

When the Team Is the Lifeline: What the Data Reveals About Belonging at Work



May 21, 2026 - By Janelle Beck, Senior Copy Editor & Tracey Carney, EdD, Research Manager

Ask most employees what keeps them going at work, and chances are they will not describe a mission statement or a quarterly all-hands. They will describe a colleague who covered for them during a hard week. A team that laughs together before a difficult deadline. The relief of not having to explain yourself to the people sitting next to you.

New research from Wiley Workplace Intelligence, surveying more than 1,600 employees, confirms what most people already know but organizations frequently underestimate: the team is not just a unit of work. It is the primary source of hope and joy in people's day-to-day experience. And when that source is disrupted, something more than morale suffers.

The data also reveals something that should give leaders pause. The connection employees feel to their teams is strong, but it is not always durable. Under pressure, it fractures in predictable ways. Understanding where those fracture points are, and what prevents them, is the teamwork question worth asking right now.

The Foundation Is Strong

Our research painted an encouraging picture. 85% of employees say they feel connected to the people they work with and 91% feel motivated to do their best work. Perhaps surprisingly given the tumult of recent years, 76% report regularly experiencing joy in their work.



76%

76% report regularly experiencing joy at work

Among those who report experiencing joy, their team is the most named source, with 39% pointing to coworkers, compared to just 6% who credit senior leadership.

These numbers reflect a workforce that draws real energy from relationships built through working together.

However, 17% of our respondents have not felt joy in three months or more. The difference between those groups and those who report frequent joy is rarely about the work itself; it is almost always about the conditions surrounding it.

Team Connection Strains Under Pressure

One of the most telling findings in the research is the relationship between joy and belonging. 50% of employees report that when their sense of joy decreases, they also feel less connected to others at work. Joy and belonging do not erode independently. They tend to go together.

That pattern becomes more pronounced under stress. Among high-stress employees, 58% say connection drops when joy drops; among low-stress employees, 39% percent say the same. Stress does not just affect how people feel individually. It weakens the relational fabric that holds teams together.



58% say team connection drops when joy decreases

For pricing, facilitation programs, Research Manuals, or to get 5B Certified - Contact Kestly Development
Mike@KestlyDevelopment.com (734) 646-9993

High connection is not the same as resilient connection. While almost 90% of employees report that they feel connected to coworkers, there is a thirty-five-point gap between how widespread that connection is and how stable it is under pressure. Teams that appear cohesive in stable conditions can fracture quickly when the environment shifts. That is where core teamwork behaviors like trust and accountability become even more important.

Common Workload Issues Compound Stressors

The research surfaces a compounding dynamic that teams rarely name directly but experience frequently. Only 64% of our respondents say they have enough time to do their work and 68% report having the resources they need.

When capacity falls short of commitment, teams absorb the difference. Work gets redistributed informally. Roles blur. Some people stretch further than others. What was meant to be temporary becomes permanent. And the invisible labor of holding a team together, covering gaps, managing uncertainty, maintaining morale while one's own reserves are depleted, tends to fall on the people most invested in the collective outcome.



Only 68% report meaningful acknowledgement of achievements

This is where trust erodes, not through conflict or crisis, but through the slow accumulation of unacknowledged strain. Recognition data reinforces this: only 68% percent of employees say their organization takes time to acknowledge important achievements and milestones. 71% feel their accomplishments are recognized at all. When teams are carrying more than they are being credited for, the conditions for resentment are already in place.

Manager Wellbeing Can Make or Break Team Dynamics

Managers continue to carry the weight of uncertainty in many organizations, and our research shows that ongoing pressure takes a toll on their wellbeing. 46% of people managers report severe stress, compared to 27% of employees without direct reports. They have less time, fewer resources, and are nearly eight times more likely than executives to report uncertainty about whether they have experienced joy at work recently.



46% of people managers report severe stress

This matters for teams because managers set the tone for everything that happens within them. 72% of employees say their manager helps them stay motivated at work, and the same proportion say their manager helps them stay optimistic during change. But that influence runs in both directions.

A manager who is stretched past the point of intentional leadership does not stop caring about the people on the team. They lose the bandwidth to create the conditions that make teams function well: the check-ins, the acknowledgments, the space for honest conversation about what is and is not working.

Protecting manager capacity is not a wellness consideration. It is a team health consideration.

What Sustains Teams When Conditions Are Difficult

The data points to specific, practicable actions that separate teams that hold together under pressure from those that quietly come apart.

Make belonging an active practice, not a passive assumption. Connection is strong when conditions are stable, but it requires active reinforcement when they are not. Teams that build explicit practices around checking in, acknowledging effort, and creating space for honest conversation are not doing something extra. They are doing the work that keeps connection from eroding when stress rises.

Close the gap between capacity and expectation. Teams cannot sustain performance on motivation alone. The twenty-seven-point gap between how many employees are motivated to do their best work and how many have enough time to do it is where team strain lives. Organizations that take workload sustainability seriously, rather than assuming it will sort itself out, protect the conditions that allow teams to function.

Recognize specifically and often. The research shows that recognition gaps accelerate disengagement. When teams are carrying more than usual and that effort goes

unacknowledged, trust erodes. Timely, specific recognition sustains belonging and increases joy.

Treat psychological safety as a daily behavior. Team relationships are not background context. They are the primary environment of work and greatest influencer of joy. Teams where people feel safe to raise concerns, name capacity limits, and be honest about what is not working are the teams best positioned to navigate uncertainty without fracturing.

The research does not describe a workforce that has lost its sense of connection. It describes one that is more motivated and more relationship-oriented than organizations often credit, but whose team bonds are under real and measurable pressure.

The teams that come through that pressure intact are the ones with the most deliberate practices: the ones where belonging is built intentionally, where capacity is protected seriously, and where the people responsible for holding teams together are given what they need to do well.

Wiley's suite of professional solutions provides a structure and common language to help empower entire organizations with the skills needed to get to the next level. From building better teams with **The Five Behaviors®**, and improving understanding to create engaged, collaborative, and adaptive cultures with **Everything DiSC® on Catalyst™**, helping you make confident hiring decisions with **PXT Select®**, or unlocking your leaders' potential to drive team and organizational performance with 360 feedback from **Kestly Development**.
<https://tinyurl.com/2zafrbzb>