

Public Relations Leaders Earn a “B-” In The Plank Center’s Report Card 2021

Did the Pandemic Improve Leadership in Public Relations?

Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., University of Alabama, Juan Meng, Ph.D., University of Georgia, and Jessamyn Katz, Heyman Associates

Leaders in public relations improved their performance during the volatile and challenging world of 2020-2022. For the first time since The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations launched its biennial *Leadership Report Card* in 2015, the grade for overall leadership performance rose to B-.

“Following small declines in leader performance in 2017 and 2019, the 2021 Report Card marks improvements in overall leadership performance, and gains in employee trust, job satisfaction, job engagement and organizational culture,” said Karla Gower, Ph.D., director of the Plank Center and professor at the University of Alabama. “Most significantly, a previous widening gender gap regarding perceptions of leadership in PR was closed. The profession moved from average to “almost good,” with “great” still in the scope in the distance.”

	2021	2019	2017	2015
LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE	A-/C+	A-/C+	A-/C+	A-/C+
JOB ENGAGEMENT	B	B-	B-	B+
TRUST IN ORGANIZATION	B-	C+	C+	B
JOB SATISFACTION	B-	C+	C+	B-
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	B-	C+	C+	B-
OVERALL	B-	C+	C+	B-

The 2020-2022 survey period was a volatile time marked by: 1) the pandemic; 2) George Floyd’s murder by police in 2020, which sparked protests and marches calling for greater social justice and DE&I; and 3) a bitter presidential election pounded by waves of mis- and dis-information in social and national media that further divided the nation.

Against this background, public relations leaders were resilient and improved their leadership. Did the pandemic, or a greater focus on DE&I, or concerns about truth and accuracy drive these improvements? To some extent certainly, but the survey was not designed to measure this. The 2023 Report Card should reveal whether the leadership gains in 2021 were lasting or not.

History and Brief Summaries of the Report Cards

Report Card 2015: In 2015 The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations and Heyman Associates produced its first *Report Card on PR Leaders*. The 838 U.S. leaders surveyed earned passing grades for the five areas examined—leadership performance, job engagement, trust in the organization, work culture and job satisfaction—but crucial gaps highlighted areas for improvement.

Report Card 2017: Nearly 1,200 PR leaders in the U.S. completed the same survey in 2017. Grades for performance and trust were unchanged, but slipped for work culture, job engagement and job satisfaction. The overall grade for PR leaders fell from B- to C+. Big gaps between leaders’ and employees’ perceptions of the five areas remained, while gender differences deepened.

Report Card 2019: The third *Report Card* in 2019 in the U.S. was based on a survey of 828 PR leaders and professionals. Grades were little changed from 2017, though job engagement, trust and job satisfaction were down a bit. Meanwhile, the gaps between men and women’s perceptions of the workplace and practice, and between top leaders and others in the organizations, deepened further.

Report Card 2021: The current Report Card is based on a survey completed in late 2021 and early 2022 with 536 PR leaders and professionals based in the United States. For the first time since 2015, the overall leadership grade for the profession rose to a B-. Important improvements were seen in trust, job satisfaction, job engagement, and organizational culture. Moreover, the widening gap between women and men and their overall perceptions of leadership in the field, disappeared in the 2021 study. Small differences remained, but they were not significant. Closing the gender gap may be the most important finding in the study. On the other hand, the significant divide between top leaders and all others in their organizations regarding leadership performance and the other four dimensions remained wide.

Commenting on the 2021 results, Jessamyn Katz, of Heyman Associates, co-sponsor of the study, said: “The Report Card has been an important accountability exercise for our profession, and we’re thrilled to see the overall leadership grade improve for the first time. Leaders were tested with constant and significant challenges since the last Report Card and to see job engagement and satisfaction, organizational culture and trust improve is remarkable, as is the disappearance of a perceived gender gap.”

Background and Demographics

The Survey

A 42-question survey examined five interrelated issues in the field: 1) organizational culture, 2) leadership performance, 3) job engagement, 4) trust in the organization, and 5) job satisfaction. Questions for each issue were drawn from the previously tested and validated item measures used in the three previous surveys. The survey was distributed online to more than 22,000 public relations leaders and professionals contained within an extensive database, and 568 completed the survey; 32 surveys completed by non-US-based participants were excluded, leaving 536 surveys for data analysis. This response provides a 95% confidence level (+/- 5%) that the results represent the larger population of surveyed professionals.

The Grades

Grades were based on mean scores for item statements, or average mean scores for subject areas for some demographics. Comparative data were used to help determine grades when available (e.g., engagement). Respondents shared their perceptions about items using a 7-point Likert-type scale to evaluate statements, ranging from “I don’t agree at all” (1) to “I agree to a very great extent” (7). For percentage analysis, the scale for items in each of the five areas was recoded as a categorical variable: unsatisfactory (or disagreement) (scale 1-3), neutral (scale 4), and satisfactory (or agreement) (scale 5-7).

Demographics

Most participants were experienced, high-level leaders and managers. More than three-quarters (83.2%) of the 536 respondents were the #1 (43.3%) or #2 (39.9%) communication professional in their organization; 96.6% had 11 years of experience or more with 73.3% specifically indicating having more than 20 years of experience. In addition, 182 professionals (34.0%) were over the age of 55; 238 (44.4%) were between 46-55 years of age; 112 (20.9%) were between the ages of 36-45; and 4 (0.7%) were under age 36.

More men (286 or 53.6%) than women (248 or 46.4%) completed the survey. The majority of participants worked in public (157 or 29.3%) or private/state-owned (102 or 19.0%) companies, followed by professionals in nonprofits and government/educational/political organizations (195 or 36.4%), communication agencies (70 or 13.1%) and self-employed or others (12 or 2.2%).

Most participants (455 or 84.9%) were Caucasian; 34 (6.3%) were Black/African American; 20 (3.7%) were Latino/Hispanic; 9 (1.7%) were Asian or Asian American; and 18 (3.4%) were mixed race or “other.” The percentage of non-Caucasians (15.1%) is higher than previous surveys.

A little more than half (282 or 52.6%) of respondents indicated they belonged to one or more professional associations, which is virtually the same as the 2019 Report Card (52.8%). Those mentioned most frequently on the 2021 survey were: PRSA (147), Arthur W. Page Society (65), IABC (37), PR Council (19), IPRA (10), and ABC (5), while 101 respondents named other professional membership associations. Nearly half (47.4%) of those surveyed said they didn’t belong to any professional association, consistent with previous surveys.

Results—Grades for the Five Areas

Public relations leaders again received passing grades for their performance, trust in the organization, job satisfaction and work engagement. They also gave a passing grade to the cultures within which they work. Overall, scores for the five areas were a bit higher than those in 2019 and earlier studies, and the highest yet in the areas of job engagement, job satisfaction and organizational culture. Most importantly, gender differences in previous surveys regarding leadership performance were not present in this study. However, significant gaps between perceptions of top leaders and other employees at lower levels, still loom large. Based on the scores, leadership in the field improved over the past two years to its highest level yet.

Leadership Performance: A-/C+ (2019—A-/C+)

This is a split grade because leaders’ and their employees’ perceptions of performance continue to differ sharply. Top leaders (232 or 43.3%) rated their performance (6.17 /7.0 scale) about an “A-,” while other employees (304 or 56.7%) rated their top leaders’ performance (4.75/7.0) a “C+.” Scores for top leadership performance were slightly higher than in 2019 (6.09 vs. 4.49), but the size of the gap in all four *Report Cards* is virtually the same. Leaders often rate their performance higher than their employees do, but the statistical difference here is substantial.

In addition to an overall performance grade, leaders were evaluated on six dimensions: self-insights (vision), ethical orientation, participation in strategic decision making, team leadership capabilities, relationship building skills and communication knowledge management. Notably, scores for all six dimensions were higher in 2021 than in the three previous surveys. Survey participants rated ethical orientation (5.99 vs. 5.75 in 2019), communication knowledge management (5.83 vs. 5.50 in 2019), and involvement in strategic decision-making (5.65 vs. 5.50 in 2019) the highest. Visioning (5.40 vs. 4.98 in 2019) and team leadership capabilities (5.44 vs 5.00 in 2019) were rated lowest. This is some evidence of improved leadership in these six areas, and it will be insightful to see how these items score in the next *Report Card* in 2023. It’s important to note that top leaders gave themselves significantly higher scores than did employees for all six dimensions.

For the first time in this biennial study, no significant differences were found between women and men on their evaluations of all seven leadership items. Previously, men had ranked all leadership dimensions significantly higher than women. Ethical orientation

was rated highest (A-) by women (6.02) and men (5.97). Communication knowledge management was rated second highest (B+) and exactly the same by women and men (5.83). Lowest scores were given for team leadership (men 5.46, women 5.42) and vision (women 5.45, men 5.36).

Closing this gender gap is an important improvement in leadership, and it also should be noted that the overall scores for these dimensions have improved a bit each year. These are “B” grades now, apart from the significant gap between top leaders evaluations of their own performance (A-) and the perceptions of those who work for them (C+).

Similar to previous *Report Cards*, agency professionals rated the six dimensions highest (6.05) among organizational types. Those working in “non-profits” (the grouping of government, educational, political and non-profits) in this study rated the six dimensions significantly lower (5.52), while professionals working in publicly held corporations gave the lowest scores (5.22) in this *Report Card*.

“It is promising to document the improved leadership during and after times of uncertainty and radical changes,” said Juan Meng, Ph.D., co-investigator, and associate professor at the University of Georgia. “It is even better to observe the closed gap between men and women when evaluating their leaders. As the society is moving rapidly to embrace DE&I, leaders need to rethink what kinds of effective practices their organizations need to ensure the sustainable improvements in leadership and its related dimensions.”

Organizational Culture: B- (2019–C+)

Overall, surveyed participants indicated small improvements in organizational culture and graded it a “B-” (mean score of 5.17 on a 7.0 scale), up from previous scores of 4.94 in 2019, 4.86 in 2017 and 4.95 in 2015. Culture refers here to the internal environment and processes and structures that facilitate or impede communication practices. Item measures for culture include the extent to which: 1) the CEO values and understands PR, 2) other functional leaders value and understand PR, 3) the organization shares decision-making power among employees, 4) two-way communication is practiced, 5) the organization values and practices diversity, and 6) the quality of the top PR leader (this item was discussed in the leadership performance section above).

Rated highest again was the CEO’s or top leader’s understanding and valuing of public relations (5.69 up from 5.48 in 2019). The understanding and valuing of PR by other functional leaders was rated significantly lower (5.02 versus 4.95 in 2019). Graded much lower was the extent to which the organization shared decision-making (4.44 vs. 4.19 in 2019) among employees and practiced two-way communication (4.94 vs. 4.69 in 2019). The extent to which the organization values and practices diversity was rated 5.49 (up from 5.22 in 2019). Shared decision-making and two-way communications were again the weakest cultural factors across all demographics, but their scores rose modestly. Cultural improvements appeared across all items versus the 2019 survey.

Top leaders rated cultural factors significantly higher (5.50 vs. 5.29 in 2019) than professionals at lower levels (4.94 at one level, 4.89 at 2+ levels). Men rated culture more positively (5.23 vs. 5.07 in 2019) than women (5.04 vs. 4.83 in 2019), who rated most cultural elements significantly lower than men, notably two-way communication, shared decision-making, and diversity. Women gave shared decision-making one of the lowest scores in the survey (4.21), the biggest gap versus men (4.65). Among organizational types, agency professionals rated cultural factors highest (5.76); the group of non-profit, governmental, educational, and political organizations rated culture lowest (4.76). Overall, the scores for cultural factors were up from those in previous surveys. The grade for culture rose from a C+ to a B-.

Job Engagement: B (2019–B-)

As indicated in the table below, job engagement in 2021 reached its highest level versus previous studies. In addition, for the first time there were no significant differences regarding engagement between women and men for any of the 12 engagement items measured. Gallup’s employee engagement survey is the framework used to assess work engagement among PR leaders and managers. Hundreds of organizations and more than 25 million employees have used the actual survey in the past two decades. Based on responses to the questions, employees are grouped into three categories: engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged.

Engaged employees give greater discretionary effort, work with passion, and feel strongly connected with their organization. *Not engaged* employees do the minimum, just enough to get by. They show up, go through the motions, but bring no energy or passion to the workplace. *Actively disengaged* employees can harm or weaken the organization. They act out their unhappiness or resentment on the job and adversely influence others—they can undercut organizational programs and goals.

In our survey, 61.2% of respondents were engaged (highest level in the four studies); 31.9% were not engaged (lowest level in the four studies); and 6.9% were actively disengaged (down from 8.0% in 2019). As indicated below, engagement scores have changed modestly over the past five years:

Job Engagement of PR Professionals

DEMOGRAPHIC	% ENGAGED				% NOT ENGAGED				% ACTIVELY DISENGAGED			
	2021	2019	2017	2015	2021	2019	2017	2015	2021	2019	2017	2015
ALL RESPONDENTS	61.2	59.4	57.2	59.7	31.9	32.6	35.9	34.4	6.9	8.0	6.8	6.0
MALES	62.6	62.3	62.1	57.9	31.6	31.7	32.5	35.2	6.3	6.1	5.4	6.8
FEMALES	60.1	57.0	52.9	61.3	32.3	33.4	39.0	33.6	7.7	9.6	8.1	5.1
TOP LEADERS	72.8	68.7	71.7	72.3	24.1	25.4	24.5	24.5	3.0	5.8	3.8	3.2
NON-TOP LEADERS	55.6	54.4	50.1	54.2	36.9	36.5	41.6	38.6	7.5	9.1	8.3	7.2

Consistent with Gallup's reports, top leaders were more engaged (72.8%) than those at all other levels (55.6%). More men (62.6%) than women (60.1%) were engaged, though this is not a statistically significant difference. It is the first time in the surveys that women and men have been engaged to more or less the same extent. In fact, women rated 6 of the 12 items slightly higher than men, who rated six other items slightly higher than women.

Highest engagement scores were in these areas: *I know what is expected of me at work* (5.52/7.0); *My employees/associates are committed to quality work* (5.75); and *Our mission makes me feel my job is important* (5.56). Lowest scores were given to these areas: *I have a best friend at work* (3.73); *I have the resources to do my job effectively* (4.59); and *In the last six months someone has talked with me about my job performance* (4.94). Finally, in the 2021 Report Card no significant differences were found across engagement levels by type of organization, or years of experience.

Understanding leaders' engagement is important because they strongly influence employees' engagement, which in turn strongly affects employee trust and job satisfaction, as indicated in the predictive model at the end of this report. As Gallup suggests in its *State of the American Workplace Report* (2013), this puts a premium on finding and hiring the right manager and leader—a set of distinctive skills and capabilities—so that hiring itself becomes a crucial engagement strategy, i.e., selecting the "right" individuals to lead, support, empower and engage others.

Trust in the Organization: B- (2019—C+)

The overall grade for trust in the organization (5.08/7.0 scale) was a "B-," the highest level of trust in the Report Cards to date, and up from a mean score of 4.71 in 2019. Trust had received the lowest grade among the five subject areas in previous surveys, but it moved ahead of job satisfaction in the 2021 survey. Trust scores once again were consistently lower at each level in the chain of command. Top leaders rated trust (5.46) significantly higher than other levels (4.71).

Six trust items were assessed, and participants gave highest marks to trusting their organization's capabilities to accomplish its goals (5.32), and to feeling confident about their organization's skills to compete successfully in the marketplace (5.19). Lower marks were given to trusting their organization to take the opinions of employees into account when making decisions (4.95) and being concerned about employees when important decisions are being made (4.74).

Female professionals (4.96) continued to be less trusting of their organizations than male professionals (5.19), though the gap in the 2021 survey was not as pronounced as in previous surveys. Women were significantly less trusting than men of relying on their organizations to keep its promises (4.95 vs. 5.20) and to take opinions of employees like them into account when making decisions (4.77 vs. 5.12).

Trust is crucial in building and sustaining relationships in our work and personal lives. In work, trust is strongly influenced by organizational culture and very strongly by employee engagement, as noted in our predictive model. Employee identification with work teams and organizations is built around trust, which influences job satisfaction. Top leaders and front-line supervisors very strongly influence culture (and are influenced by it) and strongly influence employee engagement through their decisions, communications and especially their behaviors, which help shape the extent to which an organization's culture is supportive, inclusive, and open.

Report Card 2021 reveals no significant differences about trust among age groups or years of work experience. The improvement in trust, after small but steady declines in scores in the three previous studies, is noteworthy.

Job Satisfaction: B- (2019—C+)

Job satisfaction improved versus small declines in the two previous surveys, and the overall grade rose from a "C+" to a "B-." In terms of percentages, the numbers rose slightly from 2019 when the percentage of PR leaders and professionals who were satisfied with their job was 62.1% versus 63.6% in this 2021 Report Card. Those dissatisfied dropped from 24.4% in 2019 to 19.8% in this survey, and those neither satisfied nor dissatisfied rose from 13.5% in 2019 to 16.1% in 2021.

Percentage of Job Satisfaction: Report Card 2021

DEMOGRAPHIC	DISSATISFIED	NEUTRAL	SATISFIED
ALL 526 RESPONDENTS	106 (19.8%)	89 (16.9%)	341 (63.6%)
WOMEN (N=248)	58 (23.4%)	40 (16.1%)	150 (60.5%)
MEN (N=286)	47 (16.4%)	48 (16.8%)	191 (66.8%)
TOP LEADER (N=232)	29 (12.5%)	34 (14.7%)	169 (72.8%)
ONE LEVEL BELOW (N=214)	50 (23.4%)	40 (18.7%)	124 (57.4%)
TWO OR MORE LEVELS (N=209)	90 (30.0%)	15 (16.7%)	48 (53.3%)

Job satisfaction is highest among top leaders (72.8%), up from 70.1% in 2019. Their mean scores rose from 5.11 in 2019 to 5.37 in this survey, which is significantly higher than job satisfaction at all other levels (4.53). On a percentage basis, top leaders are much more satisfied with their jobs (72.8%) than employees one level below (57.9%) and two or more levels below (53.3%), where job dissatisfaction increased slightly from 52.2% in 2019. Mean scores for men and women also rose, but disparities continued. Scores for females rose to 4.78 from 4.61 in 2019, while job satisfaction for men rose from 4.87 in 2019 to 5.07 in 2021.

On a percentage basis, 66.8% of men were satisfied with their jobs, the same as 2019, while 60.5% of women were satisfied (versus 58.1% in 2019). Those working in agencies rated job satisfaction the highest (5.27). Those working in the category of nonprofit, governmental, educational, or political organizations (4.82) and the category of public corporations (4.80) rated job satisfaction the lowest.

Summary

Grades for all five areas for leaders improved, especially in job engagement and job satisfaction. Mean scores in most areas rose modestly. Thus, the overall leadership grade rose from a C+ to a B-, the first improvement since 2015. In addition, one of three crucial gaps revealed in previous studies—the gender gap—was closed in this *Report Card*. The gaps must be reduced or closed to strengthen leadership, practice, and outcomes for the profession and organizations. Here's an update on the three gaps:

1. The perceptions of top communication leaders and their employees. Top communication leaders rate their performance, trust in the organization, work engagement, job satisfaction and work culture significantly higher than their employees. Things look different—and far better—at the top. Leaders often rate their performance and some other factors higher than do followers, but the size of the gap is Grand-Canyon sized, as it was in three previous studies. If leaders by definition have followers, then at what point do perception gaps adversely affect followers?

The gaps may be reduced through 1) increased power sharing, or leader empowering behaviors, 2) strengthened two-way communication, and 3) enhanced interpersonal skills in teamwork, such as conflict management, active listening, and empathy. Leaders at all levels can benefit from relying less on the transmission mode and more on the reception mode when communicating with employees. These approaches also help build trust.

2. Existing culture and a culture for communication. Overall, scores for organizational culture improved modestly in the 2021 Report Card. However, several issues—lack of two-way communication, limited power sharing in decision-making, and concerns about diversity—highlight continuing differences between existing organizational cultures and a rich, open communication system, sometimes referred to as a *culture for communication*.

Such a culture is characterized by 1) an open communication system where information and best practices are widely shared, 2) listening is valorized, 3) two-way and multiple channels are the norm, 4) employees feel free to speak up without fear of retribution, 5) decision-making is widely shared in teams and work units, and 6) leaders support and value communication. Organizational culture exerts a very strong influence on leadership performance and a strong influence on trust and employee engagement, especially among employees at lower levels.

3. Perceptions of women and men in the profession. The gender gap regarding overall leadership performance, which had deepened in three previous studies, literally disappeared in the 2021 survey. This is a significant improvement in the profession. Men and women viewed the survey factors more or less similarly. Smaller but still significant gaps remained between women and men regarding perceptions of organizational culture, trust, and job satisfaction. Women's perceptions of shared power in decision making, two-way communication, and the valuing of their opinions differed significantly. Women said they want more involvement in strategic decision making, they want their opinions to count for more, and they want a communication system that emphasizes two-way communication.



In addition, progress in diversity in many senses in public relations remains slow, and women and men see their organization's efforts in practicing diversity significantly different. These gaps won't magically disappear. They require action, and the power to act resides in the minds, hearts, and hands of current leaders at all levels in organizations.

"The purpose of this biennial report is to assess PR leadership and identify enrichment opportunities for it," said Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., co-investigator and professor emeritus, University of Alabama. "If we identify the gaps and work to close them, we strengthen our profession's leadership—a crucial strategic asset. This *Report Card* identified some improvements over the past two difficult pandemic years, but some crucial gaps and issues remain, as does the urgency to act."

The Power of Engagement

Job engagement improved in several areas, the first real improvements in engagement since the initial survey in 2015, but most gains were modest. More can be done and must be done because engagement impacts the bottom line. Organizations and work teams with more engaged employees have significantly better customer ratings, productivity and profit levels, and lower turnover and absenteeism (Gallup Report, 2013).

Second, previous research has demonstrated that top leaders and front-line managers strongly influence engagement levels through their behaviors, communications, and interactions with others. Highly engaged leaders, then, can energize and inspire greater discretionary efforts. Third, engagement very strongly influences job satisfaction and trust.

The study also found work engagement is strongly influenced by leadership and culture. The predictive model below (Leadership Performance Model) indicates culture and leadership also very strongly influence each other. In turn, culture strongly influences trust and engagement. Leadership strongly influences engagement. In this model, employee engagement is both a key *outcome* and a powerful *driver*. Engaged employees are productive, positive influencers and even role models.

Insights in the collective report cards underscore key needs in the profession—increased two-way communication, shared decision-making, leadership decisions and behaviors that build trust and enrich relationships, and equal opportunities for men and women of all races. We can speak and write about this knowledge. We know, or can learn, how to address the needs.

But knowing the gaps and needs, knowing what to do and how to do it to resolve them, is not enough. We must move from knowing to doing, and this transformation requires real leadership in the profession—not words and commitments, but action. Doing it.

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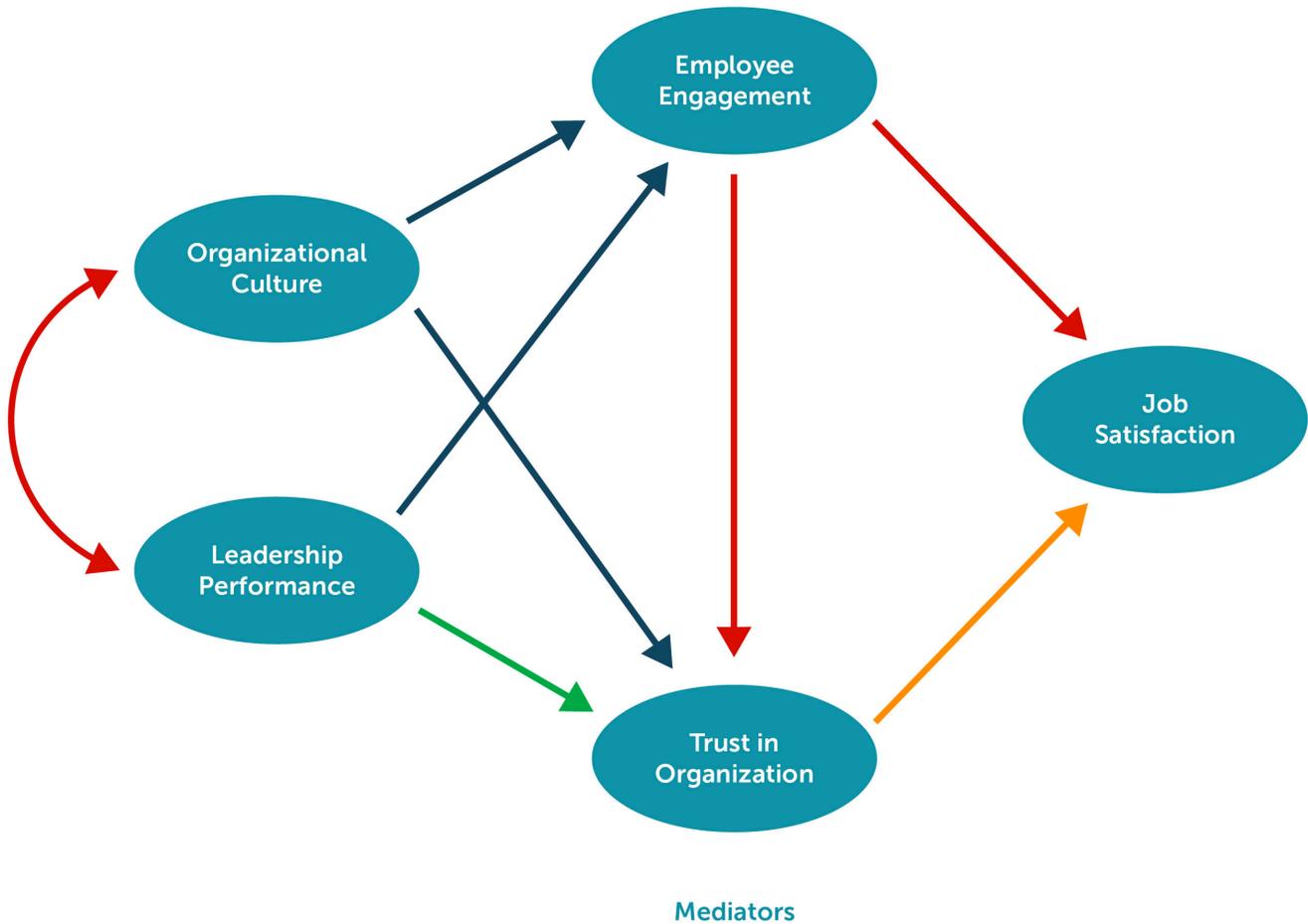
The Plank Center and Heyman Associates will conduct the leadership survey again in 2023. If you're interested in a presentation and discussion of the Report Card 2021 results in your organization, please contact Juan Meng (jmeng@uga.edu), Bruce Berger (berger@apr.ua.edu), or Jessamyn Katz (jkatz@heymanassociates.com).

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Leadership Performance Model

This model depicts the impact of supportive organizational culture and excellent leadership performance on communication practitioners' job satisfaction as mediated by their engagement and trust in their organization. Research on this leadership performance model was published in *Public Relations Review* and readers can download and read the article by [clicking here](#).



Note: Chi-square = 9.49, d.f. = 2, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .069, RMSEA = .067, NFI = 1.00, NNFI = .99, CFI = 1.00, AGFI = .97.

Red line indicates very strong and significant direct effects.

Blue line indicates significantly strong direct effects.

Orange line indicates moderate and significant direct effects.

Green line indicates non-significant direct effect.

