



Working Together: What Frontline Staff Want You To Know About Safety, Engagement, and Resilience



THE
PROSPERITY
AGENDA

A STRATEGY BRIEF FOR EMPLOYERS

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Frontline work is often derogatorily reduced to “flipping burgers” and used as a cautionary tale of what happens when someone doesn’t succeed in their education or career. These biases obscure the customer service, interpersonal skills, and quick decision making that frontline staff bring to their work on a daily basis. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic frontline employees have demonstrated a keen ability to learn and adapt on the job. Their ability to solve problems, communicate, and work as a team despite a lack of training are the coveted soft skills needed to traverse the volatile nature of work during a global pandemic and a long economic recovery. Frontline workers are valuable and essential, not replaceable or sacrificial. It is time for employers to ensure that nearly half of U.S. workers don’t have to risk their lives to earn dangerously low wages.

The Coronavirus pandemic revealed that frontline workers are essential to our communities. As society and culture shifts, the outdated narrative that frontline jobs are “easy” and workers are “unskilled” must change. Referring to workers as “unskilled labor” creates a narrative bias that can cause employers to miss and undervalue the efforts of frontline workers. Even the terms “low-wage work” and “low-wage workers” reinforce the bias that frontline employees do not bring valuable skills to the job and that it is inevitable that these jobs pay low-wages. People don’t earn low wages solely based on their effort, they are paid low wages by employers who could be making a different choice.

There are more people working for low wages in our economy than you might expect. The U.S. workforce is only 122 million people aged 18-64. Nearly half of them, 53 million people, are paid low wages by their employers. A person working a \$7.25 minimum wage job would need to work nearly 24 hours a day for six days a week to earn a living wage salary.[1]

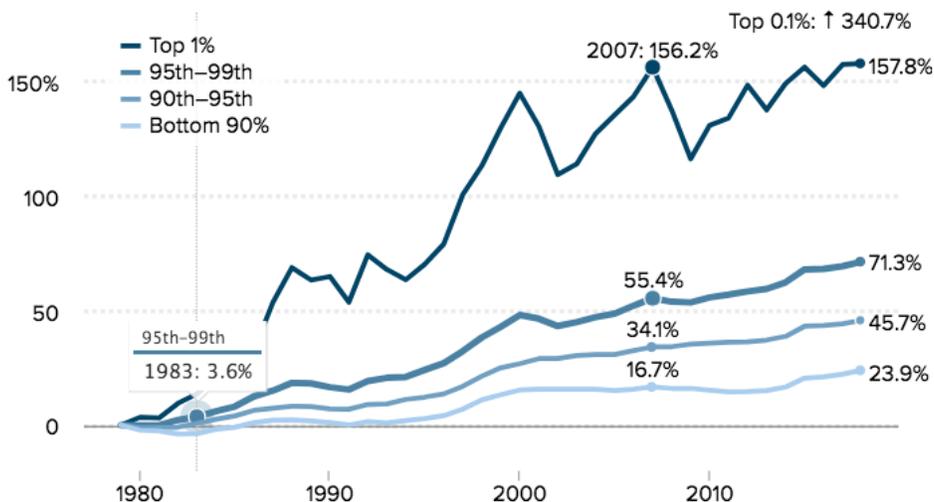
WORKERS PAID DANGEROUSLY LOW WAGES



Brookings Institute, *Meet the Low-Wage Workforce*, 2019. [2] [3]

The vast majority of workers, 90%, only received a 23.9% increase in wages, in the last three decades, while the top 1% of workers saw their wages grow by 157.8%. The top 0.1% saw their wages grow by 340.7% over the same time period. These systems-wide trends reveal the wage disparities that most workers experience in the U.S. economy.[4]

UNEQUAL WAGE GROWTH SINCE 1979



EPI analysis of Kopczuk, Saez, and Song (210, Table A3) and Social Security Administration wage statistics. [4]

In American culture, income is a primary lens for evaluating people's success. The higher a person's wage, the more intelligent and hard-working we assume they are. The lower the wage, the more incompetent and lazy someone seems.

Meritocracy is the belief that people succeed or fail as a result of their individual skills and ambitions rather than any systems of preference or privilege. Meritocracy assumes that every person faces the same hurdles and can access the same opportunities, ignoring the historical and contemporary realities of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, and their intersections. Believing that anyone can achieve greatness through hard work and perseverance alone implies that if someone is not successful, then it is their fault; they haven't worked hard enough, they lack ambition, or maybe they just aren't smart enough. A meritocracy worldview breaks down when extrapolated across the U.S. workforce.

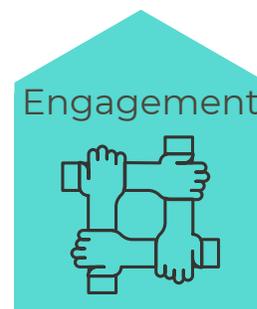
Black and Latinx women are overrepresented among workers paid low wages. 63% of all Black workers and 54% of all Latinx workers are paid low wages. Meanwhile, only 36% of White workers and 40% of Asian-American workers are paid the same low wages.[5] The stereotypes of people who are paid low wages are magnified by racial biases that attempt to discredit people of color as unskilled, unmotivated, and unintelligent. The combination of these biases cement the picture that frontline workers are paid what they deserve and are not worthy of retention or career development. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where Black, Latinx, and other people of color are paid less, accumulate less wealth, and are therefore less "successful." Disparaging and blaming poor workers of color for their low wages is a telltale sign of a segregated economy. A meritocracy worldview normalizes extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Employers can confront the damage of this worldview by addressing how we view and value frontline workers.



Three strategies to increase safety, reduce turnover, and contribute to a resilient economic recovery

Based on three years of extensive research and testing with over 200 frontline workers, managers, and leaders, The Prosperity Agenda offers three strategies for employers who want to increase safety, reduce turnover, and contribute to a resilient economic recovery.

1. Increase worker resilience through wages and benefits
2. Invest in safety through relationships, not just protocols
3. Engage employees through meaningful, not menial work



Increasing wages and benefits increases worker resilience and retention, developing relationships is an investment in safety, and meaningful work translates to employee engagement.



INCREASING WORKER RESILIENCE THROUGH WAGES AND BENEFITS

There are multiple ways to increase wages: directly increasing pay, providing career development, and offering promotion opportunities. To have healthy companies and communities, it is imperative that frontline employees are valued and compensated with living wages that reflect the skills they bring to work. Too often managers miss the creativity, decision-making, and judgement calls that frontline workers make on a daily basis. Frontline workers regularly demonstrate empathy, interpersonal skills, time tradeoffs, and quality control. In high-stakes fields like health care, childcare, and permanent supportive housing, staff de-escalate conflicts, practice trauma-informed care, and respond to physical and mental health crises. Investing in the wages and benefits of your employees is an investment in the health, development, and stability of your organization.

1. Offer professional development trainings.

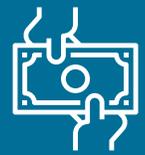
One of the best tactics for wage growth is to support employees in gaining new skills.[6] Employers can use experiential learning programs to recognize and apply the unique skills that employees already bring to their jobs and create opportunities for workers to learn from each other.

"Staff development goes in hand with retention and promotion.
A lot of people of color don't get that opportunity."

Trina Thompson, Director Of Property Management, Plymouth Housing

2. Promote employees from within the company.

Managers and leaders often struggle to identify and mentor employees who want to advance in their organizations. Managers can identify rising talent by implementing learning and development programs that encourage employees to use their best judgement to complete their work. When employees are promoted from within, they retain institutional wisdom and are more likely to engage and mentor staff in the roles they formerly had.



"We hire and promote based on potential; On what the employee brings to the table and how we can develop them into that role."

Andrea Carnes, Deputy Director, Plymouth Housing

3. Guarantee \$15 an hour or support advocacy groups working to increase the local and federal minimum wage.

In response to the pandemic and working with Color of Change, retail giant Target raised minimum wages to \$15 for all hourly workers, a significant milestone for a major national retailer.[7] When looking to increase wages at your organization, set a target date so you can plan for the wage increase. If it is not possible to immediately raise wages, support city, state, or federal advocacy efforts to raise the minimum wage on a graduated timeline.

4. Evaluate and create a cap on your pay ratio.

According to the AFL-CIO's Executive Paywatch Project the average ratio between executives and frontline staff was 246:1.[8] Evaluate your own pay ratio and create a focused initiative to implement a ratio cap. B Corporations recommend a pay ratio cap between 5:1 and 10:1 that can free up budget to pay frontline workers for the true value they bring to your organization.[9]

5. Work with HR to update your employee compensation package.

Ask for feedback about how well your organization's benefits are meeting the needs and desires of your staff. Consider forming an employee committee to evaluate non-traditional benefits such as job sharing, and flexible work hours. Consider eliminating dynamic scheduling that inhibits work life balance and planning for childcare.

Paying people what they deserve creates financial resilience for workers and for communities. You are an influential stakeholder who can turn the tide on income inequality in the United States.





INVEST IN SAFETY THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS, NOT JUST PROTOCOLS

The Coronavirus pandemic revealed how deeply intertwined our safety and health are with everyone in our communities and workplaces. In many high-stakes industries like construction, health care, childcare, and manufacturing, safety planning is at the core of their business. During the pandemic, almost all businesses have hundreds or thousands of frontline employees working in dangerous environments every day. HR Managers and Operations Directors in industries that only needed basic safety precautions before the pandemic, now need robust policies and procedures to keep employees safe and healthy. The days of relying solely on safety protocols and one-time safety trainings are over. Without continuous learning, practice, teamwork, and input from frontline staff responsible for implementing safety precautions, even the best safety training and guidelines, will only yield temporary results.

“Our staffs' characteristics set us up really well to handle the pandemic. Staff have banded together and risen to the occasion to provide extraordinary services to our clients.”

Monica Fisk, Director of Administration and Planning, DESC

Many organizational leaders are tempted to use a *command and control* approach to safety by relying on the creation and enforcement of policies and procedures. While an important contribution, policy and procedures alone do not hold the promise of repeatable, ongoing safety for a simple reason: they miss factoring in frontline workers' humanity. Workers are capable people who can exercise their own judgement to do their jobs. Workers are people who care for their friends at work and families at home. Workers are people who have a lot of insight into the day to day experience of how the business runs. Unfortunately, many organizational leaders forget to leverage their employees' talents, wisdom, and experiences.



"We formed a COVID working group. Frontline staff weren't left out of decisions. We over communicated. We are in this together. We are going through this as a family and as a community."

Trina Thompson, Director of Property Management, Plymouth Housing

Frontline staff often lament that leadership doesn't listen or trust their ability to effectively do their job. When frontline workers have the opportunity to engage with leadership, to provide feedback and understand the intention behind policies, they are more willing to work together. In contrast, when policies and procedures are not feasible, frontline staff have to choose between disregarding the policy or doing their job effectively. We explore an in-depth example of when this dynamic fails in the case study of the O'Charley's restaurant chain and when these relationships succeed in the case study of Plymouth Housing and DESC. When frontline workers are given the opportunity to contribute or provide feedback, policies are effective and feasible, achieving the standardization and compliance that employers seek and creating a work environment where everyone can thrive.

When looking to implement new policies and protocols, facilitate a process that contributes to safety by:

1. Gathering and incorporating feedback early and often
2. Ensuring that the people responsible for implementing the protocols feel like their opinions were taken into consideration
3. Researching the context, environments, and relationships the protocol will impact
4. Creating a process for ongoing feedback and iteration

Safety



O'CHARLEY'S RESTAURANTS

PROTOCOLS ALONE DIDN'T DELIVER SAFETY

Business leaders cannot afford to miss opportunities to protect the safety of workers and keep their doors open to customers. Consider the example of the O'Charley's restaurant chain. In early May 2020, their 200 restaurants reopened to the public during the Coronavirus pandemic. At a teleconference days before re-opening, leaders from corporate headquarters read a highly-detailed eight-page document of new safety protocols restaurant staff were required to follow. Managers on the call reported they were not given an opportunity to ask questions on the phone and were instead told to email their questions. Frontline staff were instructed to watch a 10-minute safety video that one employee recalls fellow staff watching without volume and few staff remembering the content.

Working with a skeleton crew due to reduced occupancy requirements, servers were asked to follow policies that they believed to be "impractical," "not possible" and "exhausting." For example, one policy required servers to replace their gloves every time they had to go to the kitchen or serve another table. In practice, a server admitted, "I don't think anybody's been thinking about it because we're so overwhelmed with what we have to do and the amount of work we have to put in making the restaurant run." [10] In late May 2020 and June 2020, two different O'Charley's locations in South Carolina were forced to close after workers contracted COVID-19. [11] [12]



Meaning

ENGAGE EMPLOYEES THROUGH MEANINGFUL, NOT MENIAL WORK

Meaningful work is the feeling that you are contributing to others by bringing your unique skills and talents to work. People's skills and talents come from a myriad of places including lived or living experience, education, or past work experiences. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy visited NASA and noticed a janitor carrying a broom. He introduced himself and asked the janitor, "What is your job? The janitor replied, "I'm helping put a man on the moon." [13] This simple story illustrates that employees thrive when they feel like they are making a meaningful contribution, regardless of their position. Organizations can foster a culture of meaningful work by encouraging and appreciating employees' capabilities and contributions.

1. Encourage and appreciate employee initiative.

Employees want the opportunity to solve problems and go the extra mile for their customers or colleagues. When employees who take initiative are ignored or punished, employees are unlikely to continue to use their discretionary effort. This limits employee's effectiveness and engagement. Since it's not feasible to have a protocol for every possible scenario, managers should focus on cultivating employees' ability to use their best judgement and take discretionary action in line with the organization's mission. When employees hone their ability to make great decisions, managers can shift their focus from putting out fires, to working with their staff to execute the organization's mission and strategy.

"Managers spend a lot of one-on-one time to empower staff to develop their judgement and discuss how to handle new situations that come up."

Yi Zhao, Chief Asset Management Officer, Plymouth Housing



Meaning

2. Promote transparency through communication.

Employees trust their employers when they receive communication or information about the organization that is honest and transparent. Employees want a shared understanding of why and how decisions are made. By communicating proactively and openly, you increase opportunities for employees to contribute to your organization's success, as well as address potential challenges.

"Leadership called every, single shift and we made in-person visits to our buildings. We had excessive transparency, high levels of communication, and an open door."

Andrea Carnes, Deputy Director, Plymouth Housing

3. Provide professional and career development.

Investing in employees' skills supports organizational stability and growth. Training programs improve job performance, increase teamwork, and build an employee's resume. Encouraging employees to make upwards or lateral movement within the organization can prevent employees from leaving to pursue a promotion with a competing organization. Programs like internal job shadowing and career mentoring support employees to identify job pathways inside the organization. Employees with a strong foundation of training are well-positioned to contribute in their current roles, be promoted within the organization, or advance in their careers. Leaders who provide professional training and career development opportunities, demonstrate their value and care for employees and gain their loyalty.

"We prioritize workers' experience to create pathways to supervisory positions. We removed degree requirements for some roles and we value lateral transfers."

Monica Fisk, Director of Administration and Planning, DESC



Meaning

4. Earn the trust of frontline workers.

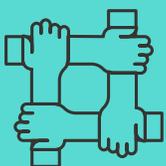
Division between frontline staff and senior leadership within an organization is extremely common. This divide can cause resentment, miscommunication, separation, and a sense of hostility in the workplace. According to employees, the most common reason for quitting their jobs is due to an unsupportive company culture. They don't quit because of their job responsibilities, they quit because their bosses or their coworkers become too challenging to work with. Cultivating a culture where there is shared alignment, vision, and meaningful relationships is key to earning the trust of frontline workers.

If people are leaving your organization in rapid succession, you may have a problem with cultivating meaningful work. Attrition and turnover are expensive problems to have. It costs businesses \$3,328 dollars to replace each \$10/hour retail employee and \$8,000 to replace a \$40,000 salaried manager.[14] Cultivating an environment of meaningful work is an investment that will save your organization money and time.

Staff from Plymouth Housing in Seattle, WA



Engagement





AMPLIFYING THE EXPERTISE OF FRONTLINE WORKERS

Plymouth Housing and Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC) are two permanent supportive housing providers in Seattle, Washington. Both organizations practice *Housing First*, a harm-reduction model that offers housing to formerly homeless people, and then provides additional services like case management, substance use disorder treatment, and mental health care. Combined, Plymouth Housing and DESC employ over 1,250 frontline staff and are continuing to grow.

For frontline workers, no two days are ever the same. Their relationships with residents and colleagues are critical for keeping everyone safe and healthy. Staff take pride in developing genuine and meaningful relationships with residents that foster community and care. From talking about someone's day to discussing family issues, frontline staff provide vital social connections. Getting to know residents also helps staff notice when a resident's actions are different from their baseline behaviors. This early detection means they can alert other staff and call in support from case managers. In situations when tensions rise, their relationships with residents help them de-escalate conflict or explain why they need to enforce a housing policy.



Staff work together during events that can be triggering to residents such as home inspections or when a fellow resident passes away. Frontline staffs' dedication to working and communicating as a team helps keep everyone stay safe and creates a caring community.

Staff from Plymouth Housing in Seattle, WA

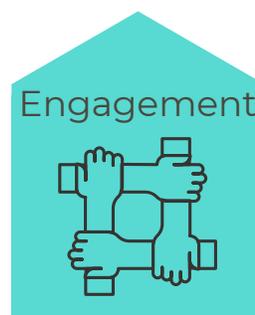


DESC and Plymouth Housing are both growing and hiring rapidly, creating teams with newer and newer staff. There are no employee handbooks or trainings that could possibly outline every scenario frontline staff at DESC or Plymouth Housing might face. Staff must rely on their relationships with their colleagues to quickly onboard them to what works and what doesn't. Hiring growth, regular turnover, and internal promotions mean frontline staff are frequently re-creating and re-forming teams, a common dynamic among organizations with numerous frontline staff. It is difficult for frontline staff to learn on the job when almost everyone on the team is new.

"Retaining our staff is really important. Staff are very committed to our tenants, our community, and our organization. In the midst of COVID, tenants come home and see a familiar face."

Trina Thompson, Director of Property Management, Plymouth Housing.

Both organizations make a concerted effort to value the lived experiences of their employees, hiring people who have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. "When people have lived experience, you can't replicate or teach it. They stay committed, have compassion and understand the big picture" says Andrea Carnes, Deputy Director of Plymouth Housing. Many employees interviewed by The Prosperity Agenda have worked at Plymouth Housing or DESC for more than five or ten years. This is unusual for the high-stakes and fast-paced work of permanent supportive housing. Both organizations still experience turnover, as some employees quickly realize the difficulty of the job. As one manager at DESC shared, "The work shouldn't be built for burnout. Anyone who wants to work here is someone that we want to hold on to." Because employees overwhelmingly feel their work is meaningful and their personal skill sets are valued by the organization, DESC and Plymouth Housing are successful in retaining and developing frontline employees.





To offer more pathways for employees to earn more and advance in their career, DESC removed the requirement that staff must have bachelor's degrees for case management positions. DESC recognized that their staff's lived experience was a more reliable indicator of their success in the role. This created additional pathways for frontline staff to advance within the organization. To recognize the skills and value that frontline employees bring to their roles both organizations pay at least \$2 more than the Seattle city minimum wage of \$15/hour, offer ongoing professional development, and additional paid time off.

Based on the insights we learned from frontline staff and interest from leadership to retain dedicated employees, The Prosperity Agenda is working with both organizations to continue building ongoing safety through teamwork and relationship building. By creating space for experiential learning, frontline staff share how they brightened someone's day, had their co-workers' back, or made a split-second judgement call that fulfilled their organization's mission and was all in a day's work. Plymouth Housing and DESC both demonstrate their commitment and value of frontline workers by paying more than minimum wage, providing opportunities for career advancement, and a meaningful mission employees can contribute to.



What will you do to amplify the expertise of frontline workers to increase safety and contribute to a resilient economic recovery?

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Cover Image: Physical distancing. Image created by Samuel Rodriguez. Submitted for United Nations Global Call Out To Creatives - help stop the spread of COVID-19.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Thank you to our project partners: Plymouth Housing, and Downtown Emergency Service Center, and Downtown Seattle Association. Their commitment to quality jobs, worker voice, and collective resilience guided this research and strategy design. Additional thanks to JPMorgan Chase & Co. and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for their generous support of this project. For more information, visit us at www.theprosperityagenda.org.

