



PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

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Background

Supervisors have performance conversations with their employees on the understanding that this affects how their employees choose to grow in their job and/or career. Ideally, when performance conversations are done well, employees' engagement is positively impacted as a result. However, over the years, BC Stats has studied the connection between performance conversations and engagement and found the evidence to be largely inconclusive.¹ This could mean that performance conversations do not play a prominent role in shaping engagement, but it could also mean that experiences didn't correspond to how performance conversations were defined and measured in the *Work Environment Survey (WES)*. In other words, perhaps the right questions were not being asked the right way, potentially clouding the relationship between the two.

To address this, two new survey questions were introduced in the 2015 *WES* cycle. The new questions improved on the previous questions because the new questions focused on the outcomes of performance conversations, as opposed to overall quality/quantity or tools used to facilitate them.² The new questions asked employees to evaluate the extent to which their supervisors provided the support and feedback they needed to do their job well and achieve their long-term career goals.

The BC Public Service Agency hopes to better understand the relationship between performance conversations and engagement with these improved measures. This analysis aims to do this by diving into data collected from approximately 19,756 employees who participated in the 2015 *WES* cycle. Employees' perceived experiences on these two topics representing performance conversations are examined alongside their engagement and experiences on other drivers of engagement.

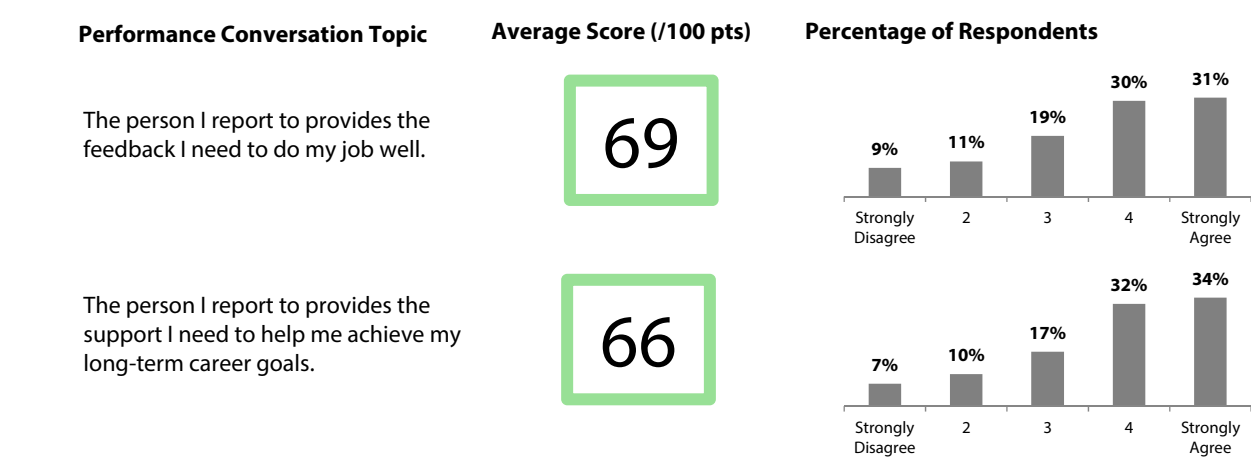
¹ BC Stats (2014). *WES and MyPerformance*. Reported prepared for the BC Public Service Agency.

² Previous questions representing performance conversations: "I receive the amount of feedback and support I need from the person I report to;" "I receive the quality of feedback and support I need from the person I report to;" "MyPerformance helps me achieve my key work goals;" and "MyPerformance helps me achieve my career goals."

Key Findings

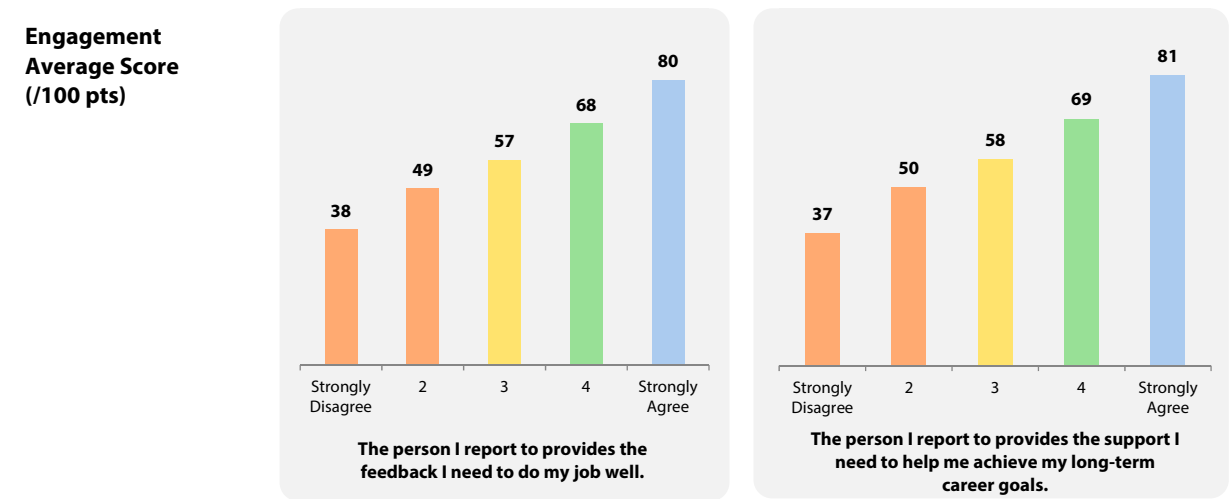
The majority of employees have positive performance conversations with their supervisors.

Approximately two in three employees reported that they received feedback and support from their supervisors to do their job well and achieve their career goals. Perceptions were more favourable on job-specific feedback than on support for achieving career goals.



There is a link between performance conversations and engagement.

A moderately-sized correlation exists between these topics and engagement.³ As scores increased on both of these topics, so did engagement (and vice versa). Up to 44 points separated the engagement between those with opposing views on performance conversations.



³ Pearson Correlation (two-tailed): job-specific feedback = $r(18,475) = 0.52, p < .0001$; career support = $r(17,964) = 0.56, p < .0001$.

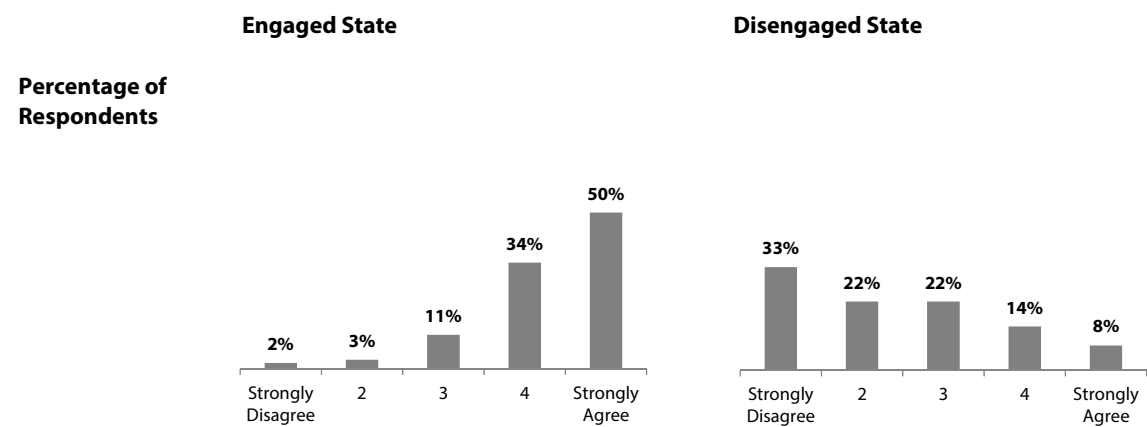
Although engagement is influenced more by career support than job-specific feedback, there is a lot of “noise” that cannot be explained.

Assuming a causal linkage could be made between the two, the next analysis examined the impact these topics have on engagement, first individually and then collectively. Of the two topics, supervisory support for achieving career goals emerged as the stronger predictor. Thirty-two percent of the variation of engagement scores—why engagement is higher for some employees than others—could be explained by experiences on this topic alone.⁴ Job-specific feedback explained slightly less of this variation in engagement (28%). Neither topic provided any additional insight when their collective impact was analyzed together. This means that despite their moderate correlation, 68% percent of the variation of engagement across the BC Public Service could not be explained by experiences related to performance conversations and were likely due to other factors.⁵

So why were the relationships between engagement and performance conversations not as straightforward as expected? Let’s explore the stronger predictor—career support—by comparing results on this topic using two of the six states of engagements that employees can belong to:

- **Engaged State:** employees reporting scores averaging 75 points or higher on satisfaction and commitment, versus
- **Disengaged State:** employees reporting scores averaging 25 points or lower on satisfaction and commitment.⁶

The vast majority of those in the engaged state believed their supervisor provided them with the support they needed to achieve their career goals. Eighty-four percent responded favourably. In other words, they selected “4” or “5 - Strongly Agree” on the five-point agreement scale. Half of engaged employees expressed strong agreement. Very few engaged employees (2%) reported the opposite.



The person I report to provides the support I need to help me achieve my long-term career goals.

⁴ Stepwise Linear Regressions: job-specific feedback: $b=0.52$, $t(18,473)=84$, $p<.0001$; $R^2=0.28$, $F(1,18,473)=7,006$, $p<.0001$; career support: $b=0.56$, $t(17,962)=91$, $p<.0001$; $R^2=0.32$, $F(1,17,962)=8,300$, $p<.0001$.
⁵ Stepwise Linear Regression of both topics together: $b=0.43$ (career support) and 0.16 (job-specific feedback), $t(17,944)=12$, $p<.0001$, $R^2=0.32$, $F(2,17,942)=4,262$, $p<.0001$.
⁶ BC Stats (2016). *Overall States of Engagement*. Report produced for the BC Government.

Disengaged respondents had more divided views about career support than engaged respondents. One in three disengaged employees strongly disagreed that they had received career support from their supervisors, while the rest were evenly mixed across most other response categories and were equally likely to select “2” or “3” on the agreement scale. Another 22% of disengaged employees actually shared the same favourable views about their career support as the majority of those in the engaged state.

This trend suggests that the importance of performance conversations, like support for achieving career goals, may be more pronounced in some states of engagement but not all. If an employee is engaged, chances are they will also believe their supervisor meets their needs with regards to career support. If an employee is disengaged, we can't say it is due to perceived challenges related to performance conversations alone, given the wide variety of opinions on the subject reported by this group.

Most other drivers do a better job at explaining why engagement is high for some and low for others.

Model tests recently explored the inclusion of the two topics in the engagement model and concluded that there was too much statistical overlap between these topics and other model drivers.⁷ The topics were too highly correlated with one another to form their own driver. In other words, they were measuring too much of the same thing. Also, their inclusion would have weakened the model and triggered substantial renovations and possibly the loss of three or more well-established drivers.

As a result the topics were deemed to not have enough unique explanatory value to fit in the engagement model. In light of these issues, analysis focused on a less holistic and more rudimentary statistical approach that ignored any interaction between factors. This analysis was done to simply gauge where topics rank in terms of predicting engagement in concert with all other drivers in the engagement model.

Analysis found that career support ranked eighth, behind the Vision, Mission & Goals, Job Suitability, Stress & Workload, Professional Development, Pay & Benefits, Empowerment and Executive-Level Management drivers.⁸ Interestingly, career support had a slight edge over Tools & Workspace, Respectful Environment and Supervisory-Level Management in terms of impact on engagement. Job-specific feedback did not rank at all. When all other drivers were considered, the impact job-specific feedback had on engagement was negligible and therefore not statistically insignificant.⁹

Rank Order of Impact on Engagement

1. Vision, Mission & Goals
2. Job Suitability
3. Stress & Workload
4. Professional Development
5. Pay & Benefits
6. Empowerment
7. Executive-Level Management
8. Career Support
9. Tools & Workspace
10. Respectful Environment
11. Supervisory-Level Management

⁷ BC Stats (2016). *Modelling the Survey Results: The Technical Report*. Available online:

<http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/StatisticsBySubject/EmployeeResearch/WES/WESPublicResources/ModelPathwaysMethodologies.aspx>

⁸ Stepwise Linear Regression all topics and drivers together: $R^2=0.74$, $F(11,12,234) = 3,223$, $p<.0001$ (with the exception of job-specific feedback). Beta (b) coefficients ranged from 0.22 to 0.02 when all drivers and topics were included.

⁹ Interestingly, Teamwork, Recognition and Staffing Practices drivers were also excluded from the rankings due to their negligible effect on engagement when their impact was analyzed using this less advanced approach.

Performance conversations are deeply tied to Supervisory-Level Management driver topics.

Analysis next explored the one-to-one relationship these topics had with every driver in the engagement model. As expected, more positive impressions of career support and job-specific feedback was linked with higher scores on all drivers.

The two topics had very strong correlations with Supervisory-Level Management (SLM), followed by other drivers like Recognition, Empowerment and Professional Development. Performance conversations had the weakest correlations with Pay & Benefits, Job Suitability and Tools & Workspace. Connections to the rest of the drivers fell in the same range as Engagement.

Correlation Strength ^{10,11}	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Engagement Model Drivers	
		Count	Name
Very Strong	0.80-1.0	1	Supervisory-Level Management
Strong	0.60-0.79	3	Recognition; Empowerment; Professional Development ¹²
Moderate	0.40-0.59	6	Respectful Environment; Staffing Practices; Teamwork; Vision, Mission & Goals; Stress & Workload; Executive-Level Management
Weak	0.20-0.39	3	Pay & Benefits; Job Suitability; Tools & Workspace
Very weak	0.00-0.19	0	--

Within the SLM, performance conversations had strong relationships on all of the question topics making up this driver.¹³ The correlation between supervisors providing job-specific feedback and clear expectations regarding work was the highest. Career support was most strongly connected to supervisors leading with an understanding of others' perspectives and consulting employees on decisions that impact them.

This analysis suggests that, statistically-speaking, the two performance conversations are very similar to these particular SLM driver topics. When supervisors are meeting employees' needs in these particular areas of communication, it appears that performance conversations are being conducted in a positive way as well.

¹⁰ All are statistically significant based on Pearson Correlations (two-tailed), $p < .0001$.

¹¹ Evans (1996) *Straightforward Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*. Brooks/Cole Publishing; California.

¹² The relationship between Professional Development and "The person I report to provides the feedback I need to do my job well" is not as strong and falls in the moderate category.

¹³ Pearson Correlations (two-tailed): r coefficients ranged from 0.74 to 0.81, $p < .0001$.

Conclusion

Let's start with the good news. Performance conversations with supervisors were positive for many employees. Approximately two in three employees who participated in the latest *WES* cycle reported that they have supervisors who gave them the feedback they need to help them do their job well and career support that helps them achieve their long-term career goals.

The not-so-good news is that the link between these topics and engagement continues to be complicated, even with the improved wording of these two topics. The results are reminiscent to past BC Stats research from the 2013 *WES* cycle using the previous survey questions. Measures are again redundant to the information already available in other drivers, especially with Supervisor-Level Development.

Of the two topics, career support had a stronger relationship with engagement than job-specific feedback. Both topics appeared to play a role on explaining why engagement is higher for some. Although a link does exist, it is not as strong as other drivers and should be considered in the broader context of what else is happening in other areas of the work environment. In other words, when performance conversations are done well, engagement could be positively impacted as a result, but only for some employees within specific work environment situations where there are likely no other issues obscuring or offsetting this impact. For instance, if employees are experiencing challenges related to Stress & Workload, then performance conversations would likely not have the desired effect until these challenges were resolved. Since the majority of the differences in engagement are explained by factors outside of performance conversations, employees' experiences in this area should not be treated in isolation of other work environment influences.

