

Built to Belong:

5 Principles for Empathic Employee Relationships

No modern organisation grows on processes alone. Culture, resilience, creativity, they all depend on the strength of the relationship between employer and employee. But across Europe, that relationship is under strain. **Europe has the lowest employee engagement in the world:** only **13%** of employees feel engaged, while **73%** are not engaged and **15%** actively disengaged (Gallup, 2025). It's a clear signal that people aren't lacking skills, they're lacking empathic connection.

Employees don't stay for salaries or perks. They stay where they feel safe, heard, valued, supported, and growing. At OVAL, we see empathy not as something soft, but as something structural, a system that makes trust, performance and belonging possible.

These five principles show how to build B2E relationships that last.

Principle 1:

Start with psychological safety & real trust

Principle 2:

Lead with listening, not just communication

Principle 3:

Turn strategy into something employees can experience

Principle 4:

Make recognition and appreciation visible

Principle 5:

Connect growth to real support

Principle 1:

Start with psychological safety & real trust

Before people do their best work, they need to feel safe enough to be honest. Psychological safety grows through clear expectations, being able to speak up without consequences, and consistent leadership behaviour. When these conditions are present, teams raise concerns earlier, solve problems faster and take responsibility without fear. Empathic leadership isn't a feeling; it's a system that removes uncertainty and reinforces trust.

- Only **53%** of European employees say they work in a 'psychologically healthy' environment (Great Place to Work, 2025).
- **87%** of employees say empathetic leadership increases respect and trust between leaders and teams. (EY, 2023).

Like we did for Vopak

To strengthen safety and trust across global leadership, we staged real business dilemmas as live theatre scenes. By letting leaders observe their own dynamics from the outside, we created space for honest reflection and open dialogue. That momentum shaped the future behaviours they committed to together.



Principle 2:

Lead with listening, not just communication

Most organizations communicate a lot, but listen very little. Empathy turns communication into conversation. When leaders actively listen, employees contribute more ideas, raise concerns earlier, and feel respected. This isn't soft behaviour; it's an innovation driver.

- **85%** of global CEOs now rate deep listening and human leadership skills as the most valuable for the decade ahead (PwC, 2025).
- **86%** of employees say mutual empathy between leaders and workers increases idea sharing (EY, 2023).

Like we did for Fundis

To develop a campaign with employees rather than for them, we brought care professionals together in structured panels to share real, day-to-day insights. Their perspectives became the foundation of the *Zorg voor Morgen* (care for tomorrow) campaign.



Principle 3:

Turn strategy into something employees can experience

Belonging grows when employees see themselves in the organisation's strategy. People commit when they understand where the company is going and feel invited to help shape it. Empathy turns strategy into something shared, through moments where employees feel included, recognised and part of what's being built.

- Only **23%** of employees strongly feel connected to their organisation's purpose (McKinsey, 2023).
- **70%** of employees say they want more involvement in shaping the future of the organisation (Deloitte, 2024).

Like we did for bol

We brought 3,000 employees together for a live Strategy Day that made bol's new strategic direction tangible and shared. By turning the "strategic house" into an experience literally built with their input, employees gained clarity on where the company is going and their role in it, reflected in a **+34% rise in strategic understanding** and a **+26% rise in feeling empowered to contribute**.



Principle 4:

Make recognition and appreciation visible

People commit where their contribution is truly seen. Recognition is a performance system: it reinforces fairness, strengthens trust, and accelerates motivation. Empathy makes appreciation specific and credible, turning everyday effort into visible impact.

- **Only 23%** of employees strongly agree they get the right amount of recognition (Gallup, 2024).
- Employees who receive high-quality recognition are **44%** more likely to be thriving and **45%** less likely to quit (Gallup, 2024).

Like we did for Randstad

To make recognition truly visible across a global workforce, we built the “Above & Beyond” celebration of and for 34,000 employees, combining live storytelling and surprise appreciation moments to spotlight everyday contributions in a way people could feel.



Principle 5:

Connect growth to real support

People grow when their organisation actively invests in their development. When opportunities feel accessible and genuinely backed by leadership, growth turns into loyalty. Empathy makes that support tangible, aligning personal ambition with a future employees can realistically build here, not somewhere else.

- Employees who feel encouraged to learn new skills are **47%** less likely to be job-hunting (Gallup, 2023).
- **7 in 10** say learning improves their sense of connection; **8 in 10** say it adds purpose (LinkedIn, 2024).



A workplace doesn't live in its policies.

It lives in the moments between people, the trust, the support, the recognition, the sense of being seen. At OVAL, we help organisations create those moments with creativity, strategy, and experiences that connect.

We can help you build a culture people want to be part of. For real.

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