

Before You Fix the Symptom, Find the Cause

A Practical Guide to Identifying the Underlying Causes of Workplace Challenges

For owners and leaders of growing BC businesses.

01

Symptom

02

Underlying Cause

03

Targeted Solution

SENTERRA HR

The Symptoms Leaders See

These are some of the most common workplace challenges organizations experience. While these issues are important, they are often symptoms of deeper organizational challenges.



Excess Overtime

Teams often working beyond capacity



High Turnover

Talent leaving faster than it can be replaced



Low Morale

Employees appear disengaged and frustrated



Communication Breakdowns

Misalignment, confusion, and information gaps



Manager Burnout

Leaders stretched too thin to lead effectively



Slow Decisions

Bottlenecks and approval delays

The Problem You See Is Not Always the Problem You Need to Solve

Organizations often rush to solutions before fully understanding what employees are experiencing. A surface-level fix may temporarily ease pressure, but without addressing the underlying cause, the same symptoms will return — often worse than before.

Communication Problem

What You See: A communication problem across teams

Possible Underlying Causes:

- Unclear leadership direction
- Poor communication practices
- Conflicting priorities

Excess Overtime

What You See: Teams working beyond capacity

Possible Underlying Causes:

- Staffing shortages
- Poor workload planning
- Inefficient processes

Accountability Problems

What You See: Missed deadlines and unclear ownership

Possible Underlying Causes:

- Unclear roles and expectations
- Poor follow-through
- Lack of defined ownership

❏ One symptom can have multiple underlying causes. Effective diagnosis requires exploring all of them.

How Employees Actually Experience the Workplace

Employees do not experience the workplace through mission statements or values posters. They experience it through the daily reality of how work gets done — and who shapes that reality.

The Employee Experience Is Shaped By



Leadership



Communication



Decision Making



Accountability



Processes



Relationships

Why This Matters

Workplace challenges often emerge when there is a gap between leadership intentions and the employee experience.

When leaders can see the workplace through their employees' eyes, patterns emerge that were previously invisible — and potential solutions become clearer.



Employee feedback is one of the most valuable sources of information when diagnosing workplace challenges — and should be considered alongside turnover trends, absenteeism, overtime, productivity, safety data, and exit interviews.

Questions Worth Asking Your Employees

The fastest path to understanding workplace challenges is to ask the people living them every day. These questions cut through surface-level feedback and reveal what is actually happening on the ground.

About Frustration

"What frustrates you most about your work?"

"What gets in the way of doing your best work?"

About Efficiency

"What slows you down?"

"What wastes the most time in your day?"

"What approvals create unnecessary delays?"

"What do you spend time doing that adds little value?"

"What process creates the most frustration for you?"

About Unresolved Issues

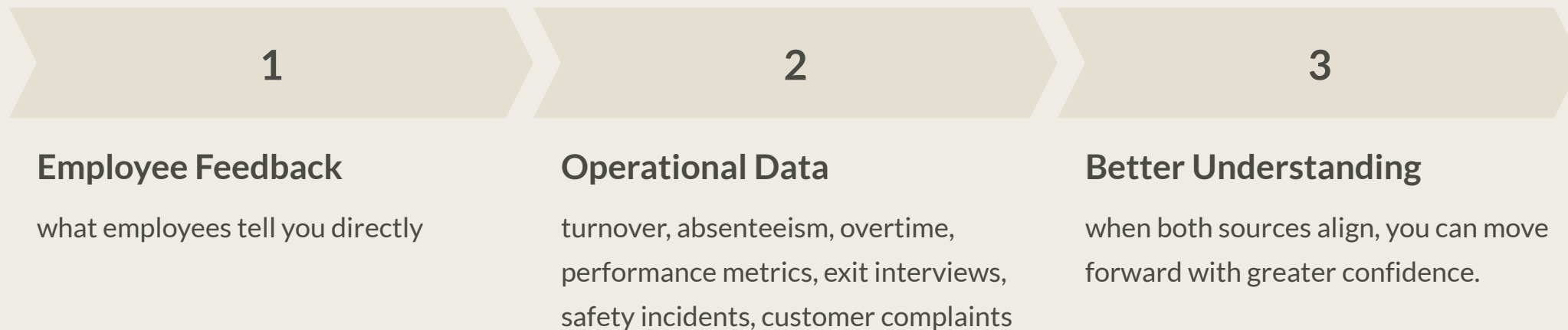
"What issue never seems to get resolved?"

"If you could change one thing tomorrow, what would it be?"

These conversations work best in psychological safety. Employees need to trust that their honesty will be met with action, not consequences.

Validate What You Hear

Employee feedback is important, but it should be considered alongside other sources of information. The strongest diagnoses combine what employees tell you with what your operational data shows.

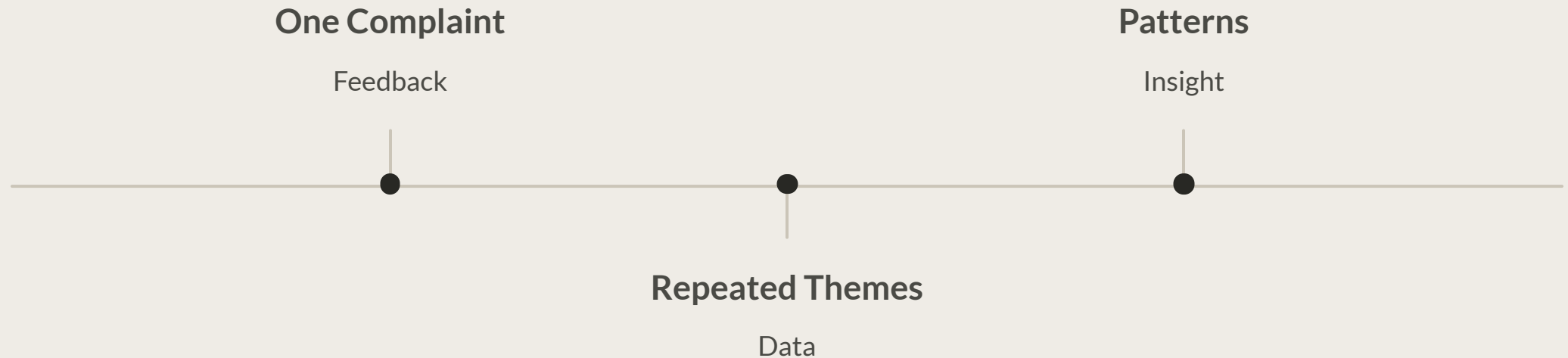


When feedback and data disagree, dig deeper — the gap usually points to something neither source fully captures on its own.

-  The problem you see is not always the problem you need to solve. Use both employee feedback and operational data to find where to look.

Look for Patterns – Not Just Complaints

One complaint is feedback. Repeated themes are data. The difference between noise and signal is pattern recognition.



What to Listen For

- Recurring frustrations across teams
- Repeated bottlenecks in workflows
- Consistent delays in approvals
- Shared confusion about roles or direction
- Common obstacles mentioned independently

Why Patterns Matter

When multiple employees — especially those who don't talk to each other — raise the same concern, you are no longer looking at an individual complaint. You are looking at a systemic issue.

Patterns reveal the underlying causes driving workplace challenges. They point to the structures, processes, or behaviors that need to change — not just the symptoms that need managing.

A useful rule of thumb: when three or more people who don't work closely together raise the same issue independently, treat it as a pattern, not a complaint.



Patterns Provide Valuable Diagnostic Information. Treat recurring themes as your most valuable diagnostic evidence.

Symptoms and Possible Underlying Causes

This is the page to bookmark. Use it as a starting point — your employee conversations will confirm or refine the real causes in your organization.

Symptom	Possible Underlying Causes
Excess Overtime	Staffing shortages • Poor workload planning • Inefficient processes • Unrealistic deadlines
Low Morale	Unmanageable workloads • Leadership challenges • Lack of recognition • Limited growth paths
Communication Problems	Unclear expectations • Inconsistent messaging • Information silos • Lack of feedback channels
Accountability Issues	Unclear roles and responsibilities • Lack of ownership culture • Inconsistent follow-through
High Turnover	Poor management • Inadequate compensation • Lack of development • Poor employee experience • Workplace relationship challenges
Slow Decision-Making	Too many approval layers • Unclear decision rights • Risk-averse culture • Lack of delegation
Quiet Quitting / Disengagement	Unclear purpose • Lack of recognition • Burnout • Misaligned workload
Frequent Conflict Between Teams	Competing priorities • Unclear ownership • Poor cross-team communication • Resource competition
Good People Leaving or Not Advancing	No development path • Inconsistent advancement criteria • Manager bottlenecks

The Senterra HR Diagnostic Framework

This seven-step framework guides organizations from symptom identification to sustainable improvement. Each step builds on the last – skipping steps leads to incomplete diagnoses and temporary fixes.



Identify the Symptom

Name what you are observing clearly and specifically



Talk to Employees

Ask the right questions in a safe environment



Understand Frustrations

Listen without defending – seek to understand first



Look for Patterns

Recurring themes are your most reliable data



Determine Underlying Causes

Identify the underlying causes contributing to the issue.



Address the Causes

Design targeted interventions, not broad fixes



Measure the Impact

Track whether changes are producing real improvement

From Diagnosis to Action: What Changes

When organizations commit to identifying and addressing underlying causes rather than treating symptoms, the quality and durability of their solutions improves dramatically. Here is what shifts when you apply this framework.



Targeted Solutions

Instead of broad, expensive interventions, you invest in precise changes that address the actual drivers of the problem — saving time and resources.



Stronger Trust

When employees see their feedback leading to real change, trust in leadership grows.



Sustainable Improvement

Addressing underlying causes increases the likelihood of sustainable improvement — reducing the need for repeated intervention.

Many Workplace Challenges Are Symptoms

Sustainable improvement happens when organizations identify and address the underlying causes driving those symptoms — not the symptoms themselves.

You can diagnose a lot of this yourself.

The questions and patterns in this guide will take you a long way. But the hardest causes to see are the ones inside your own organization — the patterns you're too close to notice, and the conversations employees won't have with the person who signs their cheques. That's where an outside perspective changes everything.

Senterra HR helps BC businesses uncover what's really driving their workplace challenges — and build practical solutions that hold.

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