

GLOBAL RESEARCH

The Manager-Employee Disconnect on Engagement and Effectiveness



Executive Summary

This global research from Canadian Management Centre (CMC) and our global affiliate, AMA Global (AMA Global), reveals where managers and employees align and where their perceptions diverge on engagement, communication, and management effectiveness.

Both groups value similar skills but interpret them differently, shaping how teams communicate, collaborate, and perform. While managers see engagement as rising, many employees view it as unchanged or declining, revealing a perception gap that affects trust and motivation.

The data also show that managers and employees face similar pressures. Managing heavier workloads, constant change, and cross-functional collaboration are top challenges for both groups. For employees, managing stress adds another layer of complexity.

Across generations, collaboration stands out as a shared priority, with Gen Z placing the highest value on it. These findings reflect an evolving workplace where communication, collaboration, and adaptability define how work gets done.

What Stood Out:

- **Shared skills, different perspectives:** Both groups value communication, coaching, and collaboration but define effectiveness differently in practice.
- **Different priorities:** Engagement looks different from each side. Managers focus on achieving departmental goals (80%), while employees see communication as their manager's most important function (71%).
- **A widening engagement gap:** 59% of managers said their engagement increased, while most employees (64%) said it stayed the same and 16% said it decreased.
- **Shared challenges:** Both groups identify expanded workloads, ongoing change, and collaboration as their most urgent responsibilities.
- **Generational differences:** Gen Z places the highest value on collaboration (60%), compared to 40–53% among older generations.

How Organizations Can Turn Insight into Action

This research highlights a clear opportunity for organizations to close the gap between intention and impact. Strengthening communication, coaching, collaboration, and decision-making skills helps managers bring engagement to life every day, creating more connected, adaptable teams where engagement can thrive.

Canadian Management Centre helps organizations build these capabilities through practical, applied learning that turns management skills into stronger team performance. Learn more at cmcoutperform.com



Introduction

Our most recent global research shows that managers and employees agree about the most important skills and functions of effective managers. However, managers and employees have different perspectives regarding managers' current level of engagement. The research concludes that the majority of managers surveyed perceived their level of engagement as increasing in the past 12 months. In contrast, non-manager employees surveyed perceived their managers' level of engagement as remaining constant or decreased. Similarly, managers identified achieving departmental goals as their most important function, while non-managers identified communication as managers' most important function. This paper explores the reasons for these differences in perspectives and offers interventions to bridge the gap.

“Managers see their most important function as achieving departmental goals. Non-managers see communication as managers' most important function.”

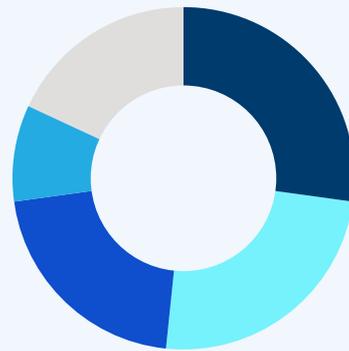
Research Overview

In June 2025, Canadian Management Centre, along with our global affiliate, AMA Global, administered a survey completed by 1,319 respondents, asking managers and individual contributors how their roles and job responsibilities have changed in the past 12 months. The survey also asked participants to assess what skills and functions are currently most crucial for managers. Countries and regions represented included the United States, Canada, Mexico, Latin America, Western Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. There were no significant differences in the answers of respondents in the United States and answers from respondents in other global regions, nor were there significant differences in responses among global regions.

Participants were evenly distributed among industries, with manufacturing, tech, finance/banking/insurance, and education being the largest individual sectors. The next largest groups represented were healthcare, retail, government/military, professional services and transportation. The majority of participants were managers (77%), and the majority of managers identified as senior managers (64%).

Survey Participant Roles

- Non-Managers
- 1-3 Years of Management Experience
- 3-5 Years of Management Experience
- 5-10 Years of Management Experience
- 10+ Years of Management Experience



Findings

Both respondents who identified as managing staff and as not managing staff were asked: "What has emerged as the most urgent new part of your role in the past 12 months?"

The 3 Most Urgent New Roles Identified by Managers

50%

Managing an Expanded Workload

45%

Helping Employees Navigate Change

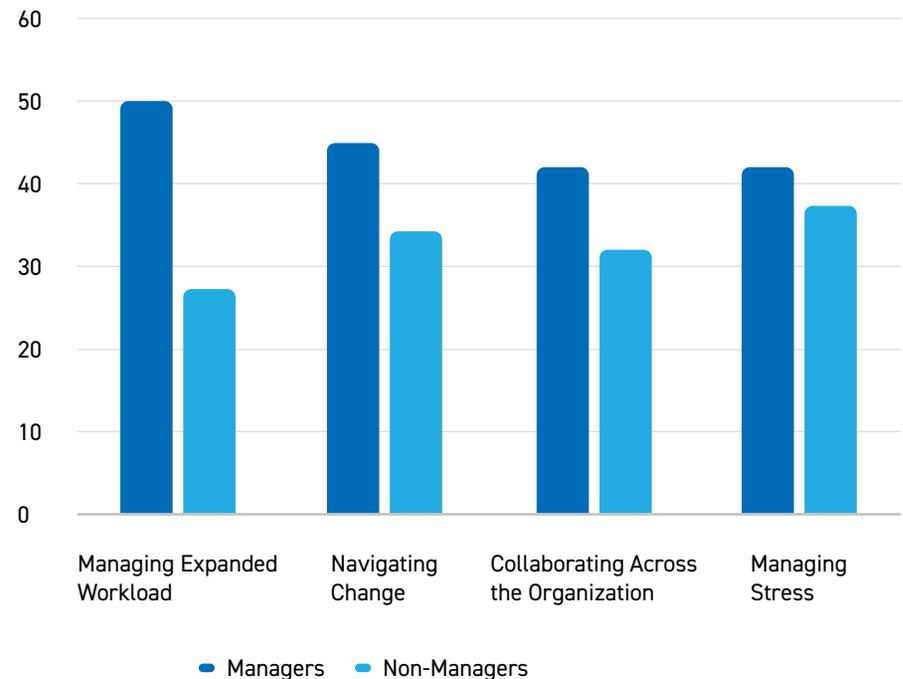
42%

Collaborating Across the Organization

Both managers with 10+ years of experience and 5-10 years of experience identified these as the most urgent new parts of their roles.

Regardless of generation or industry, individual contributors, similarly to managers, identified "Handling Frequent Change," "Collaborating Across the Organization," and "Managing an Expanded Workload," as the most urgent new parts of their roles. Individual contributors also identified "Managing Anxiety and Stress" as an urgent new part of their roles.

Manager and Non-Manager Most Urgent New Roles



In sum, managers at all levels agree that managing expanded workloads, helping employees navigate change, and collaboration are their most urgent new roles, with helping employees manage stress and anxiety coming in a close fourth. Non-managers expressed similar perceptions regarding changes in their roles in the past year.

Both respondents who manage staff and those who do not were asked: “What are the most important management skills?” Collectively, managers identified “Communication,” “Coaching and Feedback,” and “Collaboration,” as the three most important skills. Paralleling managers’ responses, individual contributors of all ages and across industries identified “Communication,” “Coaching and Feedback,” and “Collaboration” as the three most important management skills.

Manager and Non-Manager Most Important Management Skills

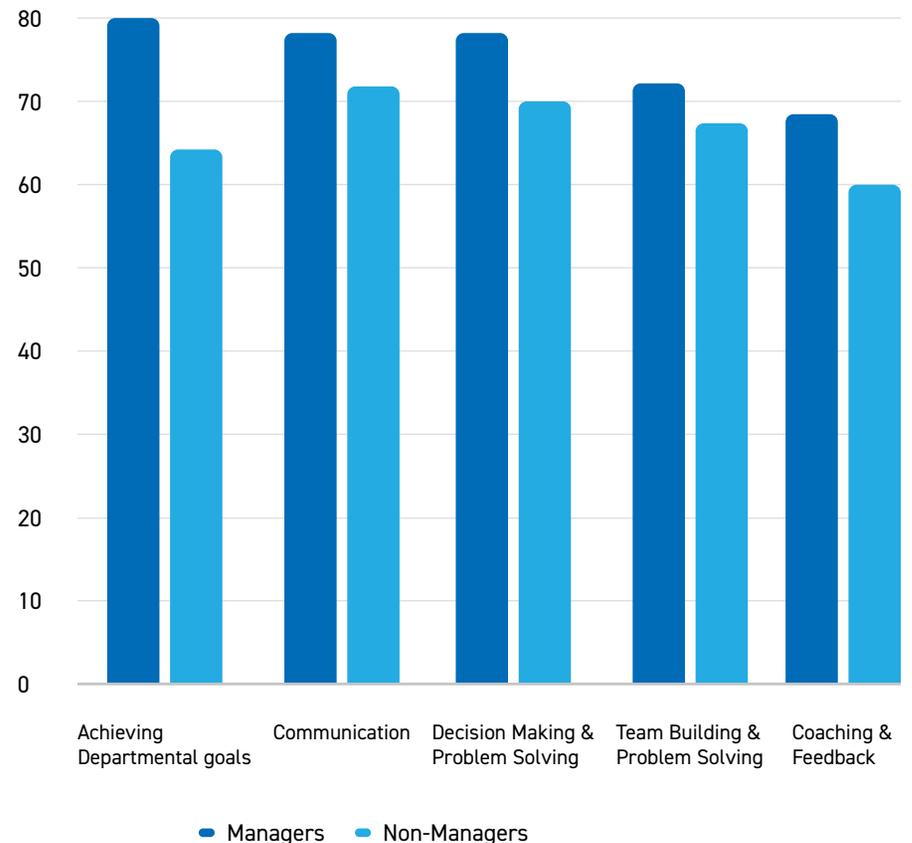


Individual contributors and managers also shared their thoughts on the most important management functions. Collectively, managers’ top answer was “Achieving Departmental Goals” (80%). Otherwise, managers’ responses paralleled their responses to previous items. “Communication” was the next highest rated function (77%), along with “Decision Making and Problem Solving,” (77%), followed by “Team Building and Motivation,” (73%) and “Coaching and Feedback” (68%). Individual contributor responses differed slightly from manager

responses. Individual contributors rated “Communication” as managers’ most important function (71%), followed by “Decision Making and Problem Solving” (70%), “Team Building and Motivation” (66%) and “Achieving Departmental Goals” (65%).

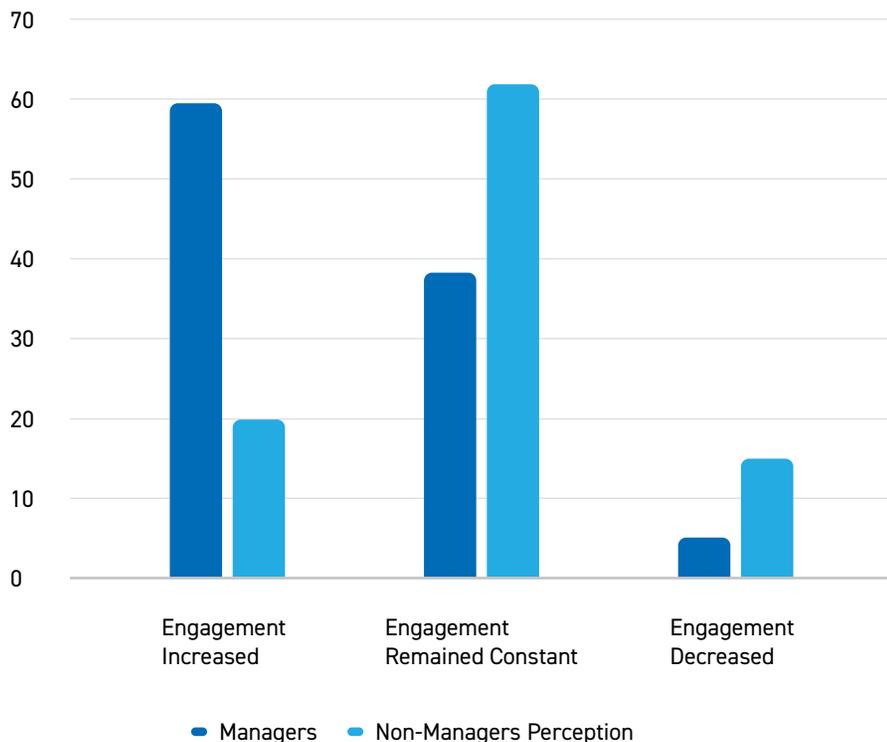
While managers and individual contributors have similar perceptions of the most important skills and functions, the biggest gap is regarding the most important manager function, achieving departmental goals. For non-managers, the ability of managers to communicate effectively, solve problems, and make decisions is most important.

Manager and Non-Manager Most Important Management Functions





Managers' and Employees' Perception of Management's Engagement Level



Similarly, the survey data shows a difference in perception regarding managers' level of engagement. Managers were asked how shifts in their roles in the past 1-3 years have impacted their level of engagement. Likewise, individual contributors were asked to assess their managers' level of engagement. Their perceptions are very different: 59% of managers said their engagement had increased, while 37% said that their engagement has remained constant. Specifically, 94% of managers with 10+ years of experience responded that their engagement level has increased, while 99% of managers with 5-10 years of experience reported the same. Likewise, 65% of respondents who identified as senior leaders indicated that their engagement had increased.

In contrast, the majority of individual contributors indicated their managers' level of engagement had stayed the same or decreased. Specifically, 64% of individual contributors said their managers' engagement had stayed the same, and 16% said their managers' engagement had decreased.

While managers and individual contributors agree on the ways their roles have changed in the past 12 months, and generally agree on the most important management skills and functions, they have slightly different perceptions regarding the importance of achieving departmental goals, and very different perceptions of managers' engagement. Most managers see their engagement as having increased, while most individual contributors see their managers' engagement as having plateaued or decreased. What might account for these differences?

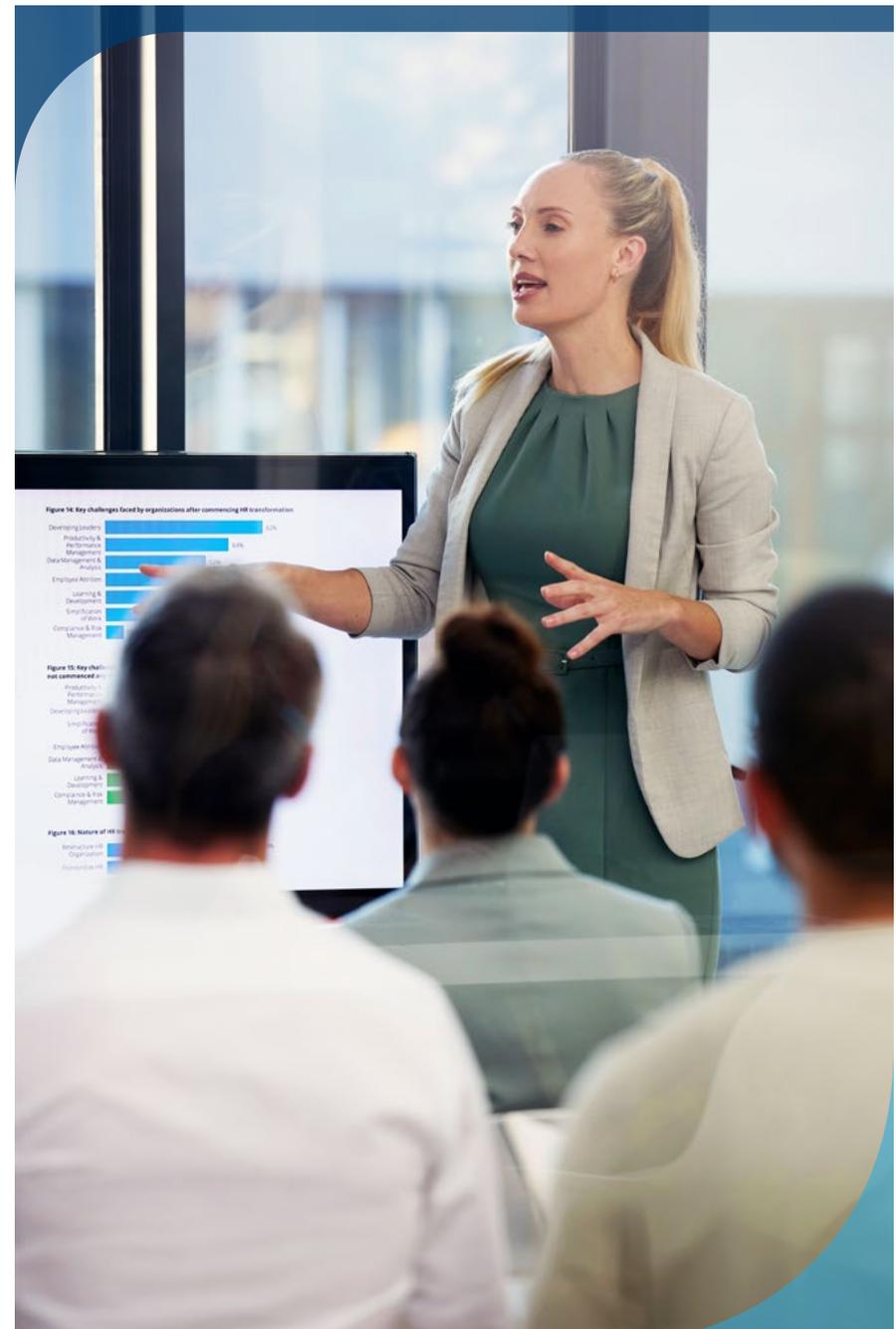
Analysis

One explanation for the difference in perception between managers and individual contributors is the way managers may define engagement. Although managers said managing expanded workloads, helping employees navigate change, and collaboration were the most urgent new parts of their roles, managers also indicated decision making and problem solving have become the most important parts of their roles in the past year.

“Managers may not be communicating their decisions and solutions to employees effectively; thus, employees perceive managers’ engagement as static or diminishing.”

Managers were asked to consider functions that have consistently been part of their roles, and to identify the functions that have increased the most in the past 12 months. They identified “Decision Maker,” “Problem Solver,” “Coach,” and “Motivator,” as the primary functions that have increased in the past year. Decision making and problem solving require large amounts of cognitive engagement. Managers may be aware of their increased cognitive engagement, while employees most likely do not directly observe this.

Employees not perceiving their managers’ increased involvement in problem solving and decision making may relate to another factor. While managers rate communication, feedback, and coaching and collaboration as highly necessary skills—and as important manager functions—this recognition does not mean managers are actually effective communicators and collaborators. Likewise, managers seeing themselves as providing increased coaching and feedback in the past year does not mean they are coaching and motivating employees effectively. In other words, managers may not be communicating their decisions and solutions to employees effectively; thus, employees perceive managers’ engagement as static or diminishing.



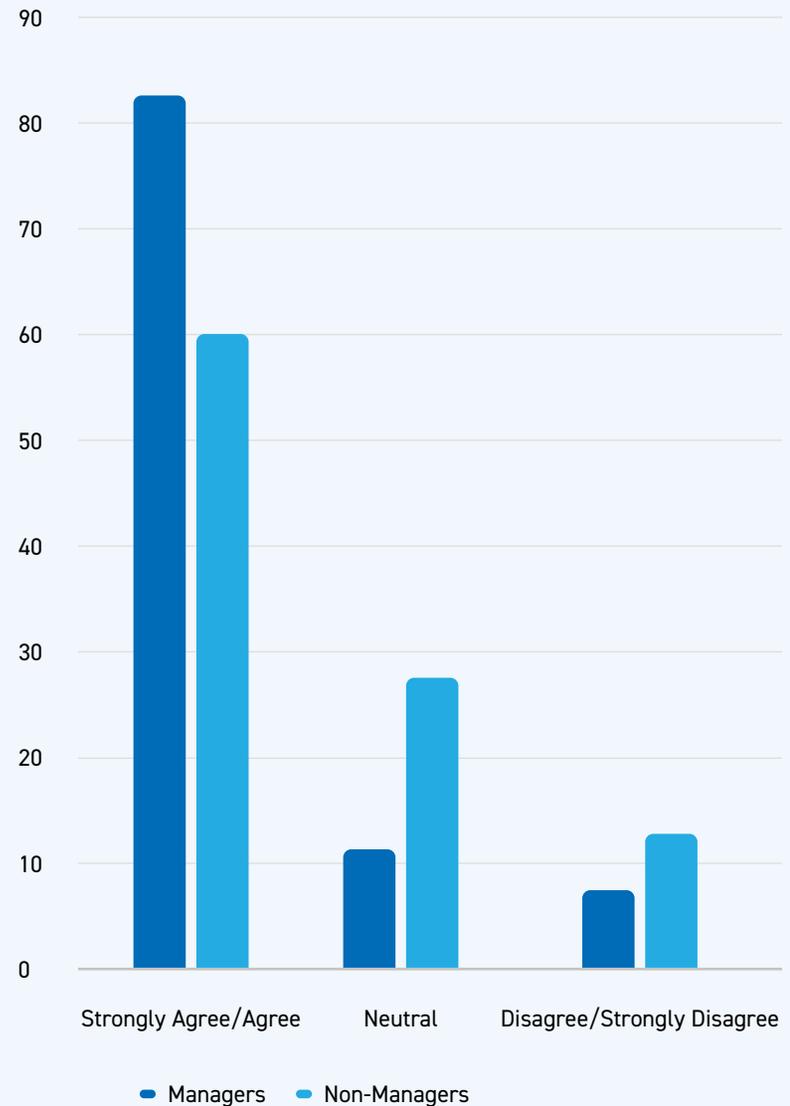
Ineffective manager communication may also explain different perceptions regarding the importance of achieving departmental goals. Non-managers may rate the importance of achieving goals slightly lower than managers because they are unclear what the specific goals are. Such lack of clarity could also explain why non-managers rate managers' ability to make decisions and solve problems as very important. Non-managers may not feel adequately equipped to solve problems and make decisions on their own.

“Non-managers may not feel adequately equipped to solve problems and make decisions on their own.”

Concurrently, as managers must do more with less, they may give additional responsibilities to non-managers, without clearly communicating information, such as success metrics, timelines, and well-defined tasks, which are essential for effective delegation. This can create a feedback loop in which non-managers' stress increases, and managers' need to coach and attend to employees' stress likewise increases. Clearer manager communication could resolve a number of issues survey respondents identified. Another explanation for the difference in managers' self-perceptions and employees' perceptions may involve the degree to which employees feel supported to be effective in their roles. In general, more managers than non-managers feel that their organization's leadership provides what they need to succeed.

This difference in the perception of support could be related to the difference in perceptions regarding managers' engagement. Individual contributors seeing their managers' engagement as plateauing or decreasing, coupled with ineffective manager communication, might translate into employees' sense that they lack support to perform job functions.

Does Leadership Provide What You Need to Be Effective in Your Role?





Conclusions

This research suggests managers at all levels, and with any range of experience, would benefit from building and enhancing effective communication, coaching, and collaboration skills. Enhancing managers' communicative and collaborative abilities will facilitate bridging the gap in managers' self-perceptions and

employees' perceptions described in this report, as well as the practical gap related to achieving departmental goals. Managers themselves identified decision making and problem solving as key ongoing parts of their jobs, which they do even more of than before. Additional development focus on decision making, critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem solving could help them perform these tasks more efficiently and effectively. Moreover, managers and non-managers generally agreeing on the importance of communication and collaboration suggests that individual contributors would also benefit from developing effective communication skills and strategies for collaboration across the organization. Non-managers' enhancing their problem-solving and decision-making skills could likewise reduce their job-related anxiety and stress, thus alleviating managers' need to attend to such employee concerns.

While there are many commonalities in the perspectives of managers and non-managers, one generational difference stands out in this survey data. Although all generations agree that communication, coaching, and feedback and collaboration are the top three most important management skills, Gen Z respondents (aged 18 to 28) rated collaboration much higher than other generations (60%, compared to 53% for those aged 29 to 44, 45% for those aged 45 to 60, and 40% for managers over 60). This difference may suggest that organizations continue to become flatter, requiring more people to develop their capacities to collaborate, influence others, and achieve results without authority. The difference also points to changing perceptions of managers' roles and what comprises the most effective management styles. The newest generation in the workforce, as indicated by this research, values a cooperative workplace culture. Developing a collaborative culture may require more seasoned professionals to shift their approaches to management practices. In addition to enhancing communicative and collaborative abilities, experienced managers may need to develop a more facilitative style, which attends to employee development as much as output.