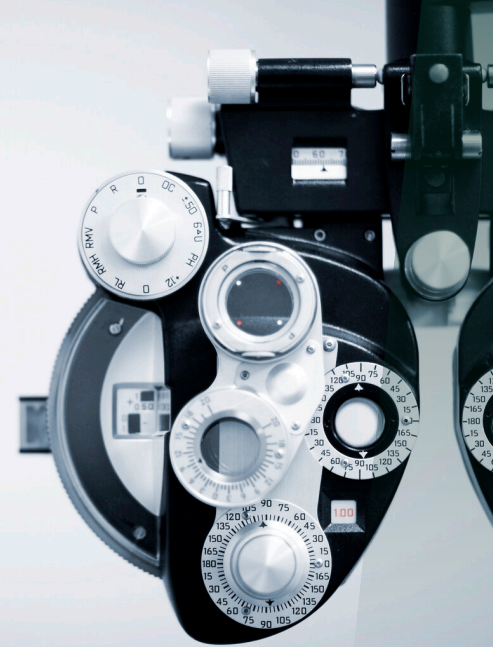


# THE POWER OF LINE OF SIGHT

How leaders can transform the employee experience by establishing a clear view and meaningful work for stronger performance

Thought Leadership



The way we view the work we do all depends on our “line of sight”—that is, how we see our individual roles fitting into the collective whole.

Employees with that line of sight, much like the janitor in NASA who described his job as “helping put a man on the moon,” understand their company’s goals and how their work contributes to these objectives. This drives employee engagement, which in turn leads to better performance and stellar results.

In today’s disruptive environment, the most successful organizations will be the ones with a clear line of sight among employees. Line of sight is an employee’s understanding of the organization’s purpose and goals and how their individual performance contributes to those objectives. This line of sight promotes both leader and employee discretionary energy and effort, and organizations succeed when their people take initiative and proactively use their skills to meet company goals.

But to engage employees, companies need to first have a compelling purpose, one that permeates through all levels of the organization. As our research shows, a strong sense of purpose helps people see their work in a different light—to make sense of their role and how it relates to the greater mission. This helps create meaningfulness, and this sense of meaningfulness keeps employees engaged and committed to their work. And when employees relate to their work—and to their company’s purpose—their productivity increases and performance improves, leading to better organizational outcomes.

Establishing a strong line of sight can give companies a competitive edge in a tight labor market. After all, people increasingly want to work for organizations that emphasize impact over status—that transcend self-interest. And with firms vying for the same talent in the era of the Great Resignation, having that line of sight—one that invigorates and inspires—may just be the key differentiator to engaging high performers.

## Defining line of sight

Line of sight is an employee’s understanding of the organization’s purpose and goals, and how their individual performance contributes to those objectives. More specifically:

- People in the teams are clear on what is expected of them.
- People understand how their work relates to their team’s goal.
- People understand business objectives and the purpose of the organization.
- People understand how their team’s goals relate to business objectives and the purpose of the organization.

## Communicating a clear, compelling purpose promotes line of sight.

A woman works as a seamstress in a company manufacturing motorcycle accessories. She connects her needlework with keeping people safe, which is the corporate purpose of the company. Over the years, her unit has received many suits worn by motorcycle crash survivors. Their lives have been saved by her suits.

Line of sight is a nested concept, manifesting at different levels of the organization. A clear line of sight exists when employees, like the seamstress, understand how their individual actions and performance contribute to their team's goals—and how those goals contribute to both business objectives and organizational purpose.

A recent empirical analysis shows this line of sight boosts stronger employee engagement and identification with their teams. The analysis used *Korn Ferry's Leadership Style and Climate Survey*, which collected data from over 1500 people across 218 teams in the U.S. during the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic, between mid-March 2020 and the end of 2021. The survey asked team members to report their perception of team effectiveness, including line of sight (e.g., clarity of organizational objectives and clarity of own role and contribution toward that objective) and team outcomes (e.g., team identification, team commitment, and team engagement).

To control for artificial relationships, our analysis split the sample into two halves: one assessing line of sight and the other evaluating team outcomes. What we found is that a clear line of sight has significant and positive correlation ( $r=.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with team identification—that is, the sense of belonging and team commitment. It has also a positive correlation ( $r=.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with team engagement, which is the shared motivation to invest high levels of energy and effort into the team's success.

Engaged employees are less likely to leave their companies. And at a time when companies face high turnover, line of sight can help to engage and retain talent, particularly high performers. But for this line of sight to be strong, all leaders need to communicate a clear, compelling, and engaging purpose—the highest level of organizational goals—and help employees translate this purpose into their day-to-day activities.

Typically, the upper echelon defines and articulates a future-oriented vision and purpose for the organization, ideally based on foresight and anticipation of core market trends, as well as on consultation with clients and employees. A future-oriented purpose is far-reaching and grand, making it more meaningful than a short-term business goal. But even employees who find their organization's ultimate aspirations compelling will be inspired only to the extent that they see how their work plays a role. This is where managers come in: they help their employees connect their day-to-day work to the company's long-term vision and purpose. They use their experience and operate like sport team coaches who clarify and reiterate tactics and strategies to win games and championships. High-performing employees—often, the next managers and leaders—look for such clarification or understand it by themselves.

Leaders show two types of connections or clarifications: horizontal and vertical. Horizontally, leaders explain how today's business goals help achieve the long-term vision and purpose. Vertically, leaders

show how these objectives cascade down to department, team, and individual performance goals. Analyzing the same survey data, we found that a manager's leadership style can also have an impact on an employee's line of sight. In the analysis, half of the team members rated the extent their managers communicate purpose, while the other half supplied data for line of sight. What we discovered is that those managers considered to have a visionary leadership style are positively correlated to employees' clarity and line of sight ( $r=.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

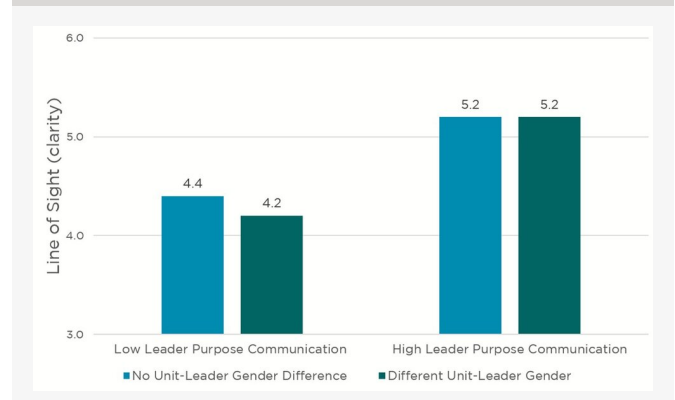
A visionary leadership style promotes shared cognition among team members. Line of sight is not only about the connection between individual contribution and the organization's purpose, but also the feeling of being together to achieve that purpose. Leaders who communicate a common purpose help team members realize they are making contributions that stretch well beyond their personal ends. This shared belief causes people to band together, driving team identification and team engagement.

## A clear line of sight contributes to team alignment.

What happens when leaders do not communicate a clear, compelling vision, and purpose? Logically, when leaders fall short, employees are less likely to establish a strong line of sight. But research by Professor Rodolphe Durand and his colleagues from HEC Paris found inadequate vision and purpose communication is particularly troublesome in diverse teams. The research team analyzed the data from the same survey, but with a much larger global sample—nearly 46,000 employees from 4,220 teams across more than 170 organizations. As expected, a leader's vision and purpose communication were positively correlated to team members' evaluation of line of sight: the better the communication, the stronger the line of sight.

Line of sight is weak in teams whose leaders exhibit little visionary leadership style (see Figure 1). According to the analysis, a team's line of sight was rated lowest in

**Figure 1**  
Impact of communication of purpose on line of sight for different teams



groups with weak communication of purpose where a man managed a team of mostly women, or a woman led a team of mostly men.

People naturally engage in social categorization—the often-spontaneous mental process by which we place ourselves into different groups. Once doing so, we begin to treat people more as members of a social group than as individuals. The tendency to categorize people satisfies a human being’s desire for certainty—people like to see patterns and be able to **predict actions, behaviors, and outcomes**. However, such predictions often result in or from bias. In teams, the consequence of social categorization is the formation of different subgroups, usually according to demographic categories like gender, age, race, and educational background. **One study** found that when followers belong to a different subgroup than their leader, their trust and support in their leader and identification with the organization decline.

Leaders can mitigate team fragmentation by nurturing shared cognition. When leaders clearly convey the company’s mission and vision—and translate this mission and vision into clear roadmaps and short-term actions and expectations—they draw individual attention from demographic differences to a collective aspiration. But when this communication is lacking, demographic differences are more salient, and team fragmentation is more likely to occur. This, in turn, may hinder productivity, resulting in poorer performance and poorer outcomes—for people, for teams, and for the business as a whole.

## Line of sight as a catalyst of inclusion.

A strong line of sight promotes shared identity and authentic self-expression because it connects individual contribution to a collective purpose.

Diversity and inclusion have now been championed in businesses across the globe. A truly inclusive environment promotes a shared identity and preserves and cherishes individual uniqueness. People can identify with the group because they have a common purpose to work towards, but they are also encouraged and empowered to bring their true, authentic self to that work all the same. **Scientific research** has found that when people are allowed to express their authentic selves at work, they are more engaged and their customers are more satisfied.

Without this shared identity, the likelihood of heterogeneous team friction increases. Line of sight is a mechanism to engage and align diverse talents, as having a clear shared objective not only transcends their differences, but also allows them to contribute by being themselves.

### Key recommendations

In today’s environment, managing an adaptive workforce is complicated by demographic trends, technological disruptions, and business uncertainties.

Based on our findings, here are some actionable strategies for leaders and their organizations to develop and activate line of sight:

- **Establish a compelling organizational purpose that transcends self-interest.** Our research shows that **externally oriented purposes have greater impact** than internally focused ones. Most people find passion in advancing the greater good. Defining organizational purpose in terms of its impact on customers, communities, and the larger society, instead of narrowly focusing on profit maximization, makes the organization more attractive to employees, particularly those from younger generations.
- **Train and develop visionary leadership styles at all levels, all the time.** In a purpose-driven organization, purpose cannot remain the exclusive responsibility of those at the top of the house. The communication of purpose must be spread throughout the ranks. This requires the development and adoption of the visionary leadership style among all leaders in the organization. Visionary leaders understand the big picture and use vision and purpose to guide their decision making. Communicating vision and purpose is not a one-time event. They use every opportunity to remind their teams of where they want to go and how they will get there together.
- **Help people see how their daily work connects to the vision and purpose.** Employees are assigned to different roles. Each of them does something different. Connecting individual performance to the broader vision and purpose can be clear for some employees, but vague, ambiguous, or nonexistent for others. Fortunately, line of sight is a constructed experience. Leaders can use techniques, such as cognitive reframing—that is, helping employees change the way they look at situations by shifting their mindsets and perspectives—to establish a strong line of sight for all employees.
- **Empower employees to bring out their best.** Aligning people around a common purpose helps build value and bring together diverse individuals’ uniqueness and authentic expression. There is a difference between preserving uniqueness and serving self-interest. Purpose binds people together, forming a safe, inclusive “moral glue” that allows leaders to encourage diverse employees to contribute their full and unique selves to the collective interest.

## Using line of sight to transform the employee experience.

Multiple sources have pointed to an engagement crisis among employees. Many companies continue to report higher-than-normal turnover. The competition for talent, in other words, is getting even tougher.

Companies will need to be creative in their efforts to engage and retain talent. It is particularly important to

understand what employees care about and what intrinsically motivates them. And connecting and clarifying individual contribution to a common vision and purpose will satisfy the inherent need for self-worth and social belonging. A person's work, therefore, becomes more meaningful.

People tend to relate to and experience their work in different ways. They view their work either as a job for tangible benefits, a career that advances power and social standing, or a vocation toward self-fulfillment. When people approach work as a vocation, that means they do their work in service of a purpose beyond self-interest. This view is often associated with highest levels of mental well-being.

Leaders play an important role in shaping the meaning of work. They can communicate about vision and purpose often to change how employees perceive and approach to their work. And by establishing a strong line of sight, they can transform the employee experience by changing how people approach and relate to their work.

Without a clear line of sight, work is just a job to make ends meet, or a career to advance occupational and social prestige. But a clear line of sight can shift individual attention from self-interest to broader business and social awareness—to their relationship with and impact on others. It allows people to make sense of their work in a more direct, meaningful way.

A strong line of sight is even more critical in the post-pandemic world, where, for some, remote work can weaken social connectivity and sense of meaningfulness. Leaders proactively working on employee line of sight will need to compensate for the lack of personal, face-to-face interactions with richer interpersonal connections and partnerships. As a result, boredom and isolation will recede while stimulation and collaboration abound.

Line of sight is a thread that links people, teams, and organizations. And a strong line of sight can generate positive impact across different levels. Employees thrive when they work with a purpose. Teams flourish when team members unite their efforts. Ultimately, when employees thrive and teams flourish, organizations can adapt to—and succeed in—this ever-changing world.

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### About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.