decreased morale, turnover and risks to both Animal Welfare and research quality. Globally, only 21% of employees are engaged, while 62% are not and 17% are actively disengaged.³ When people feel disconnected or unsupported, their disengagement can weaken systems that depend on trust, care and attention to detail.

Several factors contribute to disengagement. Poor leadership, weak supervisor relationships and toxic work environments are major drivers of turnover.⁴ Workplace stressors also play a role, including relationships with leaders, colleagues and the workplace culture.⁵ In contrast, organisations that prioritise collaboration, transparency and open communication are more likely to retain employees and support long-term high performance.^{6,7} Engagement is therefore not a soft concept, it is central to institutional stability and success.

In biomedical research settings, these dynamics carry additional weight due to the emotional and physical demands of the work. Higher burnout is associated with lower job satisfaction and intention to stay in a job, while higher compassion satisfaction is linked to greater wellbeing and retention.² Young also found that institutional culture plays a critical role in this. In qualitative responses, 70% of respondents reported that organisational culture influenced their compassion fatigue and 17% felt undervalued by their colleagues. Across organisations, the role of engagement, recognition and belonging are foundational components of high functioning cultures. If we feel looked after, we become those that look after or care for our colleagues, the animals and the science.

A Culture of Care begins with psychological safety

An institution's culture influences many aspects of the work it performs. Culture also influences the engagement level of its employees. A component of this engagement is feeling safe within our work environments to ask questions, raise concerns and share ideas without fear of reprisal. This creates a psychologically safe environment where people can bring forward innovations and question current practices.⁸ In animal research settings, this is especially important. If employees are unsure who to approach or whether their concerns will be taken seriously, silence can become their default, which may undermine both employee wellbeing and Animal Welfare.

Psychological safety also plays a role in mitigating risks for compassion fatigue. This manifests as a state of physical and mental exhaustion and an inability to cope with external environmental conditions. Exposure to sick animals and euthanasia are strong predictors of compassion fatigue.^{9,10,11} Organisations can mitigate these risks by providing clear reporting pathways, opportunities to debrief and emotional support systems.¹² Making communication about Animal Welfare routine helps reduce isolation and normalise discussion.¹³ Following up with employees to acknowledge their concerns and share outcomes strengthens trust, provides validation and contributes to compassion satisfaction.^{9,13,14}

When employees contribute ideas and refinements, they move from passive compliance to active ownership. At this junction, engagement contributes to actionable behaviour. The 3Rs, particularly Refinement, becomes visible and meaningful in daily work. Seeing the impact of their contributions reinforces engagement and connection to the broader mission.

At Charles River, multiple pathways support psychological safety and employee engagement. Animal Welfare teams encourage open discussion focussed on process improvement. Clear communication channels and visible reporting mechanisms are available throughout the vivarium. Feedback is gathered through surveys and shared across the organisation. These approaches provide practical, accessible ways for technicians and staff to raise concerns, share ideas and improve outcomes for animals and people.

Recognition makes contributions visible

If psychological safety helps people speak up, recognition helps them see that their contributions matter. Recognition communicates that work is valued and connected to something larger. According to O.C. Tanner, 53% of employees are recognised only a few times a year, yet 91% would put in more effort if they were recognised. Organisations with integrated recognition see reduced burnout and stronger employee connection. This could lead to improved employee retention and morale.

Recognition can take many forms, from formal award programmes to simple, day-to-day acknowledgment. Regardless, it is most effective when it is meaningful to the individual. Some employees value public recognition, while others prefer a private thank you. Some appreciate awards, while others respond more to sincere feedback or practical support.¹⁶ If recognition does not align with an individual's values it may be less effective or even counterproductive.¹⁷ Generational differences may sometimes also play a role. Asking employees how

they prefer to be recognised can improve impact and reinforce that their contributions and preferences matter.^{18,19}

Charles River integrates recognition at multiple levels. Programmes such as the 'make caring happen awards' and '3Rs awards', highlight contributions by employees that support people, Animal Welfare, scientific integrity and openness and transparency, or the 3Rs. These programmes recognise individuals and teams whose work has improved outcomes for animals and colleagues. Recognition reinforces behaviours that support a Culture of Care and helps ensure that contributions are visible and valued.

Professional development

Training and development create another important set of ripples. If recognition shows people that they are valued, development demonstrates they are worth investing in. Employees are more engaged when they feel capable, supported and able to grow. Early career employees benefit from foundational training and coaching, while more experienced employees benefit from opportunities to deepen their skills.²⁰

Effective learning environments include protected time for training, opportunities for practice, mentorship and psychological safety.^{10,21} Aligning development with career pathways and recognition can further improve engagement and retention.^{22,9} When training is accessible and relevant, it strengthens confidence, professional identity and relationships. Training can either support or hinder engagement. When it is disconnected from daily work or difficult to access, it can create frustration. When it is integrated into the workflow and designed with the learner in mind, it becomes a source of growth and connection.

At Charles River, multiple training approaches support engagement including on-demand modules, interactive learning activities and practical tools such as posters that reinforce key practices in the vivarium. Certificate programmes in Animal Welfare and the 3Rs provide opportunities for professional growth. Involving employees in the creation of training resources increases relevance and encourages ownership of both learning and outcomes.

Conclusion

A Culture of Care does not emerge from a single initiative. It develops through consistent, everyday actions that help people feel heard, appreciated and supported. A concern raised and addressed, a meaningful moment of recognition, a training opportunity that builds confidence – each creates a ripple. Over time, those engagement ripples shape culture.

When organisations create environments where employees feel that they matter, the impact extends beyond the individual. It strengthens how people care for each other, the animals in their care and the science they support. Engagement is not separate from a Culture of Care, it is one of the ways that a Culture of Care is strengthened.

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