

HR & Managers: The keys to a successful partnership



Effective systems and strategies for better
manager development.



What does it mean to be a manager?
In a given week, a manager can serve as a delegator, a coach, a therapist, and a cheerleader.

But so often, new managers are ill-prepared to take on the many hats of a manager.

Just because someone was a top performer as an individual contributor, it doesn't mean they're prepared for the dynamic duties of a manager.

While this isn't something we can change overnight, HR leaders are best equipped to empower manager skills.



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Traditionally, managers and HR teams have had a rocky relationship. Managers often perceive HR as someone they hear from when there's a problem, rather than as an ongoing support system, and that approach is failing managers, employees, and organizations. In recent years, we've seen a push towards more strategic HR and a greater focus on people, experience, and culture. As a result, there is a noticeable shift toward more mutually supportive relationships between managers and HR.

Research consistently shows that the success of managers is the greatest indicator of success for an organization. Simply put, "more great managers = more meaningful work = more great results = more fulfilled humans," according to Tania Luna, Co-CEO of [LifeLabs Learning](#).

It's time to focus on developing managers as insightful leaders, creating new resources to scale their empathy, and making it easier to grow themselves and their teams. With this approach, organizations will foster teams that are better equipped to chart the course towards a brighter future.

This guide is designed to help your team create systems and approaches that extend a manager's ability to connect, engage, inspire, and lead. We'll explore the changing role of managers, key areas to incorporate a more human approach, and strategies for better manager development.



“more great managers = more meaningful work = more great results = more fulfilled humans”

— Tania Luna, Co-CEO of LifeLabs Learning



What makes for *effective* managers?

There's no clear playbook for being a manager. Management can look completely different depending on the role, number of direct reports, company size, and company culture. The needs of a team are constantly changing, and it's the responsibility of a manager to adapt to these needs to create an optimal environment for their team to thrive. In short, being a manager is an inherently complex and human experience.

A good manager is so much more than a taskmaster or delegator. Strong managers understand and engage with people in their infinite complexity by inspiring teams to do their best work, having difficult conversations about disruptive change, and coaching them through the ups-and-downs of work-life (and life-life).



Managers have many roles to play, and often need to toggle between these roles throughout the day. It's time for HR leaders to adapt their approach. We've compiled a list of common roles and responsibilities of successful managers and identified opportunities for HR teams to better support them:

The Empath

Responsibilities

Sensing what your team is feeling without having to be told explicitly.

Reading people's signals or body language and noticing subtle changes in behavior is critical to identifying areas for improvement.

HR quick win

Encourage managers to hold regular 1-on-1 meetings with their reports to gauge how people are feeling. Provide discussion questions to help facilitate conversations that uncover issues.

The Fire Extinguisher

Responsibilities

Urgently addressing emergencies when your team gets into trouble.

Whether an urgent request lands in your inbox or someone hands in their notice unexpectedly, unpacking problems and prioritizing solutions are essential skills.

HR quick win

Provide a framework to help managers respond to unexpected challenges. Share a set of prioritization questions to help their team find focus and teach them how to break complex problems down into smaller individual tasks.



The Hypeperson

Responsibilities

Ensuring your team members are motivated and confident in their abilities.

Aligning projects to the right team members, boosting morale when projects are tough, and supporting individual growth are just a few ways to coach and cheer on your team.

HR quick win

Show managers how to use 1-on-1s to uncover what motivates each team member. Encourage assigning projects that align with an individual's skill level and opportunity for growth. Provide a coaching framework that encourages managers to help team members figure out solutions for themselves.

The Wise One

Responsibilities

Offering sage wisdom and advice to less experienced team members.

Letting team members make their own mistakes and knowing when to keep quiet or to offer your perspective comes with experience.

HR quick win

Coach managers to ask thoughtful questions that push team members to make smarter decisions.



The Safety Net

Responsibilities

Catching your team members before they do something unfortunate – or minimizing the impact if they make a mistake.

Managers shed light on things their reports might not be aware of, protect the team from high-level tensions, and offer reassurance and assistance when things go wrong.

HR quick win

Equip managers with the tools to give timely and actionable feedback. Encourage asking open-ended questions to understand what happened and identify learning opportunities.

The "Villain"

Responsibilities

Making the tough-but-necessary decisions, and sometimes being the bearer of bad news.

Deciding to lay off team members, having difficult conversations about someone's performance, and setting realistic expectations for promotions may make you feel alienated from your direct reports.

HR quick win

Teach managers to communicate clearly and truly listen to people's responses. Provide a framework for performance conversations so expectations are clear from the outset.

This merely scratches the surface but begins to show the myriad roles and responsibilities of a manager. Managers wear many hats and need organizational support to drive individual and team success. While we've offered a few tips above, below we will share more specific opportunities and best practices for HR to support manager development and training.



FIG 1. PREEMPTING TROUBLE



FIG 2. COMMUNICATING CLEARLY

"Strong managers understand and engage with people in their infinite complexity by inspiring teams to do their best work"

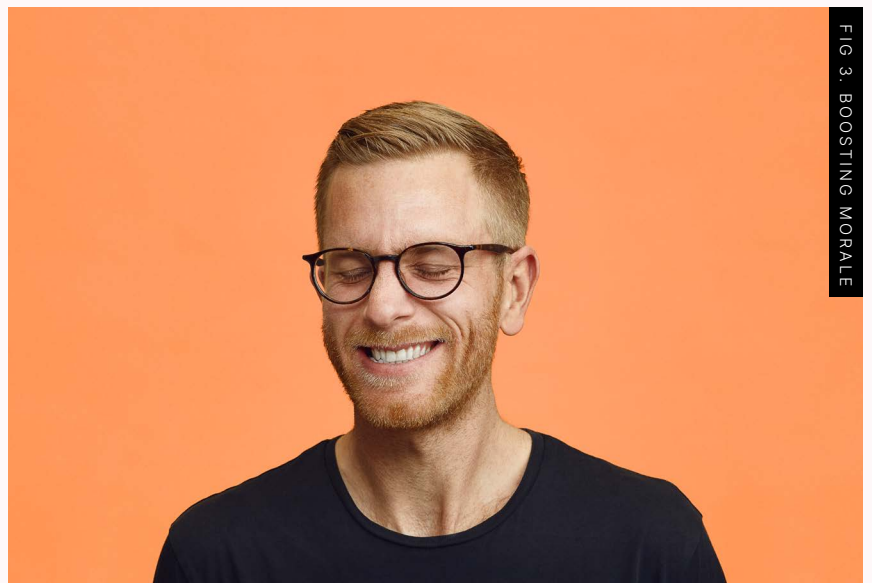


FIG 3. BOOSTING MORALE



Rethinking *effective* management practices

While it's easy to simplify the management role into one of delegation, we've just seen how many hats a manager has to wear. This requires extreme flexibility, poise, and humanity. The workplace has become increasingly human as organizations prioritize company values, culture, and perks. **However, managers have yet to receive the tools to incorporate this into their leadership practices.**

In the wake of the pandemic and political unrest, the personal and professional are now blending together more than ever. **Managers face questions like: how honest is too honest? How vulnerable is too vulnerable? Can managers be friends with their direct reports?** We're all on a constant journey to answer these questions, and there is an increasing demand for a new notion of leadership. Where employees once turned to managers only for their tasks, they now look for empathy, resilience, responsiveness, and vulnerability in their leaders.

As culture advocates, HR plays an important role in helping managers adapt to this more human leadership style. Soft skills have become a staple of all manager and employee relationships, but managers may feel uncertain about how to navigate this new set of boundaries. Fortunately, [in response to global uncertainty](#), HR thought leaders have been giving a lot of thought to setting expectations and accountability.

“We need to reimagine management and foster a culture of affiliates and coaches. In times like these, managers need to be a support system more than a taskmaster”

— Senior Director of Strategic Planning and Programs at [Slack](#).



Whether it's hard decisions that affect the team, or simply a personal challenge that is impacting your day-to-day, leaders at all levels are trying to [find the balance between healthy transparency and oversharing](#). Here are four tips from HR thought leaders to help shape the new style of leadership:

1. Create a safe space

"If you don't deliver on your culture in a crisis, then your culture meant nothing to start with," says Didier Elzinga, CEO of [Culture Amp](#).

Traditionally, work hasn't been seen as an appropriate space to discuss personal challenges or show vulnerability. So much about the professional world is about how you present yourself, whether that's through how you dress, the contents of your resumé, or the small talk you make. Over the years, organizations have slowly invited their teams to bring their whole selves to work, but individuals still tend to keep their very personal lives to themselves.

HR should empower and encourage their managers to create safe spaces to talk through personal challenges with their teams. "Your role as a leader is to set the emotional weather for your team," says Meredith Haberfeld, Founder and CEO of [ThinkHuman](#). "That requires being real and responsible for your energetic wake (how you leave people feeling)."

Why it matters

Vulnerability leads to a stronger sense of belonging, and [research shows](#) that high belonging is linked to a 56% increase in job performance and a 50% drop in turnover risk.

Getting started

People won't feel comfortable being vulnerable unless they see their leaders do the same. A simple way to start creating a safe space for your employee is to simply start every meeting with a check-in question. While at first, it may start out surface level, over time people will feel more and more comfortable to open up.



“Simply creating space for peers to share what they’re working through and cheering them on goes a long way.”

— Aubrey Blanche, Director of Equitable Design & Impact at Culture Amp

2. Lead by example

Leading with vulnerability requires humanity and empathy. Encourage your team to share their experiences, but keep in mind that this will be harder for some individuals. Existing workplace power dynamics mean it’s up to managers to pave the way. When leaders share their own vulnerability, it opens the door to the entire team.

“Your openness gives others permission to share,” says Laura Gale, Facilitator and Coach for ThinkHuman. “Responsibly sharing what you feel (without putting it on the team to hold) makes space for others to express worries, uncertainty, hopes, challenges, and ideas and allows for safety, connection, and innovation.”

According to Aubrey Blanche, Director of Equitable Design & Impact at Culture Amp, “a lot of the work here is normalizing individual struggling. Simply creating space for peers to share what they’re working through and cheering them on goes a long way.”

Why it matters

Leading by example establishes a sense of trust between leadership and their team. In fact, compared with people at low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, and 76% more engagement.

Getting started

Use 1-on-1 conversations and team meetings to build trust. Start by sharing your own challenge, but be clear that you’re not asking your team to carry this for you. Instead, use this as an opportunity to empathize and cheer each other on during difficult times and personal challenges.



FIG 4. AN OPEN DIALOGUE

3. Prioritize transparency

It's hard to know exactly what the future will look like and what kind of challenges might present themselves. As a leader, it's important to stay attuned to the fears and uncertainties of different individuals – don't shy away from difficult conversations.

"We naturally want to ease the burden for team members," says James Rosseau Sr., Executive Coach at ThinkHuman, "but people are often stronger than we give them credit for and ultimately appreciate you respecting their need for information. You may not have the answers or even the ability to assuage fears, but you can make your team feel heard and supported."

Why it matters

In fact, leadership transparency actually opens the door to more employee creativity. A [2017 study](#) found that "when leaders share information, reveal the reasons behind their decisions, and express their true feelings and vulnerabilities — it boosts employee creativity by instilling a sense of psychological safety."

Getting started

Create a forum for an open dialogue between employees and leadership. Whether it's an Ask Me Anything meeting, a Slack channel for questions, or a weekly update, these conversations may just surface out of the box ideas or insights that can help move the company forward.



4. Let empathy be your guide

Even if there's nothing you can do to “fix” the situation, just knowing that someone is empathizing with their struggles and cheering them on can go a long way in building support systems in a professional setting.

The decisions that organizations now face are tougher and more ambiguous than ever before. [Leading with emotional intelligence](#) is the only way to avoid alienating your team and, subsequently, putting the performance of your business at risk. People have to feel safe to share their challenges, so helping managers learn how to be more emotionally intelligent is key. There's no exact science to balancing transparency with professionalism, but letting empathy be your guiding principle will allow you to build trust and better support your team.

“Lean in on the things that are certain: your cultural foundations like your mission and values,” says Kath Rau, Director of People Operations at Culture Amp. “Leadership, visibility, and authenticity are key here. Employees look to them to provide regular, clear, and honest communication, and to model how they should be adapting. Seeing that their leaders are human and have their own struggles is powerful in creating a culture of two-way empathy.”

Why it matters

Empathy isn't just a soft skill. A [recent survey reveals](#) that 87% of CEOs believe a company's financial performance is tied to empathy in the workplace. The math checks out considering that 90% of employees are more likely to stay with an organization that empathizes with their needs.

Getting started

In addition to checking in, sharing your own challenges, and leading by example, consider offering emotional intelligence training to managers and even individual contributors. Nurturing these soft skills has become business-critical.



A *new* manager development tool

Until now, manager development had primarily involved long training sessions with few practical applications. Passing an online course or merely learning a coaching framework doesn't mean that managers will know how to apply it. New and uncharted challenges come up every day for managers, and development tools should be accessible and actionable.

Further, training should not be the end-all, be-all. Training should help managers develop valuable skills and open the door for them to reach out to their HR counterparts when unforeseen challenges arise. As a result, we're seeing a more hybrid approach to development through a combination of learning applications, such as micro-learning and coaching.

Consider the following approaches to manager development to help managers develop skills that are applicable to real interactions.

Micro-learning: the power of spaced repetition

So often, HR teams spend weeks crafting manager training programs, managers spend two hours learning the basics of giving good feedback, and practicing with one another, and at the end, they all say they learned a lot. But in the following weeks, you hear comments from employees that things haven't changed.

German psychologist Herman Ebbinghaus founded the [spacing effect](#), or the act of distributing learning over time. Instead of spending two hours in a workshop on one day, having half-hour workshops across four days proved to be more effective.



Managers have lengthy to-do-lists, which means they don't have time to sit through long training sessions and give their full attention. Making learning a daily practice with conversational micro-learning, helps managers digest new information and put their new skills into practice.

It's not enough for employees to learn something during training, It's important for employees to keep it top of mind for months, and maybe years to come. The space in between training is when real learning happens. It's when you're able to commit the learning to memory, make connections to how it applies in your day-to-day work, and start applying the concepts.

Managers aren't always going to find the exact scenario or problem they're trying to solve in the training. But applying their learning to new scenarios helps them generalize that learning and use it as a solution for a variety of situations.

TIPS FOR MICRO-LEARNING

Here are three simple ways to incorporate micro-learning into your manager training practice:

- 1. Break it up:** Break your training down into shorter sessions spread across multiple days. The optimal gap depends on the specific learning objectives, but typically [one day in between is best](#).
- 2. Use a refresher:** If you can't break up your training across multiple days, consider having a short refresher training at a later date.
- 3. Set up nudges:** Incorporate nudges into your program. For example, a short Slack reminder a couple of days after the training with key learnings will help managers put them to use.

[Rather than investing in long, ineffective training, get access to conversational micro-learning and watch your managers excel.](#)



Manager coaching

Managers serve as the most important driver of employee engagement and motivation. Individuals rely on their managers for day-to-day guidance, career development, and to set the tone for team morale. This is also where they get to apply the learnings from previous training and practice their skills. As a result, coaching is one of the most important management functions.

Coaching is different from managing but can serve as an instrumental approach to the management process. While coaching has the same objective as managing, the approach is more focused on helping individual employees develop their own critical thinking skills through learning. In other words, coaching is about guiding rather than telling.

Helping managers adopt a coaching approach has many benefits. For one, when reports are encouraged to identify solutions, they develop their problem-solving skills. This equips them with the tools to tackle increasingly larger projects and develop their skill set. Further, it also benefits the company by creating more specific expertise and better employee retention.

Whether or not you're ready to implement a formal training program for management coaching, the primary skills remain consistent. These five essential tactics can help you help your managers integrate key coaching principles into their daily practice:

Asking questions

Asking questions ensures individual contributors feel understood, helps clarify their thinking, and enables them to take ownership of problems. When managers shift their approach from solution-mode to coaching-mode, employees are empowered to identify potential solutions.



FIG 5. SETTING THE TONE

Active listening

Tune into what your direct reports have to say and let them drive the conversation. Actively listen by focusing on what is being said rather than your inner dialogue. This helps build deeper connections to drive greater impact across the organization.

Growth mindset

Foster a growth mindset within your team by asking questions that focus on the process instead of the end result. Be curious and hold back your own opinion to create an environment where everyone can comfortably learn and explore.

Career development

Understand the career goals of your direct reports, and identify opportunities to give them projects that can help them toward those goals. Use regular 1-on-1 meetings to track the progress your reports are making and recognize their accomplishments.

Self-improvement

The best way for a manager to become a better coach is to continue learning and growing themselves. Stay on the lookout for self-improvement opportunities – good managers should always be learning.



Manager 1-on-1s

1-on-1 meetings are a key component of a successful ongoing feedback model. These weekly or biweekly meetings give managers and their direct reports uninterrupted time to discuss projects, review performance, and remove blockers.

It also provides an opportunity for managers to get to know their employees on a more personal level by discussing career aspirations, interests, and professional growth opportunities.



FIG 6. LISTEN AND LEARN



The benefits of 1-on-1 meetings

Now that you've learned the skills and begun applying them through coaching, regular 1-on-1s help you turn learned skills into habits. 1-on-1 meetings may look different for every company, manager, and direct report. But the goal of these meetings remains the same – to maintain open communication between a manager and their direct reports. But 1-on-1 meetings do more than just that, they also:

- **Improve performance:** Weekly or bi-weekly check-ins allow managers to stay on top of employee productivity and ensure team goals will be met.
- **Drive development:** [87%](#) of millennials value growth and professional development in a job and 1-on-1 meetings are where growth conversations can happen.
- **Build trust:** [Studies show](#) when employees feel trusted at work, they feel more confident and perform at a higher level. Employees who trust their managers are more likely to share issues that might be affecting performance, which, when properly addressed, can encourage openness, honesty, loyalty, and engagement.
- **Increase agility:** 1-on-1 meetings give employees an opportunity to identify and address blockers, challenges, and issues as they arise. They also help teams pivot quickly, so teams can remain agile and adapt as business needs change.

By showing interest in and investing in your employees' growth, they will not only be happier and work harder at work, odds are they will stay with your company longer.

[Get our complete guide to 1-on-1s](#) to learn best practices and strategies for more meaningful and productive conversations.



1-on-1 best practices

Aside from operational task-focused questions, managers should use the time to discuss alignment, wellbeing, growth and progress, career aspirations, and relationships, while leaving space for direct reports to steer the conversation. Keep in mind that every employee is different and you should cater every 1-on-1 to that employee's specific needs and interests. To get you started, consider these tips to help you structure your 1-on-1s:

Personalize your meetings

There's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to organizing and leading a good 1-on-1 meeting. Your meetings should be tailored to fit your direct report's needs and preferences. Talk to your direct report to learn what would be most helpful for them in terms of meeting frequency, length, structure, etc.

Come prepared

Make a shared agenda before the meeting where you and your direct report can add any questions or topics you want to discuss. This ensures you both come to the meeting prepared and ready to make the most of the time.

Check-in

Start each 1-on-1 meeting with a personal check-in. Knowing the mental state of your team gives valuable context for how to proceed in the rest of the meeting. Flexibility is key – if you are too focused on getting through an agenda, you might miss cues when your direct reports need support or guidance.



FIG 8. MAKING GOALS A REALITY

Current projects

While it's important to touch base on current projects and weekly to-dos, keep this section to-the-point as it can quickly eat up your allotted meeting time. Have your employee share a brief snapshot of what they're working on and what they need from you to move forward.

Make space for feedback

1-on-1 conversations are a great opportunity to provide feedback and ask for feedback on your management style. Make sure this is a two-way conversation and really listen to your reports to understand where you could improve.

Growth and development

Touch base on your direct report's professional interests, growth, and long-term career goals regularly. Discuss the skills and experiences they need to gain to make those goals a reality and help them identify opportunities to keep them moving in the right direction.

Questions to close your one-on-one

End your 1-on-1 meetings with actionable next steps to create an open feedback loop. Agree upon what you're both committing to before your next meeting and note anything you didn't cover that you'd like to discuss next time.





Let's get *started*

Managers are short on time, short on support, and faced with tasks they were never trained to face. Especially in the wake of a global pandemic and political unrest, the measure of good management has changed. While many leaders acknowledge this shift in manager responsibilities, the training, ongoing support, and tools provided all remain the same.

As the world continues to evolve and face new challenges, now is the time for HR leaders to look at the role of the manager with fresh eyes so organizations can thrive, not just survive. When we redefine the role of the manager to include more humanity, we'll see improvements in engagement, productivity, and resilience. There is an opportunity for organizations to redefine what it means to be a manager and provide resources and support to help them do just that.

LEARN MORE

Looking for a science-based performance process, rooted in human insight, that your employees will love?

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