

The Ladder Check-In

Using Neuroscience to Promote Emotional Safety and Engagement

This tool equips supervisors and leaders with a neuroscience-based strategy to foster emotional safety, engagement, and well-being in the workplace. Using a "ladder" model inspired by the Polyvagal Theory, leaders can gauge an employee's nervous system state and provide tailored support to enhance focus, connection, and productivity.

The Ladder Check-In

The "ladder" is a metaphor for understanding how our nervous system shifts between states of calm, stress, and withdrawal. It allows for an accessible way to check in with employees and respond to their emotional and mental needs.

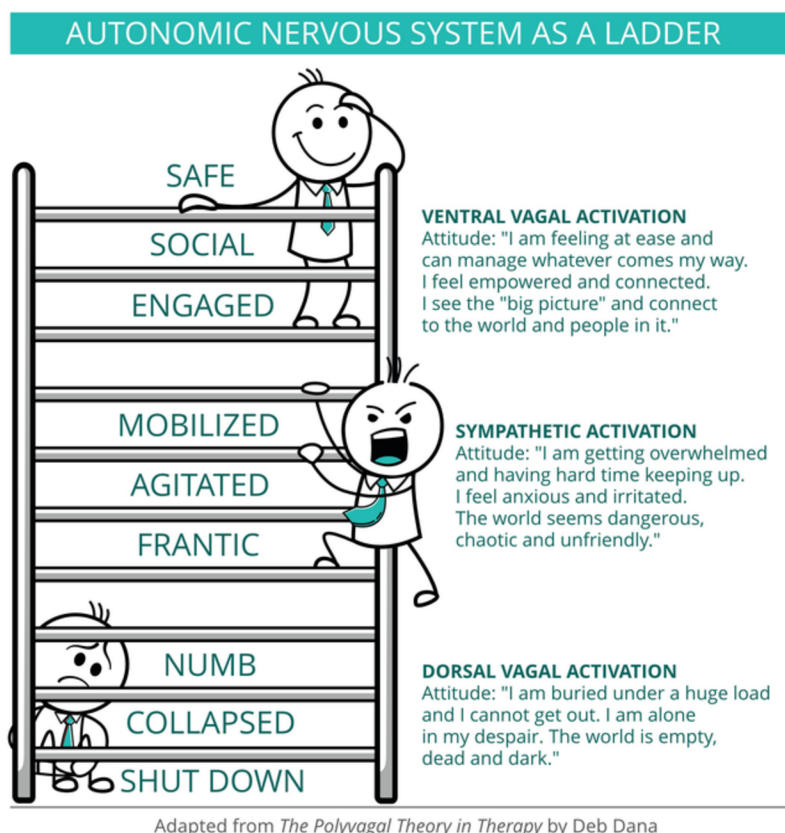
Using the Ladder Check-In:

Ask: "Where do you feel you are on the 'ladder' today?"

- Explanation: The ladder represents different states of the nervous system, reflecting how connected or disconnected the person feels in the moment.

The Ladder:

- Top of the Ladder (Engaged): Feeling calm, focused, present, and ready to engage. In this state, the employee is likely to feel productive and connected.
- Middle (Fight/Flight Response): Experiencing stress or feeling overwhelmed. They be in a problem-solving or defensive state but still engaged.
- Bottom (Freeze Response): Disengaged, withdrawn, or feeling disconnected. Here, the person may feel overwhelmed to the point of shutting down or feeling unable to engage effectively.



Follow Up Based on Their Response:

- Top of the Ladder (Engaged): Build on their positive state by discussing growth, setting future goals, or exploring how to maintain this high level of engagement.
 - Prompt: “It sounds like you’re in a good space today. What has been working well for you, and how can we support your momentum?”
- Middle of the Ladder (Fight/Flight): Acknowledge the stress they may be feeling. Offer opportunities to relieve pressure, such as a short break, flexible scheduling, help prioritizing tasks, adjusting workload, or providing task-specific support.
 - Prompt: “I hear you are feeling stressed. What do you think might help relieve some of that pressure right now?”
- Bottom of the Ladder (Freeze): Validate feelings of disconnection or overwhelm. Consider offering grounding techniques or suggesting small, manageable actions to help them reconnect.
 - Prompt: “It sounds like today has been tough. Would it help to take a step back and regroup? Let’s find small steps to help you feel more supported.”

Use Targeted Conversation Prompts:

- General Check-In: “Where do you feel you are today in terms of focus and energy? Are you feeling ready to engage or more stressed or disconnected?”
- Reflection for Support: “What’s contributing to where you are on the ladder today, and how can I best support you to move upwards?”

Application:

- When to Use: Regularly incorporate this tool during one-on-one supervision meetings or casual check-ins. Aim for at least weekly use, increasing frequency during times of heightened stress, organizational changes, or busy periods. It can be used proactively or to assess needs as they arise.
- Action Steps: Pair responses with specific actions, such as offering a break or adjusting priorities for those feeling stressed, or goal-setting for those feeling engaged. Individualized approaches ensure employees feel seen and valued. Regular follow-ups help track progress and provide ongoing support.



Targeted Action Plan Examples for Follow Up

These plans provide structured approaches for supervisors and leaders to support employees at different engagement levels, promoting emotional safety and well-being in the workplace. Feel free to use any or all of the strategies listed to create an individualized and comprehensive support plan.

Top of the Ladder (Engaged): Enhancing and Sustaining Engagement

- Goal setting: Collaboratively identify short- and long-term professional goals that align with the employee's strengths and interests.
- Positive Reinforcement: Regularly acknowledge achievements and contributions; consider implementing a recognition program.
- Skill Development: Encourage participation in relevant training or mentorship opportunities to foster professional growth and engagement.
- Continuous Feedback: Schedule regular check-ins to discuss progress, gather feedback, and explore new challenges that may arise.

Middle of the Ladder (Fight/Flight): Addressing Stress and Building Resilience

- Stress Assessment: Conduct assessments to identify specific stressors and encourage open dialogue about thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
- Prioritization Support: Assist in prioritizing tasks using manageable steps and organizational tools like to-do lists or supportive software. Offer flexibility in scheduling or workload where possible.
- Resource Availability: Identify and provide access to mental health resources, professional supports, and local support groups.
- Regular Breaks: Encourage short breaks throughout the day to recharge and suggest implementing "quiet hours" for uninterrupted focused work time.

Bottom of the Ladder (Freeze): Supporting Reconnection and Recovery

- Validation and Empathy: Listen and acknowledge feelings of disconnection.
- Small Action Steps: Make a list of manageable tasks and achievable priorities.
- Team Support: Foster a supportive team environment with peer check-ins and team-building activities that promote community.
- Follow-Up: Schedule regular check-ins to assess progress, adjust action steps as needed, and identify any ongoing challenges or support needs.

