

Propel action-taking through conversations with Microsoft Viva Glint

People science explained



Why is action-taking important? Why it matters?

The likelihood of employee feedback fueling organizational success hinges on the actions taken based on that feedback. Many companies build excitement and energy around taking the survey: “We want to hear from you!” and “Thank you for the feedback!”. However, the momentum often slows somewhere between “Here’s what we’re going to do about your feedback!” and what actually gets done to address issues and make positive incremental changes.

We’ve seen compelling data points that action taking is critical in our own research:

- People who don’t believe action will be taken are 7x more likely to report being disengaged compared to those who believe action will be taken.¹
- Teams where the manager leveraged action planning in the Viva Glint platform show 7% increased scores on average relative to the changes in the company in the areas where the manager took action within a quarter.¹
- Teams that score high on action planning are also significantly more likely to say that they have confidence in the leadership team and are excited about the future prospects of the company.
- A single quarter is enough for marked and meaningful increases in scores across teams of varying sizes and initial score levels, when action is taken by the managers.
- Regardless of the area on which action is taken, there is a high likelihood that confidence in leadership increases, and this has an indirect effect on engagement & performance.

A large, stylized purple '7X' graphic is centered on a light purple background. The '7' and 'X' are bold and modern in design.

more likely to be disengaged

¹ Glint People Science engagement study (2021)

Why action-taking isn't working today

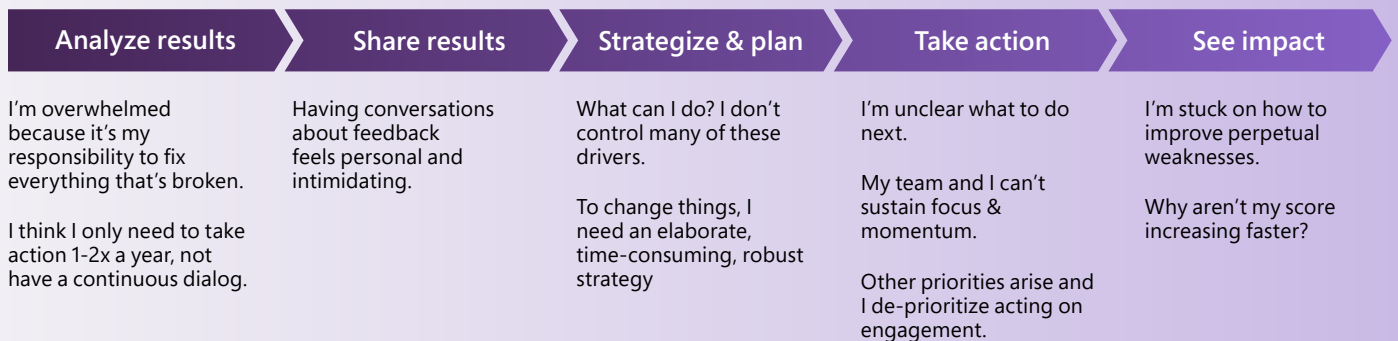
1. Ownership of action is unclear

Everyone agrees that acting on feedback is important. However, oftentimes it's unclear who is responsible for action taking or the necessary actions are unequally distributed. In some organizations, taking action on engagement results is seen as HR's responsibility. Viva Glint data shows that employees typically expect HR and leadership to own the actions that result from survey results, and that's because, in most organizations, front-line managers don't receive results for their teams. If they do receive results, they receive them weeks, if not months, after HR and executives do. While this is often viewed as a good practice because it gives each level of leadership time to synthesize results and prepare responses, it signals to managers

that engagement data is not theirs to own and improve. As a result, managers often abdicate the responsibility of acting and communicating actions to leadership and HR. HR teams feel responsible for addressing all the feedback that has surfaced during an engagement survey, which can be overwhelming for already stretched teams. Finally, the limited interaction between senior leadership and employees means that employees have less visibility into the actions being taken and the impact those actions have on their day-to-day experience.

Even in organizations that have successfully shifted some ownership to front-line managers, challenges still exist. Managers often believe that they bear the entire responsibility of action-taking and that they must respond to every opportunity surfaced in the results. This is exacerbated when surveys are long (40 or more items), giving managers hours of work to comb through results and countless problems to fix. Instead of feeling empowered, they feel deflated.

The Challenges Managers Face





2. Support and enablement is limited

Managers play a critical role in fostering engagement and learning within an organization, but many lack the tools and support they need to contribute effectively to team performance and development. First-time managers on the front-line manage nearly as much as two-thirds of the workforce, and over half of these managers don't get adequate training to prepare them for these roles.

3. Complex action plans are unsustainable

A majority of action-taking processes over-index on planning instead of actually executing. As the creators of the Agile Manifesto will tell you, it's more important to respond to change than follow a plan.

When 80% of action-taking effort is focused on developing long, detailed action plans, the process feels cumbersome, making it easier to de-prioritize when other business needs arise.² This is especially true when surveys only occur once per year or every other year. When managers feel they have 12 or more months to make improvements, they're more likely to overplan and overcommit. And it's quite likely they will lose momentum before they can actually start to take sustainable action! Bottom line, action plans are often cumbersome, lengthy, and built in a silo, and can take months to act upon. Unless people are enabled to build good and simple habits around sustainable action taking, it's likely to run out of steam.

4. Feedback can feel hard to act on

Whether giving or receiving feedback, people shy away from being direct because it feels uncomfortable, especially on teams that might lack psychological safety. Research shows that feedback which is perceived as negative doesn't always result in improvement because most people want to avoid it. Feedback may feel like a personal attack when managers see it as a reflection of their abilities and get defensive. Some will assume it's their responsibility to fix all the issues while others may feel like the issues are not under their control and defer the responsibility. Rather than feeling empowered to make change happen with their teams, they may end up feeling deflated or helpless.

² [Manifesto for Agile Software Development \(agilemanifesto.org\)](https://agilemanifesto.org/)

An agile approach to taking action

In order for actions on feedback to be effective, they must become integrated into the flow of how we work. We call this “an agile approach” to engagement. There are 3 key components to making engagement (or any HR program) evolve to meet the changing needs of today’s world: **People** who have the right mindset, skills, and behaviors to support the shift, **Technology** that puts the right information at people’s fingertips with in a simple and delightful way, and a **Strategy** that aligns with the priorities and flow of work in a business. Let’s unpack each of these.

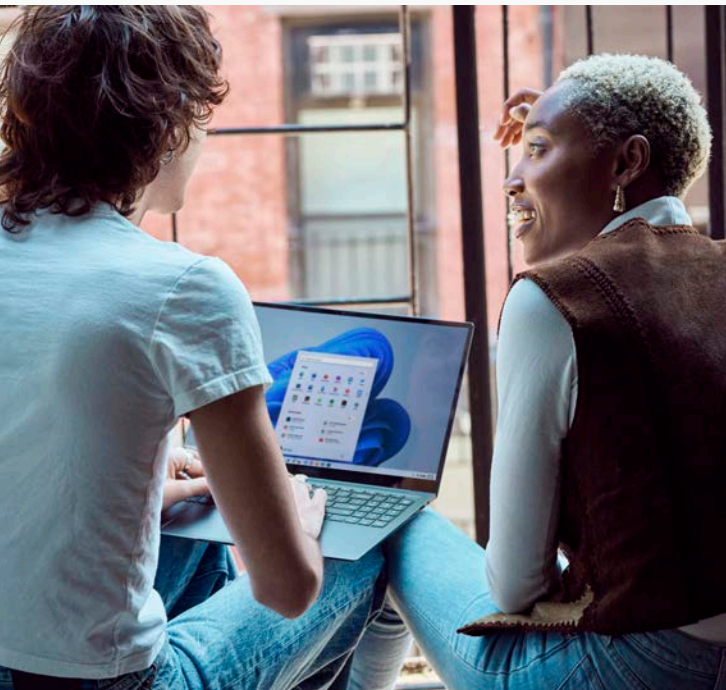
People

It starts with awareness and education about the role everyone plays in making your organization a great place to work. Show that everyone can participate in productive conversations about survey results and feel ownership over action. At a practical level, start by releasing results to all managers as quickly as possible. It’s critical that all managers are part of this process so it feels transparent and inclusive. Then, outline clear expectations for everyone, define prescriptive yet straightforward steps, and equip your HR teams to coach managers and leaders to embody the right behaviors. No one person should be solely responsible for creating an engaged and high-performing workplace.

Technology

The Viva Glint platform was designed to put meaningful insights into the hands of managers so teams can move to action. This starts with an intuitive interface that surfaces key insights based on modern People Science. Additionally, Viva Glint makes it easy to identify focus areas and provide guidance on what to do about it through:

- **Strengths & Opportunities:** a simple and highly actionable summary of a manager’s strengths and growth opportunities.
- **Narrative Intelligence:** An award-winning natural language processing (NLP) engine that surfaces key themes and associated sentiment from comment data so you can better understand employee feedback.
- **Action items:** curated recommendations for actions that can be taken as well as an extensive resource library for how to improve in any specific focus area.
- **Guided experience:** An in-platform coach that provides step-by-step guidance, taking into account the actions a manager has already taken and making intelligent recommendations for what actions to take next to help their teams be more successful.



Strategy

You need a sustainable, and simple strategy to move from one-way listening to effective action in an organization centered around the right habits. Start by rethinking how you invest your time. Instead of improving your listening strategy, shift your focus and develop a conversation strategy. Help your organization make quality feedback conversations a habit because it helps managers and teams use data to fuel action and change behaviors. Here are some key elements of a simple, agile strategy for taking action:

- **Share feedback more frequently; timely,** relevant data informs important business decisions and priorities and allows managers to build habits through repetition. If they only get feedback once per year, they have to learn interpretation and conversation skills all over again every 12+ months.
- **Reduce the time between feedback and action;** get the data out as soon as possible in the hands of teams so they can get started working on it.
- **Have a laser focus on one impactful shift at a time;** don't focus your team's energy on creating long action plans.
- **Make adjustments and learn together;** evaluate what's working and what's not. Course correct along the way.
- **Create a simple check-in process;** help teams to collaborate and hold each other accountable—this can be a 30-minute check-in when the results first come out and 10 minutes on your monthly weekly team meeting agenda to keep it alive. The key is to not just talk about action when a survey comes out.

The fuel to ongoing action-taking

Even the best-laid action taking efforts often lose momentum a few weeks after survey results are out. After the initial fervor that comes when new information settles, other priorities take over. It's not uncommon for robust action plans to see little progress because there is no simple mechanism to hold the team accountable for progress. The missing ingredient to creating sustainable focus on taking action on feedback is so obvious, it's often overlooked: Conversations.

Why do conversations matter?

Research shows that checking in and having conversations in the workplace are critical to productivity and well-being. Yet, few organizations have mastered the art of having conversations that are meaningful and propel progress.

First, let's talk about why ongoing Conversations are critical to taking action on feedback:

1

Conversations signal that we want to take action on feedback, and provide a forum for understanding the data at a deeper level.

2

Conversations, done well, can provide clarity and focus: are we on the same page on what we need to solve for?

3

Conversations make the process inherently collaborative. No one person owns taking action alone.

4

Conversations are self-correcting. If you check in regularly, the plan evolves over time and accountability to take action naturally occurs.

5


Conversations can occur and have all of the above benefits regardless of whether a survey goes out or a manager has a big enough team to get his/her own report.

But the problem with conversations is...

People give lots of excuses for avoiding important conversations. But at the heart of it, it's because:

- It's not always clear how to facilitate a good conversation, and therefore the value is unclear
- Conversations about feedback can feel awkward and/or intimidating

That's why we developed the **ACT Conversation Guide**, that serves as a simple framework for having productive conversations that foster meaningful connection and continuous improvement. The conversation framework allows managers and teams to practice the critical steps of a quality feedback conversation and make it a habit that stays with them.

The graphic features three overlapping speech bubbles containing the letters 'A', 'C', and 'T' in a light purple font. Below the bubbles, the words 'Acknowledge', 'Collaborate', and 'Take' are listed in bold black text, each followed by a short description of the step. The background is a solid light purple color.

A

C

T

Acknowledge
where we are

Collaborate
on where we want to go

Take
one step forward

Why ACT works

The conversation guide is built on a combination of behavioral science and practical expertise on what fuels change within organizations. ACT is fundamentally intended to:

Create trust on teams: By openly sharing and discussing feedback, we improve trust on teams, a crucial building block for creating high performing teams. ACT inherently requires managers bring their survey data to the team meeting for open discussion rather than deciding what the problem and solution is on their own. The conversations prompts within Acknowledge encourage the manager to bring their hypotheses from reviewing the data to the team and work together to identify the most impactful focus area. Additionally, most of the Collaborate prompts are written with the intention of maximizing psychological safety on teams. As research and experience shows, people avoid having difficult conversations, choosing instead to indulge in counterproductive behaviors like complaining to others, doing unnecessary work, or getting angry. Facing these challenges head on can be tough, but can create psychological safety to have conversations that matter.

Appreciate each other and reinforce the positive: Feedback is a gift and we need to encourage it more often. That's why in Acknowledge, we encourage kicking things off by sharing positive stories of progress you've witnessed in the last few months. This will ensure we focus on the positive in addition to what needs to improve.

Drive focus: We know focus is critical to effectiveness, yet we too often forget to aggressively prioritize how we take action on feedback. It's not uncommon for organizations to become overwhelmed by the number of issues that arise in their survey feedback and overcommit to solving everything all at once. The result is that organizational energy and resources are often diluted and nothing fundamentally changes. We commonly hear managers say "If we asked the question in a survey, we have a responsibility to address it." We don't believe that to be true. Employees understand that everyone is busy and resources are limited, so as long as they can play a part in prioritizing and as long as they see progress made on one thing, they see that survey feedback is valued. Additionally, most items in Viva Glint pulses are statistically correlated, which means that if you improve one item, you are likely to see other items improve. With Collaborate prompts, we get the teams laser focused on solving one thing. The use of one in "Take one step forward" is intentional to keeping team commitments manageable and bite-sized.



Get to the root of the behaviors that help or hinder progress: It's common for eager teams to tackle a problem by creating a new solution to address it. With all the right intentions, we add new things to do without taking anything away. Often, change requires as much undoing as doing. That's why in the Collaborate phase, we ask teams to discuss what behaviors we need to start, stop, continue. It's especially critical to talk openly about what we need to stop doing. This is important for 2 reasons: it creates focus and it makes it OK for team members to dissent and be open and proactive about derailers.

Identify individual commitment: Social theory shows that when you believe responsibility is diffused, you are less likely to make an effort to solve it. If you believe improving team morale and engagement is someone else's problem, it's unlikely you will play your part in making things better. While managers have a clear role to play (see below), each member on the team can influence the outcome. This is why in Take one step forward, we encourage individual commitments for progress as well as a commitment on when to check-in next.

Foster an environment of ongoing learning: by focusing less on achieving a goal and more on ongoing learning, we create a growth mindset where we persist in the face of obstacles, embrace challenges and seek inspiration from others. The Acknowledge conversation prompts nudge the team to share what's working and what's not in ongoing

check-in meetings. During the Collaborate phase, we encourage deconstructing what we need to start, stop, and continue doing to improve outcomes. By transparently surfacing lessons learned, we can grow together rather than defaulting to fixed mindset triggers that cause defensiveness. In the Take one step forward teams commit to when they will check in again, signaling this is not the end of the conversation.

Create an agile, continuous improvement mindset: Do you believe engagement can be fixed with a silver bullet solution? Think again. Our research has shown that the organizations that have an agile approach to people success are more likely to see business success. At the heart of an agile approach is that we can't always get it right the first time. We must continuously learn from mistakes and iterate. Rather than over-index on developing a detailed plan, the ACT conversation guide prompts teams to commit to one simple change over the course of a few weeks, share lessons learned, and repeat the process. We love the concept of shifting; shifting doesn't require you to take on a monumental change. It's the alteration of a simple behavior or habit that everyone can easily make. Here are examples of shifts that could come out of an ACT Conversation:

- **For a recognition focus:** Start regular meetings with each team member recognizing someone else on the team for their support.
- **For an empowerment focus:** The manager invites the team to come up with the top 3 things they want him/her to delegate/step out of and discuss/commit at the next team meeting.
- **For a risk-taking focus:** At the end of each week, the manager sends a note out asking team members to respond if they tried something different this week, and share how it went.
- **For a downward communication focus:** The manager sends team 3 bullets after each leadership meeting with key points for them to know.
- (Note: the Viva Glint platform has many more ideas of small shifts in the action resources associated with each driver.)

So are ACT Conversations one more thing we have to do?!

No! We know leaders and managers—really all of us—are already too busy. Creating what feels like a lot of additional work is a recipe for failure. If we want acting on survey feedback to be integrated into the “way we do things around here”, here are a couple of common pitfalls to avoid:

- **Making action planning a separate meeting:** Creating more meetings is not the answer. In fact, if this is a separate meeting, it’s likely it will get deprioritized in the face of fire drills and escalations. We suggest making this part of your regular team meetings. These check-ins don’t have to be long. They can take up to 30 minutes of your regular meeting when fresh survey results are out. From then onwards, it can be a quick 10-15 minute check in on progress to monitor what’s going well, what’s not going well, and how we need to shift.
- **Work on a problem that’s unrelated to key business activities or that you can’t easily influence:** When taking action on feedback feels separate from your business priorities, it is likely to feel burdensome. That’s why we always recommend that a manager looks at their data with the lens of “What do we need to accomplish as a team in the next 3-6 months and what do the survey results say about our ability to do that?” By putting feedback in the context of strategic objectives, we’re not working on something new, we’re working more effectively on a current priority.

What’s the Manager’s role?

Driving engagement and performance is a team sport. Leadership clearly has a role to play in influencing many key drivers such as Decision-making, Collaboration, Prospects, and Purpose. When these items show up as systemic focus areas, it’s likely senior leadership needs to own some of the actions given interdependencies to company strategies, processes, and systems.

But managers play an important role in taking action on feedback for one simple reason: they are close to the experience on the ground and can create accountability for teams to make progress. Given this unique positioning, managers can craft solutions to enhance what matters most to their people and leverage existing mechanisms to drive progress, such as team meetings, ongoing one-on-ones, inflight projects, etc. Managers can use survey feedback to build closer connections amongst their teams, and increase their participation in making things better. This ultimately benefits the company and the employees and is more meaningful than a change in engagement score.

The role of the manager in the feedback process is not to fix engagement problems in their silo but to own the ongoing conversations about taking action that fuel progress. More specifically, they need to play the role of:

- **Coach:** Managers must show confidence in the team's ability and willingness to solve problems and provide direction to keep the team on track and avoid going too broad or deep. They also serve as a role model: if employees see their manager displaying candor, vulnerability, accountability, and focus, they are more likely to follow. Finally, managers send a signal about what's important by what behaviors they recognize and discuss publicly.
- **Facilitator:** As a facilitator, managers help teams reach an outcome that works for the group. Managers can provide guidelines for prioritization and decision making based on their knowledge of the organization. As a facilitator, managers should seek out differing opinions and ensure all voices are heard.
- **Roadblock Remover:** Taking action can be tough due to organizational constraints, like company policies, work structures, budget constraints, etc. Managers are the first-line of escalation to help overcome these roadblocks and often must navigate larger organizational structures to help their teams drive change.
- **Connector:** The most important role of the manager is to have ongoing, meaningful conversations with their team that align with priorities. Managers can check-in frequently through team meetings, one-on-ones, etc. to ensure improvements are being made and course correct when needed. They can also make connections to other groups that may be working on similar challenges.

Tips for making ACT work for your organization

- The first step to building or changing a habit, is wanting to change the habit! At Viva Glint we talk about feeling accountable vs. holding people accountable. When managers feel accountable for improving engagement, they are much more likely to invest in building good habits around action taking. It starts with senior leaders role modeling the right behaviors so managers can be inspired to follow their example.
- Integrate it into ongoing processes such as performance management conversations, stand-up meetings, business reviews, staff meetings, etc. We don't need more meetings!
- Tell stories. Reliance on action plans and tracking often manifests from a desire to demonstrate progress to executives and other stakeholders. Instead of focusing on activity, focus on impact. A check-the-box mentality drives superficial change; whereas building the right habits for effective conversations results in sustainable improvements. Use stories to talk about how feedback and conversations made

a meaningful difference in the business. Did a manager use the results to improve team collaboration and deliver a major product on-time? Did an executive leverage employee input as a compass to navigate major organizational change? These stories show greater impact than sharing stats like "30% of managers viewed results."

- Embed these principles - bite-sized feedback, dialogue and collaboration between managers and teams, and quick, targeted action - into other people practices. This is not just about survey feedback, it's what builds quality managers who can lead engaged teams.

Having meaningful conversations that drive connection and focus is hard because it requires underutilized and under-practiced skills. By providing a simple framework focused on building the right habits, we can make it repeatable. And repetition will get us better at the skills and make it easier over time. Once we can build managers' muscles around feedback and connection, conversations will become habits that propel action and continuous improvement, without dependencies on HR. This is when people feel heard and valued, when organizations truly tap into their most important asset, and when people and organizations thrive.

About Microsoft Viva Glint

Microsoft Viva Glint is a “voice of the employee” solution helping organizations understand and improve employee engagement. Organizations get immediate visibility into the employee experience with org-wide surveys and recommended actions to drive business outcomes. Questions and action plans are based on people science to guide employee listening and engagement programs that support the employee experience. Leaders and managers can view results to understand strengths and opportunities, compare performance against benchmarks and receive personalized suggestions for learning courses, conversation starters, and other actions that support positive business outcomes.

<https://microsoft.com/viva>

