

The Real Reason Employee Engagement Is Dropping, and What Leaders Can Do About It This Week

Your people still care. What has changed is how much they have left to give, and what you do next determines whether that changes.

By Dan Allinger, PCC, MNLP | AGL Coaching | aglcoaching.com

The Signal

You have probably seen it. The meeting ends and everyone nodded. But a week later, nothing moved. You ask a direct question and get a clean answer, but no one volunteered what was missing. Execution is technically happening, but something has gone quiet. The energy that used to show up without being asked has stopped showing up.

If that pattern sounds familiar, you are not alone. According to DDI's 2026 Global Leadership Forecast, employee engagement has dropped from 88% to 64% in a single year. But here is what the headline misses: your people have not stopped caring. They are overloaded, stretched thin, and running on less than they had twelve months ago. The problem is not attitude. It is capacity, and the leadership approach required to lead through it.

The difference between the team you have and the team you want is not effort. Most people are working hard. What is missing is discretionary investment: the idea someone did not have to share, the problem they did not have to flag, the extra mile they chose not to take. That gap between compliance and commitment is where team performance actually lives.

Three signs the gap has opened:

- Meetings produce agreement, but follow-through is inconsistent
- Questions get answered, but problems are rarely surfaced proactively
- Execution is technically solid, but nothing gets better without direction

The Science

This is not a motivation problem. It is a biological one, and understanding that distinction is what separates leaders who fix it from leaders who keep repeating the same conversation.

The brain decides safety before it decides performance

Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux's research shows that the brain's threat-detection system evaluates perceived danger before the prefrontal cortex, which handles strategic thinking and creative problem-solving, can engage. In a workplace, anything that reads as evaluative, unpredictable, or status-threatening activates that threat system. When it does, the brain allocates resources to protection, not contribution. The result looks like passivity. It is often the nervous system doing exactly what it was designed to do.

Chronic pressure erodes more than performance

Stress biologist Robert Sapolsky's research is clear: short bursts of stress can sharpen focus. But chronic stress, particularly in environments with low perceived control and shifting expectations, degrades judgment, narrows thinking, and quietly erodes trust. Leaders who rely on urgency, correction, and consequence as their primary motivational levers are not creating drive. They are creating a team wired for survival, not success.

Towards a goal is neurologically more powerful than away from a threat

Here is what most leadership training misses. When the brain's sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is activated, the fight-or-flight response narrows attention, shortens thinking, and focuses the person on the immediate threat. They can comply. They cannot think expansively, take initiative, or own a problem.

When the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) is engaged, the brain opens. Attention broadens. Problem-solving engages. People access creativity, judgment, and the kind of discretionary thinking that produces results no one asked for. This is not a soft outcome. It is a measurable difference in cognitive capacity and execution quality.

AGL TacComm™ research and practice consistently shows that leaders who orient their communication toward a desired outcome rather than away from an existing problem create fundamentally different responses in the people they lead. The pull toward something compelling is neurologically stronger and more sustainable than the push away from something feared. The goal becomes the focal point. Obstacles, which were previously the dominant feature of the landscape, shrink relative to where the team is headed.

KEY INSIGHT

The brain moving towards a goal has more cognitive capacity, more sustained engagement, and more resilience against obstacles than the brain moving away from a threat.

This is not a mindset preference. It is neuroscience. And it is directly within a leader's control.

The Shift

Three leadership patterns consistently close the discretionary effort gap. They are drawn from AGL's coaching practice and the TacComm™ methodology, which was built on the intersection of military decision-making, behavioral science, and senior executive leadership.

1. Move from positional to personal influence

Positional power gets compliance. People act because of your title or authority. Personal power gets commitment. People act because they trust your intent and feel safe thinking in your presence. The critical distinction, developed through AGL's TacComm™ work: positional power moves people when you are in the room. Personal power moves people when you are not. Disengaged teams are often responding to a leader who has relied almost entirely on positional power, usually without realizing it.

The shift starts before the conversation. Before any difficult discussion, ask yourself: am I about to use my position or my presence? The first produces compliance. The second produces ownership.

2. Replace problem-focused questions with outcome-oriented ones

This is one of the highest-leverage moves in the TacComm™ framework. Questions that start with why and point backward activate the SNS. They signal evaluation, which the brain reads as threat. Questions that start with what or how and point forward engage the PSNS. They activate the problem-solving network rather than the defense network.

The language shift is small. The neurological effect is significant.

Instead of: "Why didn't this get done?" Try: "What would it look like if this ran the way we needed it to?"

Instead of: "You need to communicate better." Try: "What does great communication look like for you in this role?"

The goal is not to avoid accountability. It is to route the conversation through the part of the brain that generates solutions rather than defenses.

3. Anchor conversations in where you are going, not what went wrong

Before any performance conversation, any priorities reset, or any moment where the instinct is to correct, spend five minutes running what AGL coaches call a threat audit: what in this situation could be interpreted as blaming, cornering, or status-threatening? Name it. Address it before it becomes the room's invisible agenda.

Then anchor the conversation in the outcome: what does success look like from here? That single reframe engages a different brain state in the other person, one that is far more productive than the state produced by dwelling on what failed.

THIS WEEK

Pick one conversation you have been putting off or expecting to be difficult.

Before it happens: write out what you want to move toward, not what you want to move away from.

Start the conversation by naming your intent and pointing toward the outcome. Notice what is different.

The Practice

Everything in this article can be read, understood, and forgotten by Monday. That is not a discipline failure. That is how the brain handles information it has not yet practiced.

Behavior change in leaders follows a predictable sequence. Awareness opens a window. Intentional practice builds the neural pathway. Repetition makes it automatic. The research on neuroplasticity is clear: the brain rewires through deliberate, repeated application, not through insight alone. Most leadership development stops at insight and wonders why behavior does not change.

The moves described in this article are not concepts to carry around. They are skills to practice, conversation by conversation, until they become the way you lead by default.

In the next article in this series, *"Practice Makes Permanent: How Leaders Rewire Behavior That Sticks Under Pressure,"* we go deeper on exactly how leaders build new behaviors that hold under pressure, including the specific conditions the brain requires to rewire effectively. If this article opened the question, that one answers it.

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About the Author



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Dan began his career as a military criminal investigator, learning the behavioral science of interview and interrogation, and making decisions under pressure with incomplete information and real consequences. He went on to serve as a global Chief Human Resources Officer and international board member before founding AGL Coaching in 2017. He has studied Neuroscience for Business at MIT, holds his ICF Professional Certified Coach credential (PCC), and is a Master Practitioner of Neurolinguistic Programming (MNLP). Dan is also the author of TacComm™, a practical communication system built on behavioral science to increase influence and sharpen decision-making under pressure.

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AGL Coaching works with leaders and leadership teams globally to close the gap between knowing and doing. If this article raised a question worth working through, the conversation starts [here](#).

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