



The Unlock:

How Workplace Relationships Boost Resilience Through Uncertainty

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Introduction

As societal uncertainty intensifies, the emotional climate of the U.S. workforce is once again showing significant signs of strain. In our February Pulse of the U.S. Workforce (hereafter referred to as “Pulse”), negative emotions like sadness, fear, and worry reached levels not seen since March 2022, a period marked by the return to in-person work, the “Great Resignation”, the war in Ukraine, and surging inflation.

Today, emotional well-being is being shaped by similarly powerful forces: heightened geopolitical tensions, economic instability, market volatility, policy shifts, political polarization, and a growing climate of disinformation. Yet, a more nuanced - and optimistic - picture emerges when we zoom in on the workplace. Despite the turbulence outside, U.S. workers are showing surprising emotional resilience and satisfaction on the job. According to the Pulse, seventy-four percent of employees report being happy in their current roles (a figure that has remained remarkably stable over the past five months). Similarly, two-thirds of the workforce say they often or always feel engaged at work.

One reason for this stability may be that, compared to the volatility of the external environment, the workplace offers a more controlled and predictable experience, particularly through strong workplace relationships, which serve as a steady source of support amid broader uncertainty. While political jousting and economic unease dominate the societal landscape, inside the workplace, U.S. workers report a sense of connection and support. Many feel confident that their managers genuinely care about them, trust that their colleagues have their backs, and count their coworkers as friends. Though rarely making headlines, these relationships play a vital role in buffering the emotional toll of external stressors, offering a sense of stability, belonging, and emotional safety when needed. This brief focuses on Pulse statistics and research that illuminate the importance of workplace relationships, and the implications for leaders who are looking to foster purpose and connected community inside their organization, even when the outside world feels anything but stable.

Emotional Well-Being in Contrast: Societal Strain vs. Workplace Stability

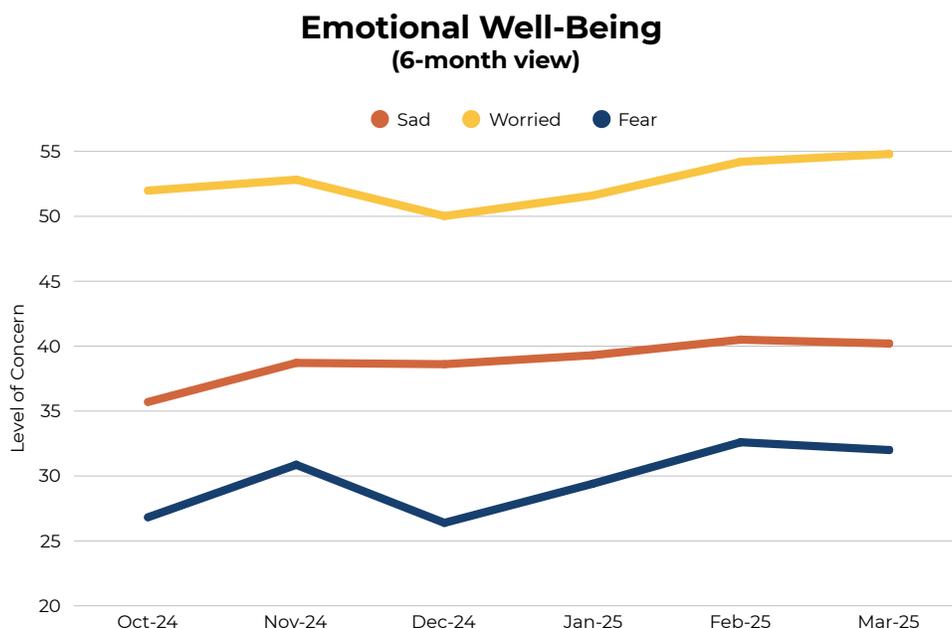
Across the U.S., emotional well-being has taken a hit:

- Sadness has increased by 120 basis points (bps) compared to last month.
- Fear has seen a sharp rise of 320 bps, signaling heightened anxiety among the broader population.
- Worry is up by 260 bps, reflecting growing concern amid global and economic instability.
- On the flip side, positive emotions are in decline:
 - Happiness has dropped by 320 bps.
 - Excitement has decreased by 200 bps.

Despite the societal backdrop, emotional well-being **inside the workplace** remains relatively strong:

- 74% of U.S. workers say they are happy in their current job. This figure that has held steady for the last five months.
- 66% of workers report feeling always or often engaged at work, a metric that has remained consistent over recent months.

What might be fueling this workplace resilience in the face of broader societal strain? One answer lies in the human connections forged at work. While the world outside feels increasingly unpredictable, many employees are finding stability, support, and belonging within their teams. Strong relationships, with managers who care, colleagues who offer support, and coworkers who become friends are likely playing a key role in sustaining emotional well-being on the job. The data reveals just how powerful these workplace relationships can be.



The Power of Managerial Care: A Balm Against Broader Stressors

One workplace relationship that contributes positively to employees' emotional wellness is the one between employees and their managers. According to the Pulse, a striking 70% of U.S. workers say that their manager cares about them as people - an increase from previous months and a powerful signal of the stabilizing role leadership can play amid external chaos.

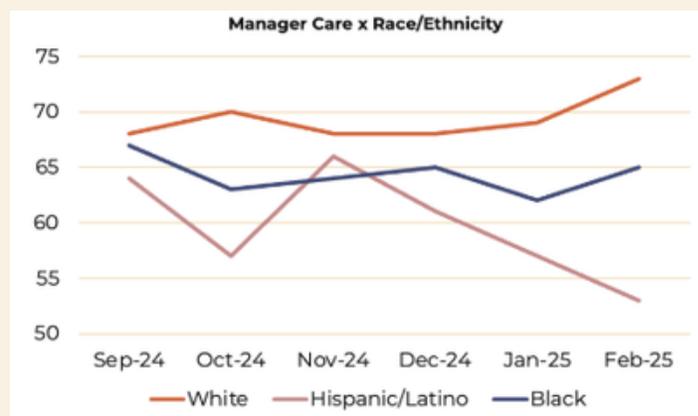
Research from The Workforce Institute at UKG has found that managers have a greater impact on our mental health than doctors and therapists, equal to that of spouses and partners. These statistics demonstrate the incredible influence that leaders can have on their employees, for better and for worse.

When the world outside is less predictable, the care and support offered by a manager can ground employees in a sense of belonging and safety. As the Well-Being At Work report from Johns Hopkins found, "when employees have support from their manager regarding their unique personal situation, priorities, goals, and interests, they are more likely to have positive engagement and commitment to the employer." High levels of managerial care, therefore, may partially account for high reported levels of engagement.

On the other hand, as the Journal of Health Psychology Research notes, "Toxic leadership is one of the potential antecedents of increased turnover intention, employee dissatisfaction, lack of commitment, and psychological stresses such as anxiety, burnout, depression, disengagement, low self-esteem, emotional exhaustion, and employee silence." This underscores the dual role managers play: as protectors of emotional well-being when relationships are strong, and as risk factors when leadership is careless, inconsistent, or harmful.

At the moment, U.S. workers seem to be feeling largely supported and cared for by their managers, which may account for higher scores of happiness within the workforce.

Despite the encouraging headline statistic, not all employees feel equally cared for. Hispanic/Latino and Black workers, as well as younger employees and those with less formal education, are less likely to report feeling valued by their managers. These disparities point to an important leadership imperative: while strong managerial relationships are a key driver of workplace well-being, they must be cultivated equitably to truly sustain engagement and emotional health across the organization.



Recommendations for Cultivating Managerial Care

1. Start with Equity

Look beneath the surface. Wherever you can, disaggregate your data by race, age, caregiving status, and income. Patterns of disengagement or burnout don't affect everyone equally and you can't solve what you don't see. Once you identify your unique gaps, you can equip managers with skills to address the needs of different employees, especially in the day-to-day interactions that make or break workplace relationships.

**The Pulse of the U.S. Workforce offers a benchmark opportunity to compare the data of your workforce against that of the national data sample with a breakdown by demographic variables. Contact idealis. for details.*

2. Be clear and real at the same time

People don't seek perfection from their managers. They seek clarity, consistency, and a sense that their work matters (and they matter). When leaders are direct and caring, people know where they stand and that they're valued for their contributions.

3. Make relationship building part of the job

Trust isn't built in performance reviews—it's built in routine check-ins, quick chats or direct messages, and small moments of follow-through (Ex. "I remembered you were working on the web design update - how is it going?"). Train and expect managers to treat connection with their people as core to their role, rather than leaving it up to chance or leadership style differences.

4. Notice the signals

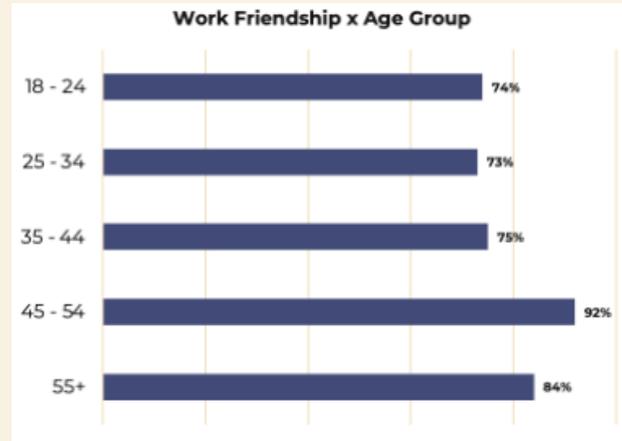
When someone goes quiet, pulls back, or seems overwhelmed—don't wait. Help managers get comfortable recognizing those signs early and responding with empathy. People appreciate when a manager notices small things that demonstrate "mattering" and when they check in without judgment or an agenda (Ex. "I noticed you have seemed quieter the past few meetings. How are you feeling about things right now?")

The Role of Friendship: Social Bonds That Strengthen the Workforce

This month, workplace friendship reached an all-time high. Four out of five U.S. workers currently say they have someone at work they consider a friend. Among workers aged 45–54, that number climbs even higher: 92% report having a friend at work. This is compared to just 73% among those aged 25–34. This may be due to the fact that more years in the workforce have allowed them to build deeper networks and relationships, that they are able to connect over shared life experiences (child raising, elder care, etc), and/or because they may hold similar generational views on the workplace as a center for social connection.

The research suggests that the presence of genuine friendships at work is likely doing more to stabilize workforce well-being than we typically recognize. The Pulse data demonstrates that individuals with a friend at work are 2 times as likely as those without a friend to be engaged with their work. This positive relationship is backed up by outside research, which has found that workplace friendships have a positive effect on how employees feel about their occupations (Austin et al., 2009). Other research has found that interpersonal ties in the workplace can lead to a sense of vitality and joy (Demir et al., 2013).

According to research from KPMG released in 2024, fostering workplace friendships is not only linked to job satisfaction. It is also critical for mental well-being and job satisfaction, particularly in environments where human interaction may be more limited to screens and chat threads.



KPMG's Friends at Work Survey found that most professionals believe that having friendships at work boosts their engagement (83%), increases their job satisfaction (81%), and strengthens their sense of connection to their workplace (80%), with hybrid workers placing the highest value on workplace friendships. In today's increasingly digital and dispersed work environments, the importance of those social bonds is growing. In 2022, Gallup research found that having a best friend at work grew in significance since the onset of the pandemic, especially with the increased prevalence of hybrid work arrangements. We continue to see this trend today. The rise in workplace friendships right now may be a product of shared experiences through challenging times and perhaps a growing recognition among employees of the value of meaningful social connection. In a time when the world outside feels fractured, these bonds offer a source of stability, connection and joy that sustains teams from the inside out.

Supporting Genuine Workplace Friendships

1. Make Room for It

Friendships rarely take flight from back-to-back virtual meetings. Build in breathing room for coffee chats, team rituals, or off-topic threads in your team chat function. People need space and time to connect with other commonalities rather than just share work assignments.

2. Try Not to Treat Social Connection as a Distraction

The data indicates that social connection is fuel, not just fluff, in between busy priorities. People feel seen when they are able to form bonds and build community. Offering flexible ways for different teams to take ownership of finding what works for them will drive employees to show up and want to engage more authentically.

3. Notice the Outliers

Encourage managers to observe those who may seem more isolated or disconnected. Get creative in finding ways to invite them in or to ask other team members to include others with intention. Feeling part of a group is not always automatic and requires an intentional nudge.

4. Lean in when Dispersed and Diverse

Distributed teams need extra glue in the form of chat channels for building personal bonds and shared culture, 1-1 connects deliberately across work functions, etc. What matters most is not the scale or frequency, but the consistency—and that these actions genuinely reflect the team's shared values and interests.

Peer Support as a Foundation: How Colleague Relationships Fortify Well-Being

In addition to friendships, support from coworkers with one's work responsibilities appears to be strengthening across the workforce. According to the Pulse, 75% of employees say that they feel supported by their colleagues. This is a notable and steady increase since July of last year.

"Instrumental" or tactical support is often overlooked in employee engagement metrics. This is defined as "tangible support that one co-worker provides to another that is intended to help solve tactical problems (Ayman, R., & Antani, A. (2008). This might look like a more tech-savvy peer offering to teach you a shortcut in Excel, covering a colleague's meeting because they fell ill and need to go home, or letting your peer know that you love copy editing and are happy to review their writing given an upcoming deadline or critical deliverable.

When done from a place of honest support and care, this tactical support offers an immediate outsized impact on team members and shapes emotional well-being at work in a way that is typically underrecognized. Researchers at Michigan State University found that coworker support was consistently associated with more positive work environments, fewer conflicts between work and family roles, and higher job satisfaction (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

In practical terms, collegial support translates into real organizational outcomes. Teams that support one another tend to communicate more openly, resolve conflict more constructively, and show greater resilience in the face of change. From a leadership perspective, fostering a culture of peer support is not just a matter of morale, it is also a matter of sustainable performance and emotional endurance.

March Pulse Brief: The Way We Work

When coworkers have each other's backs, they want to be together. In our October 2024 Pulse Quarterly report, we reported:

76% of employees who say colleagues help them with their responsibilities also prefer working **in person**.

But when that support is missing?

They're far more likely to prefer **remote work** (35% vs. 24%).

Remote workers are also 15 percentage points less likely to feel supported by their peers compared to those who work in person.

This isn't just about desks and dress codes, it is about creating conditions in which people feel part of a team, or on their own.

Workplace friendships and peer support are hidden drivers in the return-to-office conversation and it shapes how people show up and if they want to show up.

Practical Implications: How Does Your Organization Measure Up?

The data is clear: emotional resilience in today's workplace is being bolstered by human connection. Leaders play a critical role in nurturing and sustaining that resilience, especially in a broader environment marked by instability, stress, and disconnection.

Here are a few key questions to help you quickly assess whether your organization is truly supporting emotional well-being and strong human connection:

Managerial Equity

Do your employee surveys reveal meaningful differences by race, age, education, or caregiving status in how people experience managerial care or advocacy?

If so, how often are you reviewing that data, and what actions are you taking to tailor support across different groups?

Network Strength

Can you identify teams or individuals who may be more or less connected—those with fewer peer ties or cross-functional relationships?

Understanding where connection is weak helps you strengthen it with intention.

Retention Signals

Are your exit interviews or turnover models capturing the role that friendships and workplace connection play in why people stay or leave?

If they are, how are you using that insight to boost engagement and retention?

Burnout Flags

Are your check-ins with team members linking burnout to peer-to-peer support—or the lack of it? This matters most for new hires, where early gaps in connection can lead to quick turnover or disconnection that's hard to undo later.

Cultural Accountability

Are you gathering 360° feedback to shape how managers show care and build trust? Your manager assessments should include these as part of, not separate from, performance metrics.

If you're uncertain about these questions or want deeper insights, **contact us.** idealis. can **benchmark your organization's emotional well-being and relationship metrics** against national or industry-specific standards through our **Pulse of the U.S. Workforce survey.** We also provide targeted **advisory solutions** to help you pinpoint and address the specific "hotspots" impacting employee resilience, connection, and performance.

“Workplace connections serve as a buffer for the societal mayhem that we experience. People hold onto each other.”

Conclusion: Human Connection is a Strategic Edge

At a time when external stressors continue to intensify, internal relationships that are anchored by good leadership, meaningful friendships, and supportive peer networks emerge as powerful protective factors. The Pulse data reinforces that these connections are not just work perks, but strategic imperatives closely tied to retention, innovation, and organizational resilience. Leaders and companies who actively measure and intentionally strengthen these human connections position their organizations to successfully navigate uncertainty and thrive.

For ongoing insights and benchmark data on workforce well-being, subscribe to [The Pulse of the U.S. Workforce](#).

About the Pulse of the US Workforce

At idealis, we know that employee experience is closely tied to business outcomes. Yet, while financial metrics are often tracked rigorously, the workplace experience is less often measured with the same precision. Our Pulse of the U.S. Workforce, in partnership with Civic Science, captures real-time insights from over 3,000 U.S. workers each month. This data gives leaders a reliable and actionable view into how their employees feel, empowering them to make informed decisions that foster engagement and growth. To explore the insights and opportunities the Pulse can provide, visit our [Pulse website](#).

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About the Authors

Dr. Sumona De Graaf

An organizational psychologist specializing in motivation and what drives people. She has worked with founder-led businesses, family offices, venture capital and private equity companies, and boards and management teams across the public and private sector. Her work across clients has one commonality:

Sumona is called upon by Boards and C-level executives to help them navigate their most challenging human issues. As a social scientist, she uses data to draw insights, and as a career practitioner, guides her clients to redesign habits, processes and practices to create lasting impact.

Sumona is the founder and CEO of idealis. She spends her time helping clients navigate their most pressing leadership challenges, amplifying the stories of human-centered leaders, and most importantly, creating the conditions for her team of exceptional humans to thrive.

Dr. Abbey Salvas

An industrial-organizational psychologist who has been driven throughout their educational and professional career by the mission of making workplaces better for everyone.

At idealis, Abbey serves as a research lead and data expert, providing analytical support to the team to help answer our clients' most nuanced and challenging questions using best-in-class data tools and solutions. They apply human insight to hard data, answering the critical question of how to create human-centered environments that benefit everyone.

Allison Williams

An accomplished senior leader in higher education with 20+ years of strategic leadership and management responsibilities, Allison has implemented cutting edge individual and organizational leadership development initiatives with boards, executive leaders and complex organizations. She has built dynamic tools designed to ignite the leadership potential of individuals and teams to drive positive change at every level. She also teaches organizational leadership development at the graduate level and is a certified facilitator and trainer through the International Institute of Restorative Practices.

At idealis, Allison serves as our Chief Learning Officer and is guiding our growing higher education practice focused on developing current and future leaders of our world. With a deep passion for guiding others to repair culture, align vision and values, and bring forth the best in people, she couples theory and practice to offer new ways of thinking about today's most complex leadership challenges.



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