



# employee engagement handbook:

*a guide for frontline leaders to measure & drive engagement*

**VA**



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

*my***VA**  
Putting Veterans First

# table of contents

This handbook is intended for VA frontline leaders—those with managerial and/or supervisory responsibilities. It is designed to be an easy-to-use, living guide that is referenced often and updated over time to meet the changing needs of VA employees and the dynamic environment in which they work. It complements and can be used alongside other engagement action planning guides you may have received. Through recommended practices and behaviors, this handbook supports your ongoing effort to foster and sustain an environment and culture where employees feel engaged in their jobs and dedicated to the mission of VA.

- I. message from the secretary
- II. engagement matters
- III. take the pulse
- IV. engagement moves
  - i. put Veterans first
  - ii. listen & share
  - iii. work it together
  - iv. inspire wellbeing
  - v. up their game
  - vi. measure what matters
- V. frontline leader checklist
- VI. appendix

“Engagement is built by **creating trust**, which engenders loyalty. It requires **open communication**, clearly articulated goals and unambiguous expectations. It demands **shared values** and well-understood reward systems. Engagement is a journey, not a destination. **It’s work**. You have to get up every day, determined to be more engaged, a better leader.”

-Forbes Magazine

“Always treat your employees exactly as you want them to treat your best customers.”

-Stephen R. Covey

# message from the secretary

There is no higher calling than the mission we have at VA to serve our nation's Veterans. VA employees are overwhelmingly dedicated to our mission. They are enthusiastic to be a part of the solution to our current challenges and they are excited that **we have an opportunity to improve care for Veterans** in ways that didn't exist before.

Our employees are driven by our core values: integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect, and excellence (I CARE). Through the I CARE values, VA has laid the foundation to build a stronger, more engaged workforce. By actively involving employees and encouraging innovative ideas, **VA is establishing a culture of excellence** that builds and sustains an engaged, motivated, and committed workforce. We've made significant progress in recent months but there is more work to do.

As frontline leaders, you play the most critical role in engaging those you manage or supervise. Studies show that an employee's engagement level is significantly impacted by the engagement of his or her direct leader. While we all have our own unique managing style, it is **the behaviors you demonstrate and the actions you take that must align with VA's core values** and principles of engagement.

I encourage you to fully engage with your staff; discuss with them the ways that your team can continuously improve what you do and how you serve Veterans. The more that you routinely gather employee feedback, set clear goals to strengthen organizational performance, and **engage employees in improvement actions**, the more you will positively impact the organization.

Remember, the Veteran experience will never outpace the employee experience. Thank you for making employee engagement a priority in your role as frontline leaders. By ensuring that employees are empowered with the authority, knowledge, and tools to problem solve and take action, we can **unlock the full potential of the VA workforce** in place today and build the workforce we need for the future.



**INTEGRITY  
COMMITMENT  
ADVOCACY  
RESPECT  
EXCELLENCE**

# engagement matters

## business impacts

- Veteran experience
- retention
- safety
- quality
- productivity
- hiring
- absenteeism

**employee engagement**  
*/em'plɔɪē in'gājmənt/ (noun):*  
the degree to which employees think, feel, and act in ways that demonstrate high levels of commitment to the mission, goals, and stakeholders of their organization

An engaged claims examiner could result in higher **quality** and increased **productivity**.



The percentage by which companies with engaged employees outperform those without<sup>3</sup>

**202%**

**35%**

The amount that organizations can save on their payrolls by actively driving employee engagement<sup>2</sup>



A disengaged physician might lead to decreased **patient safety** and a poor **Veteran experience**.

**\$65 BILLION**

The number of taxpayer dollars of “lost employee productivity” for the Federal Government annually<sup>2</sup>

**\$500 BILLION**

The approximate amount that active disengagement is purported to cost the U.S. economy each year<sup>1</sup>

take the pulse



# take your pulse

Engagement starts with you. Current research conducted by The Engagement Institute has found that frontline leaders play the most critical role in fostering an environment of engagement.<sup>1</sup> With the most frequent and direct contact with employees, the engagement behaviors you model make the strongest impression. In your position, you also act as a conduit for communicating VA's mission, values, and strategic priorities, helping your team see how their work fits into the broader organizational goals.

If you are engaged, it is much more likely that your staff is engaged. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to take the pulse on your engagement.<sup>2</sup>

## frontline leaders impact employee engagement

**59%**

Employees who are supervised by highly engaged managers are **59% more likely to be engaged** than those supervised by actively disengaged managers.<sup>3</sup>

Managers account for at least **70%** of the variance in employee engagement across business units.



**70%**

## am I engaged?

- How do I feel about going to work each day?
- Does my direct manager/senior leader inspire me?
- Do the days I DO want to come into work outnumber the days I don't want to come in?
- Do I feel proud to tell people where I work?
- Do I have the tools to enable me to do my job effectively?
- Do I trust the information I receive?
- Do I have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect me?
- Do I understand how my role contributes to achieving VA's organizational goals?
- Do I feel valued for the work I do?

# take your staff's pulse

As a frontline leader, you are in the position to monitor the “engagement pulse” of your staff. When you identify signs of low engagement and address them early on, you can help keep your staff's engagement levels up. Employees will appreciate your genuine concern for their wellbeing and your proactive nature in working to resolve issues before they turn into risks.

## disengaged employees tend to be...



# how VA is taking the organization's pulse: FEVS

The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) is a tool used to measure employees' perceptions of whether, and to what extent, conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agencies. OPM administers the survey each Spring and applies a stratified sampling model to ensure a cross-section of VA employees are represented. In 2015, over 32,000 employees responded.

**did you know?**  
The EEI is a subset of 15 items, captured by three sub-indices (listed below). EEI measures to what extent organizational conditions lead to an engaged work environment.

**the inclusion quotient or "New IQ"**  
The New IQ is derived from the Inclusion Index built by VA's Office of Diversity & Inclusion. It is now being used by OPM to assess behaviors that lead to an inclusive environment. The New IQ uses 20 FEVS questions separated into 5 factors: **Fair, Open, Cooperative, Supportive, and Empowering**. Research confirms that workplace inclusion is a contributing factor to employee engagement and organizational performance.



**fair**

Are all employees treated equitably?



**open**

Does management support diversity in all ways?



**cooperative**

Does management encourage communications and collaboration?



**supportive**

Do supervisors value employees?

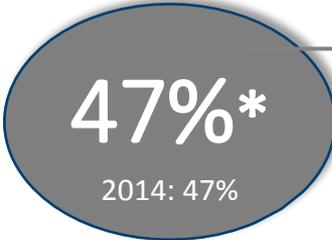


**empowered**

Do employees have the resources and support needed to excel?

## employee engagement index (EEI)

2015: 61% | 2014: 61%



### leaders lead

Reflects the employees' perceptions of the integrity of leadership, as well as leadership behaviors such as communication and workforce motivation.



### supervisors

Reflects the interpersonal relationship between worker and supervisor, including trust, respect, and support.



### intrinsic work experience

Reflects the employees' feelings of motivation and competency relating to their role in the workplace.

\*Percentage of favorable response. "Favorable" FEVS scores usually trend at or above a 65% positive (strongly agree, agree).

# how VA is taking the organization's pulse: AES

The AES is administered annually to all VA employees (VHA, VBA, NCA, and VACO). It is distributed over the course of three weeks each Fall. In 2014, approximately 4 out of 7 VA employees participated, yielding over 189,000 responses.

Being respectful and courteous at work helps you, coworkers, and clients.

## supervisory support 3.73\*

The way that VA supervisors respond to workplace conflicts and communicate with staff determines whether staff feel “psychologically safe” to report errors.

### 3.68 fairness

2013: 3.71

*My supervisor is fair in recognizing accomplishments.*

### 3.91 relationship

2013: 3.93

*I have an effective working relationship with my supervisor.*

### 3.58 favoritism

2013: 3.58

*My supervisor does not engage in favoritism.*

### 3.69 advocate

2013: 3.70

*My supervisor stands up for his/her people.*

### 3.73 communication

2013: 3.74

*My supervisor provides clear instructions necessary to do my job.*

## civility 3.63\*

Greater workplace civility in VA is related to greater satisfaction with one's supervisors and job, positive patient care experiences, mission success, and faster claims processing, as well as lower sick leave usage, reduced turnover intentions, and fewer EEO claims.

| respect | conflict resolution | cooperation | diversity acceptance |
|---------|---------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| 3.68    | 3.48                | 3.61        | 3.74                 |

## burnout 2.21\*

Scores indicate employees' perceived level of burnout across three aspects of the burnout syndrome: Emotional Exhaustion (2.75), Depersonalization (1.97), and Personal Accomplishment (1.91).

I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.

I feel burned out from my work.

I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.

\*1-5 scale, with 5 being the highest. “Favorable” AES scores usually trend at or above a 3.5 average. Exception: Turnover/Burnout items are “favorable” below a 3.0 average.

# engagement moves



# engagement moves

The following are six behaviors—what we call “Moves”—that drive employee engagement. The big moves and little moves you make as a frontline leader will have a lasting positive impact on your team and the Veterans they serve.

*“All mankind is divided into three classes: those that are immovable, those that are moveable, and those that move.”*  
-Benjamin Franklin



Make a move to **Put Veterans First** in the work you and your team carry out.



Make a move to **Listen and Share** by facilitating effective communication in the workplace.



Make a move to **Work It Together** as you collaborate and problem-solve as a team.



Make a move to **Inspire Wellbeing** through the promotion of workplace health and wellness.



Make a move to **Up Their Game** by coaching employees and focusing on your own development.



Make a move to **Measure What Matters** when managing employees’ performance.

# put Veterans first

When employees feel connected to the Veterans they serve and are confident in the quality of services they provide, they are more likely to have pride in their organization and in their role as an employee, leading to greater engagement and improved outcomes for Veterans.

## Ask yourself:

How often do I share good news about Veterans' positive experiences at VA?



## ✓ what can I do?

- ❑ **Articulate the vision:** Without an understanding of the role their efforts play in the big picture, employees may not see how their work impacts Veterans. Ensure that they are aware of the organization's mission and vision, and help them make the connection between their work and Veteran experience outcomes.
- ❑ **Connect with Veterans through volunteerism:** According to research conducted by Google's Department of People Operations, employees are more engaged and more productive when they have the occasion to interact with the customers they serve, no matter how far removed they might be.<sup>2</sup> Make it a goal to incorporate volunteerism into your team's work. Not only will it give them a renewed sense of purpose and pride for VA's mission, but serving together is also an excellent way to build team unity, respect, and trust.
- ❑ **Promote customer service training:** Equip your employees with skills to provide excellent service. Through customer service training, a team can learn how to treat each other with the same consideration that they would offer a Veteran, resulting in an improved overall employee experience and Veteran experience. **See Appendix C for a list of recommended customer service courses.**
- ❑ **Share good news & celebrate excellent service:** In team meetings, share a good news story about VA. Consider delegating responsibility to staff members to come prepared with a story. Social media is a great source for good news stories. Encourage employees to follow VA, their given Administration, and their local facility on Twitter and Facebook. Additionally, recognize employees who have gone above and beyond to offer excellent service to Veterans (e.g., Secretary's Individual Customer Service Award and Secretary's Initiative Customer Service Award). Sharing the good things that the VA and individual employees are doing for Veterans will bolster pride in the organization.

## engagement increases when employees feel connected to the mission

VA employees have countless opportunities to connect with Veterans on a personal basis through numerous Veteran-centric non-profit organizations and VA programs like [Wreaths Across America](#), [Point-in-Time](#), [Honor Flight](#), [Warrior Games](#), [homeless stand-downs](#), and many more.<sup>1</sup>



# listen & share

When you are transparent with your staff, give them a voice in decision-making and action-planning efforts, and make yourself available, their commitment to the team and to the organization will increase. Communicate when positive changes are made based on their input so they feel a sense of pride for being part of the solution.

## Ask yourself:

Do I take an active interest in my staff's input and listen to their concerns and ideas?

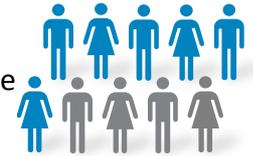


## ✓ what can I do?

- ❑ **Give them a voice:** Employees want to know that their ideas and input are heard and valued. In order to understand their perspective and to identify issues or behaviors that you can personally improve, regularly hold listening sessions and town halls where employees feel comfortable speaking openly. Because employees can sense your level of engagement and will respond accordingly, come prepared to meetings and check-ins, remove distractions (like cell phones), and actively listen.
- ❑ **Establish an open-door policy or office hours:** Engage employees by being approachable. Let them know that any question, concern, idea, or feedback they have is important to you by keeping your office door open when not in a meeting or on the phone. If an open-door policy might be a distraction to your working style, consider scheduling daily office hours when employees can feel free to stop by. An open door goes a long way in making employees feel comfortable coming to you.

## engagement relies on two-way communication

Over half of surveyed employees stated that communication and honesty are key factors that influence their engagement on the job.<sup>1</sup>



86

Percent of employees cite lack of collaboration or ineffective communication for workplace failures.<sup>2</sup>

- ❑ **Be transparent:** This allows for relationships to be built on trust and two-way communication. Give employees access to your calendar. As appropriate, be open about what you're working on and who you're meeting with. Keep employees well informed and in the loop. Focus on being authentic and vulnerable. Authenticity (being genuine and forthcoming) will gain employees' trust, while vulnerability (admitting the limits of your knowledge or mistakes you've made) will gain their respect.
- ❑ **Share what's most important:** While being transparent, bear in mind that sharing *too much* information can be overwhelming to employees. It is estimated that interruptions and information overload eat up 28 billion wasted hours a year.<sup>3</sup> Help employees distinguish urgent email from non-urgent email by tagging subject lines appropriately. State in the body of the email whether or not you need an immediate response.

# work it together

Employees involved in high-functioning teams and positive work relationships can develop an emotional commitment to VA—emotional commitment is a driver of employee engagement, intent to stay, and quality service for Veterans.

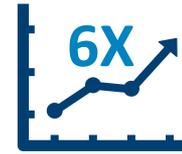
## Ask yourself:

How am I fostering or impeding teamwork among my staff? Do I recognize them for their collaborative efforts?

## ✓ what can I do?

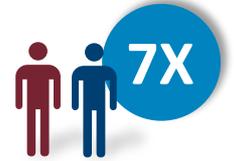
- ❑ **Hold daily huddles:** Hold a team huddle every morning to kick-start the day. Share good news. Celebrate success. Recognize birthdays or other life milestones. Provide direction, advice, or inspiration that employees need to have a successful day and take pride in their work. Team huddles do not need to be lengthy or require an agenda, but they ought to be frequent, consistent, and meaningful.
- ❑ **Foster team transparency and collaboration:** Teammates can use a shared calendar to post vacation, doctor appointments, or team events. Teams who are transparent among themselves are better communicators and collaborators. Encourage them to work together, playing off of each other's unique strengths and skills, and include them in action planning.

employees are more engaged when they feel part of a team



Individuals who are part of a team are **six times more engaged** than individuals without a team.<sup>1</sup>

A Gallup poll found that people with a best friend at work are **seven times more likely to be engaged** at their jobs.<sup>2</sup>



- ❑ **Create an onboarding buddy system:** To strengthen your facility's official orientation and onboarding process, consider providing additional support and guidance by pairing up high performing employees with peer new hires to help them understand your team's culture, their role in your organization, and office policies and processes.
- ❑ **Leverage team building resources:** VA offers a number of resources that can be used to enhance team building efforts. The National Center for Organization Development (NCOD) offers a program called Civility, Respect, and Engagement in the Workplace (CREW). You can promote diversity and an inclusive work environment by leveraging assessments and customized trainings offered by the Office of Diversity & Inclusion. Other internal resources include Workplace Improvement Teams and Unit Practice Councils. For more information on internal capabilities, **see Appendix F.**

# inspire wellbeing

Employees who feel that their workload is manageable and are being recognized for achievements are less likely to feel a sense of workplace exhaustion. When their workplace is a safe environment where they can speak up, employees feel empowered and motivation improves.

## Ask yourself:

Am I aware of my staff's workload? Do employees feel safe raising issues?

## ✓ what can I do?

- ❑ **Be civil and foster civility:** According to research by the American Psychological Association, civility and respect are positively linked with being perceived as a leader.<sup>1</sup> Encourage a civil work environment by establishing guiding principles for team interactions. Work as a team to come up with guiding principles (see **Appendix D**) based on the essentials of civility—respect, courtesy, and consideration.
- ❑ **Express appreciation:** The Department of Labor found that 64% of Americans leave their jobs because they don't feel appreciated.<sup>2</sup> Expressing sincere appreciation is a simple yet often neglected practice that has lasting impacts on employee engagement and retention. Every employee reacts uniquely to different forms of appreciation.<sup>3</sup> Some prefer public recognition or a helping hand, while others prefer quiet praise or quality time at lunch with their manager. Take the time to reward employees in ways appropriate to them so that they feel genuinely appreciated.
- ❑ **Create a psychologically safe environment:** Be accessible and approachable. Acknowledge the limits of your current knowledge. Be willing to display fallibility. Ensure employees know how to escalate an issue through multiple avenues if they don't feel comfortable coming to you. You can help foster a healthy work environment by eliminating barriers to productivity so that employees feel empowered to successfully carry out their jobs.
- ❑ **Promote wellness:** Ensure that employees are informed about VA-sponsored health and wellness programs (e.g., Wellness is Now (WIN), Employee Assistance Program (EAP)), communities of practice, and special interest groups. These programs will promote wellness, expand employees' networks, and increase their commitment to the organization. Furthermore, engaged employees are **21% more likely** to be involved in personal wellness efforts, which in turn reduces sick leave and improves productivity.<sup>4</sup>

## employees thrive when they feel appreciated



**Express verbal praise:** "You did a fantastic job addressing that Veteran's concern with empathy, in spite of the stressful environment."

**Offer a helping hand:** Ask how you can help them meet a deadline or remove something from their plate.



**Spend time with them:** Take them to lunch, a coffee break, or a mid-day walk around the block.



# up their game

Employees grow when they have the chance to extend themselves. By supporting them in their professional and personal growth, being a coach, and providing them with learning opportunities, you will empower them with an increased desire to improve themselves and contribute to problem-solving.

## Ask yourself:

Do I provide timely and honest feedback with the intent to help my staff improve?

## ✓ what can I do?

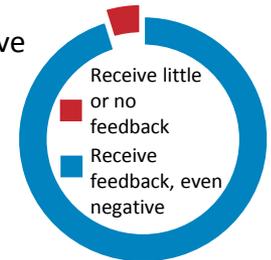
- ❑ **Provide feedback:** When you give employees direct and timely feedback, they feel both valued as a member of the team and motivated to improve. Providing no feedback or waiting to give feedback until well past the event will reinforce negative behaviors and disengage employees. **For tips on giving constructive feedback, see Appendix E.**
- ❑ **Solicit feedback:** By asking for feedback, you are demonstrating that you respect your employees. Ask them to identify your best behaviors so you can establish and maintain what you're doing well. Then, discover your shortcomings by asking how you can improve. Express to your team that you want them to help hold you accountable. Finally, set aside time for self-reflection. No one is perfect 100% of the time. Are there times when you know you're not in the best mood? Are there specific behaviors that irritate you? Awareness of these things will help you avoid potential miscommunications or incivility.

## engagement improves when feedback is provided



Employees who receive feedback about their strengths have company turnover rates that are **14.9% lower** than employees who receive no feedback.<sup>1</sup>

Employees who consistently receive feedback—even negative—from their manager are over **20 times more likely** to be engaged than those receiving little or no feedback.<sup>1</sup>



engaged employees

- ❑ **Be a coach:** Increase engagement in your workplace by taking an active interest in the development of your employees. As a frontline leader, you are in the position to offer valuable coaching that will enhance employees' professional development as you identify their strengths as well as areas for improvement.

**What distinguishes a “boss” from a “coach”?** Instead of stepping in to solve problems, try enabling your staff to solve and mitigate problems. Instead of pushing them to overcome their weaknesses, focus on encouraging them to develop their talents.

OPM states that “...coaching is an ongoing process which helps build and maintain effective employees and supervisory relationships.”<sup>2</sup> If you are approachable, trustworthy, and sincere, employees will respect your advice and even seek it out.

# measure what matters

Employees who feel that VA is providing quality products and services to its Veterans are more likely to feel pride in their organization and in their role as an employee, leading to greater engagement and commitment to VA.

## Ask yourself:

Does my staff know what is expected of them? Are they able to leverage their strengths every day?

## ✓ what can I do?

- ❑ **Hold frequent and consistent check-ins:** The dedication of time for one-on-one check-ins and the follow-up on matters discussed in those check-ins is critical to the success of the individual, the team, and the broader organization. You can determine the frequency of check-ins based on the needs and size of your staff, but regardless of how often you meet, make sure that it is consistent. Use check-ins to accurately track progress, capture accomplishments, express praise, and provide coaching around areas of improvement. Your ability to accurately and honestly rate an employee's performance depends on frequent and consistent check-ins.
- ❑ **Encourage employees to use MyCareer@VA:** This online platform was created by VA Learning University (VALU) to provide current and prospective employees with career development tools, including training opportunities, career advice, resume building, and more. Visit [MyCareerAtVA.va.gov](https://mycareer.va.gov).

## engagement can be gauged during check-ins

Research shows that weekly check-ins between each team member and his or her leader are associated with higher engagement scores.<sup>1</sup> During one-on-one check-ins, ask:

- About their progress
- What they have learned since your last check-in
- About skills they want to develop and how you can help
- On what decisions they want to have autonomy
- What is working and why it's working well
- What is not working and if they have solutions
- What is important to them
- What they expect from you to help them be successful
- What they are doing for work/life balance

- ❑ **Set expectations:** Help your employees know what is expected of them so that they can set goals and manage their schedules in such a way that prepares them to successfully achieve the task(s) at hand. Employees who are uncertain about expectations feel a strong sense of anxiety and stress, which is scientifically proven to harm analytical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.
- ❑ **Make progress visible:** Post team or work units goals and objectives, with ongoing updates on progress being made. If there are work units with similar measures, provide comparison and trend charts. This helps all employees understand and be reminded of the goals, giving them a clear picture of how they are progressing. Dashboards or whiteboards could also be used to post success stories, improvements, or employee recognitions.

frontline leader checklists



# frontline leader checklist ✓

Complete the following checklist by putting a ✓ next to each item. What are you currently doing? What have you started to implement? What are you not doing but ought to consider making part of your management style? Use the blank spaces provided to write in your own ideas, including behaviors and practices you have observed in leaders whose management style you most admire.

## have I completed these things?

| yes | no | in progress |   |
|-----|----|-------------|---|
|     |    |             | Set up recurring one-on-one check-in meetings with each member of my staff, including calendar reminders. |
|     |    |             | Create a document for each employee to help me track a list of topics discussed at each check-in.         |
|     |    |             | Commit to feedback I receive from employees, senior leaders, and peers.                                   |
|     |    |             | Create a rotation schedule to allow employees to lead team meetings.                                      |
|     |    |             | Set up a list to help me track which employees lead which initiatives.                                    |
|     |    |             | Establish team goals with my staff that are aligned with broader organization goals.                      |
|     |    |             | Create and track progress against my own IDP.   |
|     |    |             | Build a library of resources, guides, and materials for career development and subject matter expertise.  |
|     |    |             |   |
|     |    |             |   |
|     |    |             |   |

# frontline leader checklist: engagement moves ✓

Each month, focus on one or two of the recommended behaviors and actions from this Handbook. Incorporate the selected action into your management style, checking in with your progress each week until it becomes a habit. As you become more comfortable with each action, add on more so that you are constantly developing your engagement toolkit and improving your management style.

| am I doing these things? |    |             |   |
|--------------------------|----|-------------|---|
| yes                      | no | in progress |   |
|                          |    |             | Articulate the vision                           |
|                          |    |             | Connect with Veterans through volunteerism      |
|                          |    |             | Promote customer service training               |
|                          |    |             | Share good news and celebrate excellent service |
|                          |    |             | Give them a voice                               |
|                          |    |             | Establish an open-door policy or office hours   |
|                          |    |             | Be transparent                                  |
|                          |    |             | Share what's most important                     |
|                          |    |             | Hold daily huddles                              |
|                          |    |             | Foster team transparency and collaboration      |
|                          |    |             | Create an onboarding buddy system               |
|                          |    |             | Leverage team building resources                |

put Veterans first

listen & share

work it together

# frontline leader checklist: engagement moves ✓

Each month, focus on one or two of the recommended behaviors and actions from this Handbook. Incorporate the selected action into your management style, checking in with your progress each week until it becomes a habit. As you become more comfortable with each action, add on more so that you are constantly developing your engagement toolkit and improving your management style.

| am I doing these things? |    |             |   |
|--------------------------|----|-------------|---|
| yes                      | no | in progress |   |
|                          |    |             | Be civil and foster civility              |
|                          |    |             | Express appreciation                      |
|                          |    |             | Create a psychologically safe environment |
|                          |    |             | Promote wellness                          |
|                          |    |             | Provide feedback                          |
|                          |    |             | Solicit feedback                          |
|                          |    |             | Be a coach                                |
|                          |    |             | Hold frequent and consistent check-ins    |
|                          |    |             | Encourage employees to use MyCareer@VA    |
|                          |    |             | Set expectations                          |
|                          |    |             | Make progress visible                     |

inspire wellbeing

up their game

measure what matters

# appendix

# appendix

You have reached the end of the Employee Engagement Handbook. As you consider and leverage the ideas and tools in this guide, please keep us informed of your success by emailing [engagement@va.gov](mailto:engagement@va.gov).

- a. leading practices
- b. employee suggestions
- c. training and development
- d. guiding principles for effective teams
- e. tips on providing constructive feedback
- f. onboarding your new hires
- g. VA programs and contacts
- h. additional resources
- i. footnote references

“Great managers possess a rare combination of five talents. They motivate their employees, assert themselves to overcome obstacles, create a culture of accountability, build trusting relationships, and make informed, unbiased decisions for the good of their team and company.”

-Gallup

“This is a journey... Start with the right principles and roadmap, move from concept to action quickly and course correct collaboratively. The hardest part of change is not learning the new habits but forgetting the old ones...”

-St. Michael's Hospital

# appendix a: leading practices

The following leading practices were submitted by VA employees to the Idea House, an open forum where VA employees can discuss ideas for improving VA for Veterans and for employees.

| VA employee    | leading practice   |
|----------------|--|
| Jacob Burrows  | After my team set a performance record recently, the other supervisor and I decided to have a team breakfast. I brought in all the ingredients for omelets and cooked omelets for everyone individually. We had diced veggies, cheese, bacon, and a wide assortment of breakfast pastries available. I think the effort we put into the breakfast expressed the appreciation we had for our team and their hard work.  |
| Stacy Rine     | We use "Shout-Outs" at the beginning of our staff meetings. People receive peer-to-peer recognition and supervisor-subordinate recognition. It's as simple as "I want to thank Tom for helping me on that project last week. I really appreciated it."   |
| Mark Brunell   | We have a team white board and we take turns drawing a funny or motivational cartoon on it. Each new drawing has a special meaning or inside joke from our team. We also plan after work social gatherings such as going to the golf range or bowling ally after work. We make sure that it is always a healthy and positive environment in our team. These things not only helped us be one of the best producing teams in our station, but it also made us feel like we are an extended family with one another. |
| Cindy Crawford | We had a supervisor that at the end of the Friday work week would get on the intercom and thank All of us for taking exceptionally good care of our veterans for that week, then she would play "We Are Family" or the song Celebration through the intercom system, everyone would come out of their offices dancing in the hallways. It felt so good to hear that from our supervisor but it also felt good to see the responses of your coworkers dancing. It put everyone in a positive mood.                  |
| James Owens    | It is the simple things sometimes that carry more weight. As the IT supervisor I get to see all the RO employees and I have been known to dress as a pirate for the annual "International Talk Like a Pirate Day" and pass out chocolate coins. Last year I bought a few hundred metal coins to pass out.  |
| Sarah Flynn    | I am the president of the employee association at the Portland VARO, and we focus on creating morale raising events every month. This is the mission statement I created to help keep our focus on doing our part to improve workplace morale: "The mission of the Veterans Affairs Employee Association (VAEA) is to create and facilitate events that foster camaraderie, positive workplace interaction, and enhanced office morale at the Portland VA regional Office."  |

# appendix b: employee suggestions

The following suggestions were submitted by VA employees to the Idea House, an open forum where VA employees can discuss ideas for improving VA for Veterans and for employees.

| VA employee        | suggestion  |
|--------------------|---|
| Timothy Harris     | There is nothing more important than that feeling you belong and that you enjoy the team you work with, no matter what your job is.   |
| A. Elaine Robson   | Monetary rewards are nice, but not nearly so much as hearing from your superiors that your work is appreciated and that you make a difference. When all you hear is "You need to do better" and you're already giving 110% it's a real morale buster. Just a few words of encouragement and true understanding about the stresses of working chronically understaffed can make all the difference between folks feeling unappreciated and dreading coming to work and feeling like what they do is important and appreciated. |
| Carrie Frey        | We work at the VA and I believe having Veterans willing to come share their story and their experience with the VA gives me a boost in morale because I can actually SEE why I am working here and know that I am making a difference.  |
| Valerie Clark      | So many times in nursing you are advised of what you didn't do more than what you did that was helpful. No one wants to be told all the time that "this is your job you are supposed to do it." Engage us in things that matter to us, such as how well we managed a STAR situation or how we helped each other deal with change in the workplace.  |
| Domonic Gaccetta   | Consider creating a wall of fame. Display a picture of an employee with a write up of what they did and why it was amazing. Create an e-newsletter to highlight what's happening in the office, important topics, and awesome accomplishments of employees. Be specific with employees when giving praise. It's nice to say good job, but point out what about that effort made it an exceptional performance.  |
| Ron Woolery        | One word, "Communication". That can be as simple as saying good morning. If you look at the results of AES surveys across VBA, one thing stands out, the lack of communication. If you truly want to change the morale of an organization, start with management at all levels getting to know their employees. Do they have children? What kind of dog is that on their desktop background? They do not need you to be their BFF, but they do need to feel you care about them as a person, not just a production machine.   |
| Debra D'Allesandro | If you create a culture of accountability you are less likely to have morale problems. If leadership does not address issues such as poor job performance or inappropriate behavior in the workplace morale will quickly deteriorate. I think we have all worked in places whereby one or two people are not pulling their weight or behave inappropriately but nothing is done or worse yet, the problem is addressed via mass punishment!   |

# appendix c: training & development

Training is one of the key drivers of employee engagement. Employees feel empowered when they have the opportunity to build their knowledge and apply it on the job. Encourage your staff to take advantage of customer service training offered through VA. Additionally, consider what managerial and supervisory training you could benefit from as you strive to grow as a leader.

| name of course or program                                       | modality* | TMS item number |
|---|-----------|-----------------|
| <b>Career &amp; Technical (Customer Service Focus)</b>          |           |                 |
| Creating a Customer-Focused Organization                        | WBT       | 1327042         |
| Problem Solving: Determining and Building Your Strengths        | WBT       | 1310266         |
| Empathy: Building Positive Work Relationships                   | Blended   | 3126024         |
| Resilience: From Stress to Success                              | ILT       | 3126006         |
| Veterans First: Advocating for Your Customer                    | ILT       | 3126012         |
| Empathy: Sharpening Your Emotional Intelligence                 | WBT       | 3126017         |
| Customer-Driven Process Improvement: Identifying Customer Needs | WBT       | 1723220         |
| <b>Manager &amp; Supervisory</b>                                |           |                 |
| 4 Imperatives of Great Leaders                                  | vILT      | 1318052         |
| Clarifying Your Team's Purpose and Strategy                     | vILT      | 1318051         |
| Leading at the Speed of Trust                                   | vILT      | 1318026         |
| Championing Diversity   | ILT       | 1341141         |
| Unleashing Your Team's Talent                                   | vILT      | 1318053         |
| Leadership: Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results           | ILT       | 3862537         |
| Meeting Advantage   | ILT       | 1320962         |

\* ILT = Instructor-Led Training; vILT = Virtual Instructor-Led Training; WBT = Web-Based Training

# appendix d: guiding principles for effective teams

You can help create a high-functioning team by working with team members to establish “group norms,” or guiding principles that dictate how the team carries out activities and how they interact with one another. A set of non-negotiable guiding principles that everyone agrees on will give the team structure and purpose, which will foster an environment of engagement.

| topics for guiding principles    |                                  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Decision-making processes        | Mutual respect and cooperation   |
| Customer interactions            | Prioritizing work                |
| Sharing knowledge                | Reviewing work                   |
| Completing tasks                 | Conflict resolution              |
| Frequency and format of meetings | Submitting ideas for improvement |

| sample guiding principles   |
|---|
| We will let civility and respect guide all of our team’s interactions.  |
| We will work collaboratively, leveraging each other’s strengths and respecting each other’s opinions and ideas. |
| We will be proactive and not reactive in making decisions.  |
| We will strive for minimal redundancy in our efforts.   |
| We will plan and organize all activities and meetings to be successful.   |
| We will never reserve praise for our teammates.   |

# appendix e: tips on providing constructive feedback<sup>1</sup>

- ❑ Avoid sounding accusatory. (Use “I” and “we” when you can; turn “you turned in your reports late this week” to “I noticed this week that your reports were late”).
- ❑ Shift from the phrase “you need to...” to “what I’ve seen...” or “I’d like to see improvement in...”
- ❑ Don’t be vague. This will help keep you from having the same or similar conversation multiple times.
- ❑ Focus on observation rather than inference.
- ❑ Focus on behavior rather than the person. (Refer to what they DO rather than what kind of person you assume they are.)
- ❑ Beware of feedback overload. Avoid overwhelming employees by prioritizing most important feedback.
- ❑ Make sure feedback is given in a timely manner. Any delay will make it less effective.

## 5 Steps to Giving Feedback

1. State the constructive purpose of your feedback
2. Describe specifically what you have observed

3. Describe your reactions and the effect their action had on the individual, team, or organization
4. Offer specific suggestions
5. Summarize and express your support

# appendix f: onboarding your new hires<sup>1</sup>

New employees arrive excited! Your job is to channel that energy toward success by helping them acclimate to the VA. The best way to successfully engage employees is through a meaningful onboarding process. VA Handbook 5005, Staffing, outlines onboarding procedures and supervisory responsibilities.

## **Phase I – Pre-employment (prior to EOD)**

- Identify peer sponsor, brief individual on his/her role
- Provide sponsor contact information to HR
- Assign physical work space, order office equipment, and supplies

## **Phase 2 – Orientation & Training (first 30 days onboard)**

- Describe VA's strategic goals in relationship to that of the organization
- Provide the employee a copy of his/her position description or functional statement
- Review performance objectives and issue a performance plan in accordance with VA Handbook 5013
- Assist new employee with developing Individual Development Plan in accordance with VA Handbook 5015
- Provide training and professional development recommendations
- Allow adequate time for new employee to complete VA Privacy and Information Security Awareness training within 1st week
- Begin assigning employee work with clear instructions and follow up with timely and constructive feedback

## **Phase 3 – Performance Cultivation and Teambuilding (31<sup>st</sup> – 90<sup>th</sup> day)**

- Provide time for employee to complete remaining mandatory training (within 90 days of appointment)
- IAW VA Handbook 5005, coordinate with HR to complete 90 day placement follow up
- Encourage employee participation on team projects and program/mission-related initiatives to assimilate employee and build upon knowledge of organizational and VA strategic goals (recommended practice)
- Recommend training for new employee's professional development
- Provide regular communication and constructive feedback regarding employee's performance

## **Phase 4 – Integration and Transitioning (91<sup>st</sup> day – end of the first year)**

- Complete mid-year performance review after the new employee's first 6 months on board or midway through the performance cycle as applicable
- Continue providing formal and informal feedback often
- Ensure the employee receives necessary training for professional development consistent with needs of the organization
- Complete annual performance appraisal after employee's first year on board or at the end of the performance cycle as applicable

# appendix g: VA programs & contacts

## where can I find more information?

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Employee engagement</b>                         | Employee Engagement and Communications Service (EECS)          | engagement@va.gov   |
| <b>Diversity and inclusion</b>                     | Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI)                        | odi@va.gov  |
| <b>Leading practices in employee engagement</b>    | EECS   | engagement@va.gov   |
| <b>Team assessments and 180/360-degree reviews</b> | National Center for Organization Development (NCOD)            | vhancod@va.gov<br><a href="http://www.va.gov/NCOD/NCOD_Assessment_Tools.asp">http://www.va.gov/NCOD/NCOD_Assessment_Tools.asp</a> |
| <b>Team building workshops</b>                     | NCOD-Civility, Respect and Engagement in the Workplace (CREW)  | vhancod@va.gov  |
| <b>Training and development</b>                    | VA Learning University (VALU)                                  | <a href="http://www.valu.va.gov/Home/Index">http://www.valu.va.gov/Home/Index</a>   |
| <b>Wellness programs</b>                           | Work Life Benefits, Office of Human Resource Management (OHRM) | <a href="http://www.va.gov/OHRM/WorkLifeBenefits.asp">http://www.va.gov/OHRM/WorkLifeBenefits.asp</a>                             |

# appendix h: additional resources

[Managing Performance: Supervisory Workbook](#)

[SCARF360: Applying insights from social cognitive neuroscience to enhance leadership effectiveness](#)

[David Rock, “Managing with the Brain in Mind”](#)

[Gallup Report, “The State of the American Manager”](#)

[Harvard Business School Leadership Assessment, “Managing and Developing Teams”](#)

[Harvard Business Review, “The Leadership Behavior That’s Most Important to Employees”](#)

[VHA National Center for Patient Safety, “Culture of Safety and Just Culture”](#)

[Harvard Business Review, “Reinventing Performance Management”](#)

[Performance Management Resources](#)

[AES Start the Conversation Companion Guide](#)

[I CARE Resources](#)

[Organizational Action Planning Guide](#)

[Office of Diversity and Inclusion Recruitment & Selection Guide: Best Practices](#)

[Office of Resolution Management Assessment Brochure](#)

[VA Alternative Dispute Resolution Resources](#)

[Ten Years of the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® Rankings: How Six Federal Agencies Improved Employee Satisfaction and Commitment](#)

[Presidential Management Agenda](#)

# appendix i: footnote references

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Warrior Games, <http://www.teamusa.org/warriorgames/>  
Honor Flight, <https://www.honorflight.org/>  
Veteran Summer Sport Clinic, <http://www.va.gov/opa/speceven/ssc/index.asp>  
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