*THE 2021 GUIDE*

# REACHING, ENGAGING, & CHANGING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

Workshop

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# INTRODUCTION

There's an incredibly popular Harvard Business Review article from 1996 (!) that we see referenced constantly on LinkedIn, even to this day. The article, "Reaching and Changing Frontline Employees," is a must-read for anyone leading a frontline team.

The story was updated again in 2001 and is now available for a one-time purchase of $8.95. But here we are in 2021, and we can all agree that a few things have changed in the last twenty years. Even in the last 18 months, we've seen frontline employees become heroes of the COVID-19 pandemic, and now are inundated with countless reports of them resigning in droves: retail, healthcare, you name it.

So, we've decided to take the research we've done thus far and put it together for the (free) 2021 edition of "Reaching and Changing Frontline Employees."

We'll break this down into three sections (we've added a bonus one):
1. Reaching frontline employees
2. Engaging frontline employees (bonus!)
3. Changing frontline employees

Once you've mastered these three things, you'll unlock a truly powerful force for growth within your company's culture, and a rock-solid framework for staying connected with your teams.

# REACHING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

Frontline employees make up approximately 70% of the world's workforce. These individuals are tirelessly working on the actual front lines of their industry and often participating in manual, difficult, and/or customer-facing roles.

The fact that a frontline employee may feel disconnected or left out from company communications and decision-making can often be due to practical reasons: a frontline employee is, frankly, just harder to reach. Often, they don't even have a company email or a way to reach them via instant messaging. They're working on a set schedule, often in shifts, and they are incredibly busy; they aren't sitting at their desk all day, because they don't have one.

The best ways to reach a frontline employee during a big change is 1.) face-to-face, and 2.) through their supervisor. On this, we completely agree with the Harvard Business Review article...even 25 years later. But, as the article notes, these kinds of changes are only really happening every 5-10 years. So how do you reach frontline employees in the interim, and on a day-to-day basis?

For us, reaching employees really does come back to practicality (we'll talk more about changing and engaging frontline employees later). You need to have real ways to reach your frontline staff, in the event of an emergency or just to educate and inform.

## 83% of "non-desk employees" don't have a corporate email address

Relying on traditional means of communication isn't very effective for deskless workers. A report by Atlanta-based communications agency, Tribe, indicated that 83% of "non-desk employees" don't have a corporate email address and 45% don't even have access to the company intranet when at work. So while email and intranet access definitely can have a high reach for an office-based workforce, relying on desk-based technology isn't going to cut it for employees who are on their feet or on the road all day.

On top of that, organizations often rely heavily on verbal or paper-based communication channels like bulletin boards, posters, printouts, or newsletters. These are all really unreliable and ineffective ways to keep the frontline staff updated about company news. A physical reminder of a digital message is one thing, but purely hoping that employees will walk past that screen or pick up that piece of paper just won't do it. (Plus, you as the communicator have absolutely no way of knowing if they saw it or not.)

The best solution to this problem would be to use a mode of communication that can be easily accessed by your frontline employees at all times.

Cell phones are far and away the most practical solution for this communication gap. Many companies implement a BYOD or Bring Your Own Device policy, in which employees are able to use their own personal cell phones for professional purposes. It's a very effective strategy for reaching your teams wherever they may be; not only is it convenient for them to have all of their information all in one place, but it also increases the likelihood that they'll check and engage with your communications, as well. (We've created a BYOD Policy and Agreement template that you can download and customize.)

# ENGAGING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

According to a Gallup study, only 15 percent of worldwide frontline workers around the world feel engaged in their work.

Pair that up with employee turnover data, and you start to get a really startling, serious picture about the state of frontline employee engagement. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, **more than 50 percent of all new hourly employees quit or are terminated within six months of being hired.** (Recent reports, especially in retail and food service, estimate it to be even higher).

These are all statistics and issues that you're likely acutely aware of. So, how can you turn the tides?

For starters: don't treat frontline workers as if they're constantly replaceable. After all, you're investing a lot of time into hiring, training, and onboarding these employees.

In every case, they're either a.) the face or b.) the backbone of your organization. If you engage these employees thoughtfully, you can get a lot of valuable feedback and insights and significantly improve your retention rates…saving your company a significant amount of cash, and creating a better company culture in the process. Plus, research suggests that organizations who connect frontline employees can also achieve significantly faster growth and improved productivity.

(And in the end, if it's not a great fit, it is highly likely that you can find a replacement — but nobody wants to feel that way.)

Other than taking a moment for the above mindset shift, there are five major ways to engage a frontline or deskless employee:

*No. 01*     **Through their direct supervisor**

*No. 02*     **Through the company's culture**

*No. 03*     **Through technology**

*No. 04*     **Through feedback**

*No. 05*     **Through internal & external marketing**

We'll walk you through each of these, one by one.

## Engaging through their direct supervisor

The original Harvard Business review article spends quite a few pages championing direct supervisors as the opinion leaders in an organization, and in many instances, we agree! As they say: "Frontline supervisors greatly influence the attitudes and behaviors of others; they are critical to the success of any change effort."

To be honest, this isn't unique to frontline workers; we all know that managers play a pivotal role in employee engagement.

No one has a bigger influence on an employee's day-to-day interactions, processes, and operations than the managers on the ground with them...frontline or not.

If you find a team that's struggling, start with their manager...and make sure your managers are prepared to shoulder that kind of responsibility. Invest in training, communications tools, and resources to ensure they can do their jobs well (the bulk of which is engaging their teams and generating results for the business).

One other instant place to focus: **make sure frontline employees are recognized and appreciated throughout the organization**. This goes for their direct supervisor, and their supervisor's supervisor, and so on and so forth.

Often, these workers have to deal with a lot of the downsides of customer service or hard labor. Whether you honor them through a handwritten note (our favorite), an Employee of the Month award, small gifts, a shoutout in an all-company meeting, catered surprises, thoughtful feedback, a day off, etc., take the time to check in and ensure that they are being regularly thanked for their hard work.

There's no time where this is more critical than during a worldwide pandemic, when so many of these frontline employees are risking so much to keep us safe and help ensure that the rest of us can access essential items and services.

# Engaging through the company's culture

There are mixed reviews as to whether or not frontline employees respond to the mission, values, and culture of a company...and the truth is, they might not, at first. However, it's absolutely critical for employee engagement and retention. Sure, they might have taken the job for the paycheck, but if you're competing entirely on the basis of hourly pay or salary alone, you'll simply become a commodity.

Sure, employees might be joining the team just for the job, but they'll stay because they care. This is constantly referenced in articles about the millennial and Gen Z workforces; according to Deloitte, *seventy-six percent of millennials view business as a source of powerful and positive social impact*. It's <u>one of the top five things millennials want from their work</u>. And this isn't just for Silicon Valley tech companies; organizations across every industry are learning that company culture can be a key differentiator, especially for frontline or labor-intensive roles.



# Engaging through technology

Frontline or deskless workers are often siloed from the rest of their company. Connecting these employees with each other (as well as those who are in the office) is incredibly beneficial for both employee engagement and organizational performance.

Technology can give these employees a sense of place and a sense of community. Even if they don't get much face time with their coworkers, you can connect these employees with the right product.

**Select a tool that can:**

- Send employees messages on the communications channel or device they prefer (in many cases, via their cell phone)

- Provide an asynchronous place for frontline employees to catch up during breaks/after shifts (and add their own comments and voice to the conversation)

- Encourage two-way communication between leadership teams and frontline employees

- Keeping messages brief and engaging (with embedded videos, surveys, etc.)

At the end of the day, you really just want a tool that can allow you to keep these frontline employees informed and engaged; you don't want them to constantly have to hear company news through the grapevine or feel like they're disconnected from HQ all the time.

Workshop excels as a frontline employee communications solution. It's mobile-friendly and integrates with multiple channels, so you can create emails, texts, Slack messages, intranet posts, and so much more. It's a one-stop shop for planning, targeting, publishing, and measuring your internal communications. Learn more about Workshop here.
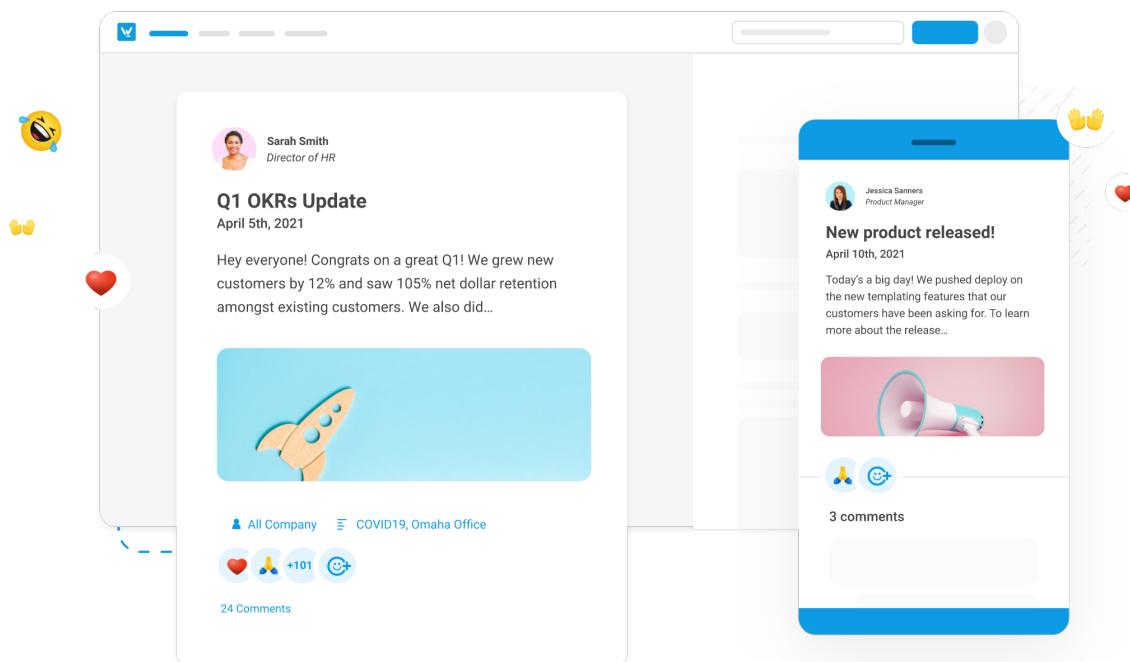
# Engaging through feedback

One of the easiest ways to engage frontline employees is consistently overlooked in almost every business we've come across: bring them into the fold and get their feedback. Frontline and deskless employees are often your direct connection to customers, and/or your eyes and ears on the floor. Value their unique insights and, quite simply, ask them for their feedback.

These employees are ready and willing to give advice, too. In a Medallia study, 51 percent of frontline employees said they had suggestions for improving customer satisfaction at least quarterly, and 22 percent said they had feedback to share weekly or even daily.

Yet nearly 20 percent said their organizations never asked for their thoughts on improving customer service, and a third said they were asked for their opinions once a year or less. Decades of research have shown that employees are highly accurate in their assessments of customer satisfaction and the quality of their company's service. If you give them more opportunities to share their insights and suggestions, you'll be far better prepared to understand and respond to your customers...and the competitive advantages and success you achieve as a result could be astronomical.

**51%** *of frontline workers say they have suggestions for improving customer satisfaction*

There are a few great channels to solicit these thoughts and opinions:
- Creating an employee suggestion box or offer an anonymous Q&A
- Encouraging frontline managers to ask for it in one-on-ones
- Offering skip-levels or having senior leadership do listening tours
- Using communication tools such as Slack or Workshop
- Running employee opinion surveys

The feedback loop doesn't stop at customer service, either. Employees on the front lines are uniquely positioned to identify common issues across the business. Not only that, but they can provide context, help identify the root cause(s), and provide ideas for potential solutions.

The best part? Not only are you gaining the benefits of all this feedback and insight, but the employee feels more engaged as a result: they're making a meaningful impact, helping the company achieve its mission and vision, and improving the business' performance.

# Engaging through marketing

Internal marketing is the promotion of the mission, values, objectives, brand, and offerings of a company to the people within it.

There are all kinds of programs, initiatives, and events that can fall into this category: the company newsletter, all-hands meetings, quarterly retreats, internal product launches, celebrations, memos, OKRs, videos, employee resource groups, big announcements, new hires, swag, presentations, employees' social media posts, you name it.

Ultimately, though, it's obvious to all marketers that the lines between internal and external marketing are becoming blurrier and blurrier by the tweet. Investing in the *way* you communicate to your employees and putting intentionality and resources behind it can have an incredibly positive impact.

Just take a look at all of the trends that naturally feed into a robust internal marketing strategy, like employer branding, thought leadership, and brand advocacy. At large-scale organizations, we've even seen everything from massive employee conferences to internal podcasts.

One of our favorite examples comes from Sherwin-Williams (though they ultimately didn't handle it the right way). One of their frontline employees, Tony Piloseno, had a massively popular TikTok account that was entirely dedicated to mixing paint. Instead of embracing the account as a digital marketing strategy, the company chose to fire Tony for using social media on company time. (He was ultimately hired by a competitor.)

Another way we've done this in the past is to create a blog entirely for stories about our company culture and employee experiences. Life at Flywheel is an archive of some of the best internal marketing efforts from our previous company, from the origins of our branded two-day company retreat to our massively successful mentoring program for managers.
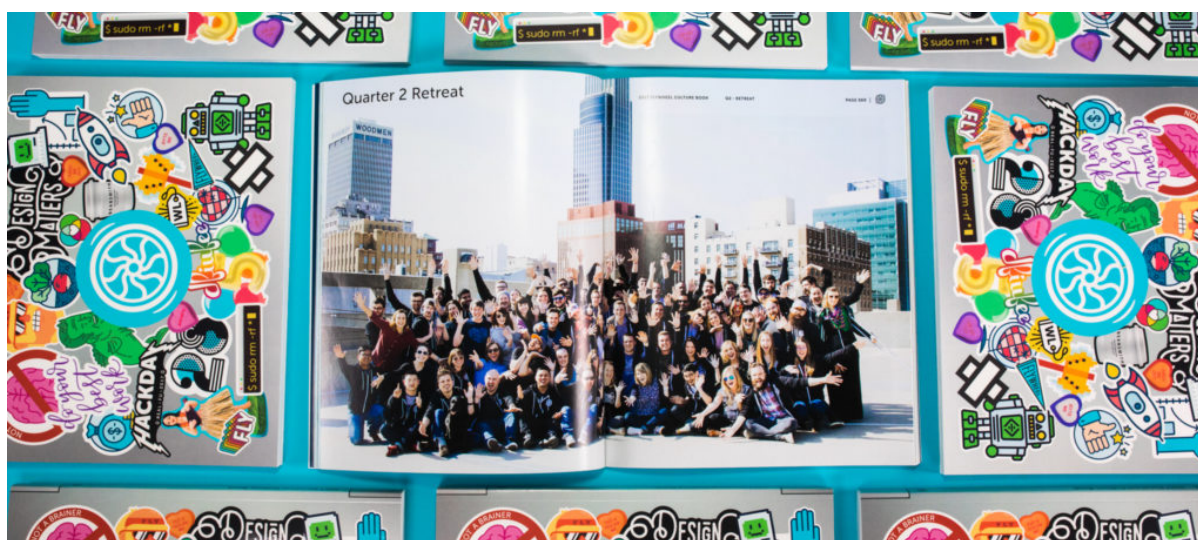


Similarly, incredible customer experiences can go viral. Giving frontline employees the leeway to share those amazing stories on social media can drive unbelievable results for your brand, and internally, it can be a great source of pride for the entire team. (We have an #awesome-stuff channel in Slack dedicated just for this purpose.)

And every time one of your employees shares a company post or highlights a positive part of their work, that's bolstering your organization's reputation. The benefits from these word-of-mouth experiences can be huge, from assisting with recruiting efforts to bringing in new customers. (Keep in mind that negative customer and employee experiences can also have a viral effect, so it's nice to have a bank of public-facing stories that showcase the positives.)

# CHANGING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

Driving change across a frontline workforce is often a particularly challenging problem. If you have the last two pieces in place — a reliable way to reach them, and a more engaged group of employees — you'll have a solid foundation for successful change management.

We're with the original Harvard Business Review article: work closely and train your frontline managers. However, we depart a bit on the *way* you should bring frontline managers into the fold.

HBR recommends that employees hear big news from their frontline managers *first*. We tend to believe that this makes the supervisor the "fall guy". However, supervisors should be a key part of forming the change management and subsequent communications strategy; we've done this most successfully by taking more of a cascading approach.

## *Our recommended communication order for large-scale changes:*

Senior leadership

Department heads

"Core team" of champions & captains

Middle managers and direct supervisors

Marketing/PR team

Frontline employees

Customers

Other stakeholders (partners, vendors, etc.)

The general public

*Here's a detailed process and look into how we think about rolling out large-scale changes:*

**1 | Senior leadership is the first to know.**

**2 | Department heads are brought in next.**

**3 | Recruit a 'core team' to craft the communications strategy, messaging, and materials.** This is best accomplished as a representative group from within the company, not strictly senior leaders (and this is where a lot of companies will go wrong). You want to bring in champions and captains from across the organization. These will ideally be individuals who are in the thick of the work but can also understand and believe in the bigger picture, and individuals who have great influence and respect among their peers. Make sure you have different departments, roles, levels, backgrounds, and optimize for a diversity of opinions.

**4 | Build your plan.** It doesn't need to be 100% perfect, and will likely change during subsequent rounds of feedback, but try to get it to 70-80%. Here's a very basic outline for a change management plan to get you started.

**5 | Share it with middle managers and direct supervisors.** Get their feedback on what the core team has already put together. Any earlier than this and you tend to get a massive mix of opinions that are all over the place; this at least gives you a plan that they can direct their feedback towards, and not simply an open call for ideas.

**6 | Build your materials with the core team and bring in any needed production artists or creative resources.** Incorporate any meaningful feedback from middle managers and direct supervisors. Recruit the marketing, HR, or communications professionals you need within the organization to create videos, infographics, emails, etc.

**7 | Share all materials with the core team for feedback.** I typically only offer one round of edits...usually, time is of the essence.

**8 | Share all materials with leaders and managers.** Give them all of the tools, FAQs, and materials they need to handle questions and concerns from their team in advance.

**9 | Announce the change internally.** We typically recommend doing this via a live all-company meeting for each office location or continent, though you could do it by department. The reason for this approach, rather than rolling it out via supervisors, is that we do believe that hearing change directly from the CEO prevents the frontline manager from being that "fall guy," and adds weight, context, and vision to the announcement. It's important that every employee sees the change as a part of a larger picture, and it's crucial that they are all hearing the same narrative. (Usually, you'll want to do this via a well-rehearsed and engaging presentation.)

**10 | Immediately follow the announcement with small-group discussions and one-on-ones.** This is where your supervisors are absolutely crucial. You've set them up as the "soft catch," and by now, you've also given them any needed messages and materials they need to inform their team. They can tackle FAQs and tailor the announcement follow-ups appropriately. They've hopefully thought through which employees may support the change, and which ones may take issue with it. Plus, they knew about the news before the launch, so you've likely worked through any potential concerns of their own and have been able to get them more bought-in to the change in the first place.

**11 | Provide all frontline employees with the materials they need for the public announcement.** If your support team is going to be fielding questions from customers, make sure they have those FAQs in hand. If your communications team will be bombarded with questions from the press, make sure they've got their talking points ready to roll. If your HR team will need to handle a bunch of severance packages, be sure they're prepared with the right documentation. Don't leave your team scrambling to create all of these items last second.

**12 | Announce the change publicly.** We recommend that it goes to your customers/stakeholders first, and the general public second. For some reason, this doesn't always happen in this order. You don't want your employees to find out about the news from a press release, and you don't want your customers to find out about it from your employees. Make sure you have the proper expectations and embargoes in place to control the flow of announcements in a really intentional way.

Of course, all of this assumes you know about the change well in advance and have the time to properly prepare for it; if you're managing more of a crisis communications situation, you may have to take shortcuts or issue pre-prepared holding statements while you can get all of the above in place.

Once the change is communicated to all employees, remember that the work isn't over. Make sure that your frontline supervisors continue to ask questions and get feedback from the team in one-on-ones.

We typically also recommend that you put together a debrief with the core team once enough time has passed, so that you can document your results and improve processes and strategies in the future.

# NEXT STEPS

If you need assistance managing your communications strategy in the midst of a large company change, we're here to help. Not only is Workshop a great solution for everyday communications with frontline employees, but you can use it to create an internally-focused command center and single source of truth during times of uncertainty. It's the perfect solution for planning, publishing, and measuring your communications across multiple channels (email, text, Slack, your corporate intranet), all from one place.

**Learn more about Workshop and contact us here!**