

LEADING WITH PURPOSE

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After 40 years in the fire service, Chief Randy Bruegman founded The Leadership Crucible Foundation to reshape future leadership with a focus on fostering courage, empathy, and humility in leadership positions.

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The Crisis Beneath the Numbers

How Purpose-Driven Leaders Can Turn Gallup's Warning Signs Into a Blueprint for Stronger, More Resilient Organizations.

As we move into 2026, the latest Gallup data confirms what many of us have felt for a long time, our workplaces are struggling, and our people are carrying more than we often realize. Gallup's 2025 survey shows that a majority of employees feel disconnected from their organization's mission and increasingly uncertain about the direction of their leadership. Engagement hasn't just slipped, it has stalled. Trust is fragile. And in far too many places, teams are trying to succeed without the clarity, support, or direction they need. ¹

What those numbers point to is something deeper than dissatisfaction. They reveal a leadership gap. When people don't feel seen, valued, or supported, culture begins to erode. Turnover rises. Burnout spreads. And a growing number of employees simply disengage and quietly quit on the job, which is damaging not only to the organization in the short term, but to the employee's long-term growth, confidence, and sense of purpose. Across public safety, business, education, and government, I've seen the same pattern repeat. The symptoms vary, but the cause is consistent. People need leadership rooted in purpose, humility, and character. When it's absent, they either leave, or they remain physically present but emotionally checked out.

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Yet even with these challenges, there is reason for optimism. Gallup's Q12 Client Database, especially the organizations performing at or above the 90th percentile, tells a very different story. These organizations are not perfect, but they are remarkably consistent in how they lead and how they build their cultures. They communicate clearly and often. They build trust long before they need it. And they put people at the center of their decisions, not as an afterthought, but as a guiding principle.



Where High-Performing Organizations Succeed

What sets these organizations apart is that they have accountability built into their systems at every level, for both the organization and the individual. Expectations are clear, follow-through is consistent, and people understand what good performance looks like. They focus intentionally on engagement, not as a metric, but as a daily leadership practice. And most importantly, they invest in their people.

They coach, they develop, they mentor, and they create opportunities for employees to grow. Because of that, their cultures thrive. Employees stay longer, contribute more, and feel a genuine sense of ownership in the mission.

Leadership like that doesn't happen by accident. It's intentional. It's disciplined. And it's built on the belief that people, when supported and guided well, will rise to meet whatever challenge is in front of them. That is the kind of leadership we need more of, in classrooms and boardrooms, in command staff offices and city halls, and in every place where people depend on one another to do meaningful work.

How We Got Here

Over the past several years, a number of forces have pushed us to where we are today. The COVID experience reshaped how people work, communicate, and think about their own well-being. Teams became more isolated, and many never fully rebuilt the connection they once had.

As communication shifted from conversations to screens, misunderstandings increased and relationships weakened. With the lines between home and work blurring, burnout settled in as a steady undercurrent across many organizations.

"At the same time, many workplaces drifted toward policy-driven constructs instead of people-building efforts. That shift showed up in a variety of well-intended initiatives, DEI programs, hiring frameworks, and new workplace mandates, all rolled out more as compliance exercises than meaningful efforts to strengthen people or culture."

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These initiatives were too often implemented as box-checking exercises rather than genuine people-building efforts. Instead of strengthening belonging, trust, and diverse thinking, many of these efforts were rolled out without preparing supervisors or cultivating the relationships that real inclusion requires. Other mandates added layers of procedure without offering guidance on how to lead through them. The result was predictable: process overtook purpose, and employees felt acted upon instead of invested in.

Another contributing factor has been a steady decline in accountability, both organizationally and individually. Difficult conversations were avoided, expectations shifted from one department to another, and follow-through weakened. High performers carried more of the load while low performers continued

without coaching or support. Accommodation is always easier than accountability, but it rarely builds the strength or capability our people need.

On the individual side, ownership slipped. Missed deadlines, incomplete work, and unaddressed habits became more common, and over time those small lapses added up. The lack of shared accountability frustrated good people and slowly eroded the cultural foundation strong organizations depend on. In many places, we also shifted from offering a hand up to simply handing things out.

Short-term fixes replaced development, incentives replaced coaching, and support was given without inviting people to take ownership alongside it—creating dependency instead of capability.

Rethinking DIOA: Diversity, Inclusion, Opportunity, Accountability

Too often we tend to define diversity narrowly, focusing primarily on race or ethnicity. Those factors matter deeply, especially for organizations to reflect the people they serve. But Gallup's research shows that high-performing teams also rely on diversity of thought, the ability to bring together people with different experiences, perspectives, and problem-solving approaches. Without that, organizations struggle to innovate and adapt. Diversity in background and diversity in thinking are both essential if we expect performance and engagement to improve.

But diversity alone isn't enough. Inclusion is where most organizations stumble. Too often, we equate inclusion with simply being invited into the organization. As Verna Myers said, "Diversity is being invited to the party, Inclusion is being asked to dance,." The Gallup data echoes this: employees who feel their opinions matter are far more likely to be engaged and committed to their organization's success. Inclusion requires more than representation; it requires participation. It requires leaders who intentionally bring people into the decisions and processes that shape the future. Diversity without inclusion creates numbers, not culture.

The third piece is opportunity, and here the data is equally compelling. Gallup reports that one of the strongest predictors of engagement is whether employees feel they have room to grow. Organizations have a responsibility to create those opportunities through training, education, mentoring, and stretch assignments. But individuals must also take ownership, stepping through the doors that open before them, even when the path feels uncertain. Opportunity is a two-way investment: the organization must create it, and the employee must embrace it.

And finally, accountability, a principle that Gallup's highest-performing organizations consistently demonstrate. Accountability must exist at every level: in the systems leaders build, in the expectations they set, and in the behaviors they model. Policies and values statements mean little if they're not lived out. Organizations must be accountable for preparing their people to

succeed. Employees must be accountable for their performance, their readiness, and their willingness to step into growth. When we lose accountability, we lose our footing. When we practice it consistently, our culture becomes stronger and more resilient.

After looking at the research from Gallup, McKinsey, Deloitte, and others, a consistent pattern emerges. The practices that set top-performing organizations apart align directly with the principles of DIOA: Diversity, Inclusion, Opportunity, and Accountability, and provide a blueprint for building cultures where people feel connected, supported, challenged, and accountable. And while none of this is complicated, it does require leaders who are intentional, present, and willing to put their people first.

1. Start with Strong Leadership at Every Level

Gallup has shown that nearly 70 percent of the variance in team engagement comes down to the manager. Culture is shaped far more by everyday leadership behaviors than by slogans or strategic plans. The best organizations invest in developing leaders who communicate well, set clear expectations, and build trust long before they need it. They teach supervisors to coach, not just correct, and they hold them responsible for both results and the culture they create.

2. Hire and Promote for Diversity of Thought

Diversity matters, not just in who we are, but in how we think. High-performing organizations intentionally bring in people who challenge assumptions, broaden perspectives, and help teams see around corners. They use structured interviews, diverse panels, and competency-based promotions to reduce bias. When leaders value diversity of thought as much as diversity of background, innovation grows and blind spots shrink..



3. Make Inclusion a Daily Leadership Practice

Inclusion cannot be a once-a-year conversation or a policy on a shelf. It has to be lived out in how we lead. People want to be heard, involved, and invited into decisions that affect their work. Research shows that individuals who feel included are more engaged, more committed, and far more likely to stay. Inclusion means giving people a real voice, not just a seat at the table.

4. Create Clear, Visible Pathways for Growth

One of the strongest predictors of engagement is whether employees believe they can grow. Organizations have a responsibility to offer mentoring, training, education, and stretch assignments. Individuals have a responsibility to step into those opportunities, even when the path feels uncertain. Opportunity works when both sides own their part of the process.

5. Build a Culture of Shared Accountability

The highest-performing organizations are crystal clear about expectations. People know what good performance looks like, how decisions

are made, and what values guide the work. Accountability is not punitive, it is clarifying. Leaders model the behavior they expect, and employees take responsibility for their preparation, performance, and follow-through. When accountability is missing, culture drifts. When it is present, culture strengthens.

6. Connect Daily Work to Purpose

People stay and perform at higher levels when they understand why their work matters. Leaders who consistently connect the dots between individual effort and organizational impact strengthen loyalty, pride, and perseverance, even during difficult times. Purpose remains one of the most powerful drivers of engagement, especially for the younger generations entering the workforce.

7. Communicate Clearly, Then Communicate Again

Gallup consistently ranks communication as one of the most underestimated drivers of engagement. People want to know what is happening, why it matters, and how decisions affect them. Regular updates, open dialogue, and transparent conversations build trust, especially in times of change. Communication is the backbone of Inclusion, Opportunity, and Accountability.



Pulling It All Together

When you look across the research — from Gallup to McKinsey to Deloitte — a consistent message emerges:

Organizations don't rise on programs. They rise on leadership.

DIOA gives us a roadmap for what that leadership looks like:

- Diversity in who we are and how we think
- Inclusion in how we engage and involve people
- Opportunity that is both provided and embraced
- Accountability at every level and by everyone

These principles, lived out consistently, are what move organizations from average to exceptional. And in an environment defined by rapid change, they are not optional, they are essential.

Final Thought

At the end of the day, leadership isn't about

the spreadsheets, the policies, or the titles we carry. It is about the people we serve and the culture we choose to build around them. The Gallup data reminds us that there are real challenges ahead, but it also gives us an invitation, to lead differently, to lead better, and to lead with a deeper sense of purpose.

When we show up with clarity, courage, and compassion, we do more than strengthen our organizations, we help people believe in what's possible again. And that is the kind of leadership our teams, our communities, and our country need now more than ever. As we move into 2026, the leaders who will make the greatest impact are those who choose to lead with purpose, build people with intention, and create cultures grounded in DIOA, because that is the path to stronger teams, healthier organizations, and a better future for all of us.

Chief B Quote

"Diversity, inclusion, opportunity, and accountability are not initiatives, they are the daily habits of leaders who build healthy, resilient cultures." Chief B.

Chief B's Key Leadership Takeaways

- Leadership sets the tone.
- Culture erodes when people don't feel seen, valued, or supported.
- Policy can't replace people-building.
- Accountability is essential, individually, and organizationally.
- Diversity must include diversity of thought.
- Inclusion is participation, not presence.
- Opportunity requires ownership.
- Purpose drives engagement.
- Communication ties everything together.
- DIOA is a blueprint, not a program.

Recommended Reading

If you're looking to go deeper into the themes of leadership, culture, engagement, and organizational health, here are five powerful books that align closely with the challenges and opportunities we explored this month:

1. Leaders Eat Last — Simon Sinek

A compelling look at how trust, safety, and purpose-driven leadership create teams that thrive. Sinek shows why people perform at their highest when leaders put their people first, a message at the heart of closing today's leadership gap.

2. The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else — Patrick Lencioni

Lencioni argues that healthy organizations outperform smart organizations every time. His framework reinforces what Gallup's top-tier organizations demonstrate daily: clarity, cohesion, and culture are competitive advantages.

3. Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us — Daniel H. Pink

Pink breaks down the science of motivation, autonomy, mastery, and purpose, all of which connect directly to DIOA and the need for leaders to create environments where people feel valued and able to grow.

4. First, Break All the Rules — Marcus Buckingham & Curt Coffman (Gallup)

Based on extensive Gallup research, this book reveals what the world's best managers do differently. It provides practical insights on engagement, strengths-based leadership, and why great culture begins with the immediate supervisor.

5. Dare to Lead — Brené Brown

Brown explores courage, vulnerability, and the heart of brave leadership. Her work reinforces your core message: leaders must show up with humility, clarity, and compassion to build trust and shape strong cultures.

References

¹ Gallup Poll of the U.S. Working Population (2025).

Nationwide annual survey measuring trends in employee engagement, workplace sentiment, and organizational trust across diverse industries in the United States.

² Gallup Q12 Client Database (2019–2023).

Aggregated results from organizations with 1,000+ employees performing at or above the 90th percentile on Gallup's Q12 engagement