



Rethinking Connection for a Hybrid Work World

By Heather Gilmartin Adams



Contents

TL;DR	4	Measuring connection	24
Why talk about connection, and why now?	6	What do your existing surveys tell you about connection?.....	25
5 challenges to enabling connection.....	7	What data can your work tech provide about connection?.....	25
An opportunity to intentionally build connection.....	9	What can Organizational Network Analysis tell you?.....	25
Understanding connection	10	Does your organization have connection-specific tech?	26
Connection within teams.....	11	What are managers and leaders sensing from their teams?.....	26
Connection across teams	12	Wrapping Up	27
Connection with the organization.....	13	About the Author	28
Enabling connection	15	Contributors	28
Enabling connection within teams	17	Methodology	29
Enabling connection across teams.....	20	Survey demographics	30
Enabling connection with the organization.....	22		

About RedThread



Sure, we're experts in performance, people analytics, learning, and D&I—and we're well-versed in the technologies that support them. But we're also truth-seekers and storytellers in an industry often short on substance, and too full of @#\$%. Our mission (indeed, our very reason for existing) is to cut through the noise and amplify what's good. We look for the connections (or red threads) between people, data, and ideas—even among seemingly unrelated concepts. The result is high-quality, unbiased, transformative foresight that helps you build a stronger business.

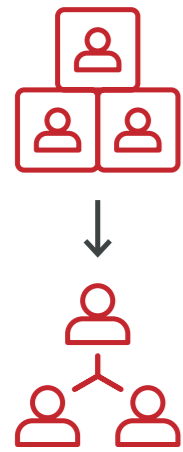
To learn more, reach out to us at hello@redthreadresearch.com or visit redthreadresearch.com.



This copy of this report provided to you by:

Enboarder creates better human connections in your organization, inviting engagement and building alignment along every step of the employee experience. Our Human Connection platform cuts through the noise of daily communications and elevates the things that matter most with interactive, actionable nudges. Leading global brands like McDonalds, Hugo Boss, ING, and Eventbrite use Enboarder to drive behavior, spark joy, and nurture a culture of connection and belonging. To learn more, visit enboarder.com.

TL;DR



As more organizations look at hybrid work for the long term, they're wondering how to ensure employees can **build, maintain, and strengthen** the connection they need for their work and for themselves.

Connection is good for employees and organizations alike. This research found that organizations with more connection were:

5.4x

more likely to be agile

3.2x

more likely to have satisfied customers

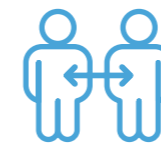
2.3x

more likely to have engaged employees

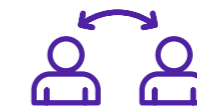
Odds ratios calculated from RedThread survey data | RedThread Research, 2022

Connection needs planning and thought, especially in an unpredictable and hybrid environment.

Most people think about connection in 3 buckets:



Connection within teams



Connection across teams



Connection with the organization

But that's not enough. To effectively enable connection, you need to know—very specifically—what types of connection need to be enabled, where, and why, given your goals and situation.

TL;DR



Distinguish between emotional and intellectual connection. Emotional connection is what people feel. Intellectual connection is what people know.

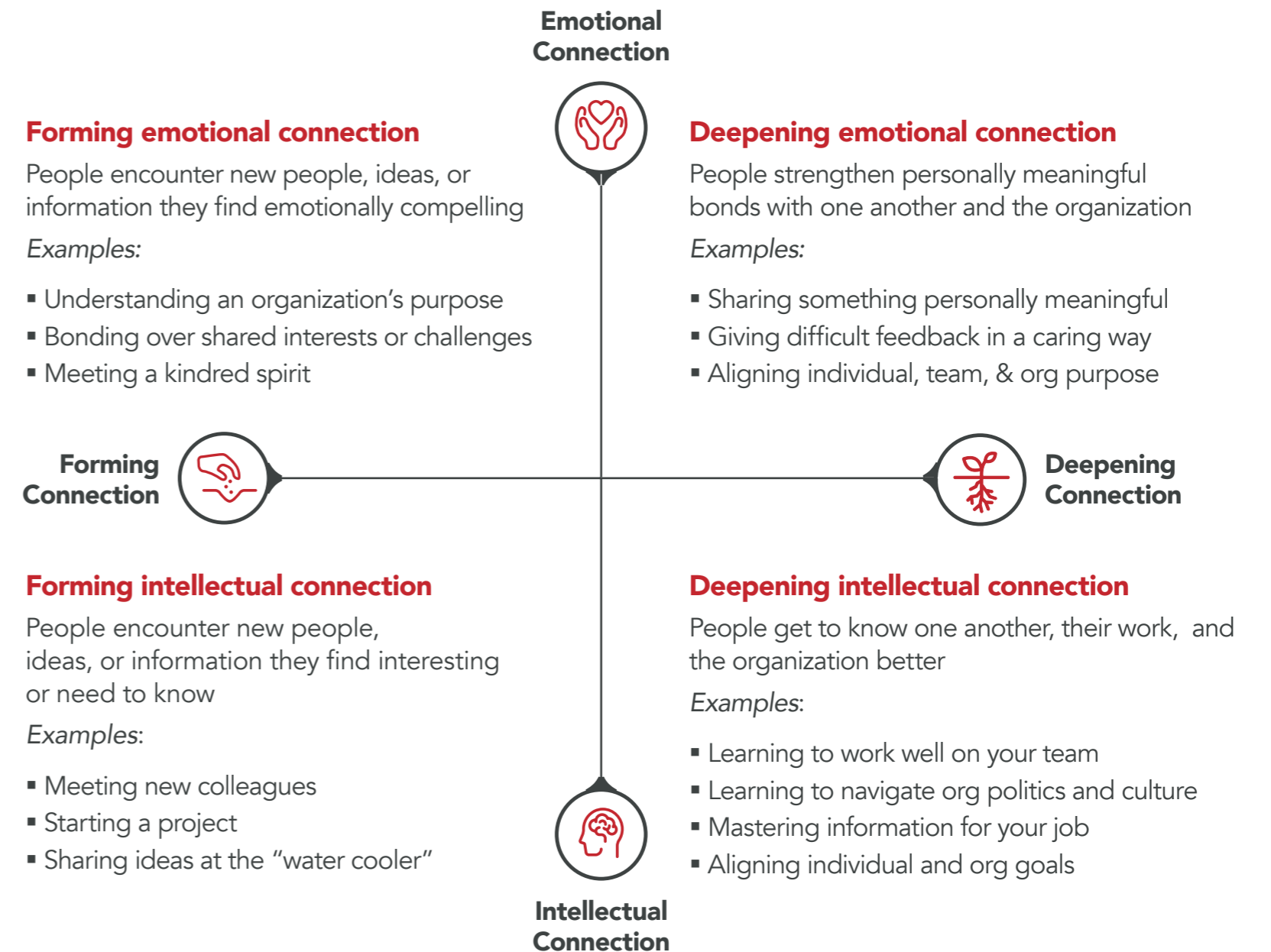


Distinguish between forming and deepening connection. Making a new connection isn't the same as building on an existing one.

Different situations call for different types of connection. Ask:

- ➔ Given the situation and our goals, what type(s) of connection do we need to enable?
- ➔ Do we need to form new connection or deepen existing connection?
- ➔ Does the connection need to be intellectual, emotional, or both?
- ➔ What methods might be most appropriate for our goals?

To enable connection at work, consider all 4 aspects of connection



Connection matrix | RedThread Research, 2022

Why talk about connection, and why now?

It seems like we just got through the COVID-19 pandemic, and now we're heading into yet another phase of uncertainty and change. Organizations are facing looming economic uncertainty, potential belt-tightening, and possible layoffs.

At the same time, the importance of employee well-being, engagement, and belonging is at a high. Employees want more flexible working arrangements and more support from their organizations—and many are willing and able to walk away from organizations that don't meet their needs.

In this context, one topic keeps popping up in our conversations with leaders: connection. One leader said she feels bombarded by messages about the importance of connection at work. We feel the same. It's almost as if the floodgates have opened on a topic that's been on everyone's minds for a while.

Connection is one of the hot topics of the day—**for good reason.**

Connection is one of the hot topics of the day for good reason. It's one of the linchpins that can help organizations stay agile, keep employees engaged and cared for, and satisfy customers in the crazy, ever-changing environment we all find ourselves in. In fact, in our survey of over 700 employees, we found that organizations with more connection were:

- ➔ **5.4x more likely** to be agile
- ➔ **3.2x more likely** to have satisfied customers
- ➔ **2.3x more likely** to have engaged employees

Connection is good for organizations, and it's good for employees.

You may be reading this paper because you, like many others, have seen data like the above. You may sense that connection is important. You may agree with Matt Gosney, who [said](#):

"[Connection] is how all work gets done. It's a baseline antecedent to progress."

— **MATT GOSNEY**, VP ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, UCHEALTH

And you may want to enable more connection in your organization.

But, also like many others, you may be facing challenges.

5 challenges to enabling connection

Many organizations have never had to build connection in a situation like the one we're in. Figure 1 outlines 5 specific challenges that organizations face in the current environment.

- ➔ **Definitional confusion.** Many leaders struggle to understand what connection means in a hybrid context, which fuels debates about whether/when/how to return to the office (and other ways of connecting).
- ➔ **Unprecedented environment.** No organization can bring everyone face-to-face again and expect connection to return to the way it was 3 years ago. You're in uncharted waters.
- ➔ **Overwhelm and burnout.** Slack's Future Forum [reported](#) that 40% of employees globally are burned out, which makes reaching out to connect feel extra difficult. The burden is particularly hard on managers in hybrid workplaces, [Gallup found](#).
- ➔ **Social division.** Some of our society's social and political divisions are percolating into organizations—potentially making it harder for employees to connect in all the ways they need to.
- ➔ **The economy.** With inflation and an uncertain economic future ahead, fostering connection could be one of those things that leaders feel the need to deprioritize in favor of short-term security and cost-cutting measures.

Organizations face 5 challenges as they try to build connection in a hybrid work world

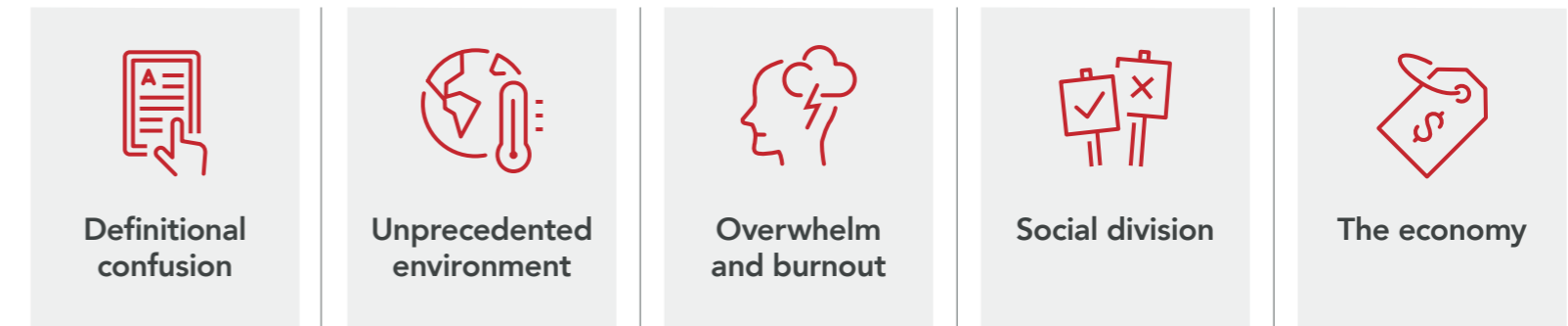


Figure 1: 5 challenges to building connection | RedThread Research, 2022

Even global companies—the type of companies familiar with remote collaboration and distributed teams before “hybrid” became a term—are in new territory. Huge percentages of employees from many different backgrounds work remotely or in a hybrid environment. Many work from home, not even commuting to local offices. And those working in person still may not have all that much human interaction.

Within this context, many leaders struggle to see how they might foster connection in their organizations.



Jessica Amortegui, a global talent development leader at a tech company, described her organization's hybrid experiment—and their challenges enabling connection in that environment—[like this](#):

“We’re experimenting with a hybrid strategy. We like to call ours ‘flexible and connected.’ We’re trying to optimize for both ends of those spectrums... The flexible thing we're crushing! It's the latter half of that—the connection piece—that I think we're still struggling and trying to get our heads around.”

— **JESSICA AMORTEGUI**, GLOBAL TALENT DEVELOPMENT LEADER, AIRTABLE

Like Jessica, you may be wondering: How can we enable connection in such an uncertain, hybrid environment?

This paper will help you answer that question in a very practical way.

A key to success, it turns out, is intentionality.



How can we **enable connection** in such an uncertain, hybrid environment?

An opportunity to intentionally build connection

In this research, we frequently encountered a problematic assumption: that physical proximity = connection. But think of a common occurrence: people working heads-down in cubicles, physically proximate but mentally distant from their coworkers. Just because people are together in person doesn't mean they're building connection.

And just because people are remote doesn't mean they're not building connection. For example, many leaders told us how much closer they feel to coworkers now that they've seen their homes, families, and pets via Zoom. And as Ashley Goodall [pointed out](#):

“Some conversations even benefit from a little physical separation.”

— **ASHLEY GOODALL**, AUTHOR, AND THOUGHT LEADER



Organizations can **ditch the assumption** that bringing people together is the only way to build connection.

This is good news: Organizations can ditch the assumption that bringing people together is the only way to build connection. Instead, they can intentionally:

- ➔ Rethink what it means to build connection in their workplace, within their culture, given their goals
- ➔ Choose from many more options—remote, in-person, and hybrid—to enable that connection
- ➔ More actively ensure the right connection is happening
- ➔ Be more equitable about connection: ensure everyone has opportunities to connect, unlimited by geography, physical location, or who happens to be in the room at a critical moment

But being intentional does take... well, intentionality. Planning. Thought. That means you need to:

- ➔ Understand what connection means in your organization's context
- ➔ Think through what types of connection to enable and when
- ➔ Identify methods to enable the connection you want to create

The rest of this paper is meant to get you started on that thinking.

Understanding connection

Part of the reason there’s definitional confusion about connection is that the word means different things in different circumstances. We heard many definitions in this research, from “being known and accepted as a person” to “leveraged relationships” and everything in between.

Based on all our conversations, our working definition of connection is:

Relationships—with people, ideas, and information—that help people get work done and feel they’re part of something meaningful.

We’ve purposely defined connection broadly because so many different types of connection matter in organizations.

You might think about connection at work in 3 buckets:

- ➔ Within teams
- ➔ Across teams
- ➔ With the organization

And you’d be in good company—many leaders in this research talked about connection in these 3 buckets. They make sense for most organizations because they mean different things and produce different outcomes (Figure 2).

Many leaders think about building connection in 3 big buckets

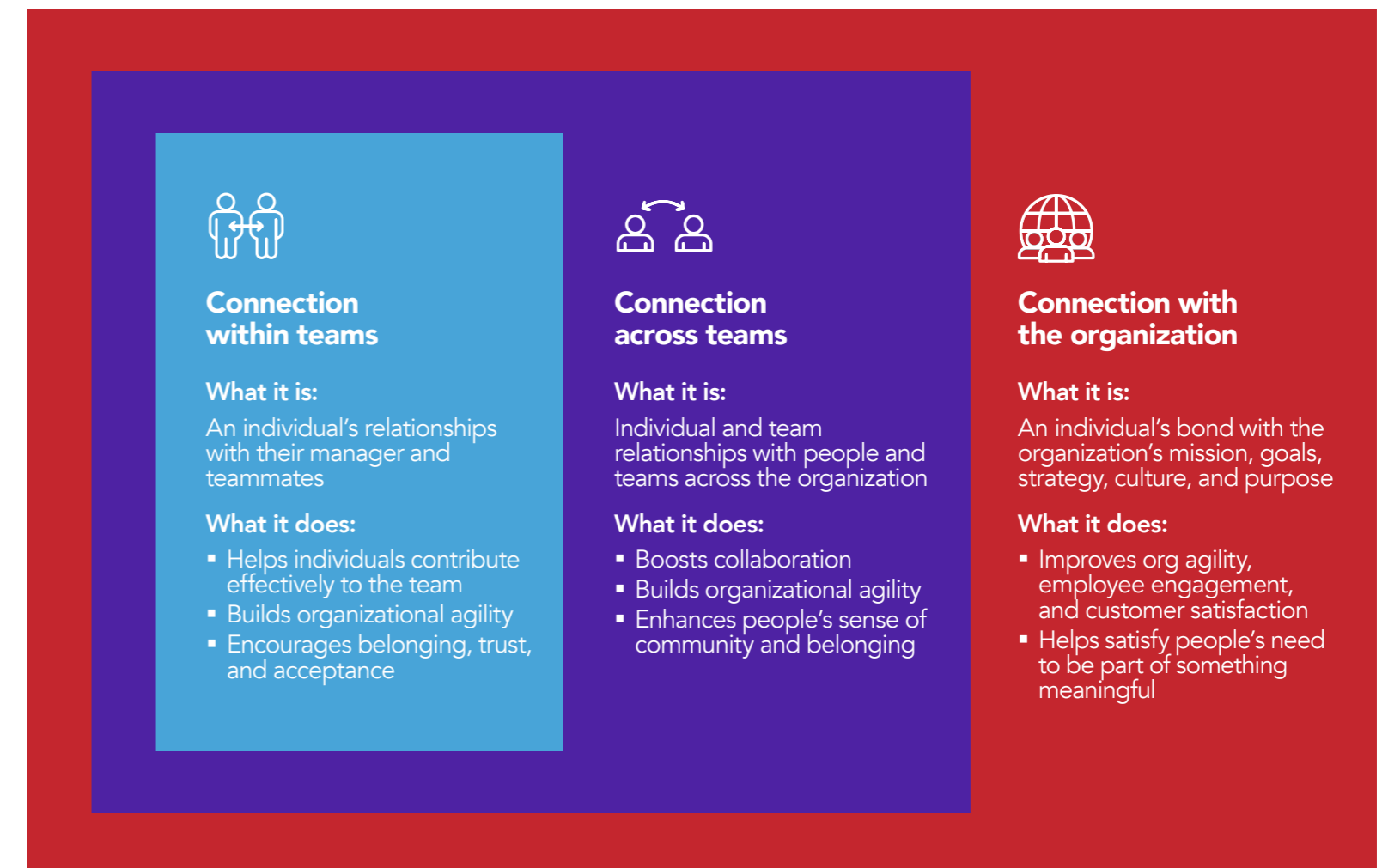


Figure 2: 3 types of connection | RedThread Research, 2022

 **Connection within teams**

Connection within teams is:

| An individual's relationships with their manager and teammates

Connection within teams is important because it ensures people can contribute effectively to the team and complete their daily work. It also provides people with opportunities to develop a deep sense of belonging, trust, and acceptance.

Connection within teams also means more agile organizations. Figure 3 shows the link between organizational agility and 3 specific practices to foster connection within teams.

We think connection within teams and organizational agility are strongly linked because when employees feel supported by their manager and team, they can adjust quickly to changing circumstances.

Organizations with more connection within teams are also more agile

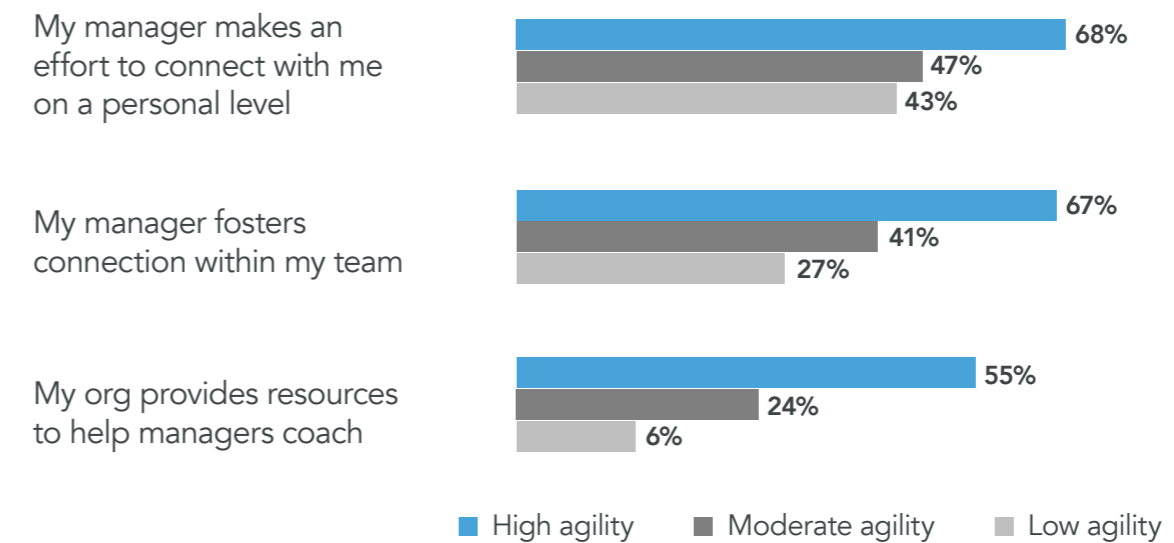


Figure 3: % of employees in organizations with high, moderate, and low agility who agree to a significant or very great extent with the statements, n=739 | RedThread Research, 2022

 **Connection across teams**

Connection across teams refers to:

Individual and team relationships with people and teams across the organization

Connection across teams ensures people have the relationships they need to collaborate across functions and get things done.

Cross-team connection also provides opportunities for people to connect with the broader community. One senior leader described a peer coaching program that matched employees based on shared interests:

“One of the things that people most valued was that they all met somebody that they would not have interacted with normally.”

— **JULIE BAKER**, SR. DIRECTOR OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE, SITEIMPROVE

Organizations that foster connection across teams are also more likely to be highly agile—by quite a bit: there’s almost a 20 percentage point difference on all 4 items in Figure 4. That’s likely because this type of connection keeps teams aligned and working well across functions even as priorities change, problems emerge, or the environment shifts.

Organizations with more connection across teams are also more agile

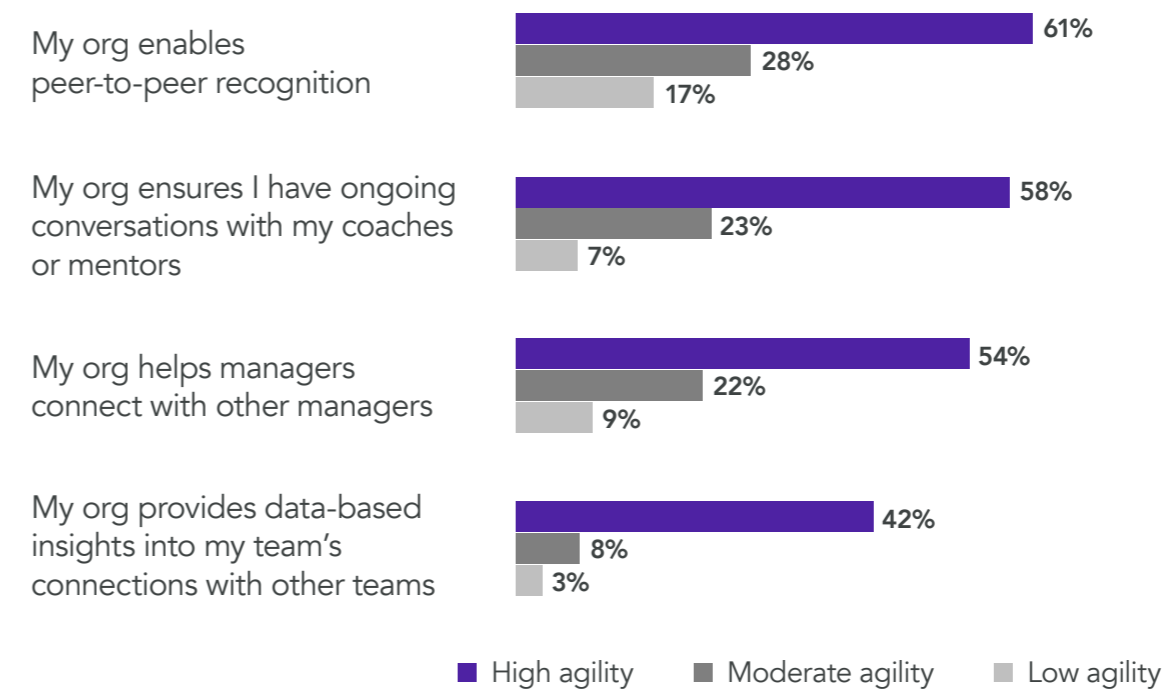


Figure 4: % of employees in organizations with high, moderate, and low agility who agree to a significant or very great extent with the statements, n=739 | RedThread Research, 2022

Connection with the organization

Connection with the organization is:

An individual's bond with the organization's mission, goals, strategy, culture, and purpose

Connection with the organization also encompasses the individual's understanding of how their work contributes to the big picture. It's important because people—humans—want to feel they're contributing to something meaningful:

"You want to feel you're part of something."

— TAMARA HLAVA, PARTNER, COLUMNFIVE MEDIA

In addition, organizations that foster connection with the organization have higher employee engagement, higher customer satisfaction, and more agility (Figure 5).

Connection with the organization is associated with org agility, customer satisfaction, and employee engagement



Figure 5: % of employees who agree to a significant or very great extent with the statements, by high/moderate/low for each outcome n=739 | RedThread Research, 2022



These findings suggest that organizations can improve key outcomes by enabling connection within teams, across teams, and with the organization.

In addition, a culture of trust seems to be a foundational element that enables connection to grow. In our survey, trust was correlated with every question we asked about connection (all 34). Our interviews also revealed that building connection can build trust. It's a virtuous cycle: Connection builds trust, and trust builds connection.

These 3 major categories of connection—within teams, across teams, and with the organization—are helpful when you're thinking broadly about what connection is and why it's important.

But when it comes to actually enabling connection, these 3 big buckets aren't enough. They're important, but they don't tell you with enough granularity or specificity where to focus your efforts. You need more detail.

That's where we'll turn next.



Thinking about connection in 3 buckets—within teams, across teams, and with the organization— isn't enough. **You need to know exactly where to focus your efforts.**

Enabling connection

To effectively enable connection at work, you need a way to determine what types of connection need enabling, where, and why (given your goals and the situation). Figure 6 introduces the 2 axes of a model to help you do that.

Distinguish between emotional vs. intellectual connection, and between forming vs. deepening connection

➔ **Emotional vs. intellectual connection (vertical axis).** Emotional connection is what employees *feel*. They feel accepted, like they belong, that they're plugged in. Intellectual connection is what employees need to *know*—people, ideas, and information.

➔ **Forming vs. deepening connection (horizontal axis).** Sometimes people need to make (form) connection with new people, ideas, and information. Other times they need to deepen existing connection with other people, their work, and the organization.

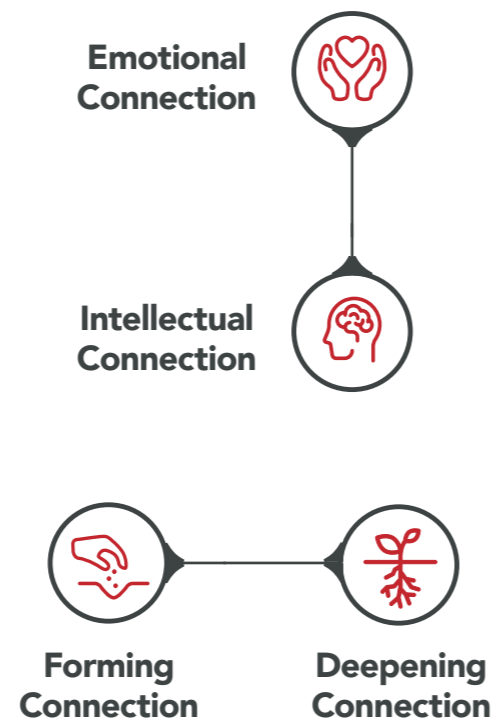


Figure 6: The 2 axes of a model for enabling connection | RedThread Research, 2022

We plotted the 2 axes in Figure 6 against each other to form a **4-quadrant model**. Figure 7 provides a definition of connection in each of the 4 quadrants, as well as examples of what connection in each quadrant looks like.

As you think about enabling connection, Figure 7 prompts you to ask:

What connection, specifically, are we trying to enable?

- ➔ Given the situation and our goals, what type of connection do we want to enable?
- ➔ Do we want people to form new connection or deepen existing connection? (How much connection already exists?)
- ➔ Does the connection need to be intellectual, emotional, or both?

If, for example, you're onboarding a new employee, consider focusing on forming intellectual connection, at least initially. If you're managing an established team, you may want to focus on deepening emotional connection.

And if you're looking at connection across your organization, you'll likely want to consider all 4 aspects of connection.

The following sections look specifically at how you might use this 4-quadrant model to enable connection in the 3 buckets we looked at earlier (in Figure 2): within teams, across teams, and with the organization.

To enable connection at work, consider all 4 aspects of connection

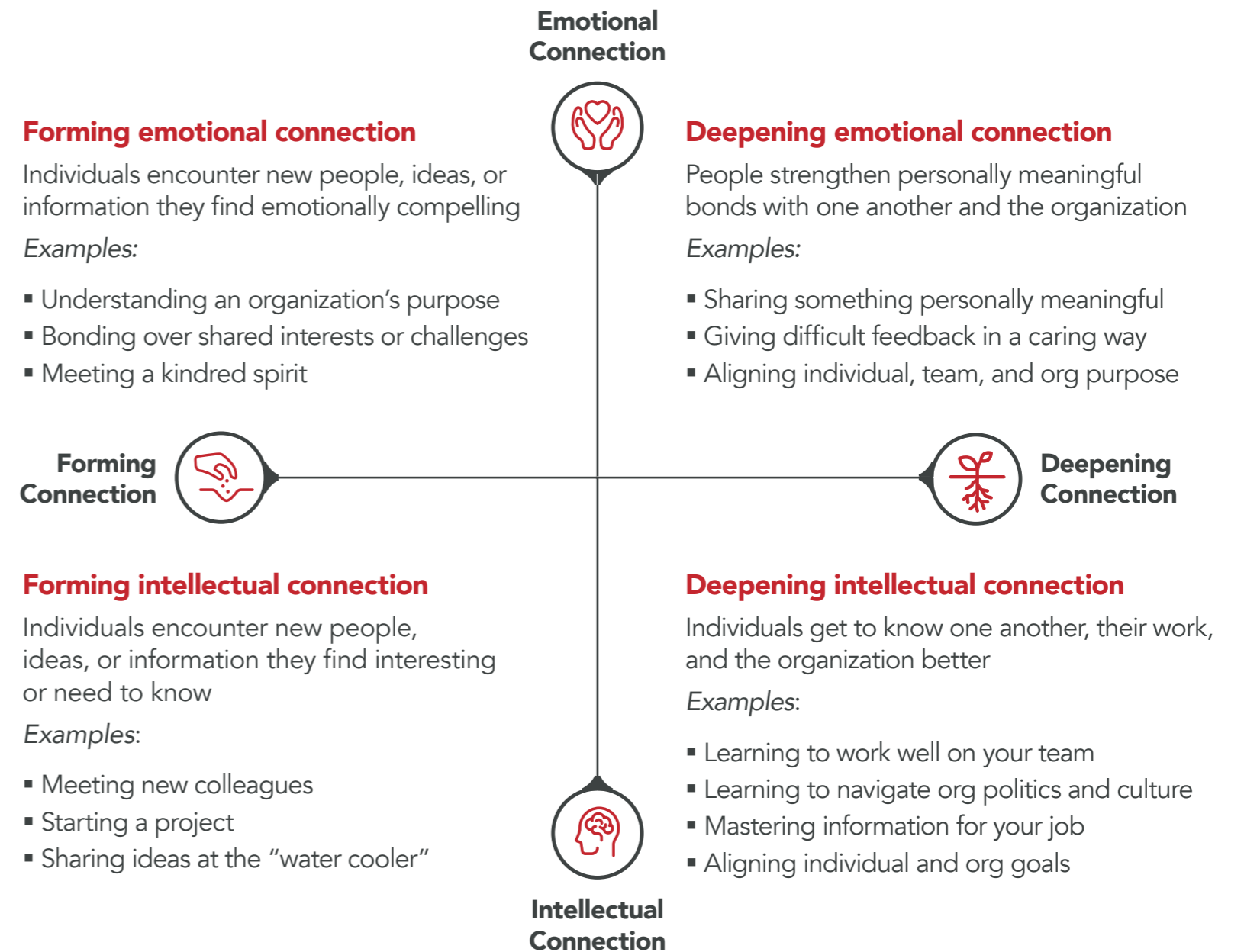


Figure 7: Connection matrix | RedThread Research, 2022

Enabling connection within teams

In the center of Figure 8, we use the 4-quadrant connection model we introduced above to describe precisely what it looks like to form and deepen emotional and intellectual connection within teams.

Then, around the perimeter of Figure 8, we list methods leaders said they're using to enable each of the 4 types of connection within teams. The list is undoubtedly incomplete—we'd love to hear what else you're doing. But it should give you an idea of the types of methods you can use to enable different types of connection within teams.

To enable connection within teams, think about ways to support both managers and team members

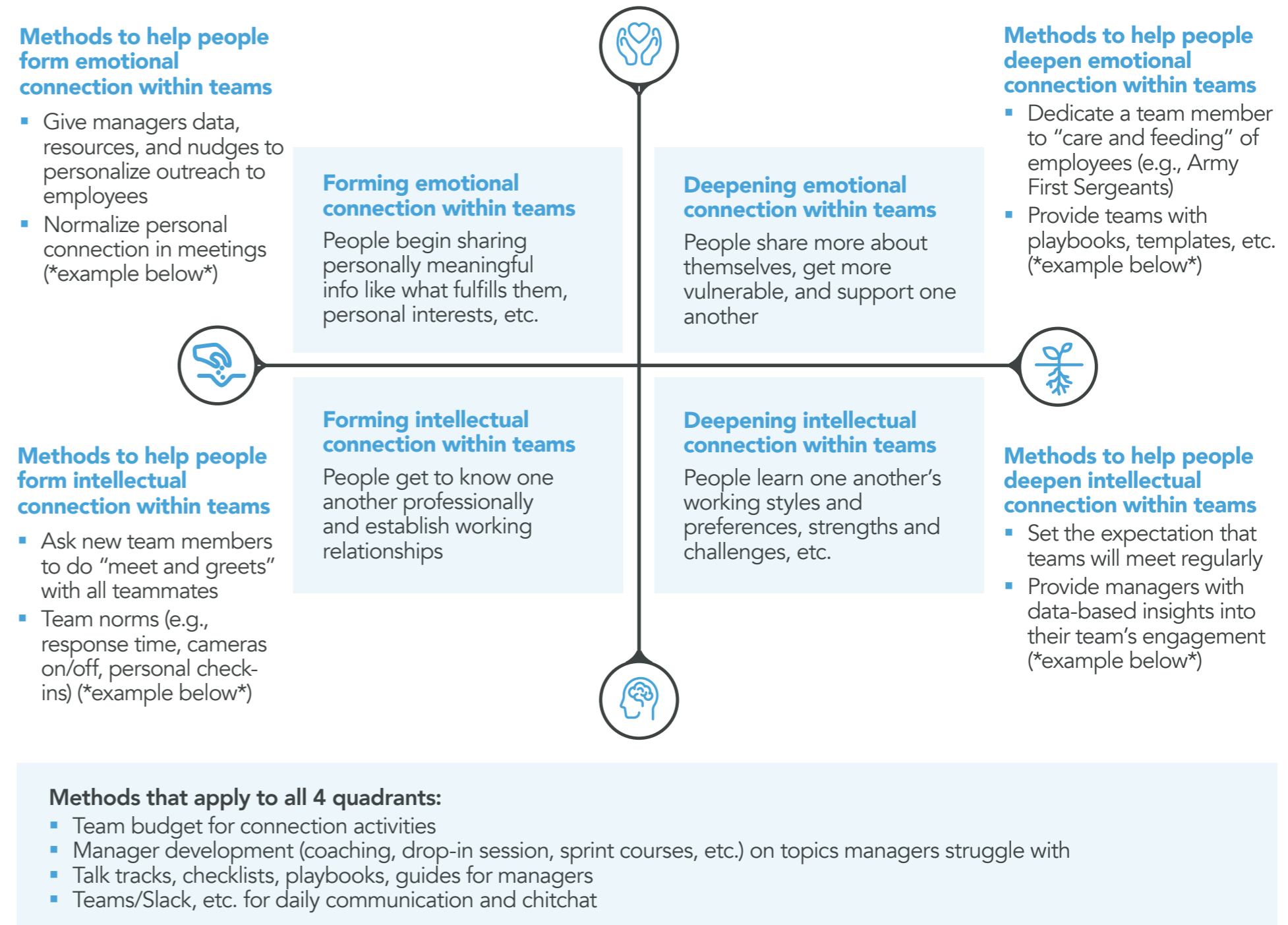


Figure 8: Definitions and methods to enable connection within teams | RedThread Research, 2022



As you consider how to enable connection within teams in your organization, keep in mind one of the challenges we listed in the introduction: burnout. Employees and managers are struggling. **Managers are particularly overwhelmed** by the responsibility on their shoulders. They are feeling immense pressure to not only ensure team performance in an uncertain and fast-changing environment changing, but to do so in a way that deeply supports team members' well-being.

The leaders we talked to are addressing this challenge by finding ways to enable connection within teams that take stuff off managers' plates rather than add to them.

One leader said that in her organization, they're taking a "stealthy" approach. They're embedding connection opportunities into existing processes, like onboarding and regularly scheduled communications to managers. She described it as:

"Giving all the goodies without it being a program."

— **EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE LEADER**, MULTINATIONAL PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY

Other organizations are finding ways to enable team members to connect without depending as much on the manager. The following examples highlight some of these approaches.

 **Examples: Enabling each aspect of connection within teams**

To bring some of the methods listed above to life, here are examples of how real organizations enabled each of the 4 aspects of connection within teams.

FORMING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITHIN TEAMS WITH PERSONAL CHECK-INS

To encourage people to form emotional connection on their teams, senior leaders at retailer Saks OFF 5TH established the expectation that employees spend time connecting personally.

At the beginning of meetings and other interactions, it's customary to spend a few minutes checking in on non-work stuff. A new employee said:

"You always start with a personal conversation. It would be gauche to start right away with business." — **CHERYL SMITH**, TALENT AND PERFORMANCE LEADER, SAKS OFF 5TH

Although employees work hard and sometimes put in long hours, the expectation of personal connection ensures time and space for employees to form the emotional connection the company values.



DEEPENING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITHIN TEAMS BY PROVIDING PLAYBOOKS

Leaders at Airtable, a cloud collaboration service provider, wanted to provide managers and teams with resources to deepen connection. A leader [said](#):

"[Teams] have to have the support, and [they] have to have the tools to ensure [they] optimize the time together." — **JESSICA AMORTEGUI**, GLOBAL TALENT DEVELOPMENT LEADER, AIRTABLE

To provide the needed support, the talent development team created a connection playbook. Teams can use the exercises in the playbook to build psychological safety and trust, set norms, create common language about emotions, understand team members' personal motivations, etc.

Airtable also supports team connection with teambuilding budgets and training for managers.



FORMING INTELLECTUAL CONNECTION WITHIN TEAMS WITH ONBOARDING TECH

A cross-functional team at a large retail chain was tasked with improving the onboarding process. The team wanted to help new employees quickly get their bearings and make it easy for managers to welcome new people to their teams.

To support this effort, the team selected an employee engagement technology that sends automated communications to managers and new hires. New hires receive information about the company, its goals and mission, and general expectations for new employees. Managers are reminded of their onboarding responsibilities and nudged to email or text the new employee (with templates they can copy/paste).

Through these communications, the retail chain helps employees form intellectual connection with their manager and the wider organization.



DEEPENING INTELLECTUAL CONNECTION WITHIN TEAMS USING DATA

UC Health, a regional healthcare system, does frequent employee pulse surveys. Leaders are asked to talk with their teams about the results of each survey. And every survey asks employees whether their leader did talk to them about the previous survey's data.

These regular, data-based conversations help teams align on their challenges, goals, priorities, and future actions: They deepen intellectual connection.

When leaders talk to their teams about the survey data, engagement tends to be high. Most importantly, [talking about the data was more important than what the data said](#):

"It didn't matter what questions we asked. Simply the act of leaders having meaningful dialogue with their teams... led to improved engagement." — **MATT GOSNEY**, VP ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, UC HEALTH



Enabling connection across teams

Broadly speaking, employees need intellectual connection across teams to get things done and grow their careers. By contrast, emotional connection across teams is more about finding and building community.

In the center of Figure 9, we describe what it looks like to form and deepen emotional and intellectual connection across teams. The surrounding text contains methods for enabling the 4 aspects of connection across teams. Note that many of these methods work well in person or remotely.

Here again, in the spirit of not adding stuff to people’s plates when they’re already overwhelmed, it is often effective to incorporate connection opportunities into the things employees are already doing. In [research we did on learning methods](#), we found that L&D functions are doing just that. They’re offering many different learning methods that help employees connect with one another as part of their development. Some of these methods are listed in Figure 9.

Connection across teams: Provide lots of opportunities for people to get to know each other

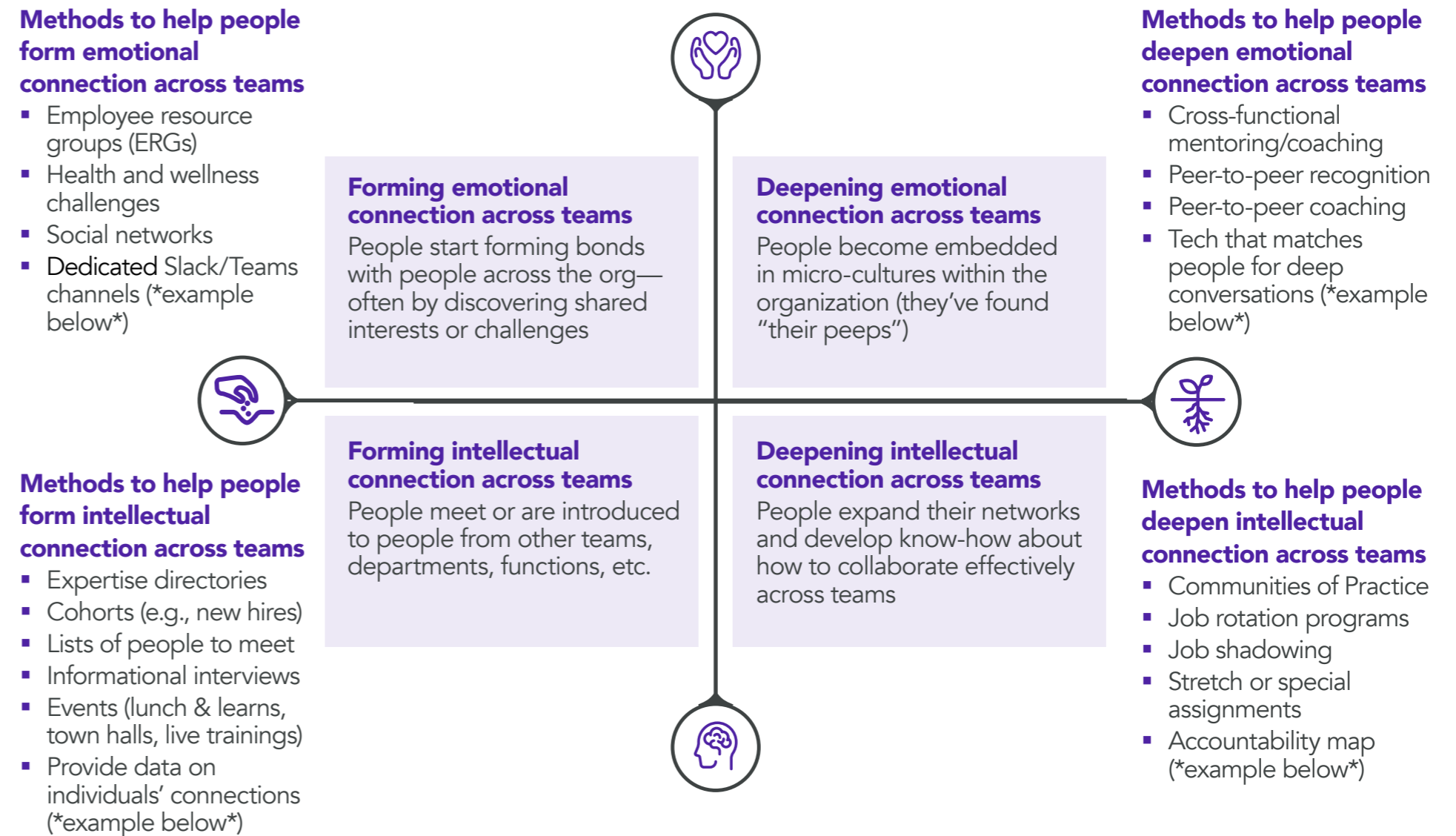


Figure 9: Definition and methods to enable connection across teams | RedThread Research, 2022

Examples: Enabling each aspect of connection across teams

The following examples highlight methods that real organizations use to enable the 4 aspects of connection across teams.

FORMING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION ACROSS TEAMS WITH CHAT CHANNELS

When we asked leaders what tech they use to enable employees to meet people across the organization, almost everyone mentioned chat tools—Slack and Teams, mostly. Many went into excited detail about the channels that provide opportunities to connect over shared interests, passions, or challenges (i.e., form emotional connection). Some channels were for:

- ➔ New parents
- ➔ Fans of various sports teams
- ➔ “Challenges” (health & wellness, activities, etc.)
- ➔ People in specific locations (cities, etc.)
- ➔ New hire introductions / questionnaires
- ➔ Daily icebreakers

Reflecting on how active people were in these channels in her organization, one senior leader said:
“That’s how people start to tell their stories and get to know each other outside of a work context.”
 — TAMARA HLAVA, PARTNER, COLUMNFIVE MEDIA



DEEPENING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION ACROSS TEAMS WITH PAIRED CONVERSATIONS

Siteimprove, a multinational SaaS company, implemented a technology that matches employees and prompts deep conversation. Matches are based on that information employees share about their personal values and purpose.

The director of employee experience at Siteimprove described the technology like this:

“It’s a very different experience than, say, having a coffee together. You get to deep and meaningful conversations quickly, because they’ve matched you based on shared values and purpose statements, and they prompt you with deep questions.” — JULIE BAKER, SR. DIRECTOR OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE, SITEIMPROVE

This structured format helps employees meet and quickly develop deep connection with people they don’t work with directly and, in most cases, haven’t met before.

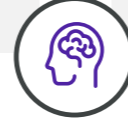


FORMING INTELLECTUAL CONNECTION ACROSS TEAMS WITH DATA

A health information technology firm wanted to help employees meet the right people across the organization. They use the Microsoft suite, so they started prompting employees to pay attention to Microsoft Viva. Viva sends employees data about whom they know, whom they meet and communicate with, and so on.

Employees are encouraged to use these data to identify connections they may need to form:

“We are talking to people about how they can use these data to see if all their connections are in the same geography, or the same business, or on the same team, and then reach out to people where they may have holes in their networks.” — SENIOR DIRECTOR OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE, HEALTH IT FIRM



DEEPENING INTELLECTUAL CONNECTION ACROSS TEAMS WITH ACCOUNTABILITY MAPS

In a large multinational corporation, employees use an Accountability Map to identify intellectual connections needed to succeed in a role.

In this exercise, employees map out their key relationships—with peers, reports, leaders, and even customers. They then rate how important those relationships are to their ability to get things done, and they rate the quality and strength of each relationship.

The exercise leaves employees with a heatmap that helps them prioritize the connections they need to deepen.

Enabling connection with the organization

Intellectual connection with the organization means employees have big-picture context about what’s going on and why. In the past, this type of information was often acquired through chance observations or encounters in the office. In a hybrid setting, leaders are more intentional about putting that information in places any employee can access it, anytime, from anywhere—like on intranet sites or in chat channels.

Employees connect on an emotional level with the organization through meaning and purpose. They resonate with the organization’s “why,” they see how their personal purpose aligns with the organization’s, and they feel they’re contributing to something meaningful.

As in previous sections, the center of Figure 10 describes what it looks like to form and deepen emotional and intellectual connection—this time with the organization. The surrounding text lists methods for enabling the 4 aspects of connection with the organization. Again, many of these methods work in person or remotely.

Enable connection with the organization by linking people to organizational goals and purpose

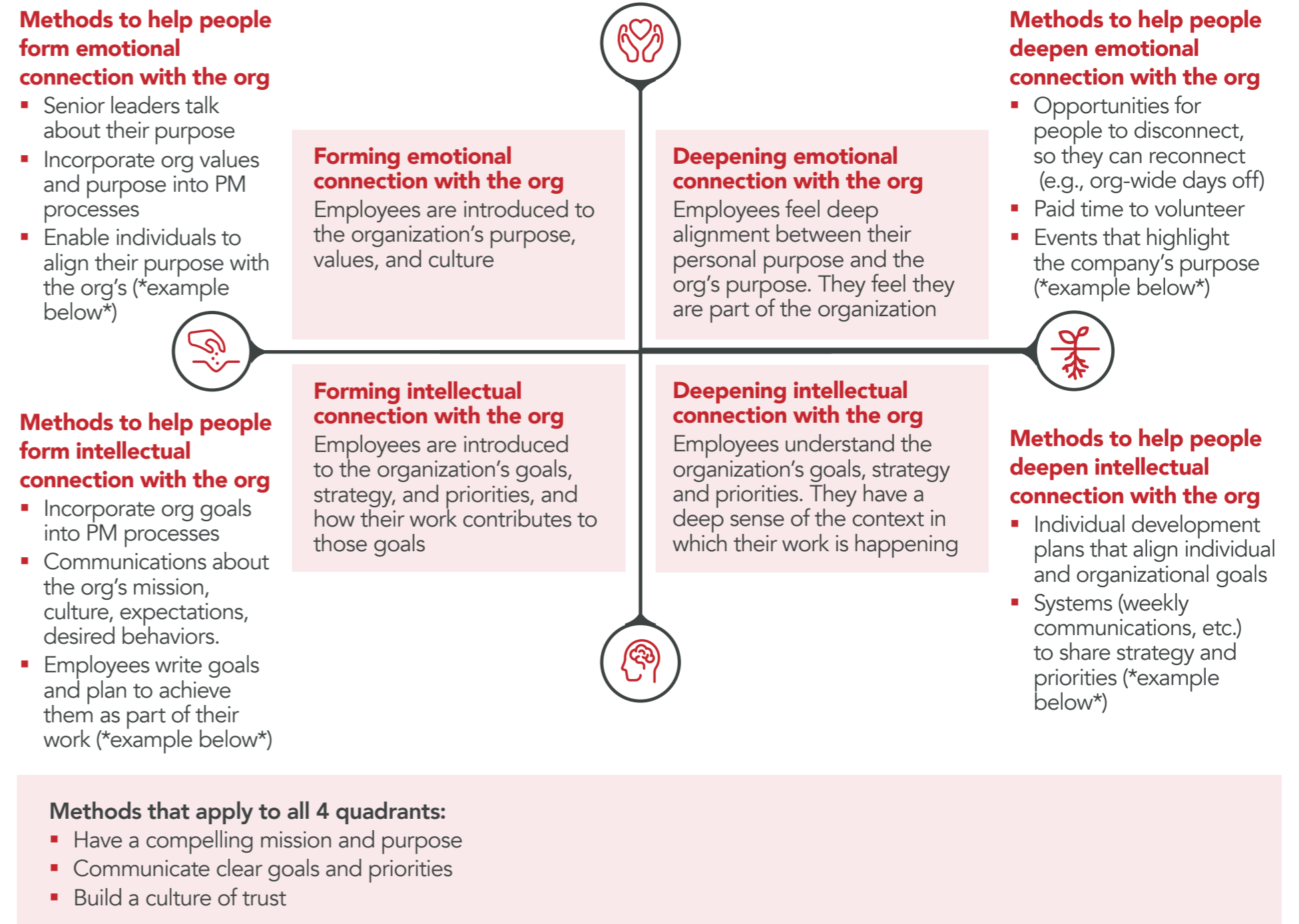


Figure 10: The 4 aspects of connection with the organization | RedThread Research, 2022

Examples: Enabling each aspect of connection with the organization

The following case studies highlight 4 methods that real organizations have used to enable the 4 aspects of connection with the organization.

FORMING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH THE ORG THROUGH PURPOSE WORKSHOPS

Business management consulting firm EY [sees a clear link](#) between unlocking the power of each employee's personal purpose and driving the organization's purpose. Yet many employees are unsure how to find their own purpose:

"They expect to maybe stumble across it and then everything will click." — **TAL GOLDHAMER, PARTNER AND CLO, EY**

To address this disconnect, the L&D function developed a program that helps people articulate their personal purpose, then figure out a way to put it into use in the organization.

Creating clear, personally meaningful, and well-articulated links between individual and organizational purpose helps employees form emotional connection to the organization.



DEEPENING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH THE ORG THROUGH COMMUNAL EVENTS

A private online university's purpose is to democratize access to education. It underpins everything the organization does.

As one way of deepening employees' connection to this "why," the university holds monthly town halls that showcase student success stories and the employees who played a part in that success. Town halls are held in person and streamed virtually, and they're very well attended—often by 5,000 or 6,000 of the 8,000 employees—because they're so emotionally impactful. One senior leader said:

"My team members say that every time they go to a town hall, they think, 'I love it here.' They feel really connected." — **VP PEOPLE & TALENT, PRIVATE ONLINE UNIVERSITY**



FORMING INTELLECTUAL CONNECTION WITH THE ORG WITH GOAL ALIGNMENT

Service Express, an IT maintenance service firm, values helping employees achieve their personal, professional, and financial goals. Because of this value, employees are encouraged to write down their goals, talk about those goals with their manager and teammates, and think about how they might work toward those goals at Service Express. CHRO Gretchen Murphy [said](#):

"We, as the organization, can't accomplish those goals for you. But we can help you, we can guide you, we can support you, we can give you resources, whatever they might be." — **GRETCHEN MURPHY, CHRO, SERVICE EXPRESS**

Giving individuals such a clear link between their own paths and the organization's helps them form intellectual connection with the organization.



DEEPENING INTELLECTUAL CONNECTION WITH THE ORG WITH WEEKLY VIDEOS

At Udemy, the online learning provider, leaders wanted to ensure that all employees—regardless of where or how they work—have the context and information they need to do their jobs well.

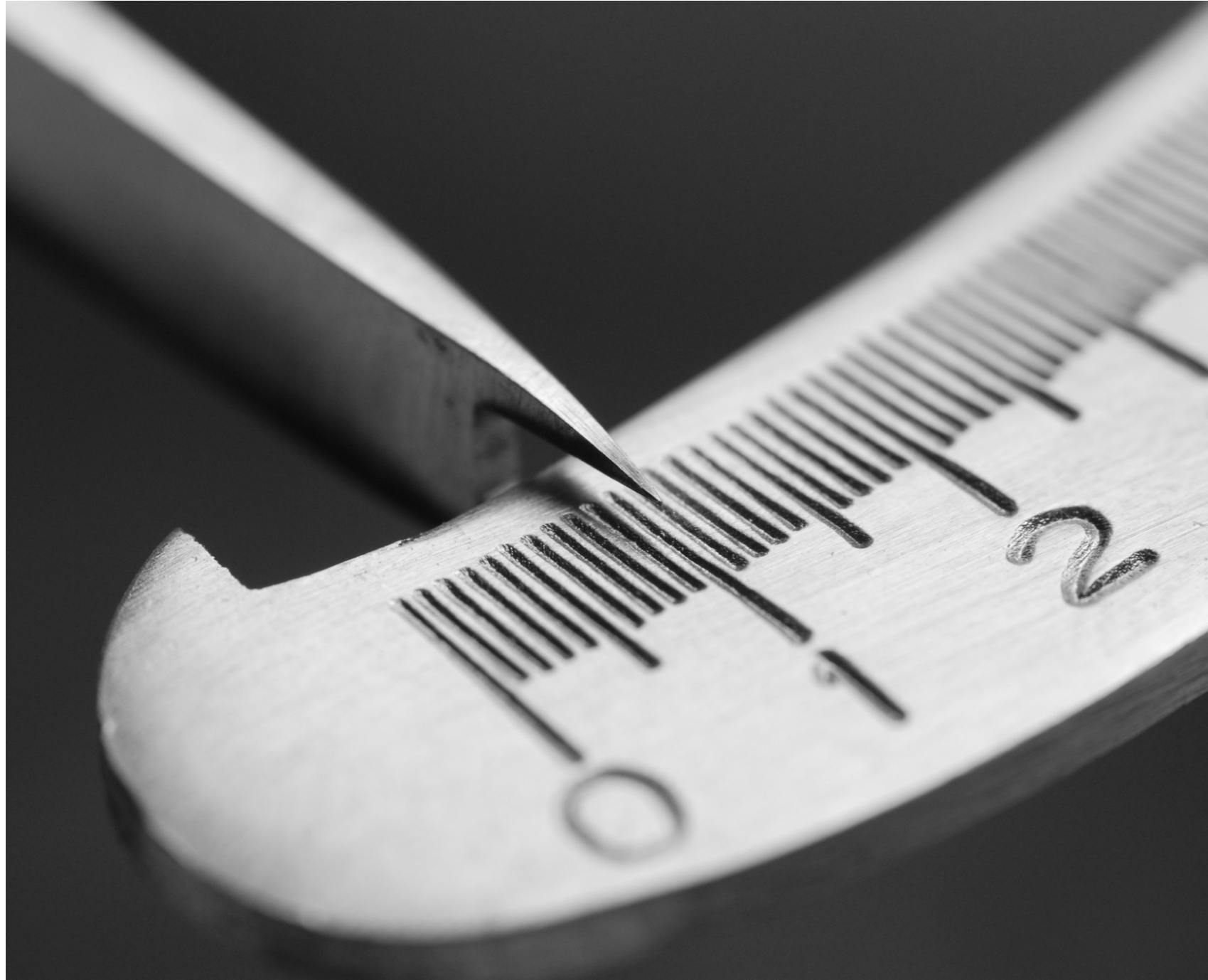
To connect employees to this context, CLO Melissa Daimler posts a video on Slack every Monday, where she shares her priorities and top-of-mind thoughts for the week. She [recounted](#):

"These are the kinds of conversations that might have happened informally, before a meeting or in the hallway. We're putting them in the digital space." — **MELISSA DAIMLER, CLO, UDEMY**

Intentionally putting this kind of contextual information where anyone can see it gives people regular opportunities to update their understanding of the bigger picture in which they're working.



Measuring connection



If you've set out to build connection, it's natural to want to know:

- ➔ How are we doing?
- ➔ Have we built the types of connection we intended?
- ➔ Where are there gaps in connection—pockets where there's not as much connection as there should be?
- ➔ What should we do differently to plug gaps and enable connection where and how we need?

First, connection is primarily a means to create outcomes like community, belonging, trust, organizational agility, innovation, and so on. You may already have ways of measuring these outcomes and can leverage what already exists. For example, many leaders said they're using the belonging questions on their employee engagement surveys as indicators that deep emotional connection is happening in their organizations.

Other data sources may provide insights into other types of connection—like whether employees know the right people.

Consider the following questions as you think about measuring connection. They're intended to help illuminate some sources of connection data that may exist in your organization.

What do your existing surveys tell you about connection?

Several leaders said they rely on their employee engagement surveys to provide insights on connection. Specifically, they look at indicators relating to:

- ➔ Greater fulfillment and engagement
- ➔ Greater sense of belonging and acceptance
- ➔ Better collaboration and less evidence of silos
- ➔ Less burnout

Engagement survey data are a prime source of information about emotional connection. They can help you understand whether employees are emotionally connected and whether they want more emotional connection—which can help you decide whether to boost efforts to enable emotional connection in certain areas.

What data can your work tech provide about connection?

Software like Microsoft Viva and the Google Suite can provide data about how and when employees communicate with each other, how often they're meeting, and for how long. For example, [this recent research from Microsoft](#) contains powerful insights into Microsoft employees' collaboration and connection patterns. There are privacy considerations, but some organizations can anonymously roll up these data to get a picture of some aspects of connection.

Using these data to identify collaboration patterns and communication networks can help you see where you may need to help people meet one another or connect certain teams more closely.

What can Organizational Network Analysis tell you?

Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) is a subfield of people analytics that collects data on employee networks to understand their relationships and collaborative behaviors. Data can be collected passively from collaboration tools, email, calendars, etc., or actively via surveys.

ONA can offer insights into connection-related topics like diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), burnout, collaboration patterns, overload, isolation, and well-being. It can help you decide who may need more support or a lighter load, who may need to connect to whom, where to target DEIB efforts, and so on.

What connection-specific tech does your organization have?

Connection-focused tools like [Enboarder](#), [Circles](#), [Imperative](#), [Cultivate](#), and [Kunik](#) often collect data from employees. For example, a technology asks employees to name 1 word that describes how they're feeling before and after each facilitated connection session. A leader at a real estate tech firm said:

“The word cloud from before the session has words like ‘overwhelmed,’ ‘stressed,’ and so on. By the end of the conversations the words are, ‘energized,’ ‘excited,’ ‘calm,’ or ‘rejuvenated.’ People have this one conversation and they leave with this totally different sentiment.” — VP TALENT SUCCESS, REAL ESTATE TECH FIRM

This type of data can give you a sense of how emotionally connected employees are feeling, and help you assess whether your investment in this type of tech is worthwhile.

What are managers and leaders sensing from their teams?

Managers continue to be a prime source of information about their teams' connection. Equip managers to keep an ear to the ground, continually checking in with their teams and scanning for information. In a hybrid context, this might look like asking, depending on your culture:

- ➔ How actively are employees participating in work activities?
- ➔ How actively are employees participating in social activities at work?
- ➔ Are employees following established norms (e.g., cameras on)? Why or why not?

One leader also asks employees if they feel they can talk about non-work topics with their coworkers. She uses their answer as an indicator of connection.

Data from managers and leaders can help you decide which managers may need more support in fostering engagement for their teams. This information can also help you identify which teams may need more support building connection for themselves (to lighten the manager's load).

Figure 11 summarizes some of the data you might consider collecting on each of the 4 aspects of connection.

Whatever data you do collect, we recommend analyzing it by demographic characteristics to understand differences between demographic groups. Check out our report, [DEIB Metrics: An Essential Guide](#), for more detail on the why and how of demographic analysis.

Consider these data to measure the 4 aspects of connection

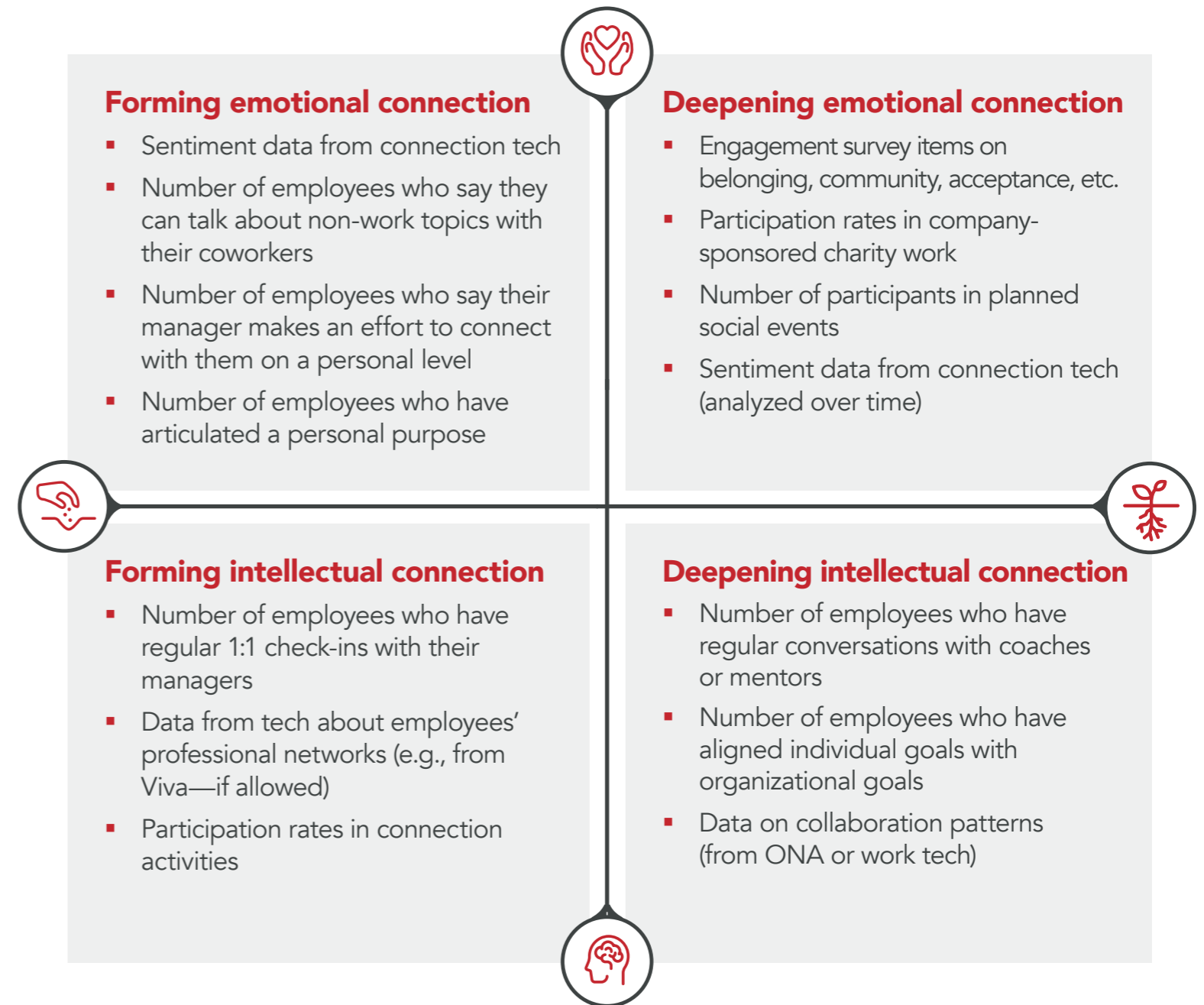


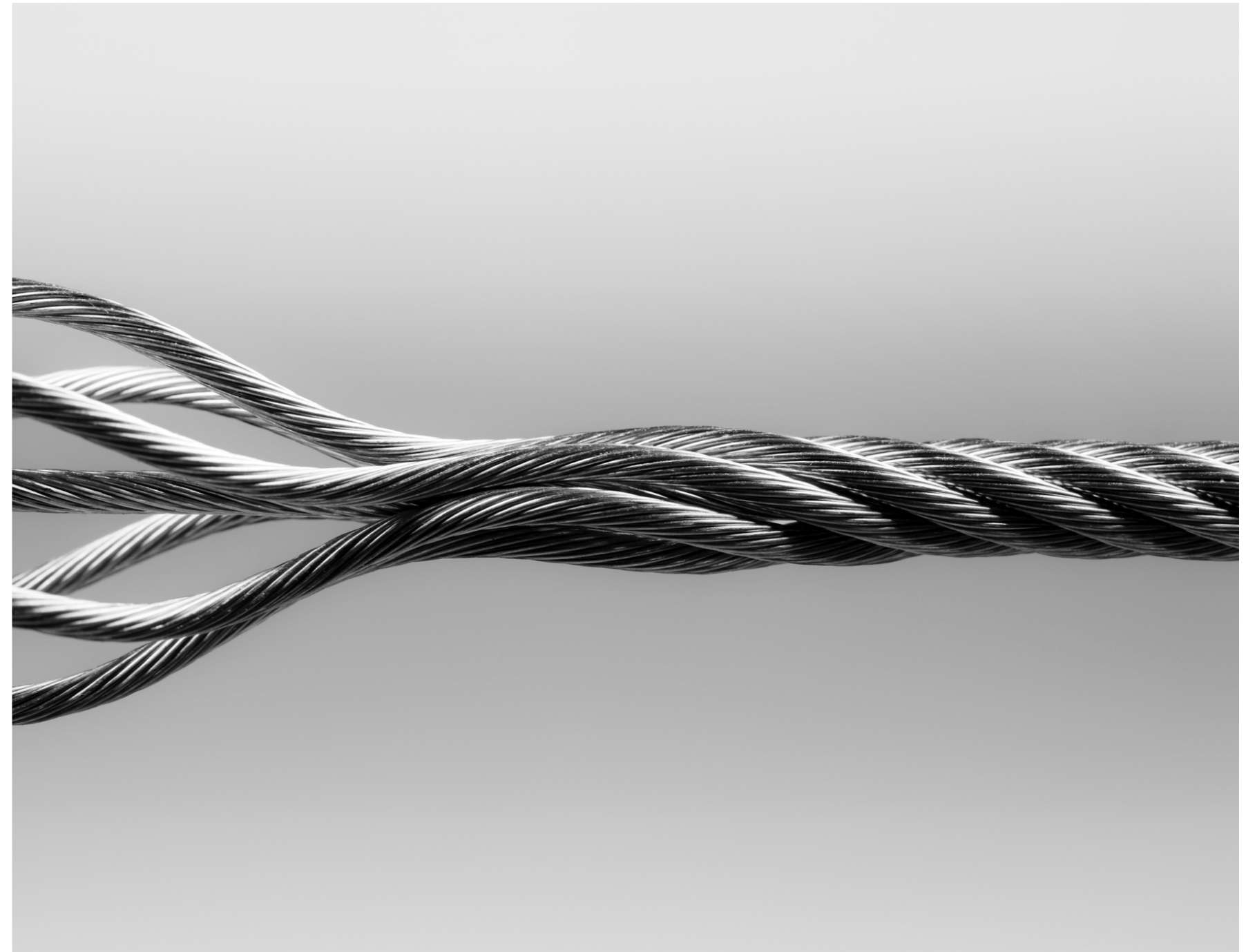
Figure 11: Ways to measure connection | RedThread Research, 2022

Wrapping up

The world feels increasingly unpredictable. We can't foresee what'll happen to organizations and their employees in today's environment of economic uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and massive social shifts. But from this research, we're convinced that strengthening connection in organizations is one way to enable them to weather whatever does come their way.

Yet we know that organizations will also likely have to do some belt-tightening in the near future. Whatever they do to build connection, it needs to be targeted and effective.

That's why we hope the insights in this report will help you think more intentionally about what types of connection you need to build in a given situation. We encourage you to use the 4-quadrant model to focus your efforts. By enabling connection in the ways your organization needs, you can help your organization build agility and become less vulnerable to stress and challenging times. Let us know how it goes.



About the author



Heather Gilmartin Adams

Senior Analyst | *Research Areas: Enabling Leaders, Learning & Skills*

Before joining RedThread in 2020, Heather spent 10 years at organizational culture change consultancies and the U.S. Department of the Treasury. She has an MA degree in International Affairs from Columbia and a BA in History from Princeton. Heather has lived in Germany, China, Japan, and India and was, for one summer, a wrangler on a dude ranch in Colorado.

Contributors

Thank you so much to those who participated in our roundtable and interviews. We couldn't have done this research without you! In addition to the leaders listed below, there are many others we can't name publicly. We extend our gratitude nonetheless: You know who you are.

Amanda Nolen

Andrew Wolhuter

Berengere Toscano

Cheryl Smith

Cindy Baudoin

Dan George

Dana Pellegrino

Danelen Johnson

David Ulrich

David Youssefnia

Elene Ghelagutashvili

Gretchen Murphy

Ixchel Torres

Jessica Amortegui

Julie Baker

Liz Wiseman

Mariel Davis

Matt Gosney

Maurik Dippel

Megan Galloway

Melissa Daimler

Michael Madon

Mitch Zenger

Mitchel M.

Penny Wong

Stephen Young

Tamara Hlava

Methodology

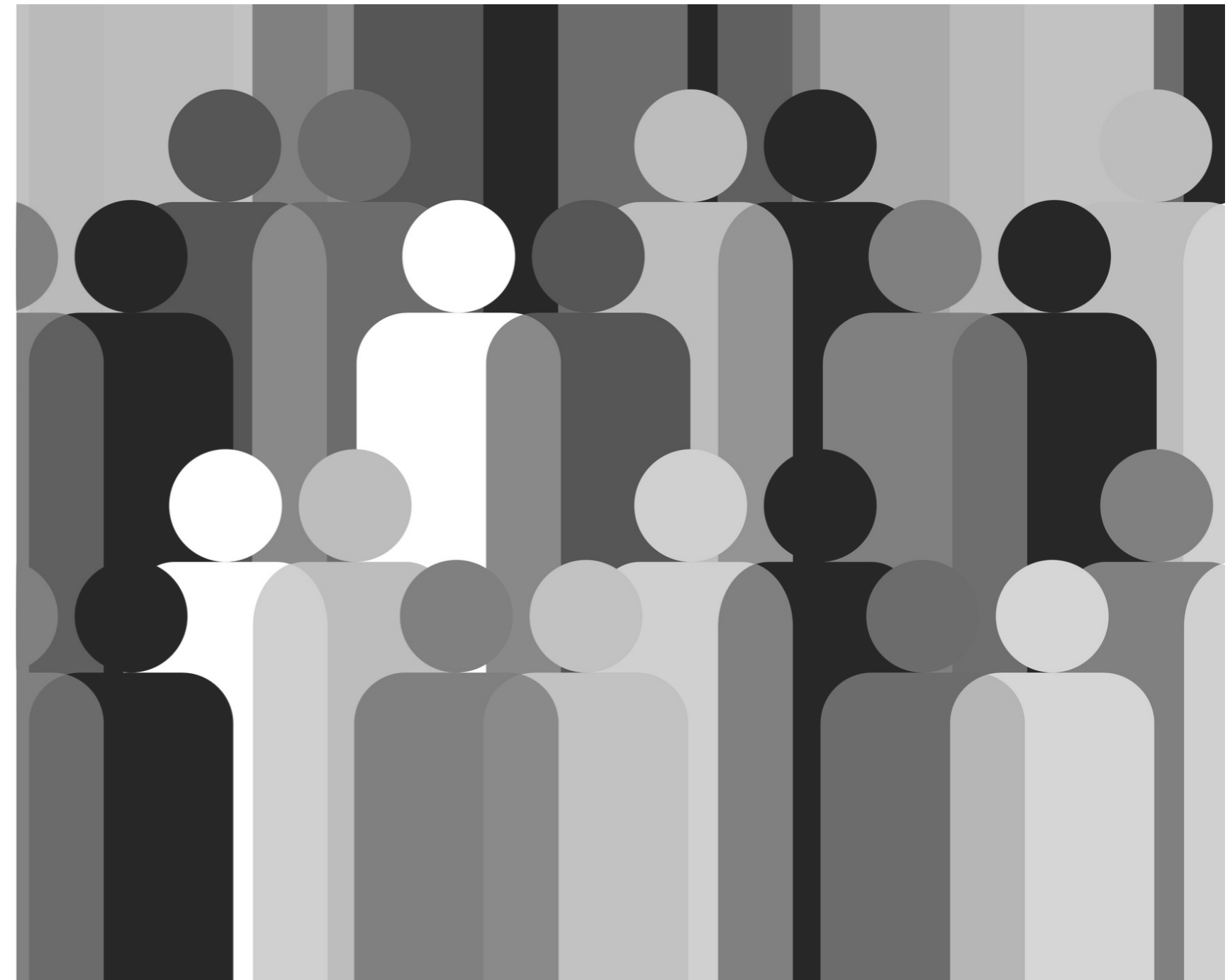
For this research, we surveyed over 700 employees across North America and Europe. Participants represented a wide range of industries and job functions, and skewed slightly more toward women than men. Specific demographic percentages are presented below.

You may have noticed that we displayed only a few items from our survey—out of the 34 we asked—in the charts in this report. The items displayed were the ones that were significantly related to each outcome when we ran regressions against our outcome variables:

- Organizational agility
- Employee engagement
- Customer satisfaction
- Employee NPS
- Business goals
- Innovation
- Manager effectiveness
- Intent to stay

In this paper, we focused most heavily on the top 3 outcomes (organizational agility, employee engagement, and customer satisfaction) because they had the most robust links to this topic, enabling connection at work.

We also conducted a roundtable with 27 leaders across industries and interviewed 17 leaders in depth. Seven interviews were conducted as part of our sixth podcast season, [The Great Reconnection](#). The other 10 were confidential.



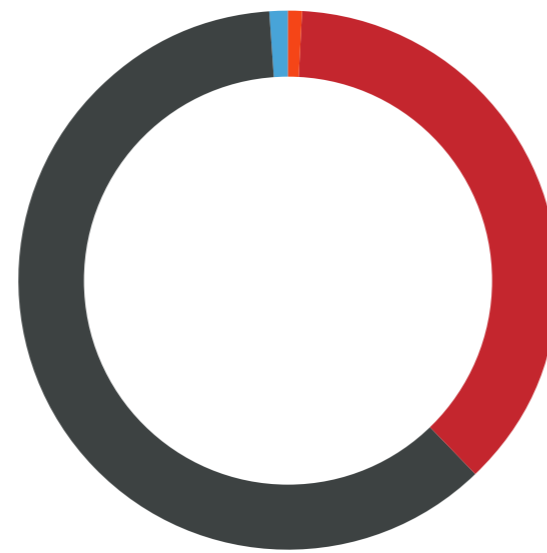
Survey Demographics

JOB LEVEL



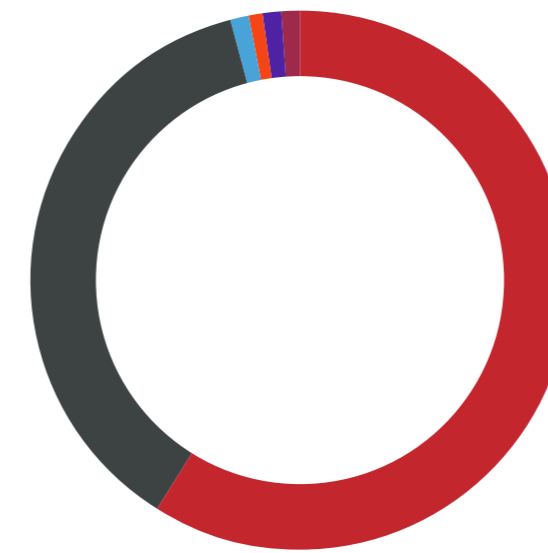
- C-level, CEO, or board member **3%**
- Vice President or Senior Vice President **4%**
- Director or senior director **16%**
- Mid-level manager **18%**
- First level manager **22%**
- Individual contributor **38%**

GENDER IDENTITY



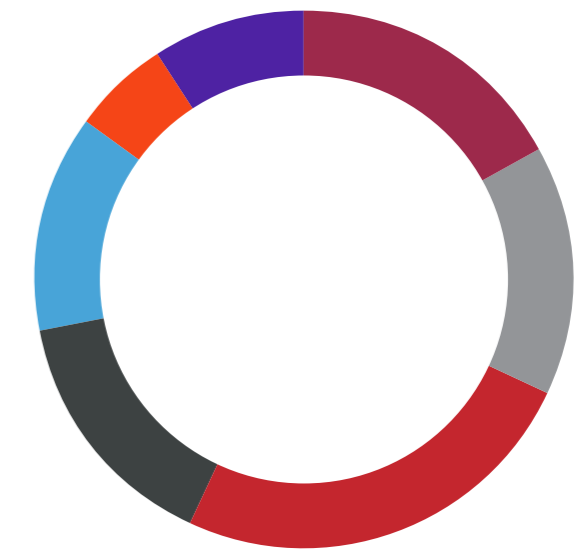
- Agender, nonbinary, or another gender identity not listed **1%**
- Man **37%**
- Woman **61%**
- I prefer not to say **1%**

COMPANY LOCATION



- North America: US, Canada, Mexico **59%**
- Europe (western Europe, eastern Europe, the Baltics, Russia) **37%**
- Asia (central Asia, south Asia) **1%**
- Asia-Pacific, Australia, New Zealand **1%**
- Central and South America and the Caribbean **1%**
- Middle East, Africa **1%**

COMPANY SIZE



- 101 to 500 employees **17%**
- 501 to 1,000 employees **15%**
- 1,001 to 5,000 employees **25%**
- 5,001 to 10,000 employees **15%**
- 10,001 to 50,000 employees **13%**
- 50,001 to 100,000 employees **6%**
- More than 100,000 employees **9%**



redthreadresearch.com