

## Gender Differences Deepen, Leader-Employee Gap Remains and Grades Slide --Plank Center Report Card 2017 on PR Leaders--

*We need to be bigger leaders to close the gaps.*

Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., Juan Meng, Ph.D., and William Heyman

In 2015 the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations and Heyman Associates produced its first *Report Card on PR Leaders*. The leaders 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.

Nearly 1,200 PR leaders and professionals in the U.S. recently completed the same survey. Grades for leadership performance and trust were unchanged in 2017, 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.

Women in public relations were significantly less engaged, less satisfied with their jobs, less confident in their work cultures, less trusting of their organizations and more critical of top leaders than men. Previous concerns about two-way communication, shared decision-making and diversity were again underscored by women and men.

Commenting on the results, Bill Heyman, CEO and president of Heyman Associates, co-sponsor of the study, said: "Social tensions in our world today have likely exacerbated these issues. We need to be bigger leaders to close these gaps."

<i>LEADERSHIP REPORT CARD</i>		
	2017	2015
LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE	<i>A-/C+</i>	<i>A-/C+</i>
JOB ENGAGEMENT	<i>B-</i>	<i>B+</i>
TRUST IN ORGANIZATION	<i>C+</i>	<i>C+</i>
JOB SATISFACTION	<i>C+</i>	<i>B-</i>
CULTURE OF ORGANIZATION	<i>C+</i>	<i>B-</i>
OVERALL	<i>C+</i>	<i>B-</i>

A - EXCELLENT    B - GOOD    C - SATISFACTORY  
D - POOR    F - FAILURE

## Background and Demographics

### The Survey

A 39-question survey examined five interrelated issues in the field: 1) leadership performance, 2) trust in the organization, 3) job satisfaction, 4) organizational culture and 5) job engagement. Questions for each issue were drawn from previously tested and validated item measures used in the 2015 survey and in earlier Plank Center leadership research. The survey was distributed online to all 31,352 public relations leaders and professionals contained within an extensive database, and 1,185 completed the survey. This response provides a 99% 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., Gallup's engagement research). Respondents shared their perceptions about items by 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).

### Demographics

Most participants were experienced, high-level leaders and managers. Three-quarters (74.9%) of the 1,185 respondents were the #1 (33.1%) or #2 (41.8%) communication professional in their organization; 60.3% had more than 20 years of experience; and 91.7% had 11 years of experience or more. In addition, 329 professionals (27.8%) were over the age of 55; 498 (42.0%) were between 46-55 years of age; 273 (23.0%) were between the ages of 36-45; and 85 (7.2%) were under age 36.

More women (631 or 53.3%) than men (554 or 46.7%) completed the survey. The majority of participants worked in public (453 or 38.2%) or private/state-owned (189 or 15.9%) companies, followed by professionals in nonprofits and government/educational/political organizations (357 or 30.1%), communication agencies (157 or 13.2%) and self-employed or others (29 or 2.5%).

Most participants (1,035 or 87.4%) were Caucasian; 55 (4.6%) were Black/African American; 39 (3.3%) were Latino Hispanic; 31 (2.6%) were Asian or Asian American; and 24 (2.1% were mixed race or other).

A little more than half (53.3%) of respondents indicated they belonged to one or more professional associations. Those mentioned most frequently were: PRSA (337), IABC (137), Arthur W. Page Society (99), PR Council (24), AMA (24), Council for Advancement & Support of Education (20), IPRA (16), ABC (16) and Communication Leadership Exchange (13). However, nearly half (46.7%) of those surveyed said they don't belong to any professional association.

## 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 organizational cultures within which they work. However, overall the scores for the five areas were a little lower in 2017, and specific grades for culture, job engagement and job satisfaction fell.

**Leadership Performance:** **A-/C+** (2015—A-/C+)

This is a split grade because leaders' and their employees' perceptions of performance differ sharply. Top leaders rated their own performance (6.14 /7.0 scale) about an "A-," while employees

rated their top leaders' performance (4.53) a "C+." Scores for leadership performance were slightly lower than in 2015 (6.31 vs.4.67), but the size of the gap is more or less the same. Leaders often rate their performance higher than their employees do, but the statistical difference here is vast.

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. Survey participants rated ethical orientation (5.55) and involvement in strategic decision-making (5.42) the highest; visioning (4.86) and team leadership capabilities (4.92) were rated lowest. Leaders gave themselves significantly higher scores than did their employees for all six dimensions.

Men ranked all six leader dimensions (5.31) significantly higher than women (4.97), who gave lower grades than in 2015 (5.12). Agency professionals ranked the six dimensions (5.34) highest of all organizational types, while those working in private companies rated their top leaders lowest on the dimensions (4.86).

"This gap doesn't necessarily mean leaders are deficient or ineffective," said co-investigator, Juan Meng, Ph.D., University of Georgia. "Employees may assign lower grades for many reasons: they might be upset about other issues in their lives, or unhappy with a recent assignment. But closing this perception gap is important because leaders influence all other areas in the study."

**Job Engagement: B-** (2015—B+)

Job engagement again received the highest mean score in the study (5.08 vs. 5.17), though the grade dropped from a "B+" two years ago. Much of the slippage was due to reduced engagement among female professionals.

Gallup's 12-item employee engagement survey (Gallup Q12) was used to assess work engagement among PR leaders and managers. Hundreds of organizations and more than 25 million employees have used the survey in the past two decades. Based on responses to the 12 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, 57.2% of respondents were engaged (vs. 59.7% in 2015); 35.9% were not engaged (vs 34.4%); and 6.8% were actively disengaged (vs. 6.0%). Based on Gallup data, and even with the slightly reduced percentages, these scores suggest that more PR leaders and managers may be engaged, and fewer actively disengaged, than leaders and managers in other professions, though the difference has diminished since 2015.

**Job Engagement of PR Professionals: 2017 vs. 2015**

Demographic	Engaged		Not Engaged		Actively Disengaged	
	2017	2015	2017	2015	2017	2015
Total respondents	57.2%	59.7%	35.9%	34.4%	6.8%	6.0%
Male professionals	62.1%	57.9%	32.5%	35.2%	5.4%	6.8%

Female professionals	52.9%	61.3%	39.0%	33.6%	8.1%	5.1%
Top leaders	71.7%	72.3%	24.5%	24.5%	3.8%	3.2%
Non-top leaders (all others)	50.1%	54.2%	41.6%	38.6%	8.3%	7.2%
Males (non-top leaders)	54.7%	52.7%	38.7%	39.6%	6.6%	7.6%
Females (non-top leaders)	46.4%	55.5%	43.9%	37.7%	9.7%	6.8%

Consistent with Gallup’s database, top leaders were more engaged (71.9%) than those at other levels (50.1%), and engagement was strongest among high-ranking, long-service PR professionals, and weakest among lower-level professionals with less than 11 years of service.

The decline in engagement in 2017 is largely tied to lower engagement levels among women. In 2015, more women (61.3%) were engaged than men (57.9%). However, in 2017 the opposite is true. More men (62.1%) were engaged than women (52.9%). In the non-top leader group, less than half of women were engaged (46.4%), and nearly one in ten (9.7%) was actively disengaged. Men were significantly more engaged on seven of the 12 items used in the assessment, for example: *my opinions count at work*, *my supervisor discusses my performance*, and *my supervisor encourages my professional development*.

Understanding leaders’ engagement is important because they strongly influence employees’ engagement, which in turn strongly affects employee trust and job satisfaction. As Gallup suggests in its comprehensive *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. a premium is placed on selecting the “right” individuals to lead, support, empower and engage others.

**Trust in the Organization: C+** (2015—C+)

The overall grade for trust in the organization (4.76) was a “C+,” the lowest grade among the five subject areas for the second time. Scores were lower at each level in the chain of command. Top leaders rated trust (5.32) significantly higher than professionals at other levels (4.48).

Six trust items were assessed, and participants gave highest marks to trusting their organization’s capabilities to accomplish its goals (5.07), and to feeling confident about their organization’s skills to compete successfully in the marketplace (4.90). Lower marks were given to trusting their organization to take the opinions of employees into account when making decisions (4.56), and being concerned about employees when important decisions are being made (4.33).

Female professionals (4.59 vs. 4.65 in 2015) continued to hold much less trust in their organizations than male professionals (4.95 vs. 4.81 in 2015). They were significantly less trusting of their organizations’ concerns about employees when important decisions are being made (4.19) and taking opinions of employees into account when making decisions (4.38).

Trust is crucial in building and sustaining relationships in our work and personal lives. Employee identification with their work teams and organizations is built around trust, which influences job satisfaction. Top leaders and front-line supervisors strongly influence trust through their communications and behaviors, which help shape the extent to which an organization’s culture is supportive, inclusive and open.

**Job Satisfaction: C+** (2015—B-)

Job satisfaction dropped from 4.94 in 2015 to 4.76. The percentage of PR leaders and professionals who were satisfied or very satisfied with their job fell from 66.7% to 61.9%; those dissatisfied or very dissatisfied rose from 22.1% to 24.1%; and those neither satisfied nor dissatisfied rose from 11.2% to 14.0%.

The biggest declines in job satisfaction were among top leaders and women. Scores for top leaders fell from 5.51 to 5.31, though they were still significantly more satisfied with their jobs than those at all other levels (4.49). Scores for females dropped from 4.94 to 4.64. Scores for men also declined, but more modestly (from 4.99 to 4.90). On a percentage basis, 65.9% of men were satisfied vs. 58.3% for women. Those working in nonprofits rated job satisfaction the highest (4.94); in 2015 they rated job satisfaction the lowest. Private companies rated job satisfaction the lowest (4.54) this year.

**Organizational Culture: C+** (2015—B-)

Overall, survey participants gave organizational culture (4.86 vs. 4.95 in 2015) a “C+” grade. Culture refers here to the internal environment and processes and structures that facilitate or impede communication practices. Item measures for culture included 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 was the CEO’s or top leader’s understanding and valuing of public relations (5.49); understanding and valuing of PR by other functional leaders was rated significantly lower (4.89 vs. 5.07 in 2015). Graded much lower were the extent to which the organization shared decision-making (4.16) among employees, and practiced two-way communication (4.67). The extent to which the organization values and practices diversity was rated 5.10. Shared decision-making and two-way communication were again the weakest cultural factors across all demographics.

Overall, top leaders rated cultural factors significantly higher (5.13) than professionals at lower levels (4.73), but top leaders rated cultural factors lower than they did in 2015 (5.36). Men rated culture more positively (5.0) than women (4.74), who rated all cultural elements significantly lower except for the valuation and understanding of PR by other functional leaders, which they rated more or less the same as men. Women also gave shared decision-making one of the lowest scores in the survey (3.98). Among organizational types, agency professionals rated cultural factors highest (5.33); private companies rated those lowest (4.59).

### Summary

Overall grades for the five areas issues for leaders remained passing grades. However, most mean scores for the 2017 report card were a bit lower than they were in 2015, and grades for three areas fell —organizational culture, job engagement and job satisfaction. In addition, three crucial gaps were revealed, and they must be reduced or closed to strengthen leadership, practice and outcomes for the profession and organizations. The three gaps are:

**1. The perceptions of top leaders and their employees.** Top leaders rate their performance, trust in the organization, work engagement, job satisfaction and organizational culture significantly higher than their employees. Things look different—and far better—at the top. Leaders may often rate their performance and some other factors higher than do followers, but the size of the gap is

Grand-Canyon sized. If leaders by definition have followers, then at what point do perception gaps adversely impact 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 team work, such as conflict management, active listening and change management. 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 are likely to build greater trust.

**2. Existing culture and a *culture for communication*.** Several issues—lack of two-way communication, limited shared power in decision-making, and concerns about diversity—point to 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) dialogue, discussion and learning; 3) the use of two-way and multiple channels; 4) a climate in which employees can speak up without fear of retribution; and 5) leaders who support and value public relations and internal communications. Organizational culture exerts a very strong influence on leadership performance and a strong influence on trust.

**3. Perceptions of women and men in the profession.** The gender gap deepened in the 2017 survey in every subject area. Women’s perceptions of shared power in decision making, two-way communication, and the valuing of their opinions differed significantly as reflected in trust in the organization, culture and engagement issues. 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 places greater emphasis on two-way communication.

Progress in diversity in many senses in public relations remains painfully slow. For women in the survey, it appears that being successful in the field is still challenging; the pay gap is real; the opportunity gap is real; and the *being-heard-and-respected-gap* is real. 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.

Further analysis of these gender gaps in hierarchical levels revealed that significant differences existed at all levels **except** the top-leader level, a group of 392 (F=189; M=203) survey participants. As indicated below, men’s mean scores were numerically a little higher than women’s scores at the top level, but ***no statistically significant differences*** existed between them.

**Mean Scores of Top Leaders’ Perceptions in the 2017 Survey**

Subject area	Women (n=189)	Men (n=203)
Top-leader performance (self-evaluation)	6.11	6.16
Trust in the organization	5.26	5.40
Job satisfaction	5.27	5.34
Quality of organizational culture	5.04	5.20
Work engagement	5.40	5.50

**Note:** Mean scores are on a 1 to 7 scale, ranging from “I don’t agree at all” (1) to “I agree to a very great extent” (7).

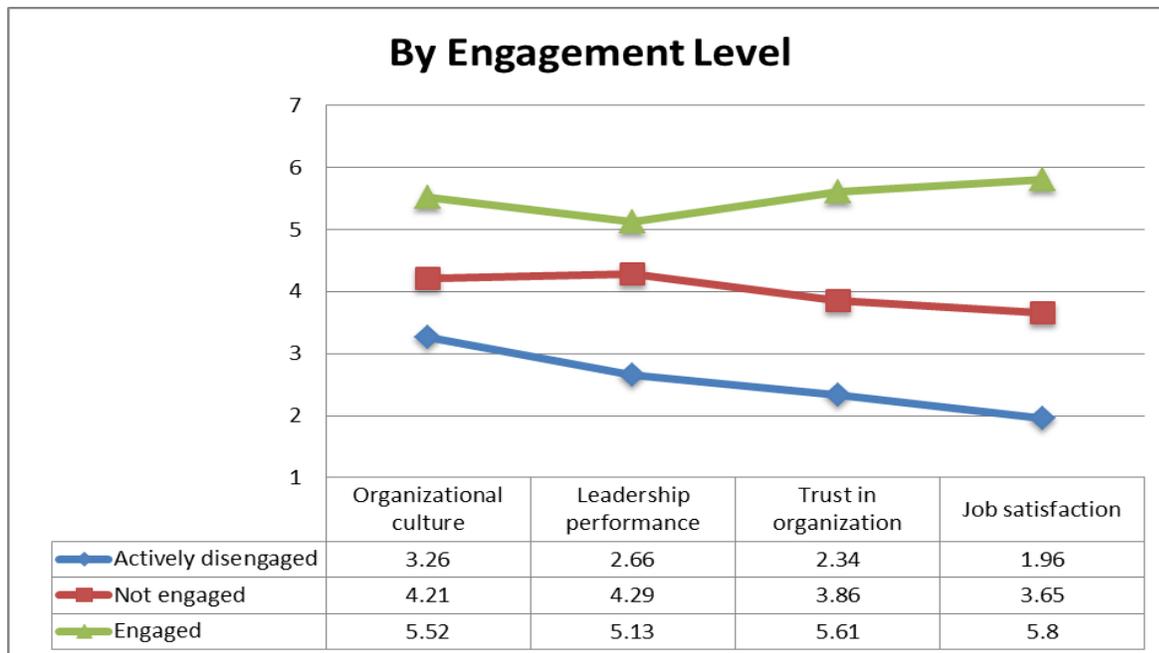
At every level below the top, however, the differences were sharp and significant. Why do women and men at the highest level share similar perceptions, while those at lower levels differ sharply? Do professionals who ascend to leadership positions suddenly alter their views of their workplace? Do women feel more empowered when they reach the top? Is the playing field more level at the top? Or is it just the norm that hierarchical positions reduce or magnify differences in perceptions?

“The purpose of this biennial report is to assess leadership in PR and identify enrichment opportunities,” said Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., co-investigator and research director of the Plank Center at the University of Alabama. “If we identify the gaps and work to close them, we strengthen our profession’s leadership—a crucial strategic asset. The 2017 Report Card underscores the continuing gaps and the urgency to act.”

### The Power of Engagement

The reduced levels of engagement among PR professionals in the 2017 study represent a final concern for several reasons. First, engagement affects 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 appears to be a key driver that strongly links to each of the other issues in the study. Figure 1 depicts how engaged employees hold significantly more positive perceptions of the other four subject areas in the study:

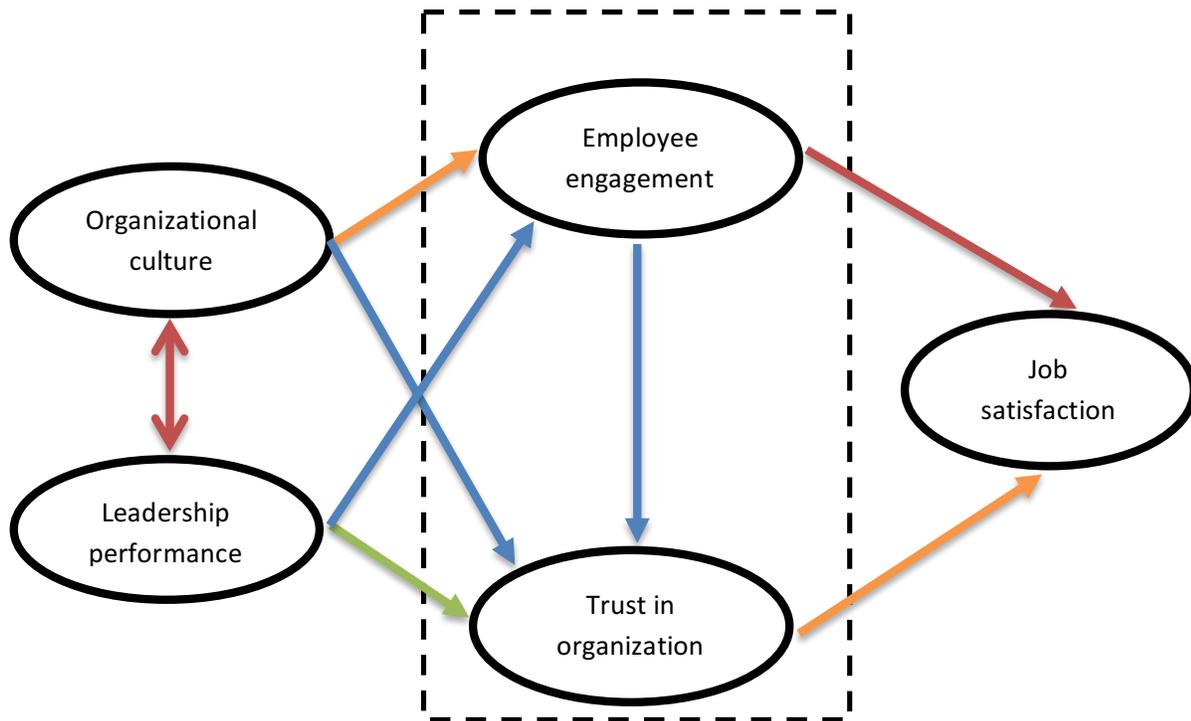


**Figure 1:** Relationships between engagement levels and the other subject areas — mean score comparisons.

Engaged PR professionals: 1) viewed their organization’s culture as more supportive, 2) rated leader performance higher, 3) placed greater trust in their organization and 4) expressed greater job satisfaction. All ratings are significantly higher than the other groups.

The study also found that engagement is strongly influenced by leadership and moderately influenced by culture. The predictive model below (Figure 2) indicates culture and leadership very strongly influence each other. In turn, culture strongly influences trust and moderately influences engagement. Leadership strongly influences engagement and has a small influence on trust. Engagement strongly influences trust, and very strongly influences job satisfaction. In this model, employee engagement appears to be both a key outcome and a powerful driver. Engaged employees are productive workers, as well as positive influencers and role models.

**Organizational culture and leadership performance  
predict job satisfaction—mediated by engagement and trust.**



**Figure 2:** Predictive model of the effects of the subject areas in the study.

Note: Chi-square = 13.28, *d.f.* = 2, *p* < .001, RMSEA = .069.

**Red line** indicates very strong and significant direct effects.  
**Blue line** indicates strong and significant direct effects.  
**Orange line** indicates moderate and significant direct effects.  
**Green line** indicates small but still significant direct effects.

The Plank Center and Heyman Associates will conduct the leadership survey again in 2019. If you're interested in a presentation and discussion of the *Report Card 2017* results in your organization, please contact Bruce Berger ([berger@apr.ua.edu](mailto:berger@apr.ua.edu)) or Bill Heyman ([bill@heymanassociates.com](mailto:bill@heymanassociates.com)).