

# Different Communication, Different Engagement: How Line Managers Shape Employee Engagement

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## **Abstract**

*Employee engagement remains a central managerial concern, yet the role of communication led by line managers is often treated as uniform. This study examines how different communication domains are associated with employee engagement. Drawing on Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), communication is conceptualized as a relational mechanism through which managers influence employee behavior. The study distinguishes between communication related to organizational matters, unit-related matters, and employee-focused communication, alongside two behavioral expressions of engagement: basic task-focused engagement and high-level engagement reflected in enthusiasm toward work and the organization. The findings reveal a clear distinction between prevalence and impact: while unit-related communication is most frequent, employee-focused communication shows the strongest association with high-level engagement. The results highlight that communication effectiveness depends not only on frequency, but also on its focus.*

**Keywords:** *Employee engagement, Line manager communication, Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), Communication types, Manager–employee relationship*

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## **1. Introduction**

Employee engagement is increasingly recognized as a central managerial concern due to its association with organizational performance and effectiveness. Recent global evidence indicates that low levels of engagement are linked to productivity losses, while higher levels contribute to improved performance and organizational outcomes (Gallup, 2026). Accordingly, understanding how managers influence employee engagement has become a key focus in management research.

Communication led by line managers is one of the primary mechanisms through which such influence is enacted. As the direct link between the organization and its employees, line managers play a central role in shaping how employees interpret organizational goals and their role within them. Prior research has highlighted the importance of internal communication in fostering engagement

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(Men, 2015; Jiang & Men, 2017), yet communication is often treated as a general construct, without sufficient attention to its content. At the same time, employee engagement is frequently examined as a unified construct, despite evidence that it can be expressed through different behavioral forms (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2008). This limits the ability to understand how specific managerial practices are associated with different forms of engagement.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a differentiated perspective by examining communication led by line managers across three domains: organizational matters, unit-related matters, and employee-focused communication. In parallel, employee engagement is examined through two behavioral expressions: a basic level reflected in task-focused engagement, and a higher level reflected in enthusiasm toward work and the organization. Drawing on the logic of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), which emphasizes the role of relational quality between managers and employees (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the study conceptualizes communication led by line managers as a relational mechanism. From this perspective, different types of communication may signal different relational meanings and therefore be associated with different forms of engagement.

The findings highlight a distinction between the prevalence of communication types and their association with engagement. While communication related to unit-level matters is more prevalent, communication focused on the employee shows a stronger association with higher levels of engagement. This suggests that the effectiveness of managerial communication depends not only on its frequency, but also on its focus.

By linking communication domains with differentiated engagement expressions, the study contributes to how communication led by line managers shapes employee engagement.

## **2. Literature review**

Recent global evidence positions employee engagement as a central managerial concern, directly linked to organizational performance and effectiveness. According to the latest Gallup (2026) report, disengagement continues to generate substantial productivity losses, while high levels of engagement are associated with improved productivity, profitability, and overall organizational outcomes.

### **2.1 Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and Manager–Employee Relationships**

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory provides a central framework for understanding how relationships between managers and employees shape work-related attitudes and behaviors. Unlike traditional leadership approaches that assume a uniform leadership style, LMX emphasizes that managers develop

differentiated relationships with individual employees (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1997). These relationships vary in quality and are influenced by constraints such as time and resources, leading managers to form closer, high-quality exchanges with some employees, while maintaining more formal and limited interactions with others (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen, 1976).

High-quality relationships are characterized by trust, mutual respect, and reciprocal influence, and are associated with greater access to information, increased autonomy, and broader involvement in organizational processes. In contrast, lower-quality relationships tend to remain within formal role boundaries and are characterized by limited interaction and lower levels of support.

Importantly, prior research indicates that employees involved in high-quality exchanges are more likely to demonstrate behaviors that extend beyond formal role requirements, including discretionary effort and active contribution to organizational goals (Liden & Maslyn, 1998).

Building on this perspective, LMX theory suggests that variations in manager–employee relationships constitute a key mechanism through which managerial practices influence employee behavior and engagement.

## **2.2 Line Manager Communication as a Managerial Mechanism**

Within organizational settings, communication led by line managers represents a central managerial practice through which relationships with employees are shaped. Research highlights that managers play a key role as communication leaders, responsible not only for transmitting information but also for creating meaning, fostering dialogue, and supporting employee involvement (Pugh & Dietz, 2008; Welch & Jackson, 2007).

Recent studies further emphasize that the role of the line manager as a communication leader has become increasingly significant, particularly in complex and changing organizational environments (Workshop Research Company, 2025).

Managerial communication contributes to employee motivation by connecting employees to the broader organizational context, goals, and vision (Mishra et al., 2000; Timm & Peterson, 2000). At the same time, the effectiveness of such communication depends on the manager's ability to create open, transparent, and dialogic interactions, as well as to adapt communication channels and styles to employees' needs (Men et al., 2020).

Communication that is perceived as transparent and supportive has been linked to higher levels of trust and organizational identification, which in turn are associated with increased employee engagement (Jiang & Men, 2017).

In this sense, communication led by line managers can be understood not only as an operational activity, but as a relational mechanism through which managers influence employees' perceptions, motivation, and behavior.

### 2.3 Employee Engagement and Its Organizational Outcomes

Employee engagement has been widely recognized as a key factor associated with positive organizational outcomes. Contemporary research highlights that engaged employees are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of productivity, improved performance, and proactive work behavior (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Arif et al., 2023). Recent global findings further reinforce this relationship. According to Gallup (2026), organizations with higher levels of employee engagement outperform those with lower engagement across multiple performance indicators, including productivity, profitability, customer loyalty, and employee retention.

From a conceptual perspective, employee engagement has been defined as the extent to which individuals invest their cognitive, emotional, and physical energies into their work roles (Kahn, 1990). This definition emphasizes engagement as an active state reflected not only in internal experience but also in observable behavior. Accordingly, engaged employees are characterized by high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and willingness to contribute to organizational goals (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Such engagement is particularly relevant in the context of organizational change, where employees' level of involvement influences their acceptance of new processes and technologies (Braganza et al., 2020).

These findings position employee engagement as a central mechanism linking managerial practices to organizational outcomes.

### 2.4 Research Gap and Study Aims

Despite the growing body of research on employee engagement and managerial communication, several important gaps remain.

First, while prior studies have established that internal communication is associated with employee engagement, most research has treated communication as a general organizational construct, without distinguishing between specific types of communication led by line managers. As a result, limited attention has been given to how different communication focuses, such as organizational issues, unit-related matters, and employee-centered communication, may differentially shape employee engagement.

Second, although Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes variation in the quality of relationships between managers and employees, existing research has not sufficiently examined how these variations are reflected in concrete managerial practices, particularly communication. The mechanisms through which different communication patterns contribute to relationship quality and subsequent employee behavior remain underexplored.

Third, employee engagement has often been examined as a unified construct, without distinguishing between different levels of behavioral expression. While prior studies have linked engagement to performance and organizational

outcomes, less is known about how managerial practices are associated with differentiated levels of engagement, particularly the distinction between basic task-related engagement and higher-level engagement expressed through enthusiasm and discretionary effort.

In light of these gaps, the present study aims to examine how different types of communication led by line managers are associated with differentiated levels of employee engagement. Drawing on LMX theory, the study conceptualizes managerial communication as a relational mechanism through which managers shape employee engagement.

Specifically, the study focuses on three types of communication led by line managers: communication related to organizational issues, communication related to unit-level matters, and communication focused on the individual employee. The analysis examines how these communication types by line managers, are associated with two distinct levels of engagement: task-focused engagement and higher-level engagement reflected in enthusiasm and behavior that goes beyond formal role requirements. By linking specific managerial communication practices to differentiated engagement levels, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how managerial actions shape employee behavior and, ultimately, organizational outcomes.

## **2.5 Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Building on the study framework, the present research examines how communication led by line managers across different content domains is associated with employee engagement. In addition, employee engagement is examined through two distinct behavioral expressions: a basic level reflected in task-focused engagement, and a higher level reflected in enthusiasm toward work and the organization. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How are different types of communication led by line managers: organizational, unit-related, and employee-focused communication, associated with basic task-focused engagement?

RQ2: How are different types of communication led by line managers associated with high-level engagement, reflected in enthusiasm toward work and the organization?

### **Hypotheses**

H1: Different types of communication led by line managers are positively associated with basic task-focused engagement.

H2: Different types of communication led by line managers are differently associated with high-level engagement, with employee-focused communication showing the strongest association.

### 3. Methodology

This study reports the quantitative stage of a broader mixed-methods research design. The overall research combined a preliminary qualitative stage with a subsequent survey in order to examine internal communication processes and their association with employee engagement. The qualitative stage informed the development of the questionnaire, while the quantitative stage enabled statistical examination of relationships between variables.

The present article focuses on the quantitative findings related to communication led by line managers and employee engagement.

#### 3.1 Questionnaire Development

A structured questionnaire was developed based on insights derived from the qualitative stage alongside selected items adapted from previously established engagement and communication measures. Additional items were constructed to reflect communication practices identified during the qualitative phase, with particular attention to communication led by line managers.

The questionnaire was administered in both digital and paper formats due to information security restrictions in some participating organizations. It included items directed to employees and managers, as well as a demographic section.

Items were organized into five sections:

- (A) senior management communication
- (B) line manager communication
- (C) corporate communication
- (D) engagement
- (E) manager-specific items

Responses were recorded on a six-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 6 = to a very great extent), in order to reduce central tendency bias and allow clearer differentiation between response levels.

#### 3.2 Measures

Independent Variable: Communication led by line managers

The independent variable was operationalized through three types of communication led by line managers, reflecting different content domains within the manager–employee relationship:

- Communication related to organizational matters
- Communication related to unit or departmental matters
- Communication focused on the employee, including personal and professional aspects

These distinctions enable examination of how different communication focuses are associated with employee engagement.

Dependent Variable: Employee engagement

Employee engagement was examined through two distinct behavioral expressions, reflecting different levels of involvement in work:

- Basic task-focused engagement: referring to consistent and focused execution of assigned work responsibilities.
- High-level engagement: referring to a more advanced form of involvement, expressed through enthusiasm toward work and the organization, and a willingness to invest much additional effort beyond routine task execution.

This operationalization emphasizes observable work-related behaviors, allowing differentiation between routine performance and more committed, energy-driven involvement. This operationalization builds on prior literature that conceptualizes engagement as observable work-related behaviors, while focusing on two distinct expressions that capture differences in intensity and form of employee involvement.

### **3.3 Reliability and Instrument Assessment**

The questionnaire underwent a multi-stage refinement process. First, a pilot study with 20 respondents was conducted to identify unclear or repetitive items. Second, the instrument was reviewed by a statistics expert to ensure alignment between the research design and the analytical approach. Third, a social science research expert evaluated clarity, structure, and coherence. Internal consistency of the multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The communication-related scales demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha > .80$ ), and the engagement scale showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha \approx .90$ ). Items addressed only to managers demonstrated lower internal consistency and were therefore analyzed descriptively rather than as a composite measure. These results support the reliability and suitability of the instrument for subsequent statistical analyses.

### **3.4 Sample and Data Collection**

Data were collected from employees and line managers working in three organizational sectors: financial organizations, high-tech companies, and industrial-technological organizations. Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling within participating organizations. A total of 168 usable questionnaires were obtained, including 101 employees and 67 managers. The sample included participants aged 26–65, with varied organizational tenure and balanced gender representation. Demographic variables, including role, education, and tenure, were collected.

To examine whether organizational context influenced the results, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted. No significant differences were found across

organizational sectors, indicating that the observed relationships are not limited to a specific sector.

### **3.5 Statistical Analysis**

The statistical analysis was conducted in two stages.

First, a t-test was used to examine differences between managers and employees in their perceptions of the extent to which communication led by line managers occurs across the three communication domains. This analysis enabled comparison between groups regarding the prevalence of different communication types. Second, to examine the relationships between types of communication led by line managers and levels of employee engagement, Spearman rank-order correlations were conducted. This method was selected due to the ordinal nature of Likert-scale data and to ensure robustness of the findings.

The analysis focused on identifying the strength of association between each communication type and each level of engagement, allowing comparison between communication domains and engagement expressions. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 and .01 levels.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the study was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any stage. All responses were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was recorded.

Data were analyzed in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality. The questionnaire was distributed through internal organizational channels, reducing direct identification of participants and minimizing response pressure.

## **4. Findings**

The findings are presented in two stages. First, differences between managers and employees are examined in relation to the extent to which communication led by line managers is perceived to occur across different content domains. Second, the associations between types of communication led by line managers and levels of employee engagement are analyzed.

### **4.1 Perceptions of Communication Led by Line Managers**

A t-test was conducted to examine differences between managers and employees regarding the extent to which communication led by line managers takes place across three domains: organizational matters, unit-related matters, and employee-focused communication. The findings indicate that both managers and employees perceive communication related to unit-level matters as the most prevalent form of communication led by line managers. Communication related to

organizational matters is perceived as occurring to a lesser extent, while communication focused on employees' personal and professional matters is reported as the least frequent.

In addition, statistically significant differences were found between managers and employees across all three communication types, with managers consistently reporting higher levels of existing communication compared to employees' perception as presented in table 1.

**A t-test examining differences between managers and employees in perceptions of line manager communication**

**Table 1**

Parts of the statistical analysis	Index content	Employees (N=101)		Managers (N=67)		statistic	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	Sig
Communication led by line manager	1. Communication from line manager – regarding organizational matters	3.80	0.80	4.23	0.55	-4.16	0.000
	2. Communication from line manager – regarding unit-related matters	4.22	0.92	4.58	0.61	-2.85	0.005
	3. Communication from line manager – regarding employee-focused communication	3.28	0.90	3.60	0.65	-2.64	0.009

*Source:* authors' own contribution

**4.2 The Relationship between Communication Types and Employee Engagement**

To examine the associations between types of communication led by line managers and employee engagement, Spearman correlation analysis was conducted.

The findings reveal a differentiated pattern of associations between communication types and the two levels of engagement examined in this study. With regard to basic task-focused engagement, all three types of communication show positive and statistically significant associations. Among them, communication related to organizational matters demonstrates the strongest association, followed by unit-related communication, while communication focused on the employee shows the weakest association. These findings provide support for H1, indicating that communication led by line managers is positively associated with basic engagement.

In contrast, a different pattern emerges in relation to high-level engagement, reflected in enthusiasm toward work and the organization. Communication focused on the employee demonstrates the strongest association, followed closely by communication related to organizational matters, while communication related to unit-level matters shows the weakest association. This pattern provides support for H2, suggesting that different types of communication are not equally associated with higher-level engagement, and that communication focused on the employee is more strongly related to this form of engagement as presented in table 2.

**The relationship between types of communication led by line managers and levels of employees' engagement - Spearman's correlation**

**Table 2**

Engagement levels	Communication led by a line manager		
	1. Communication from line manager – regarding organizational matters	2. Communication from line manager – regarding unit-related matters	3. Communication from line manager – regarding employee-focused communication
<b>Basic task-focused engagement:</b> referring to consistent and focused execution of assigned work responsibilities	0.308**	0.260**	0.204**
<b>High-level engagement:</b> referring to a more advanced form of involvement, expressed through enthusiasm toward work and the organization	0.485**	0.338**	<b>0.493**</b>

(\*p < .05; \*\* p < .01.)

*Source:* authors' own contribution

Overall, the findings indicate a clear distinction between the prevalence of communication types and their association with employee engagement levels. While communication related to unit-level matters is perceived as the most frequent, communication focused on the employee shows the strongest association with high-level engagement.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined how communication led by line managers across different content domains is associated with distinct behavioral expressions of employee engagement. Drawing on the logic of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), the study conceptualized communication led by line managers as a relational mechanism through which managers shape employee engagement.

The findings reveal a clear distinction between the prevalence of different types of communication led by line managers and their association with engagement levels. Communication related to unit-level matters was perceived as the most frequent form of communication led by line managers, yet it showed a comparatively weaker association with employee engagement, particularly with high-level engagement. In contrast, communication focused on the employee, although reported as the least frequent, demonstrated the strongest association with high-level engagement, reflected in enthusiasm toward work and the organization.

These findings can be understood through the LMX theory. Communication led by line managers extends beyond the transfer of information and reflects the nature of the relationship between managers and employees. When communication focuses on the individual employee, it signals attention, recognition, and relational investment. Such communication appears to be more strongly associated with higher levels of engagement, characterized by greater enthusiasm, commitment, and willingness to invest effort beyond routine task requirements.

At the same time, communication related to organizational matters was found to be consistently associated with both levels of engagement. This suggests that communication led by line managers regarding broader organizational issues may contribute to a sense of alignment and understanding, supporting engagement across different levels, although not to the same extent as employee-focused communication in relation to high-level engagement.

In contrast, communication related to unit-level matters, despite being the most prevalent, appears to play a more limited role in shaping employee engagement. This type of communication may be perceived as part of routine coordination of work tasks, and therefore more closely associated with basic engagement rather than with more advanced forms of involvement.

Overall, the findings indicate that communication led by line managers is not uniform in its association with employee engagement. Rather, the content and focus of communication play a central role in shaping how employees engage with their work and with the organization, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between different communications domains in understanding engagement outcomes.

## **5.1 Managerial Contribution**

The findings offer a focused managerial perspective on how communication led by line managers can be directed more effectively to shape employee engagement. The results indicate that not all types of communication contribute equally to engagement outcomes. While communication related to unit-level matters is the most prevalent, it appears to be primarily associated with routine task execution and less with higher levels of engagement. In contrast, communication focused on the employee shows a stronger association with high-level engagement, suggesting that attention to employees' personal and professional context plays a more central role in fostering deeper involvement. These findings highlight that communication led by line managers should be viewed as a limited managerial resource. Its effectiveness depends not only on how frequently communication occurs, but also on its focus. A more deliberate emphasis on employee-focused communication may enable managers to more effectively influence higher levels of engagement.

## **5.2 Theoretical Contribution**

LMX theory emphasizes that the quality of the relationship between managers and employees shapes employee attitudes and behaviors. However, it provides limited insight into how this relationship is enacted through specific managerial practices. The present study adds a focused perspective by showing that communication led by line managers functions as a concrete relational mechanism, and that its content matters. The findings demonstrate that different communication domains reflect distinct relational signals, and that communication focused on the employee is more strongly associated with high-level engagement. By linking communication content to differentiated engagement expressions, the study refines the application of LMX and highlights how managerial communication contributes to variation in employee engagement.

## **5.3 Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, the data were collected at a single point in time, and therefore do not capture changes in communication practices or engagement over time. Second, the findings are based on employees' and managers' self-reported perceptions, rather than on longitudinal or behavioral measures of engagement. Future research may benefit from longitudinal designs that examine how communication led by line managers evolves over time and how it shapes employee engagement in a dynamic manner. In addition, further studies could incorporate objective or behavioral indicators of engagement to strengthen the empirical understanding of these relationships.

## 6. Conclusions

This study highlights that communication led by line managers is not uniformly associated with employee engagement. While communication related to unit-level matters is more prevalent, communication focused on the employee shows a stronger association with high-level engagement. These findings emphasize that the effectiveness of managerial communication lies not only in its frequency, but also in its focus, offering a more nuanced understanding of how line managers influence employee engagement.

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