



Improving the team member experience at AAFCANS

Key insights, considered strategy and practical takeaways to elevate team member experience



CASE STUDY • EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE • NOT-FOR-PROFIT

Context

Australian Army & Air Force Canteen Service (AAFCANS) is a not-for-profit organisation that serves Australian Defence Force bases by operating canteens, cafes, and other food outlets. AAFCANS operates across 27 bases Australia-wide, employing 280 people. As a not-for-profit with a central focus on contributing to Defence capability, AAFCANS seeks to employ people from within the Defence community, enabling ease of transfer across Australia. They also contribute significant disbursements towards bases and facilities improvements.

In partnership with Insync, AAFCANS surveys team members every three years, using results to directly inform strategic and corporate planning.

Following the 2022 team member engagement and alignment survey, sentiment toward senior leadership and communication was low, while recognition and overall job satisfaction were also identified as key areas for improvement. In response, AAFCANS placed people at the centre of its 2023–2026 strategic plan. The organisation prioritised strengthening career development pathways, improving succession planning and future-proofing its workforce. Alongside this, targeted efforts were introduced to enhance recognition practices and build a more engaged workplace that would reshape the culture.

What followed was a focused, coordinated effort to turn those priorities into practice. This case study explores what changed across senior leadership, people practices, systems, and processes, and why it made a difference.

Why the 2025 results are significant



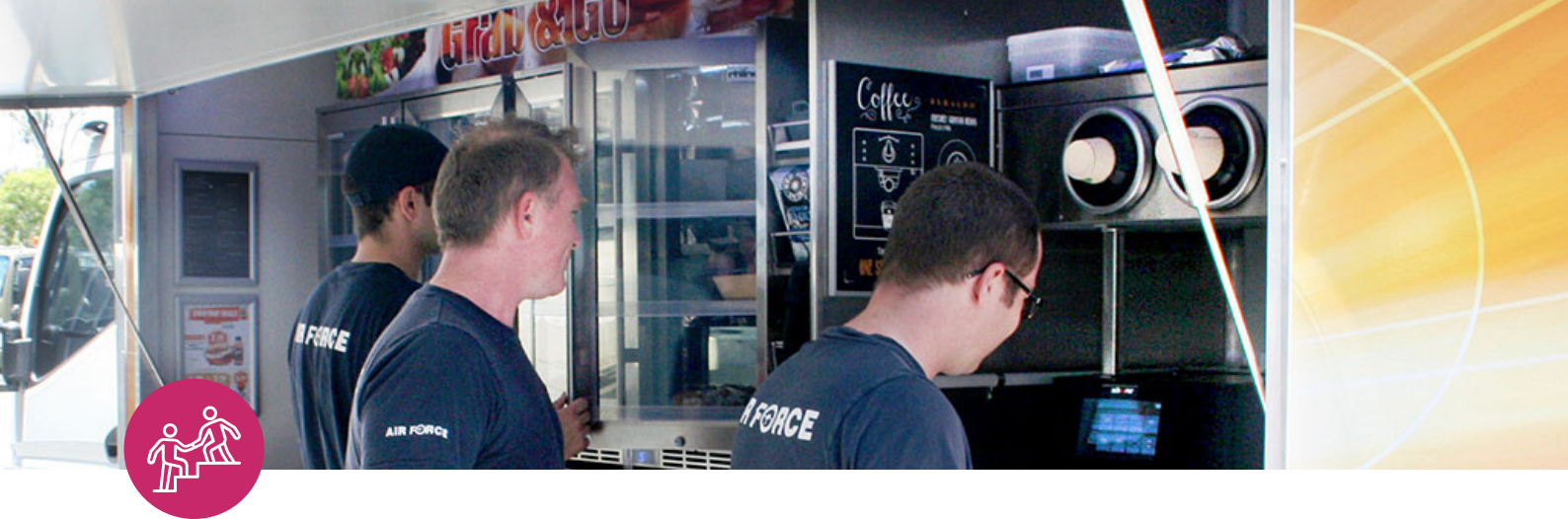
In 2025, AAFCANS’ employee engagement improved by 17%, while alignment rose by 18%. Both of these measurements now sit in the top quartile of the Insync not-for-profit benchmark, rising from the bottom quartile. Seeing this level of improvement so quickly reflects the strategic plan, which places people at its core. It is important to note that the AAFCANS workforce is non-hybrid, and these changes were made while Australia was gripped with lockdowns and other difficulties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The investment and careful planning by senior leadership indicate a commitment to improving the working environment for all team members.

These results were not driven by isolated efforts, but coordinated focus on three key areas known to influence the team member experience:



Harry Long, Senior Consultant at Insync, spoke with Rachele Moylan, Head of People & Culture at AAFCANS, to dive deeper into what drove the results seen in 2025 and how these changes have become embedded in everyday practices at AAFCANS.

*All survey items included in this study saw statistically significant improvement, marked by a * throughout.*



1. Senior leadership

Indicators

- I understand how AAFCANS expects to achieve its goals +30%*
- I am comfortable speaking up and raising issues +27%*
- Our senior leaders are good role models +25%*
- Our senior leaders thank people for their contribution +22%*

Feeling seen and connected to leadership

Senior leadership placed a strong emphasis on being visible and connected to team members across all venues. Small adjustments, including walking around the corporate offices, ad hoc conversations with team members inside or outside their teams, and a shift in approach to celebrating team member, all contributed to the positive sentiment around senior leaders. This consistent presence helped build trust and clarity among team members, contributing to a sense of reliability and cohesion throughout the organisation.

A stable senior leadership group was critical to success. Consistency enabled accountability and buy-in from the senior leadership team, who were primarily responsible for the strategic plan in the first place. It was important to demonstrate to team members that this was an area they were serious about improving. A stable leadership team also means team member can get to know their leaders on a deeper level, aiding opinions on their visibility across the organisation.

Feeling valued in the workplace

As part of the changes to improve the team member experience, recognition practices were revised to be more immediate and meaningful. Team members receiving positive feedback via text message has become commonplace and is often at the discretion of the Venue Managers. Empowering Venue Managers to recognise their team member's efforts and placing trust back in their hands is another reason perceptions of senior leadership changed for the better. Without the need to wait for higher-level approval, ad hoc recognition could be streamlined, replacing an old process that was convoluted and complex. In addition to text messages, small gifts and shoutouts on Employment Hero were also used to recognise contributions. It is important to note that a number of methods can be used to celebrate people, as some team members will prefer quiet, private recognition, while others will appreciate public acknowledgment.

Practical takeaway



Visibility and recognition don't require grand gestures. Small, consistent behaviours like walking the floor, having informal conversations, and saying thank you in real time shape how leadership is perceived. Empowering managers to recognise effort without layers of approval so that appreciation feels timely and genuine is also key to success.



2. People practices

Indicators

- AAFCONS has effective processes for developing team members +32%*
- There are opportunities to improve my skills at this organisation +28%*
- AAFCONS supports me to achieve work-life balance +25%*

Supporting work-life balance in a non-hybrid environment

With a workforce that predominantly requires in-person work, some measures were introduced to ensure flexible arrangements were available in a non-hybrid environment. Firstly, an RDO program was implemented and “was a big hit” among team member. Additionally, AAFCONS wanted to be an employer that could adapt to different lifestyles. Flexible working arrangements, including a four-day work week and early access to long service leave, particularly targeted parents with young children, as well as the older workforce at AAFCONS. Allowing early access to long service leave meant in-person workers could take a day off as annual leave when they needed to, or simply to refresh. These changes were particularly impactful for these cohorts and demonstrated a level of care and willingness to support work-life balance that had previously not existed at AAFCONS.

Setting a future and defining a career path

Ensuring there is a clear roadmap for development and career progression is central to the team member experience. AAFCONS sought to define an internal pathway for team members to demonstrate that there are opportunities to build a career at AAFCONS, exemplified by many of the current Venue Managers rising through the organisational hierarchy. In addition to career advancement, there was a greater focus on individual development, which became more structured. Tools such as Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and formal performance appraisals were integrated into the work experience, guiding team member development and career trajectories. AAFCONS also complemented formal development programs with informal, on-the-job learning opportunities. This included hands-on development in areas such as IT, allowing team members to build skills to complement their day-to-day responsibilities.

Building skills and autonomy

A major investment was made in team member development, particularly through the adoption of the Litmos training platform. This online resource enables team members to easily access skill- or professional-development courses of their choice, rather than mandating compulsory sessions. This puts development and upskilling back in team members' hands and signals a commitment from senior leadership to improving the team's skills.

Practical takeaways



Even in non-hybrid working environments, flexibility is possible. Look beyond hybrid work and consider options like RDOs, compressed weeks/fortnights, and early access to leave. When team members feel their organisation adapts to different life stages, trust and commitment tend to follow. Similarly, a clear development pathway helps team members see how their careers will progress. Combining a structured approach, such as an IDP, with informal, hands-on opportunities allows team members to see how their professional growth will be supported.



3. Systems and processes

Indicators

- AAFcans allocates resources (money, people and effort) towards achieving organisational goals +20%*
- The technology provided by the organisation allows me to be as productive as possible +14%*

Providing a safe and productive work environment

AAFcans made substantial upgrades to its facilities to improve both productivity and team member safety. Large-scale renovations of canteens and smaller-scale upgrades to the fleet of Mobile Food Vans are examples of this. Separate from the physical upgrades were efforts to increase efficiency and productivity by upgrading outdated equipment. The introduction of Merrychef ovens not only reduced cooking times but also significantly improved safety by reducing the risk of burns. Additionally, all Point of Sale (POS) systems were upgraded to tablet-based systems, which streamlined transactions and allowed customers to navigate the facility more efficiently. Such improvements were a significant investment for AAFcans, but they are indicative of their focus on improving the work experience for their team members.

Improving consistency and accessibility of online systems

AAFcans revamped internal systems to enhance productivity and usability. Venue Managers and Assistant Venue Managers were trained and granted access to a centralised online platform integrated with SharePoint. Previously, there were issues with accessing company documents, namely, user manuals for recipes and drinks, as well as key company policies. The changes allowed uniformity across all AAFcans sites, ensuring easy access and consistency of products and services. Not all upgrades were immediately embraced, and some sites required additional support to adapt to new systems, but the results have been demonstrated in the long run.

Also central to the digital upgrades were improvements made to operational systems. SharePoint was overhauled to be more user-friendly, while a new HRIS was introduced to streamline processes. Part of this was to allow inductions for new team members to be conducted online. Doing so allowed the onboarding process to be consistent across all sites Australia-wide and new starters to be more closely aligned to the direction of the organisation.



Practical takeaway

Ask frontline teams what slows them down and fix those issues first. When team members see their feedback lead to real change and understand what is coming next, trust and engagement follow. This is driven by leadership and a commitment to transparency, leaving team members feeling they have not been kept in the dark.

Where to next?

With a clear and well-executed strategic plan completed, AAFCANS is now turning its attention to a new focus on customer centricity. While the past three years have been centred around improving internal culture, systems and leadership practices, AAFCANS recognises that focus needs to pivot to the customer experience. Not all priorities can be tackled at once, but key lessons from the successful rollout of the previous strategy can help ensure the next one is implemented in a similar fashion. AAFCANS demonstrates that engagement doesn't shift through programs, it shifts through consistent leadership behaviour, practical improvements to daily work and systems that make jobs easier. These small, sustained changes are what build meaningful results.



About Insync

Organisations built on service, whether to defence communities, customers or the public, run on the people behind them. When those people feel seen, supported and connected to a shared purpose, the impact flows outward.

At Insync, we partner with organisations to measure what matters most: how people experience leadership, culture and their day-to-day working environment. Through our validated Alignment & Engagement Survey, we turn employee voice into evidence and evidence into action.

Our work with AAFCANS shows what becomes possible when an organisation commits to listening and then follows through. When senior leaders are visible and accountable, when recognition is timely and genuine, and when systems are built around the people using them, engagement doesn't just improve. It transforms. Because in an organisation built on service, the quality of what you deliver to the outside world starts with the quality of the experience you create on the inside.

