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Employees See Engagement Differently

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JOURNAL OF THE CANADIAN MANAGEMENT CENTRE

GLOBAL RESEARCH

From Disconnect to Alignment: Employees See Engagement Differently

While nearly 6 in 10 managers reported feeling more engaged than a year ago, most employees said their managers' engagement had stayed the same—or even declined. The result is a revealing gap between perception and experience, one that sheds light on how our evolving workplace is redefining what it means to manage people. Page 6

DEPARTMENTS

REDEFINING MANAGEMENT

EQUIPPING THE MODERN MANAGER

HUMANITY AND TECHNOLOGY

Employees Still Feeling Disconnected With Managers

If you are a manager, and you believe your employees understand you and the reasonings for the decisions you make, I hate to break it to you—they probably don't.

Don't take just my word for it. This issue's cover story, "From Disconnect to Alignment: Employees See Engagement Differently," highlights our research, which shows while managers believe they have been more engaged with employees and effective, employees say they are seeing either no real change or an actual decline in their leaders' engagement. While the majority of managers surveyed saw achieving departmental goals as the most important management function, a majority of employees ranked communication first.

Many of the articles in this issue address how to fill that gap in connection and improve communication between managers and employees. In "The Human Side of Management: Leading with Empathy," Tom LeNoble talks about how bosses can become true coaches by equipping, empowering, and inspiring employees to figure out addressing change together Filip Pesek, in "From Boss to Coach: How Modern Managers Create Space to Lead," highlights how bosses need to become coaches. And Julie Ferris-Tillman, in "The Manager as Teacher: Start Sharing Know-How," discusses how classroom learning techniques can show managers how to coach, not correct.

These articles are a few highlights in our special management issue of *CMCQuarterly* that address how leaders can be better at connecting with and supporting their employees, so the whole team thrives. Our mission continues to be providing the educational and leadership training that will improve not only you but your entire organization.

Christiane Truelove

Christiane Truelove
Guest Editor, *CMCQuarterly*

Making Engagement Visible: Closing the Manager-Employee Gap

Our latest global research reveals a visibility challenge hiding in plain sight: a gap between how managers believe they're engaging and how employees experience that engagement. Most managers believe their engagement is stronger than ever, yet many employees do not see it that way. This perception gap is more than a difference in opinion; it is a signal of performance risk.

Why the disconnect? Managers are often deeply engaged in unseen parts of their role—solving problems, making decisions, and navigating constant change. Employees, however, experience engagement through what's visible: context, communication, and support. When managers focus on operational intensity, but neglect visible connection, well-intentioned managers can appear detached.

Bridging this divide isn't about more activity, it's about giving more clarity. Make thinking transparent: Narrate the "why," not just the "what." Explain the reasoning behind key decisions so teams can align faster. Coach with clarity: Replace periodic evaluations with ongoing, practical feedback that drives learning in real time. Create two-way momentum: Turn updates into conversations that clarify priorities, ownership, and outcomes. These moments of trust transform engagement from a one-sided effort into a shared experience.

As the workplace continues to evolve, so must our approach to management. Engagement today is not sustained by authority alone but by authenticity and accessibility. The data shows managers and employees agree on what matters most—communication, collaboration, and coaching. The opportunity lies in how consistently those behaviors are practiced. While managers have to do more today, they can't lose sight of managing in a way that supports more productive teams.

The future of management will belong to those who lead visibly, listen actively, and make engagement a two-way street. That is how teams move from compliance to commitment, alignment is built, and collective performance thrives.

Manny Avramidis
President & Chief Executive Officer
AMA Global

From Disconnect to Alignment:
Employees See Engagement Differently

BY AMA GLOBAL STAFF

Most managers believe they're more engaged and effective than ever. Their employees don't see it that way.

That's the paradox uncovered in our latest global research on management effectiveness. While nearly 6 in 10 managers reported feeling more engaged than a year ago, most employees said their managers' engagement had stayed the same—or even declined. The result is a revealing gap between perception and experience, one that sheds light on how our evolving workplace is redefining what it means to manage people.

THE PERCEPTION GAP

Managers and employees still agree on what good management looks like. Across industries and generations, both groups ranked communication as most important, second coaching and feedback, and third collaboration as the three most essential skills for effectiveness. But alignment ends there. While managers rated communication, feedback and coaching, and collaboration as highly necessary skills, and believed they are providing increased coaching and feedback, this does not mean they are actually effective communicators and collaborators or are coaching and motivating employees effectively.

When asked about what matters most in practice, the majority of managers (80%) prioritized achieving departmental goals, while almost three-quarters of

employees (71%) ranked communication first—a subtle yet powerful difference. To managers, success is measured by outcomes; to employees, it's measured by connection.

This divergence becomes clearer when looking at engagement. Almost 60% of managers believed that their engagement had increased, and 37% said their engagement had remained constant. However, less than 20% of employees stated that managers' engagement had increased; many (64%) said they believed their managers' engagement had stayed the same, and 16% said it had decreased.

Digging further into the numbers, 94% of managers with more than 10 years of experience responded that their engagement level had increased, while 99% of managers with 5 to 10 years of experience reported the same. Likewise, 65% of those who identified as senior leaders indicated that their engagement had increased.

The disparity of perception could be due to managers measuring engagement based on cognitive efforts: decision making, problem solving, and navigating change. Employees, however, value relational visibility: responsiveness, clarity, and presence.

Managers are often engaged in thought, but these cognitive activities are invisible to their employees, who would prefer to see visible, direct interaction—such as collaborating with team members or presenting ideas in a meeting.

ENGAGED IN THOUGHT, DISCONNECTED IN ACTION

The data helps explain why. In AMA's survey of more than 1,300 global respondents, managers cited their most urgent new responsibilities as managing expanded workloads, helping employees navigate change, and collaborating across the organization. Each of these requires deep analytical and strategic focus—forms of engagement that aren't easily observed from the outside. Employees, meanwhile, are contending with their own pressures: increased workloads, constant change, and heightened stress.

It's not that managers aren't engaged—it's that their engagement isn't being seen or felt in ways that matter to their teams.

One way of engagement that employees believe matters is how managers make decisions and solve problems. As managers have to do more with less, and their own responsibilities grow, they may be passing on new responsibilities to their team members—without actually communicating essential information such as success metrics, timelines, and tasks.

As a result, many employees don't feel equipped to make decisions or solve problems independently, and they rely on their managers' communication to provide clarity and confidence.

When communication is inconsistent or delayed, employees could interpret it as disengagement. And as non-managers become more stressed, managers could find themselves in a never-ending feedback loop of tending to non-managers' stress, instead of moving forward on the tasks at hand.

THE ENGAGEMENT DISCONNECT

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37% of managers reported their engagement had remained constant

80% of employees stated their managers' engagement had stayed the same or decreased
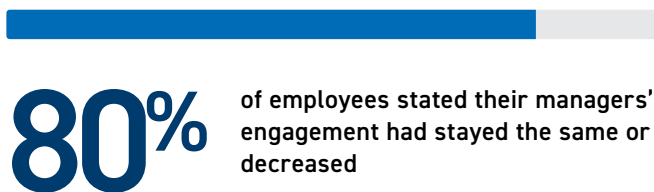
THE NEW EXPECTATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT

Generational trends add another layer to this story. While all age groups in the survey agreed on communication and coaching as vital skills, Gen Z workers (ages 18 to 28) placed far greater emphasis on collaboration—60% versus just 40% among those over 60. This signals not only shifting workplace values but also a broader transformation in organizational design: flatter structures, shared ownership, and success built on influence rather than authority.

For these younger professionals, engagement means inclusion. They expect transparency, feedback, and a sense of shared purpose. Managers who focus solely on output risk losing credibility with employees who equate leadership with collaboration and accessibility.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

The gap isn't about effort but visibility. Managers make decisions and solve problems, yet without clear communication, their work goes unseen.

BRIDGING THE GAP REQUIRES REDEFINING ENGAGEMENT AS SOMETHING MUTUAL:

MAKE THINKING VISIBLE

Managers can narrate decisions and share context so that employees understand the "why" behind actions.

COACH WITH CLARITY

Regular, candid feedback helps employees feel guided rather than managed.

BUILD COLLABORATIVE FLUENCY

Managers and contributors must strengthen communication and problem-solving muscles.

It's less about control today and more about connection.

Ultimately, engagement isn't a state that managers achieve; it's an experience employees perceive.

THE WAY FORWARD

This research underscores an essential truth about modern management: It's less about control today and more about connection.

The same skills that both managers and employees value—communication, collaboration, coaching—are the tools needed to bridge the engagement divide. Managers should focus on further developing decision making, critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem solving to help them perform these tasks more efficiently and effectively.

As the workplace continues to evolve, so must our understanding of what engagement looks like in action. It's no longer enough for managers to be committed. They must also be communicative.

The most effective leaders make their engagement visible, their decisions transparent, and their support unmistakable.

Adapted from our global research report, "The Manager–Employee Disconnect on Engagement and Effectiveness." Download the full whitepaper at cmcoutperform.com.

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1

REDEFINING MANAGEMENT

How management itself is being reimagined for a new era

From Boss to Coach:
How Modern Managers Create Space to Lead

BY FILIP PESEK

When I first stepped into management, I thought the role was all about having the answers. I'd walk into meetings ready to fix things, direct traffic, and push projects over the finish line. It felt productive, even satisfying—my team came to me for decisions, I could solve their problems on the spot, and the work kept moving.

Until it didn't.

After a while, progress slowed. My team's growth stalled, my own workload ballooned, and I found myself running on fumes. I was the one pushing every project forward, answering every question, and signing off on every step. Without realizing it, I'd become the bottleneck.

THE MANAGER'S NEW REALITY

The truth is, today's managers are working in a different world than we were a decade ago. Teams are rarely in one place. Messages and updates arrive before you've even had your first coffee. Priorities shift weekly—sometimes daily. And your team isn't just here to get paid. They want meaningful work, a chance to grow, and a manager who's genuinely in their corner.

The old "boss" model—where you keep your hands on every detail—simply doesn't fit anymore. It exhausts you, frustrates your team, and leaves no space for the kind of leadership that actually moves things forward.

I learned that holding onto everything isn't leadership. It's a form of control that eventually slows everyone down. When every decision, approval, or conversation depends on you, the pace of the entire team is tied to your personal capacity. That's a ceiling no organization can afford.

The real shift happened when I stopped thinking of myself as the central problem solver and started acting as the builder: the one who creates the systems, boundaries, and trust that allow the team to move forward without constant intervention.

It's not about stepping back completely. It's about setting things up so they run smoothly whether you're in the room or not.

THE TURNING POINT

My own breaking point came when the mental load became too heavy to carry. On paper, I was performing—hitting targets, keeping projects moving—but inside, I was drained. The constant switching between big-picture strategy and the tiniest operational details was exhausting. I'd spend mornings thinking about long-term plans, then get pulled into a chain of quick-fire approvals, budget clarifications, and last-minute scheduling changes. Even on my days off, I was thinking about what was waiting for me on Monday.

It became clear: I could keep going until I burned out completely, or I could change the way I worked.

LETTING GO WITHOUT LOSING CONTROL

The first thing I did was stop carrying everything in my head. I began documenting decision-making boundaries so everyone knew what they owned and what needed my input. I batched small approvals and quick decisions into two windows a day instead of letting them interrupt me constantly.

I also asked for help. I brought in someone who could act like my second brain—filtering the noise, bringing me only the things I truly needed to decide, and keeping me focused on the big picture.

Leaders need to strip away the mental clutter, put the right systems in place, and free up the headspace they need to lead with clarity, focus, and purpose.

SHIFTING INTO COACHING MODE

With the bottleneck gone, I had space to think differently about my role.

Instead of rushing in with answers, I started asking more questions: What do you think the next step should be? How would you approach this if I weren't here?

It was uncomfortable at first—both for me and for my team—but over time it changed everything. People started coming to me with recommendations instead of problems. They gained confidence, I gained time, and the quality of our decisions improved because more perspectives were in the mix.

I also changed the way I approached one-on-one meetings. Instead of running through a list of updates, I used the time to talk about growth, feedback, and problem solving. We kept project tracking in shared tools, so our conversations could focus on what was working, what needed support, and where people wanted to develop next.

This coaching approach has another advantage: It works beautifully in a world of constant change. When priorities shift—and they will—you don't have one person scrambling to adjust while everyone else waits for instructions. You have a team that can adapt together because they've been building their decision-making muscles all along.

That adaptability is the difference between a manager who survives change and one who can actually lead through it.

PROTECTING HEADSPACE FOR EMPATHY

One of the most overlooked skills in management is empathy—not the vague, soft-edged kind, but the kind that directly drives performance. Empathy builds trust, helps resolve conflict, and lets you spot burnout before it becomes a crisis.

But here's the problem: Empathy requires space. If your brain is overloaded, you can't listen properly, notice subtle cues,

or respond thoughtfully. That's why letting go of the right things is so important. It's not just about efficiency. It's about protecting the mental bandwidth that makes you effective as a leader.

Leaders transform when they finally stop carrying every operational detail in their heads. They show up more present, more thoughtful, and far more capable of inspiring their teams.

Technology, including AI, can help automate and surface priorities. But it's not a silver bullet. Tools only work if you've done the human work of building trust, creating systems, and letting go where it makes sense.

Letting go isn't a single moment. It's something you build into the way you lead. I ask myself regularly:

- Is this really mine to decide?
- Could someone else do this better or faster?
- What would happen if I stepped back here?

Those questions help me stay focused on the work that truly needs my attention—the decisions, conversations, and relationships that only I can handle.

FROM BOSS TO COACH— AND BEYOND

Looking back, the biggest shift I made wasn't about time management or delegation. It was about redefining the purpose of my role.

When I stopped trying to control everything, I started coaching instead. I built a team that could make smart decisions without me, adapt to change, and grow in ways that didn't require my constant oversight.

It's not glamorous work, and you won't always get the credit. But you will have a healthier team, a workload you can sustain, and a career that lasts.

Because leadership isn't about carrying the most weight. It's about knowing which weight is yours, and having the discipline to set down the rest. CQ

Filip Pesek is founder and CEO of DonnaPro, a company that provides virtual EU-based executive assistants who can handle the complete spectrum of responsibilities for CEOs, founders, and business leaders.

The Human Side of Management:
Leading with Empathy

BY TOM LeNOBLE

Once upon a time, the most celebrated leaders were the ones who barked orders, enforced discipline, and measured success by compliance. The "boss" archetype thrived in predictable environments where the rules were clear, the market was stable, and the pace of change was relatively slow.

That world no longer exists.

Today's leaders operate in an environment defined by constant change, increasing complexity, and unprecedented uncertainty. Disruption isn't an event; it's a permanent state. In such a landscape, the old command-and-control leadership model not only fails—it actively stifles the adaptability and creativity organizations need to survive.

What's replacing it? A leadership style rooted in coaching,

empathy, and collaborative problem solving. Leaders who thrive today are those who don't just tell people what to do. They equip, empower, and inspire them to figure it out together.

This is the shift from boss to coach. It's not optional.

WHY COMPLEXITY BREAKS DOWN THE "BOSS" MODEL

When complexity spikes, whether from technological disruption, market shifts, or internal transformation, the instinct for many leaders is to tighten their grip. More rules, more oversight, more directives.

The logic makes sense: If things are chaotic, someone needs to take control. But in complex systems, control is often an illusion. The more we try to dictate every move, the more we create bottlenecks, crush initiative, and slow down the very responsiveness we need.

The boss model assumes:		In reality:
The leader has the most knowledge.	→	No single person can know it all.
Problems have clear solutions.	→	Problems are often ambiguous and interconnected.
The leader's job is to provide answers.	→	The leader's job is to frame the challenge, unlock collective intelligence, and guide people toward their own best solutions.

This is why a coaching mindset is more effective. It shifts the leader's role from being the source of answers to being the source of better questions—ones that spark reflection, creativity, and ownership.

THE COACHING LEADER'S PLAYBOOK

Making the shift from boss to coach isn't about giving up authority. It's about changing how you use it. A coaching leader:

Creates psychological safety. People can't innovate or problem-solve if they're afraid of looking foolish or making mistakes. Coaching leaders create space where it's safe to explore, fail fast, and learn publicly.

Asks before telling. Instead of "Here's what you should do," try "What options have you considered?" or "What's another angle we haven't explored yet?" Questions shift responsibility for thinking back to the team and build their problem-solving muscle.

Focuses on development, not just delivery. The goal isn't only to get the task done. It's to help people grow so they can take

on bigger challenges in the future. Great coaching leaders measure success not just in quarterly metrics but also in the capability and confidence of their people.

Shares context and clarity. People can make better decisions when they understand the "why" behind them. Coaching leaders overcommunicate the vision, priorities, and trade-offs so decisions align with the bigger picture.

Models adaptability. Coaching leaders are willing to say, "I don't know yet" and "Let's figure this out together." That vulnerability builds trust and resilience, especially in uncertain environments.

Uses feedback as fuel. Instead of treating feedback as criticism, coaching leaders frame it as a gift. It is a pathway to better outcomes for individuals and the team.

LEADING THROUGH CHANGE AND COMPLEXITY

Change used to feel like a chapter in the business story, something that happened once in a while and was followed by a period of stability. Now it's the entire plot. Whether it's

> **Great coaching leaders measure success not just in quarterly metrics but also in the capability and confidence of their people.**

adopting new technology, navigating economic volatility, or restructuring teams, leaders face a triple challenge:

- The pace of change is faster than most organizations can naturally adapt to.
- The volume of change overwhelms employees' capacity to process and respond.
- The unpredictability of change means leaders must make decisions with incomplete information.

This environment requires leaders to operate more like guides than commanders. A guide doesn't pretend to have a perfect map in a shifting landscape. They help the team read the terrain, adapt as conditions change, and keep moving toward the destination.

THREE ANCHORS FOR LEADING IN COMPLEXITY

Coaching leaders can use these three strategies to help their teams navigate the current tangled, complex world:

Aim for clarity over certainty. In complex times, certainty is rare, but clarity is essential. Leaders must clearly communicate priorities, principles, and decision-making criteria, even when they can't promise specific outcomes.

Focus on what's in your control. A coaching leader helps teams separate what they can control from what they can't, directing energy toward meaningful action instead of wasted worry.

Use short feedback loops. In a volatile environment, long planning cycles can be dangerous. Leaders should establish regular check-ins to assess what's working, what's not, and what needs to shift.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY IN LEADERSHIP

Empathy is not "soft." In fact, in high-change, high-complexity environments, empathy is a strategic advantage. Why? Because change is hard—emotionally, mentally, and physically. Even when the change is positive, it disrupts routines, challenges competence, and triggers fear of the unknown.

Empathy allows leaders to see beyond the surface, noticing when resistance is rooted in fear, confusion, or past experiences; tailor support by understanding each individual's

needs, strengths, and stressors; and build resilience, as people who feel seen and understood are more likely to weather challenges without disengaging or burning out.

But empathy is not the same as indulgence. Coaching leaders balance compassion with accountability by acknowledging people's challenges while still expecting them to rise to the occasion.

Here are five practical ways to lead with empathy through change:

Name the change's emotional impact. Don't just outline the logistics. Acknowledge the human side too. Say, "I know this shift may feel unsettling" or "This is a lot to absorb, and it's okay to feel overwhelmed."

Listen without fixing (right away). Often, people need to feel heard before they're ready to hear solutions. Give them space to express concerns without jumping straight to problem solving.

Show your work. Be transparent about how decisions are made. Even if people disagree, they're more likely to trust the process when they understand it.

Offer agency. In times of change, people often feel powerless. Wherever possible, give them choices or involve them in shaping the path forward.

Recognize and celebrate progress. Small wins matter, especially when the ultimate outcome is still far away. Celebrate the steps, not just the finish line.

CASE STUDY 1: A TECH COMPANY'S TRANSFORMATION

When I was leading a division at a fast-growing tech company, we faced a sudden market pivot that required reorganizing nearly every team. The old "boss" in me wanted to call everyone into a meeting and dictate the new structure, roles, and timelines.

Instead, I paused. I knew this change would test people's trust and resilience, so I chose the coach route.

We started with a series of listening sessions—no presentations, no announcements, just open dialogue about what people feared, what opportunities they saw, and what support they needed. Then we co-created the transition plan, with clear nonnegotiables from leadership but flexibility in how teams adapted.

We added peer-led problem-solving circles so teams could share solutions across departments. We also built in biweekly "pulse checks" where employees could anonymously share how the transition was impacting them emotionally and operationally.

The result? We still faced bumps and setbacks, but engagement scores stayed high, turnover remained below industry average, and several employees later told me it was the "most empowering" change they'd ever been part of.

CASE STUDY 2: A HOSPITAL UNDER PRESSURE

In a large metropolitan hospital, the leadership team faced unprecedented strain during a flu season that collided with staffing shortages. Traditionally, department heads would simply hand down schedules and assignments, leaving frontline staff with little input.

This time, the chief nursing officer took a coaching approach. She began by gathering small groups of nurses and asking, "What's the hardest part of your day right now?" and "If you could change one thing this week, what would it be?"

From these conversations came unexpected solutions, such as reorganizing shift overlaps to reduce burnout, creating a "rapid relief" float pool to cover urgent needs, and pairing less-experienced nurses with seasoned mentors. The hospital not only weathered the crisis but saw reduced turnover in the months that followed. Staff later said they felt "part of the solution" rather than "part of the problem."

THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP: COACHING AND EMPATHY AS CORE COMPETENCIES

Looking ahead, the leaders who will thrive aren't those who can simply enforce compliance or hit quarterly targets. They'll be those who can develop people's capacity to adapt.

Several trends make coaching and empathy nonnegotiable:

- Hybrid and remote work require leaders to connect without constant physical presence.

- Generational shifts bring new expectations for autonomy, purpose, and well-being.

- Rapid technology adoption demands faster learning and higher emotional resilience.

- Global uncertainty makes adaptability the defining leadership skill.

In this future, leadership is less about "being in charge" and more about being in service to the mission, to the people, and to the long-term health of the organization.

How to start your own shift from boss to coach

You don't need to overhaul your leadership style overnight. Start small with baby steps:

- → Choose one meeting this week where you'll ask more questions than you answer.

- → Identify one upcoming change and proactively acknowledge its human impact.

- → Schedule regular one-on-ones focused not just on work output but on personal development.

- → Review your language. Replace phrases that close conversations ("Here's what you need to do") with ones that open them ("What do you think our next step should be?").

- → Model the mindset. Admit when you're learning too. Show your team that adaptability is a shared value.

Over time, these habits compound, transforming not just your leadership but also your culture.

THE LEADER PEOPLE WILL FOLLOW ANYWHERE

The leaders people follow through the storms of change aren't the ones who claim to have all the answers. They're the ones who help us find our own answers, who see us not just as employees but as human beings, and who believe in our capacity to rise to whatever challenge comes next.

In an era defined by uncertainty, the most powerful thing you can be is not a boss, but rather a coach with empathy, guiding your team through complexity with clarity, courage, and care. CQ

Tom LeNoble is a resilience coach, inspirator, humanitarian, investor, author, and speaker, with a diverse career spanning major companies such as MCI (Verizon), Palm (HP), Walmart.com, and Facebook (Meta), as well as successful startups such as SupportSpace (BestBuy) and SpeedDate (Match).

The Manager as Teacher:

Start Sharing Know-How

BY JULIE FERRIS-TILLMAN

Like many, I claim to be a "Jill of all trades," although I know that adage has more meat than we typically consider. Shakespeare's line was "A jack of all trades, a master of none, but oftentimes better than a master of one." This applies even more to managers and leaders, because it takes facility with many skills to achieve a leadership role, but once in that position, your future success and growth rely on mastering just a few of those skills.

I have a squirrel's career path. It's never strayed too far from the initial trail—professional communications and strategic thinking—but there have been more than a few diversions to harvest nuts as I spotted them. I've realized that the most useful core of my career is my time spent teaching.

Initially, I taught in my Roman Catholic parish's CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) program. I led camp programming for kids. I upped the ante and officially donned the title of teacher through my graduate programs, learning as a TA, then an instructor, and then a tenure-track professional. My graduate focus included research and concentration in pedagogy, the method and practice of teaching.

Deep research into how people take in and share information, and how communities learn, informed my classroom performance and guided me in writing assignments that would foster learning. And this attention to how we think and learn improved my own learning. Democratizing a classroom means absorbing from the students. When "knowledge is power," I was trained to focus on sharing that power equally.

Professors get student evaluations, and those scores are something we report in tenure files or annual reviews. In the workplace, those scores are our ROI, the outputs and outcomes our team produces. More productivity is often equated with the quality of your leadership. The quality of your leadership is often measured in the years you've been leading, or a productivity trend that only goes up. As team size increases, so does output. Great outcomes emerge, and your leadership gets accolades.

One of the most valuable lessons in my career came when I realized I wasn't the one doing the teaching. I was learning from someone on my team, and it hit me hard: Leadership today isn't about logging the most years. It's about being open to learn from anyone at any stage. That shift—from boss to teacher—is the difference between managing people and helping them grow.

We're all working in multigenerational, AI-driven environments where change feels constant. If managers want to lead well, they need to think like teachers: Recognize learning styles, find the lessons that stick, and create spaces where knowledge is democratized.

Leadership today isn't about logging the most years. It's about being open to learn from anyone at any stage.

WHY MANAGERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND LEARNING STYLES

Teachers know that not every student learns the same way. Some people need to see a process in action to understand it. Some need to hear a description of that process, and others need to try it for themselves. Great teachers flex. They don't insist on one method; they adjust until the lesson lands. Managers should do the same.

This can be a challenge in a work world that asks us to constantly streamline, where efficiencies are turned into huge reductions of context or simply checkmarks on a group task board. There's little to see on such a board, and the only lesson available is "You didn't complete your task on time." The process of "optimizing" can steer off course and become the equivalent of unintentional busy work.

For companies, practices that can achieve common matrices or deliverables are useful; standard operating procedures are essential. But working with them in your team requires you to recognize how team members can master them. Do the tasks need to be explained repeatedly, using already existing guidance? Or do they need new explanations? Do team members need full context to understand the procedure and its reason for being? If leaders don't stop to recognize how teams take in and master information, procedures become impenetrable rules that hold back teams and drive burnout.

THE LEARNING WITHIN FEEDBACK: LESSONS THAT STICK

Teaching and learning happen in every moment, and feedback is one of the most recognizable ways managers can show intentions, empathy, and share knowledge. Education researcher John Hattie, in a study published in 2007 with co-author Helen Timperley ("The Power of Feedback," *Review of Educational Research*), says feedback is one of the most powerful drivers of achievement when it's clear, timely, and specific. That's the difference between a teacher redirecting an argument in the moment versus waiting until it goes awry on the final exam. In work terms, it's the difference between waiting for an annual review and giving a quick coaching note during the project itself.

And psychological safety matters. A 2022 Harvard Business School study by Henrik Bresman and Amy Edmondson ("Exploring the Relationship between Team Diversity, Psychological Safety and Team Performance: Evidence from Pharmaceutical Drug Development," HBS Working Paper Series) showed that diverse teams only performed better when they felt psychologically safe. Without that sense of safety, diversity has no effect on boosting outcomes. Teachers call it classroom culture. Managers can call it Tuesday. If people can't admit mistakes or ask "dumb" questions, they can't learn. As a manager, your team is your classroom: You gather together regularly, you achieve goals together, you learn together and you, as a team, are a knowledge hub.

Managers must be willing to learn as they go. They must learn from their team where the roadblocks are and evaluate whether everyone on the team has the same barrier to understanding. For example, could it be how you as a manager communicated the task or the need? Feedback flows both ways, and it often doesn't come when a leader says, "Anything I can do?" The leader is responsible for observing the team's strengths, abilities, and barriers and learning new ways of coaching, framing the work, or allocating the time.

COACHING IS TEACHING, NOT CORRECTING

Too many managers confuse coaching with correcting. Coaching is about noticing the opportunity, not just the error. A 2022 meta-analysis from the *Journal of Work-Applied Management* ("The Effectiveness of Workplace Coaching: A Meta-Analysis of Contemporary Psychologically Informed Coaching Approaches") found that workplace coaching significantly improves not only performance but also confidence and well-being. We are living through a moment where work is shifting. A massive upskilling is before us, and global economic shifts are changing supply and demand. Layer with that new generational perspectives on the value of work and community and "confidence and well-being" become outcomes a leader should work toward to secure talent, performance, and effectiveness.

Learning styles play a role here too. If someone learns best by talking it through, coach verbally. If they're a visual learner, sketch it. If they learn by doing, let them try, reflect, and try again. The best teachers adapt. The best managers should too. I've had some managers who say, "I have an open door!" or "Just put time on my calendar!" Those leaders forget that not all team members will attend "office hours" unsolicited. Nerves, confidence, energy style, and learning style can all affect whether a team member takes the initiative to ask for feedback. By following learning styles and observing how team members take in and use information, leaders can see that initiating a conversation with some employees is the best way to reach them, instead of insisting, "Well, they've never come to me for help."

BUILDING TWO-WAY LEARNING LOOPS

Classrooms are full of peer teaching because it works. Business can learn from that. Reverse mentoring—when junior employees teach senior leaders—is just another form of peer teaching. A 2024 study in *Current Psychology* ("Breaking Barriers: Exploring the Impact of Reverse Mentoring on Change Adaptation Behavior Through Sequential Mediation of Cognitive Flexibility and Resilience") found that reverse mentoring helped senior leaders become more adaptable and resilient. For younger staff, it gave confidence and visibility. Both sides walked away smarter.

That's the real shift. Managers don't need to be the sole source of knowledge. They need to set up loops where knowledge travels up, down, and sideways.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR WOMEN IN PARTICULAR

Teachers know students thrive when they see people like them succeed. The workplace is no different. A 2019 study in PNAS ("A Network's Gender Composition and Communication Pattern Predict Women's Leadership Success") showed that women MBAs with both broad networks and a close inner circle of female peers were 2.5 times more likely to land high-ranking jobs compared to women without that circle. For men, centrality alone was enough. For women, context and trusted allies mattered.

The lesson for managers: Build spaces where women can share know-how and experiences. Create platforms where stories travel. It's not performative, it's structural.

THE MANAGER'S PEDAGOGICAL MINDSET

Here's how to bring the teacher mindset into your day-to-day:

1 **Clarify objectives.** Teachers explain what "good" looks like. Managers should too. Write a definition of done, spell out criteria, and set checkpoints. And within that, grow team members' business savvy by also mapping the context of the work and how it connects to the overall big picture of the business, company, sector, and industry. Feedback works best when it's timely and task-specific.

2 **Use formative assessment.** Teachers check students' progress before the final exam. Managers can do the same for their team members. Run a 15-minute weekly "teach-back" where a team member demonstrates unfinished work and asks for input. Rotate the mic. Build safety. Agile offices build for this process in their daily standups. Identifying blockers allows you to explore the "how" of team members' work and revise work approaches.

3 **Coach, don't correct.** Ask "What's your learning style?" Adjust your coaching. Some people need words, some need sketches, some need practice. Many are framing their work in context. Sharing the big picture or the reasons why there are changes in structures or paths can be valuable to broad thinkers who work intuitively. The right method makes the message stick.

4 **Start two-way loops.** Pair a senior employee and a junior employee on a project. Give them equal teaching roles. Reverse mentoring boosts adaptability and confidence, and it makes knowledge travel in unexpected ways.

5 **Make empathy the curriculum.** Empathy isn't soft. It's the glue that holds growth together. Studies on perceived organizational support show that when people feel supported, their satisfaction, performance, and loyalty rise. Ask what support looks like before offering it.

6 **Treat AI like a teaching assistant.** Use AI to draft rubrics, summarize meetings, or generate practice questions. Let it handle the busy work. Then spend your time on the human part—empathy, clarity, coaching.

MANAGING YOUR OWN GROWTH

Here's the uncomfortable part: Teachers never stop learning. Neither should managers. Sharing know-how means being willing to admit what you don't know and learn in public. That might feel risky if you were trained to equate tenure with authority. But research says the opposite. High-quality management practices, trust, and coaching deliver measurable results in performance and retention.

And let's not forget mentoring. Meta-analyses show that mentored employees report higher pay and satisfaction, and mentors themselves report more engagement and performance. Teaching grows the teacher. That's true in classrooms, and it's true at work.

CLOSING THE LOOP

When you lead like a teacher, you stop relying on "I've been here 25 years" as a badge of authority and start sharing the

Teachers never stop learning. Neither should managers.

authority of know-how. You set clear outcomes. You check for understanding early. You coach in the way people learn best. You trade the solo lecture at the front of the room for many voices in a circle.

Your team feels it as clarity, growth, and trust. Research shows they'll stick around longer and perform better. The business benefits. But the best payoff is the same one teachers get: watching people surprise you with what they can do next. CQ

Julie Ferris-Tillman is manager, communications-media relations at the Mayo Clinic, and was VP and b2b tech practice lead at Interdependence Public Relations.

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THE HIDDEN LEVERAGE LAYER:
Middle Managers

BY KENDRA JOHNSON

In the grand theater of corporate hierarchy, middle managers often find themselves in the wings. Visible but underappreciated, essential yet undervalued. While C-suite executives command attention with strategic vision and frontline managers receive recognition for operational execution, middle managers operate in what we might call the "hidden leverage layer" of organizational success.

This positioning, while perhaps accidental, is also evolutionary. As organizations have grown more complex, more matrixed, and more interconnected, middle managers have become the critical connective tissue that holds everything together. They are the translators, the bridges, and increasingly, the make-or-break factor in whether organizational strategies actually work.

Yet despite their outsized impact on organizational success, middle managers remain the most under-supported leadership layer in most companies. This guide explores why that needs to change and how organizations can better leverage this critical role to increase productivity and job satisfaction across the board.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MIDDLE MANAGER ROLE

The role of the middle manager has fundamentally transformed over the past two decades. They're no longer simply supervisors who relay information up and down the chain of command. Today's middle managers are strategic orchestrators operating in multiple dimensions simultaneously.

Modern middle managers must excel at:

- Managing up by translating frontline realities into executive language while advocating for resources and clarity
- Managing down by inspiring teams while providing clear direction in an environment of constant change
- Managing across by collaborating with peers across departments, functions, and (now to add another layer) geography to deliver integrated solutions

This three-dimensional management model represents a complete departure from traditional hierarchical structures. Middle managers now operate more like conductors of an orchestra than supervisors of an assembly line.

WHY MIDDLE MANAGERS ARE THE BIGGEST LEVERAGE POINT

Research consistently shows that middle managers have a disproportionate impact on organizational outcomes. Gallup's "State of the Global Workplace 2020" poll reveals that managers account for 70% of the variance in employee engagement, demonstrating their outsized influence on team performance and organizational culture.

The data behind the impact of middle management is increasingly compelling. Research from McKinsey's Bill Schaninger, Bryan Hancock, and Emily Field, in their 2023 book *Power to the Middle: Why Middle Managers Hold the Keys to the Future of Work*, reveals that 60% of organizational change initiatives fail due to poor execution at the middle management level, but when middle managers are engaged and empowered, their teams are five times more likely to achieve successful transformations. In large, complex organizations, execution lives and dies with "distributed leaders," including middle managers who run critical businesses and functions.

Middle managers simultaneously represent organizations' biggest bottleneck and most critical bridge. They can accelerate or impede information flow, decision making, and change implementation. Understanding this dual nature is essential for organizational success.

BEYOND TECHNICAL COMPETENCE

While technical skills got most middle managers promoted, we're seeing now more than ever that soft skills determine their success in the role. **The matrix environment demands a sophisticated skill set that many organizations fail to develop systematically, specifically:**

- Communication in the middle management space isn't just about clarity (although that's important too). It's about becoming a master translator who can speak fluently in "executive," "frontline," and "peer-to-peer" contexts depending on the situation.
- Middle managers must become experts at building bridges where none existed before. This means understanding how decisions ripple across interconnected systems and creating sustainable relationships cross-departmentally that transcend formal authority.
- Perhaps the trickiest skill of all is creating clarity around joint responsibility in matrixed structures while ensuring everyone feels ownership rather than confusion about their role in collective success.

These three competencies work together, but they're only as strong as a middle manager's ability to execute them consistently. The Venned Group's T.A.C.T. framework provides a practical starting point for building this consistency, particularly in the challenging area of managing up.

T

Tailor the message
Understand your audience's communication style, priorities, and constraints. A data-driven executive needs different information packaging than a relationship-focused leader.

A

Articulate clearly
Structure your communication to lead with the most important information. Use the "headline first" approach: State your main point, then provide supporting details.

C

Choose the appropriate channel
Use email for documentation, face-to-face for sensitive topics, and presentations for complex information. Match your channel to your message and your audience's preferences.

T

Test understanding and confirm
Don't assume your message landed as intended. Ask clarifying questions and confirm next steps to ensure alignment before moving forward.

While T.A.C.T. provides a solid foundation for managing up, the reality is that soft skills gaps in middle management create cascading problems throughout organizations.

THE REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES OF MISSING SOFT SKILLS

The absence of these enhanced soft skills creates predictable patterns of organizational dysfunction. Two scenarios we see repeatedly illustrate just how costly these gaps can be:

The promoted expert trap. A high-performing director gets promoted to regional manager but continues doing the detailed work he excelled at previously. Instead of developing the team's capabilities, the regional manager becomes the bottleneck for every decision and task. The team becomes disengaged, feeling untrusted and underutilized, while the manager burns out trying to be everywhere at once. Growth stagnates because leadership capacity never expands beyond one person's bandwidth.

The "great" isn't standard challenge. Different middle managers across an organization each have their own definition of what constitutes quality work or excellent service. Without consistent frameworks and communication, customers receive wildly different experiences depending on which team they interact with. One department's "great" becomes another department's "barely acceptable," creating confusion internally and inconsistency externally. The result: eroded brand trust and frustrated employees who can't understand why their good work doesn't seem to matter.

These common breakdowns point to the need for a framework that addresses all aspects of the middle manager's connective tissue role. That's where BRIDGE becomes invaluable.

THE BRIDGE FRAMEWORK FOR MIDDLE MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE

Think of BRIDGE as your navigation system for the complex terrain of middle management. Each letter represents a critical capability that transforms good managers into organizational connectors.

B

Build relationships strategically
The goal isn't to become everyone's best friend (although being likable doesn't hurt), but rather to invest time in understanding stakeholder motivations, constraints, and success metrics.

R

Relay information effectively
Resist the urge to be a human photocopy machine. Your job isn't to pass information unchanged but to add value at each step. Become an intelligent interpreter who helps messages land with maximum impact and minimum confusion.

I

Integrate across boundaries
Look for opportunities to connect dots that others miss. Your unique position gives you visibility into patterns and possibilities that more specialized roles might not see. Use this perspective to facilitate relationships and collaborations that wouldn't naturally occur.

D

Drive accountability collectively
Create shared success metrics and collaborative problem-solving approaches that transcend departmental boundaries. Help people see how their individual contributions connect to broader organizational outcomes.

G

Generate solutions collaboratively
Position yourself as a catalyst for innovation by bringing together diverse perspectives and resources. The best middle managers aren't just problem solvers; they're solution architects who help others build answers together.

E

Evolve continuously
Commit to the ongoing development of both hard and soft skills while helping others do the same. In a rapidly changing business environment, static skills become obsolete surprisingly quickly.

While BRIDGE provides a comprehensive approach to middle management excellence, successful execution often comes down to making sound decisions amid competing priorities and stakeholder demands.

THE TRIPLE LENS DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Middle managers must evaluate decisions through three lenses simultaneously:

- **The strategic lens.** How does this support organizational objectives?

- **The operational lens.** What are the practical implementation requirements and constraints?

- **The relationship lens.** How will this impact stakeholder relationships and future collaboration?

The alignment of all of these lenses is difficult to balance, and often only one becomes the primary focus at a time. So how do modern organizations support the middle manager in navigating these dynamics?

The gap in supporting middle managers primarily exists where organizations invest heavily in executive development and frontline training while leaving middle managers to figure things out independently. Left untouched, this gap creates a critical weakness in organizational capability that smart companies are beginning to address systematically.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

When companies invest in developing the specific soft skills middle managers need, they see direct improvements in employee engagement, customer satisfaction, and bottom-line results. Modern middle managers need targeted development in several critical areas, many of which need to be foundational before we introduce new ways of working or tools such as AI.

Understanding power dynamics and influence strategies in matrix organizations becomes essential when managers must navigate complex stakeholder environments without

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traditional authority structures. This includes building genuine comfort with ambiguity and shared decision making, skills that don't develop naturally but respond well to structured training approaches.

Communication skills for middle managers go far beyond basic presentation abilities. These leaders need to facilitate difficult conversations that span multiple organizational levels. They must present complex, nuanced information to audiences with vastly different backgrounds and interests, while managing conflict in environments where multiple stakeholders have legitimate but competing needs.

Systems thinking represents another development area, helping middle managers understand how organizational interconnections create ripples from their decisions. This includes recognizing unintended consequences before they become problems and identifying leverage points where small changes can create maximum positive impact across the organization.

Perhaps most important, emotional intelligence enhancement helps middle managers read organizational dynamics and unspoken tensions that significantly impact team performance. This involves managing their own stress and uncertainty while simultaneously supporting others through organizational changes, building personal resilience that enables sustained high performance in consistently high-pressure environments.

CREATING SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Organizations must build infrastructure that acknowledges the unique challenges middle managers face if they want to see success within that layer. This infrastructure can include:

Peer learning networks. Cohort-based training is an excellent avenue to facilitate discussions across peer groups that might not otherwise take place. These work best when they're structured but informal, with real problems and real solutions taking center stage.

Executive sponsorship. Senior leaders who actively (and genuinely) mentor and advocate for middle management development see greater autonomy and confidence in their direct reports.

Decision-making clarity. Clear frameworks, which define authority levels and escalation paths in matrix environments, need to be in place. When everyone knows who decides what, middle managers can focus on value creation rather than political navigation.

Resource allocation. Dedicate a budget and time for middle management development, not just crisis response. Treat middle management development as an investment, not an expense.

MEASURING MIDDLE MANAGEMENT EFFECTIVENESS

Traditional performance management systems often miss the nuanced impact middle managers have on organizational success. New measurement approaches can capture their connective tissue function rather than just individual deliverables.

Key performance indicators can include:

- Relationship health metrics such as cross-functional collaboration frequency and quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and conflict resolution effectiveness and speed

- Information flow indicators such as communication effectiveness across organizational levels, and knowledge transfer and organizational learning facilitation

- Team development outcomes such as direct report growth and promotion rates, and team capability building and skill development

- Organizational integration measures such as cross-departmental project success rates, resource optimization, and cultural cohesion and alignment maintenance

THE FUTURE OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

The middle management role will continue evolving as organizations become more distributed, technology-enabled, and purpose-driven. Future middle managers will need to master new competencies while strengthening traditional relationship-building skills. Additional and increasingly important competencies that will need upskilling in the coming years include virtual relationship building, AI collaboration, Agile adaptation, and purpose alignment

PREPARING FOR TOMORROW'S MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Middle managers are not just another layer in the hierarchy. They're the hidden leverage that transforms strategy into results, potential into performance, and individual talent into collective capability. The most successful companies will be those that elevate middle management from an afterthought to a strategic priority, developing leaders who serve as organizational connective tissue.

The question now shouldn't be whether middle managers have such influence, but whether your organization is ready to fully support their potential as the critical leaders they've already become. CQ

Kendra Johnson is a soft skills expert and the founder of The Venned Group.

Burning (and Replacing)
Your Management Playbook

BY JIMMY BURROUGHES

My most valuable leadership lesson wasn't learned in a classroom. It was learned with the bite of an enormous backpack digging into my shoulders on some godforsaken training exercise in Wales. In the British Army, you learn one thing fast: Extra weight is a liability. It doesn't just make you tired; it gets people hurt. So you become ruthless. You field-strip your kit until only the essentials are left (memories of cutting toothbrushes in half remain). That instinct has never left me.

Twenty years on, I see the same thing playing out in offices, but in reverse. I watch good people, smart managers, dragging themselves through the week. They're carrying a metaphorical pack, one that's stuffed with rusty tools, outdated beliefs, and habits that should have died a decade ago. And they wonder why they feel slow, why they're frustrated, and why their teams look like they've completely checked out.

But burning the old playbook raises an obvious, and fair, question: What do you replace it with? It's not enough to point out what's broken. You need a new set of tools—a lighter, faster, and far more effective kit for leading in a world that won't slow down. After working with more than 3,000 leaders, I've seen what that new toolkit looks like. It starts not by adding more, but by ruthlessly jettisoning what's holding you back.

EMPTYING THE OLD BACKPACK AND WHAT TO TRY INSTEAD

Before you can pack the right gear, you have to ditch the dead weight. Most managers are weighed down by four pieces of obsolete kit:

The annual performance review. This is the heaviest, rustiest tool in the bag. It's a corporate séance where managers, armed with vague recollections, attempt to justify a rating decided months ago. The feedback is delivered too late to be useful, and the process breeds fear and reduces a year of

human effort to a single box-ticking exercise. It's a process designed for organizational compliance, not for performance improvement. The cost is immense: You create a culture of fear around feedback and miss countless opportunities to course-correct in real time.

Instead, try focusing on 10- to 15-minute meaningful check-ins weekly with each member of your team. We use a format called 3x3x3: three wins you had this week and what impact they made to the team; three things you are prioritizing next week and how they will benefit the team; and three things you need approved, decided, or supported by me. This helps you get a handle on what your team is doing and steer them in real time without micromanaging.

The illusion of control. When we feel unstable, our instinct is to grab the wheel tighter. This shows up as a desperate need for control, manifesting in two classic symptoms: endless meetings and approval bottlenecks. Meetings multiply to "stay aligned," but most are just poorly disguised status reports that could have been an email. Approval gates are added to "ensure quality," but they just create queues, slow down the work, and signal a fundamental lack of trust. This isn't management; it's anxiety. And it puts a tax on your team's speed and morale.

Take two mindsets here. The first is the realization that you got where you are through a combination of hard work and battle scars. We have to kiss some professional frogs to find a prince/princess, and the same applies for your team. Let them kiss frogs. Allow this to happen in areas where they can graze their knees, not break their legs. We want battle scars, but we don't want permanent disfiguration. If you are in a 3x3x3 catchup and you know that something is not going well for them, but that it will give them a great experience, let it flow.

Equally important is to realize that sometimes giving up control can ease the burden on you and sometimes create better results than you can. L. David Marquet's book *Turn the Ship Around!* centers on the idea that letting 143 sailors think

is always going to outperform relying on one for everything.

The "hero manager" cape. The hero manager who always swoops in to save the day feels essential. They get a rush from being the one who has all the answers, the one who fixes the crisis. But this is one of the most selfish acts in management. Every time you "save" your team, you rob them of a chance to learn. You create dependency, not capability. You become the ceiling on their potential, and you guarantee your own burnout. Your job isn't to be the hero; it's to build a team that doesn't need one.

Try and become the icebreaker leader. The icebreaker is the activity at the start of a networking event or meeting that helps everyone feel a little more at ease. This is essentially creating psychological safety. Try and put your team at ease by helping them feel safe to speak, act, learn, and grow.

Think of an icebreaker ship, the one sailing in front of the flotilla and breaking the ice, removing the icebergs that could tear a hole in the hull or sink one of the ships. The best leaders spend their time hunting for friction (icebergs): the invisible, systemic issues that cause problems in the first place. This is the role you can play for your team. Help them sail through smoother waters by removing problems that might slow them down, ensuring there is a clear channel. Friction hides in handoffs, in approval delays, and in ambiguous standards. Your job is to find it and kill it.

A construction firm I worked with was constantly missing project deadlines. The leadership blamed the site managers; the site managers blamed the crews. Everyone was working harder, but they were still falling behind. Instead of firefighting, we went friction hunting:

- **Step 1: Map the work.** Get everyone involved in a process in a room with a whiteboard. Draw the process from start to finish. Don't map the ideal process from the manual. Map what actually happens, warts and all.

- **Step 2: Time the waits.** Look at the gaps between the boxes. This is where the friction lives. How long does it take for a decision to be approved? How long does a request sit in someone's inbox? We found the construction firm was losing three days on every project waiting for a single engineering approval.

- **Step 3: Ask "why?" five times.** Once you find a delay, don't just treat the symptom. Dig for the root cause. Why is there a three-day wait? Because the engineer is overloaded. Why is he overloaded? Because he has to approve things that don't need his expertise. Why? Because the policy hasn't been updated in ten years. By asking "why" repeatedly, you move from blaming people to fixing the broken system.

The "more is more" mindset. Faced with a problem, the default corporate response is to add something. A new process. A new software tool. A new initiative. A new meeting. We pile on solutions without ever taking anything away. This "initiative-itis" just adds more weight to an already overburdened pack. The most effective leaders I know are masters of subtraction. They understand that progress doesn't come from doing more things, but from removing the friction that slows down the important things.

I teach a model called PVC, an operational filter for every commitment. Before you invest your focus, energy, or time, run the task, meeting, or project through these three gates. If it fails any one of them, it doesn't get your attention.

P — PURPOSE: THE WHY

The work: Why this? What critical outcome does it serve? What breaks if we simply don't do it? Does it serve the mission or is it a distraction?

My involvement: Why me? Is my involvement essential, or am I just the default? Am I here to enable a decision or to control an outcome?

V — VALUE: THE TRADE-OFF

The work: Is this the highest-value activity for the business right now? What are we saying "no" to by doing this? Does this create leverage or is it a one-off task?

My involvement: Is this the highest-value use of my time? What is the opportunity cost of my involvement here versus somewhere else? Am I doing £10 work at a £1000 an hour rate?

C — CAPACITY: THE REALITY CHECK

The team: Does the team have the skills, time, and authority to win? What's missing: a skill gap or a system constraint? Are we setting them up for success or for burnout?

My involvement: Do I have the personal bandwidth to do this properly? Will I be fully engaged or just a drive-by manager causing chaos? What does saying "yes" to this take my energy away from?

YOU CAN'T GIVE WHAT YOU DON'T HAVE

Here's the final, crucial piece of the puzzle. A disengaged manager will never build an engaged team. You can't give what you don't have. Many leaders are running on empty, buried in work that drains them, and then they're asked to go and inspire their teams. It's an impossible task.

Before you can fix your team, you have to fix your own role. Try this simple exercise. I call it the Calendar Audit. Your calendar is a statement of your priorities. A cluttered calendar means cluttered priorities. Use this response menu to protect your focus and ensure every meeting is a high-value use of time. This isn't about rejection; it's about precision, so we need to respond and clear out a heap of these meetings.

Try the Calendar Defense Menu:

Need a meeting? **What it means:** "Is a live meeting the right tool for this job, or could a call or email be faster?"

No. **What it means:** "This does not align with our priorities and has no clear strategic value."

Not yet. **What it means:** "We are not prepared. A meeting now would be a waste of time."

Need more. **What it means:** "I cannot have a useful discussion without more information (e.g., purpose, data, agenda)."

Not now. **What it means:** "This is important, but it is not the priority right now."

> ## A disengaged manager will never build an engaged team. You can't give what you don't have.

Not me. **What it means:** "I am not the right person to add value here. This should be redirected."

Noodle. **What it means:** "This topic is too important for a quick decision and requires dedicated thinking time."

Not enough people. **What it means:** "A 1-to-1 doesn't need a formal meeting slot. Let's have a quick phone call instead."

The job of a modern leader isn't to carry the weight for everyone else. It's to make the pack lighter. It's not about having all the answers. It's about building a system that finds them. After working with thousands of leaders, I believe only about 3% truly get this. The rest keep piling more into their pack and wondering why the journey is so challenging. CQ

Jimmy Burroughes learned leadership as a military officer leading troops in some of the world's most dangerous places and as a corporate high-flyer in high-pressure organizations. He is the author of Beat Burnout, Ignite Performance: The Leader's Playbook for Building a High Performance Team Culture *(2023).*

2

EQUIPPING THE MODERN MANAGER

The tools, frameworks, and skills managers need to succeed today
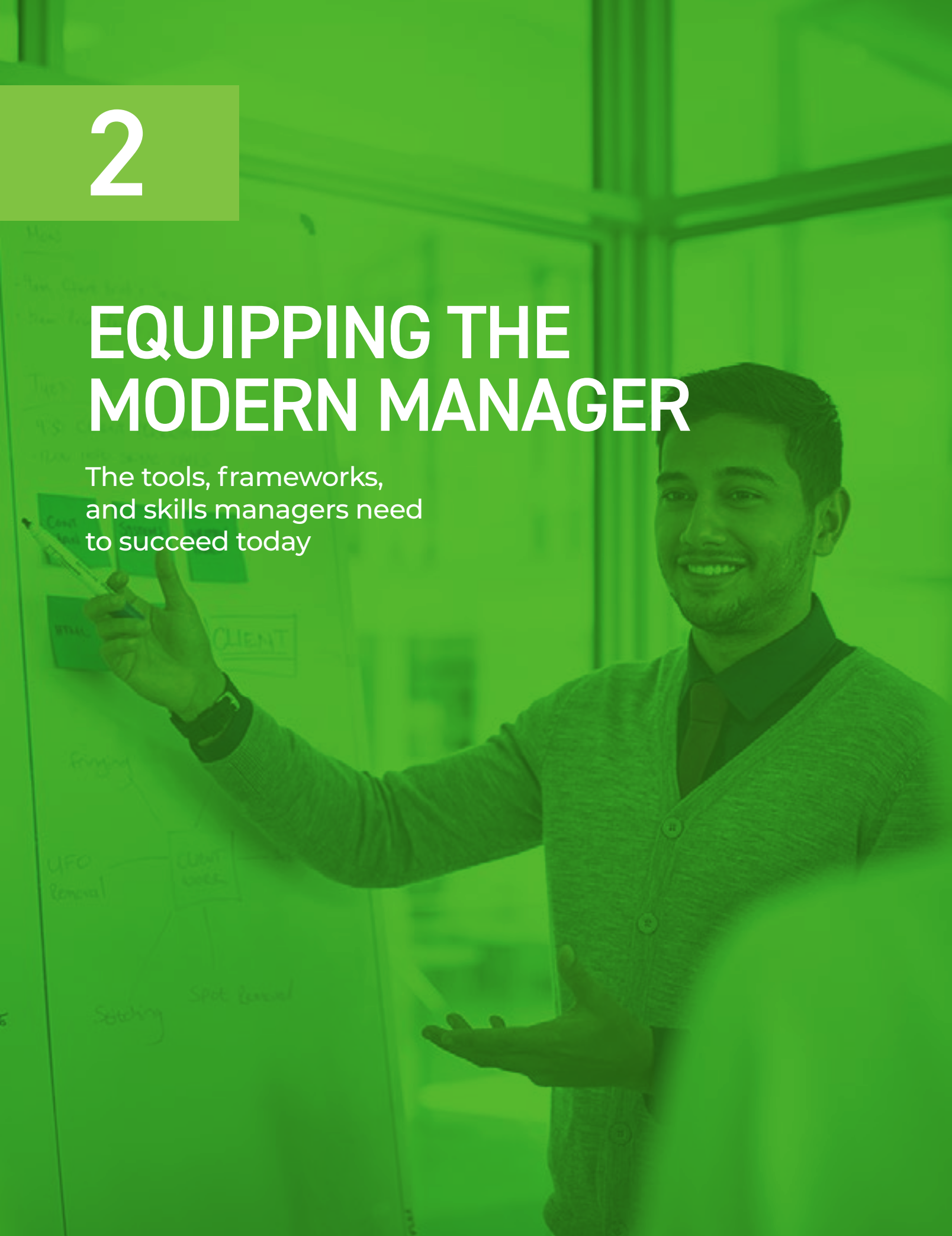
THE NEW MANAGER'S TOOLKIT

BY JESSICA EASTMAN STEWART

I'm writing this article from my kitchen table on a Monday morning, chai in hand, after finishing a conversation with one of my team members. She's been with us for over a year now, and after just talking with her, seeing how much her confidence has grown during that year has been one of the highlights of my week.

It's also a reminder of how much I wish I'd had a practical toolkit when I first became a manager a few decades ago.

You know that feeling you get when you're promoted and suddenly are responsible for other people's success? (And happiness. And career growth. And daily productivity.) It's exciting and terrifying all at once. I remember thinking I could just wing it. After all, I was good at my individual contributor role, so management should be similar, right?

Spoiler alert: it's not.

Management is a practice. It requires intention, systems, and yes, actual tools. The good news? You don't need to figure it all out from scratch. Today, I'll share the three foundational pillars that will transform your management approach: collaboration, coaching, and communication. These aren't just theoretical concepts. They're practical tools you can start using this week.

THE COLLABORATION TOOLKIT: BUILDING YOUR TEAM'S FOUNDATION

Let's start with collaboration, because here's what I've learned: Great managers don't just assign tasks and hope for the best. They create environments where their team members can do their best work together.

If you take nothing else from this article, please take this: Regular check-ins with your team members are non-negotiable. They are your collaboration cornerstone. I recommend a weekly cadence for most managers, although some situations call for more or less frequent meetings.

Here's the key shift that changed everything for me: The agenda isn't created by you. It's created by your team member, with you having the opportunity to add discussion items. This immediately transforms the dynamic from "manager checking up on employee" to "collaborative problem-solving session."

The agenda can look something like this:

- Updates on current projects
- Roadblocks or challenges they're facing
- Wins or progress to celebrate
- Questions or areas where they need your input
- Development goals or learning opportunities

Build time into your system to review their agenda in advance. This isn't just courtesy, it's strategic. When you've thought through their challenges beforehand, you show up as a better thought partner.

SMART DELEGATION: GROWING YOUR TEAM WHILE GROWING IMPACT

One of the most powerful collaboration tools in your toolkit? Delegation. But I'm not talking about just offloading tasks you don't want to do. I'm talking about smart delegation practices that create stretch opportunities for your team.

Here's a practice that's transformed how I think about this: I use weekly reminders in Asana to ask myself what I could pass along to someone on my team. If you're struggling to think creatively about what you can delegate, ask your own manager or a peer. They'll help you see opportunities you might miss.

The magic happens when you start viewing your own to-do list as a development opportunity menu for your team. That presentation you need to give? Maybe it's a chance for your team member to practice public speaking. The client meeting you're dreading? Perhaps it's perfect for someone who's been asking for more client exposure.

RETENTION CONVERSATIONS: COLLABORATION'S LONG GAME

Some of the most important collaborative work happens in conversations that might not feel like collaboration at all. I'm talking about deliberate retention and career coaching conversations.

These discussions don't naturally come up in the course of regular business (which is exactly why you need to schedule

them). When you really want to retain someone, you've got to spend time making sure they know that and actively support their growth within your organization.

I recommend asking questions such as:

- What do you like most about working here?
- What could I do to make your work more satisfying?
- What would need to happen for you to stay happy and engaged with the company for the next three years?
- What strengths would you like to use more?
- What other skills might be helpful to you not only in this role but also later in your career?

These conversations are collaborative in the truest sense. You're working together to design their experience and future with your organization.

COACHING AND FEEDBACK: YOUR DEVELOPMENT ACCELERATOR

Now let's talk about coaching and feedback, because this is where so many new managers get stuck. We know feedback is important, but knowing how to give it well? That's a learned skill.

Here's a statistic that should make every manager pay attention: According to Therese Huston in her book *Let's Talk: Make Effective Feedback Your Superpower*, Gallup has found in its Q12 Engagement Survey that the most engaged employees are those who answer affirmatively to this question: "In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?" Those who report not being adequately recognized are three times more likely to say they're planning to quit in the next year.

Weekly praise matters, and some managers find this frequency easier than others. If you're less consistent than you want to be, set up appreciation reminders.

Share specifics and explain why the contribution an employee made mattered. It can be as simple as: "I really appreciate how you got that website update done earlier this week, even though you were in the middle of other things when we needed your help. It was critical to the success we saw with the membership program."

I often text my team members if I think of something about their work I want to appreciate when I'm not near them physically, because appreciation that happens in the moment feels more genuine than appreciation that gets saved for the next meeting.

THE 2X2 FEEDBACK STRUCTURE

One of my favorite coaching tools is the 2x2 structure for giving and getting feedback. I always schedule one of these conversations six weeks into a new team member's tenure, and then annually after that at a minimum. These sessions are a cornerstone of how I develop leaders—structured yet conversational, they bring out growth opportunities for both of us. Over time, this rhythm creates a culture where feedback feels routine, transparent, and genuinely developmental.

The structure is beautifully simple:

- Two things you're doing well
- Two things you could do differently or improve

But here's the part that makes this truly powerful for coaching: You ask for the same feedback about your management (two things you're doing well in your management relationship with them and two things you could improve upon). Your direct reports can give insight into your management practices that no one else can. Their feedback is crucial information for improving your leadership skills.

PROJECT COMPLETION APPRECIATION

If your team member has a big project about to close, put a reminder for yourself to appreciate them once it's finished. A card or small gift on their desk the morning after their big event or after their budget gets board approval can mean more than you realize.

I keep a small stash of thank-you gifts ready to go—nothing extravagant, just thoughtful tokens that say, "I see your hard work and it matters." A bottle of wine, a gift card for a night out at the movies, or even a handwritten note can work wonders.

COMMUNICATION: THE THREAD THAT CONNECTS EVERYTHING

Finally, let's talk about communication. This isn't just about having clear conversations (though that's important). It's about creating systems that keep everyone aligned and informed.

Set expectations from Day One. One of the best communication tools I've implemented is creating a "Management Memo"—a written version of my management approach that I share with all my direct reports. It lays out my work style, expectations, and hopes for the team.

This isn't about being rigid or overly formal. It's about transparency. When team members know how you prefer to work, what your communication style is, and how you want to reach goals, they can show up more effectively.

Your memo might include:

- How you prefer to receive updates (email, Slack, in person)
- Your typical schedule and when you're most available
- What you value most in work relationships
- How you give feedback and how you'd like to receive it
- What success looks like on your team

Great managers also take care of their team as human beings, and part of doing so is remembering their birthday and work anniversary. I make notes in my task management system to celebrate these days. A verbal or emailed note is baseline, but you might also consider a gift or card.

Sometimes this means remembering other significant dates too. For example, when my brother died unexpectedly years ago, I didn't expect anyone to remember the anniversary. But when people around me did remember, it meant quite a bit to me. You'll know whether this applies to your team members—the key is paying attention to what matters to them and acknowledging it.

The hardest part of communication for many new managers? Having difficult conversations. But here's what I've learned: Most "difficult" conversations become much easier when you approach them as collaborative problem-solving sessions rather than confrontational moments.
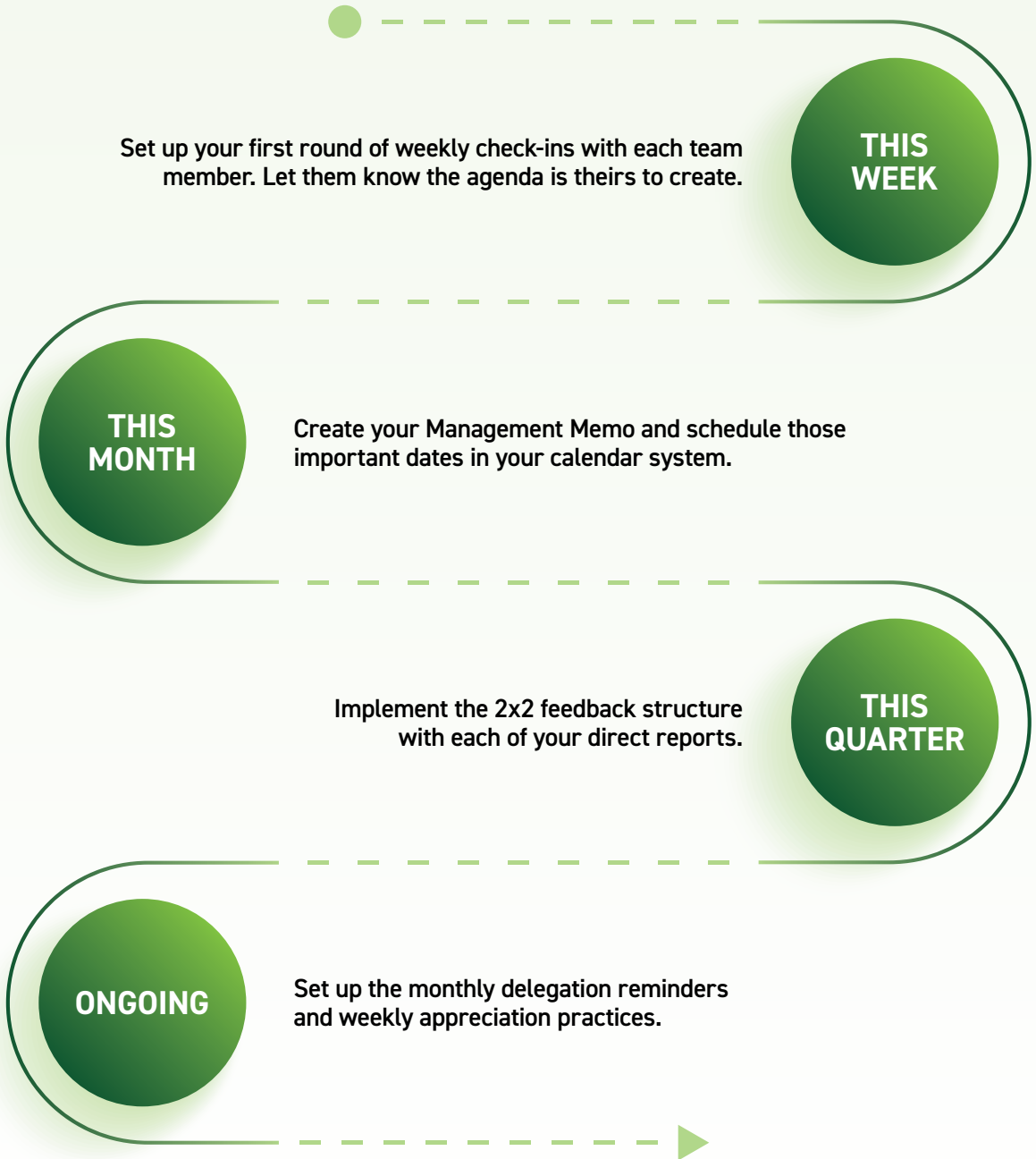
When you need to address performance issues or give corrective feedback:

- Lead with curiosity rather than judgment
- Focus on specific behaviors and their impact
- Ask for their perspective before sharing yours
- Work together to identify solutions
- Follow up to ensure progress

The goal isn't to avoid difficult conversations. It's to make them productive ones. Remember that the bigger the gap between what you're thinking and what you're actually saying, the harder the conversation.

YOUR IMPLEMENTATION PLAN: START HERE

Reading about these tools is one thing. Actually implementing them is where the real work begins. But you don't need to tackle everything at once.

THIS WEEK

Set up your first round of weekly check-ins with each team member. Let them know the agenda is theirs to create.

THIS MONTH

Create your Management Memo and schedule those important dates in your calendar system.

THIS QUARTER

Implement the 2x2 feedback structure with each of your direct reports.

ONGOING

Set up the monthly delegation reminders and weekly appreciation practices.

Remember, excellent management is much more than a checklist. It's an adaptive leadership challenge that requires vision, listening skills, empathy, judgment, and strategic thinking. But creating a strong foundation of management systems helps create the space for the leadership you need to bring.

Management is a practice, and like any practice, it gets better with intention and repetition. You're not going to be perfect at this immediately (none of us are), but with the right tools and commitment to growth, you can become the kind of manager who creates environments where people do their best work.

Building great teams is one of the most rewarding parts of leadership work. Intentionally getting great at this will supercharge your career and your impact. CQ

Jessica Eastman Stewart is a management, team culture, and productivity trainer who supports teams to get critical work done more easily and with more joy through her virtual and in-person workshops. Find out more about her activities on LinkedIn, Instagram, and at jessicaeastmanstewart.com, where you can sign up for her weekly newsletter, The Friday Five, which provides five tips to make the week go better.

Change Agility:
The New Manager's Essential Skill Set

BY LESLIE ELLIS

For decades, managers were taught to think of change as an event—something with a kickoff, a plan, and an end. That era is gone. Today, change isn't an initiative. It's the air managers breathe. Markets shift weekly, technology evolves monthly, and priorities are rewritten quarterly.

The question for managers is no longer whether things will shift, but rather how quickly they can align their teams and keep momentum when it does.

That's a different job than many were trained for. The skill set required to thrive now is less about mastering a playbook and more about building what I call change agility—the ability to navigate uncertainty while keeping performance, focus, and morale intact.

Consider the reality most managers face today: A software rollout gets delayed while customer expectations accelerate. Budget approvals slow down while competitive pressure speeds up. Hybrid work policies get updated before teams have found their groove. Each of these is not a crisis requiring a task force. It's an ordinary day of the week.

Managers struggle most often when trying to create stability in a chaotic environment. They exhaust themselves and their teams attempting to control variables that can't be controlled. The managers who succeed learn to ride the waves instead of fighting the current.

DIAGNOSING THE REAL CHALLENGE: FATIGUE OR CONFUSION?

Too often, leaders misdiagnose what's really happening on their teams. They see resistance and assume people are simply "tired of change." Sometimes that's true. More often, what looks like fatigue is really confusion.

Change fatigue is when people are maxed out—too much, too fast, with no capacity left. You'll see it in burnout, turnover, and disengagement. Employees hit their psychological and emotional limits. A team experiencing genuine fatigue will perceive additional communication as more demanding on their already stretched capacity.

Change confusion happens when priorities aren't clear,

sequencing is sloppy, or messages conflict. People aren't tired—they're frustrated. A confused team might say things such as "We keep getting mixed signals" or "I don't understand how this connects to what we did last month." They want to engage but can't figure out how. They might welcome more communication and clearer direction.

A manager's first job is to identify the difference, since the remedies are not the same. Confusion can be solved with sharper communication and better alignment. Fatigue requires leaders to create breathing space, celebrate progress, and reconnect people to the deeper purpose.

Managers who misdiagnose fatigue and confusion risk making the problem worse. Pushing harder on a confused team only deepens frustration. Slowing down a fatigued team without clarity prolongs the exhaustion.

▎THE NEW TOOLKIT MANAGERS NEED

The traditional tools of management—planning, delegating, monitoring—still matter, but they're no longer sufficient.

Modern managers need a few new muscles, such as my proprietary change methodologies, Strategic Tension™ and Layered Alignment™, and other strategies:

Strategic Tension™. Great managers identify the gap between today and tomorrow and then use that discomfort to create urgency and focus. They don't pretend it isn't there. This means being willing to say things like "Our customer satisfaction scores are good, but our competitors' are better, and that gap is growing."

Layered Alignment™. Alignment isn't one thing. It exists in layers: where we're headed, what matters most, how resources are applied, and whether the team has the skills to execute. Trying to achieve perfect alignment on all layers at once is paralyzing. Sequencing it layer by layer creates momentum.

Real-time resistance reading. Resistance isn't the enemy. Sometimes it signals fear, sometimes it reveals legitimate obstacles. Effective managers listen for the difference and the reason behind the resistance and respond accordingly.

Change communication as a core skill. Forget the polished talking points. What teams want is context, clarity, and honesty. The best managers make the "why" visible, point out what will stay the same, and frame uncertainty as information, not failure.

DAILY PRACTICES THAT BUILD RESILIENT TEAMS

Resilience is cultivated in the daily moments. Managers who consistently practice a few habits create teams that are better prepared for the unexpected:

Reset expectations regularly. Don't wait for annual reviews to update team members' roles and priorities. Have short, frequent check-ins to realign. This could be a five-minute conversation every few weeks to prevent the accumulation of misalignment.

Work in experiments. Treat pilots and tests as the norm, not the exception. Celebrate intelligent failures and the learning they create. This practice reduces the pressure for perfect solutions and increases tolerance for ambiguity. Teams that are comfortable with iterating and adjusting are much more adaptable when change occurs.

Think across functions. Few problems live neatly inside one silo. Encourage your team to see how their work connects to the bigger system. This cross-functional thinking prepares teams to collaborate more effectively.

Plan back from the future. Start with the outcome you need and work backward to the capabilities, decisions, and resources required to achieve it. This approach is very useful when the path forward isn't obvious or when multiple options exist.

These aren't side tasks. They are the work of leadership in a change-constant environment.

REINVENTION READINESS: MANAGERS EVOLVING THEMSELVES

Perhaps the most overlooked skill of all is reinvention. Many managers hit a wall not because the environment changes, but because they don't.

Reinvention readiness means knowing when your leadership approach has reached its limit and deliberately building the next version of yourself. There are several ways this reinvention of yourself and your skills might look, such as:

Shift from directing to coaching. Ask better questions and provide feedback that develops capability rather than just ensuring compliance.

Build comfort with ambiguity. Model comfort with not having all the answers. Be transparent about what's known and unknown while still providing direction.

The future doesn't belong to managers who cling to stability. It belongs to those who treat change as evolution, not disruption—who see it as the job, not the distraction.

Strengthen influence when formal authority isn't enough. Develop skills in persuasion, negotiation, and collaborative problem solving.

Learn to collaborate more effectively across layers and functions. Become comfortable working with peers, senior leaders, and external partners to create integrated solutions.

The managers who thrive aren't the ones who resist these shifts. They're the ones who step into them early.

MEASURING SUCCESS IN A CHANGE-CONSTANT WORLD

How do you know if you're developing these capabilities effectively? **The metrics aren't always obvious. Look for leading indicators:**

- How quickly does your team adjust when priorities shift?
- How often do they come to you with solutions rather than problems?
- How comfortable are they with ambiguity and iteration?
- Do they see change as an opportunity or a threat?

Highly adaptable teams display increased confidence during uncertainty, faster problem-solving skills, and more proactive communication about challenges and opportunities.

The future doesn't belong to managers who cling to stability. It belongs to those who treat change as evolution, not disruption—who see it as the job, not the distraction.

The best managers aren't "doing change management" on the side. They're leading in a way that makes their teams resilient, agile, and confident, no matter what comes next.

In a world where the only constant is change, managers who embrace this reality will not simply keep up. They'll set the pace. CQ

Leslie Ellis is a Conscious Change leader and senior consultant at Being First. She is a Certified Change Management Professional and a member of the Association of Change Management Professionals. Ellis has specialized in designing and implementing effective change strategies for Fortune 500 companies worldwide for more than a decade.

MANAGING ACROSS
GENERATIONS
IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL FATIGUE

BY RYAN FERRIER

For the first time in modern history, we're working in a four-generation workplace. Baby boomers, Generation Xers, millennials, and Generation Zers now share office space, Slack channels, and Zoom rooms. At its best, this mix offers perspective and creativity you can't replicate in a homogeneous team. At its worst, it creates friction, misalignment, and frustration.

This tension isn't just about age. It's about mindset. Each generation carries expectations for communication, recognition, and leadership shaped by the world they grew up in, from fax machines to TikTok. And while every era of work has had to manage across age groups, today's leaders face an added complication: digital fatigue.

Notifications, emails, and back-to-back video calls have blurred boundaries and overloaded everyone. In Lob's recent consumer research, more than half of people said they feel overwhelmed by digital communication. That applies in the workplace too: Employees are also consumers, bringing the same expectations for clarity, authenticity, and trust into their jobs.

The challenge for leaders is clear: How do you manage across these divergent generational mindsets while cutting through digital noise? The answer isn't to adopt one "correct" style. It's about designing systems that respect differences, bridge gaps, and create room for every generation to thrive.

THE RISING PRESSURE OF DIGITAL FATIGUE

Technology was supposed to make work smoother. Instead, it has created a constant state of being "on." **Digital fatigue shows up as:**

- Cognitive overload from too many channels (Slack, email, project tools)

- Emotional drain due to perpetual notifications, creating urgency that isn't always real

- Shallow focus because of fragmented attention and context switching

For managers, this scenario creates a new kind of leadership challenge. It's no longer just about setting direction and driving execution. It's about curating the flow of communication so that the right messages break through at the right time. Managing attention is now part of managing performance.

The irony is that younger generations, often stereotyped as "digital natives," are among the most drained by digital fatigue. Gen Zers and millennials crave clarity and authenticity more than constant contact. They want communication that matters, not more noise.

This isn't just a productivity issue. It's a trust issue. When communication feels excessive or irrelevant, employees

disengage. And disengagement has a cost: lower retention, weaker culture, and slower growth.

UNDERSTANDING THE GENERATIONAL MINDSET GAP

Each generation in the workplace was shaped by different formative experiences. Those experiences drive how they interpret leadership today.

Baby boomers (born 1946–1964) value hierarchy, structure, and consistency. They came of age in a world where careers were linear, institutions were stable, and authority was respected. They trust formal communication and expect thoroughness. A leader who sends long, detailed updates feels reliable, not overwhelming.

Generation X (born 1965–1980) grew up with economic uncertainty and the rise of personal computing. Members of this generation tend to be independent, pragmatic, and skeptical of over-engineering. They value process and reliability but dislike micromanagement. Communication that is clear, structured, and respectful of their autonomy lands best.

Millennials (born 1981–1996) came of age during the internet boom, 9/11, and the 2008 financial crisis. They've seen institutions falter and have rebuilt careers in the gig and startup economy. They value authenticity, purpose, and flexibility. A polished corporate memo often feels hollow; a transparent Slack post from a leader feels more real.

Generation Z (born 1997–2012) is the first true digital-native

workforce. This generation has grown up with smartphones, social platforms, and information overload. As a whole, they tend to be adaptive, values-driven, and quick to disengage if communication feels inauthentic. People from this generation want leaders who are transparent, empathetic, and direct and who respect their need for boundaries in a 24/7 world.

These differences create a mindset gap. A Gen Z employee might interpret weekly process-heavy check-ins as micromanagement. A boomer manager may see those same touchpoints as necessary accountability. Neither is wrong, but if not addressed, this disconnect erodes trust.

The mindset gap shows up most clearly in how people prefer to communicate, recognize one another, and lead. Some people are more direct and asynchronous, others lean formal and synchronous. Some thrive on public praise, others value a private word of acknowledgment. Some want autonomy with clear outcomes, others prefer structured oversight and process.

The point isn't to force everyone into the same mold or to compromise for compromise's sake. It's about building systems where different preferences can coexist and still drive the business forward. That's where culture becomes real, not in theory but in the way we design how we work together.

WHAT CONSUMER BEHAVIOR TEACHES LEADERS ABOUT THE WORKPLACE

One way to understand the generational gap is to observe what people expect from the brands they interact with, as these preferences mirror what employees expect from the workplace.

Research into consumer preferences offers an important parallel: The same people ignoring irrelevant marketing emails are ignoring irrelevant workplace messages. **Here are three points to keep in mind:**

PERSONALIZATION MATTERS

67% of consumers take action when physical communication is personalized; 72% discard it when it's generic. The same is true at work. Employees disengage from one-size-fits-all communication.

AUTHENTICITY BUILDS TRUST

49% say physical communications feel more credible than digital. In the workplace, transparent leadership builds credibility across generations.

CLARITY CUTS THROUGH NOISE

84% of people read physical communication the same day they receive it. Employees respond similarly when messages are concise, direct, and intentional.

These preferences also apply to expectations for leadership. Where older generations may value thorough and structured communication, millennials and Gen Zers often see formality and repetition as clutter. They prefer clear, transparent updates delivered in casual and asynchronous ways versus high-volume, real-time communication.

The takeaway? Employees are consumers too. Their expectations for clarity and authenticity don't stop when they log in to work.

FIVE LESSONS FOR MARKETING LEADERS

For marketing leaders, getting four generations to collaborate effectively isn't easy when everyone communicates differently.

The key is to be intentional by crafting messages that can flex to meet people where they are. In a multigenerational, digitally saturated workplace, one-size-fits-all communication just doesn't work.

HERE ARE FIVE LESSONS TO GUIDE THE WAY:

Listen first, then adapt

One of the biggest mistakes that leaders make is assuming one style works for everyone. It doesn't. Some employees crave regular communication, while others find it disruptive. The fix isn't customizing for every individual but rather listening to your team. Ask what communication cadence helps them succeed, and use surveys, office hours, or informal check-ins to gather feedback. Even the act of asking for personal preferences builds trust.

Treat communication as leadership in action

Marketers know communication defines perception. The same is true for leaders. A quick Slack ping may solve a tactical issue, but a handwritten thank-you note or thoughtful all-hands email signals something bigger: You see people, you value them. These small, unexpected gestures cut through digital clutter and create moments of authenticity.

Prioritize authentic dialogue over polished jargon

The members of younger generations, especially millennials and Gen Zers, can spot corporate jargon a mile away. They want real talk, not "alignment of synergies." That doesn't mean oversharing or informality for its own sake. It means saying what you mean, even if it's difficult. Leaders who admit uncertainty or acknowledge mistakes build more trust than those who hide behind spin.

Be clear, then get out of the way

Autonomy is only empowering if expectations are clear. Younger employees thrive on freedom, but without defined outcomes, flexibility becomes chaos. Leaders must outline what success looks like, when it's needed, and why it matters. Once clarity is established, step back. Let employees choose the "how." This satisfies both the structure older generations want and the autonomy younger generations need.

Harness generational strengths through mentorship

Every generation brings unique strengths. Baby boomers and Gen Xers model accountability and process discipline. Millennials and Gen Zers push for innovation, inclusivity, and authenticity.

The most effective leaders don't force uniformity; they pair strengths. A cross-generational mentorship program, for example, allows baby boomers to share institutional wisdom while learning digital fluency from Gen Zers. When differences become assets, not obstacles, teams thrive.

The five lessons are practical but are not set in stone. Success comes not from insisting on one method, but from taking a flexible approach to accommodate diverse mindsets.

FUTURE-PROOFING LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL FATIGUE

The generational mindset gap is real, and digital fatigue makes it harder. But it's also a strategic opportunity. Organizations that bridge these divides will unlock creativity, loyalty, and resilience that competitors can't match.

If leaders ignore it, they risk fractured teams, rising turnover, and communication that fuels disengagement instead of trust.

If they embrace it, they can design workplaces where multiple generations bring their best, not despite their differences but because of them.

That shift redefines the manager's role. Today, managers aren't just people leaders; they're system designers. They shape how information moves, how recognition happens, and how trust is built across different mindsets. Done well, these systems unlock the creativity and accountability that make generational diversity a strategic advantage.

The future of leadership isn't about choosing between formal memos and Slack updates, or between private recognition and public praise. It's about building systems of communication that are flexible, authentic, and intentional.

Generational diversity isn't a liability. It's an advantage if we build for it. CQ

Ryan Ferrier is the CEO of Lob.

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How Can Managers Measure Happiness at Work?

BY NIC MARKS

In the nautical world, it's a high compliment to say a captain runs a happy ship. It means morale is high, the crew members are working well together, and success is more likely. The same is true for managers: Leading a happy team is both easier and more rewarding than leading an unhappy one.

Why does it matter? Because happy teams deliver. In my book, *Happiness Is a Serious Business: Why Happy Teams Are More Successful and How to Build Them* (Rethink Press), I identify "seven successes of happy teams": They are more stable (lower turnover), more energetic, more collaborative, more creative, more attractive (attract support and resources), more effective, and ultimately more profitable. Happiness isn't a fluffy extra; it's the foundation of success.

And it makes leadership less stressful. A happy team doesn't mutiny—they don't even "jump ship." They stay, contribute, and grow. For managers, that's the difference between constantly firefighting and genuinely enjoying the role of leading a great team.

CREATING CONDITIONS, NOT FORCING HAPPINESS

Here's the good news: It's not a manager's job to make people happy. You can't force happiness, but you can create the conditions where it flourishes. Think of it less as a commanding role and more as a facilitative one, like a coach who sets up the playing field so the team can succeed.

At the everyday level, this role means helping people achieve their goals. People feel happiest at work when they make progress—small wins that build momentum. What drains them most are frustrations: clunky systems, poor communication,

Happiness isn't a fluffy extra; it's the foundation of success.

and interpersonal tensions. I call this approach reducing friction and increasing flow. Set your team's realistic goals and remove obstacles out of the way. Managers who tackle those frictions free their teams so they can get into their flow, where challenges and skills are well matched and energy soars.

This everyday level is about what the team members are working on. In contrast, the deeper cultural level is about how they are working together. The manager's role is to create a supportive and appropriately challenging environment that helps the team be happy and successful.

In my book, I frame these as positive actions that managers and team members can apply. These aren't new scientific discoveries. Versions of them have appeared in psychology for decades. I call them "the Five Ways": connect (it all starts with people); be fair (the foundation of a happy place to work); empower (give people the freedom to use their strengths); challenge (professional development fosters a sense of achievement); and inspire (employees want to feel they are making a difference).

Keep these Five Ways in mind as you interact with your team: Are people connecting? Are they being treated fairly, trusted with responsibility, stretched in the right way, and inspired by the bigger picture? When these conditions are met, people feel good and do great work.

SEPARATING DRIVERS AND OUTCOMES

To improve anything, you need to measure it. But you also need to measure the right things. Here's where many organizations get stuck: They confuse what we statisticians call "drivers" and "outcomes."

Take the popular concept of employee engagement. It sounds good, but scratch beneath the surface and most "engagement surveys" are really collections of drivers: Do you have a best friend at work? Do you know what's expected of you? Are you using your strengths? These are all important questions, but without a clear outcome measure, it's hard to know what they're actually driving. Engagement becomes a vague corporate construct rather than something people experience directly.

Happiness is different. Ask someone, "How happy were you at work this week?" Everyone, from the shop floor to the top floor, has an answer. It feels genuine because it is rooted in people's lived experience. We all have felt happy and unhappy at work. And when measured alongside its drivers (the Five Ways), you get a clear statistical picture: which drivers matter most, and how they relate to performance.

That's why I recommend two simple tools:

- **Weekly pulse check**—a regular snapshot of the team's happiness, plus an opportunity to share successes and frustrations. It is inevitable that teams will have good and bad weeks, and this weekly measure will capture these.

- **Quarterly culture profile**—a deeper dive based on the Five Ways. The results help you understand how the team members are working: their strengths and the areas they need to work on.

The weekly measure ensures that team happiness is tracked and any frustrations are picked up quickly before they become bigger problems. In contrast, the quarterly culture profile allows for a deeper reflection so managers and teams can see not only how happy they are but also why.

TURNING DATA INTO ACTION

Measurement by itself changes nothing. In fact, asking people how happy they are and then doing nothing with the results is worse than not asking at all. You've asked them to share but have not listened.

The real value comes when teams meet to reflect on the data. A short weekly check-in, just 15 minutes, can transform how teams work together. **The agenda is simple:**

- Celebrate wins and achievements (increase flow).

- Surface and tackle frustrations (reduce friction).

- Agree on actions.

It is important to start the meeting by focusing on the positives. Too often, teams rush straight to the next challenge without pausing to notice what they've achieved. Taking a moment to celebrate progress not only feels good but also creates positive energy to tackle the trickier stuff. The aim of these meetings is to learn in real time and ultimately to have more good weeks at work than bad ones.

Once a quarter, it pays to go deeper, with a one- to two-hour session on exploring the team's culture profile. This kickstarts conversations on what's working and what's not, and then teams can decide on which one or two areas to improve. Again, it's important to start with the team's strengths, acknowledging what is going well, before turning to any challenges. These meetings are more reflective, and their aim is to create a more functional team that can work well together and can rise to any challenges it faces.

Some managers feel a little nervous about leading these meetings.

Here's a tip for leading better conversations: Think mirrors and windows. Mirrors reflect back what people say so they feel heard and can clarify their own thinking. Listening isn't nodding; it's paraphrasing, summarizing, showing you've understood. Windows open up new perspectives, helping people see possibilities and connect their motivation with the team's goals.

When leaders act like a mirror, they are supporting their team to see things as they are. In contrast, acting like a window enables the team to see where they could go. In this way, conversations can naturally shift between being supportive and inspiring.

BUILDING A RHYTHM

For a leader to build happy, successful teams, it's critical that these reflective meetings become part of your regular routine.

This is why I call my cyclical methodology Measure-Meet-Repeat. It's a measurement-led approach, but numbers only start the process. The real magic happens in the repeated meetings. One-off surveys or away days won't change culture. But when you make happiness a habit, transformation follows.

There are two Measure-Meet-Repeat cycles: one lighter and faster, the other slower and deeper. Both are powered by happiness data—the weekly pulse check feeds the first fast cycle, while the quarterly culture profile drives the slower one. Each cycle provides opportunities for teams to reflect, learn, and build the conditions for greater happiness and success.

The process is simple:

- **Measure:** Track weekly happiness and quarterly culture (the key drivers).

- **Meet:** Reflect weekly on everyday work and quarterly on how you work together as a team.

- **Repeat:** Make it a habit.

HAPPINESS IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

Over time, the effects of this repeated cycle compound. Small actions—recognizing achievements, fixing small frustrations, thanking each other—build trust, collaboration, and energy.

This process does work, both at an organizational and a team level. One leader I worked with inherited a struggling team. He didn't fix things overnight, but within six months of committing to this rhythm, trust had returned and performance had lifted. An organization of more than 200 employees that we have worked with for many years took a systematic approach to improving happiness. Every team leader was required to have weekly check-ins with their teams. Over the next three years, all of the organization's happiness scores improved, and staff turnover dropped from 14.5% to just 9.5%.

The repeat element of Measure-Meet-Repeat reminds us that consistency counts and that excellence isn't an event, it's a habit.

OVERCOMING THE TIME OBSTACLE

Measure-Meet-Repeat is a simple process, but that doesn't mean it is always easy to implement. The biggest pushback I hear from managers is, "I don't have time for this." This is very understandable, as most leaders are stretched thin already. They have pressure from above and below, with many working several hours of unpaid overtime every week. But here's the paradox: Investing a little time in team happiness actually saves time.

Weekly check-ins take 15 minutes. Quarterly sessions are an hour or two. In return, you get fewer crises escalating to your desk, faster problem solving, and a team that manages itself better.

Ignoring team happiness, on the other hand, is costly. Underperformance becomes the norm. Overlooked frustrations don't vanish; they fester. Team members become more negative and drained of energy. And nothing eats into a manager's time more than recruiting replacements for people who've quit.

Happiness isn't a distraction from the "real work." It's what makes the real work possible.

A CALL TO ARMS

For many leaders, the default response to pressure is simply more of the same—push harder, demand more, tighten controls. But there is another path, often overlooked: Treat happiness not as a luxury, but as essential to success.

Leaders who choose this path don't just avoid unhappiness. They create teams that rise to challenges together. Team members build on each other's efforts, creating momentum that carries the whole team forward. These are the teams and organizations that sustain performance and thrive in the long term.

The choice is real. Do you want to run a happy ship or be constantly firefighting? You don't need to be the world's greatest manager, or even a happiness statistician. You just need to create the conditions for teams to flourish. It starts with measurement and then you commit to the rhythm. Measure. Meet. Repeat.

Why not start this week? Fifteen minutes is all it takes. The repeating rhythm will do the rest. CQ

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HUMANITY AND TECHNOLOGY

Balancing people and progress in the age of AI

THE MANAGER'S NEW MANDATE

BY ANDREA SCHNEPF

Artificial intelligence and constant change are redefining the manager's role. No longer occasional change leaders, managers now operate in a state of continuous transformation where AI adoption is both a technology shift and a human challenge. Here are the skills, mindsets, and organizational support needed to lead effectively at this intersection.

THE NEW REALITY: CHANGE IS THE OPERATING SYSTEM

Change isn't coming. It's here, and it's accelerating.

Once, change was something organizations planned for. Leaders designed transformations with clear beginnings,

middles, and ends, followed by a period of stability before the next wave arrived. Today, that cadence is gone. The modern workplace is an ecosystem of constant change. Market disruptions, mergers, shifting customer expectations, evolving regulations, and new ways of working arrive in rapid succession. Nowhere is this more visible, or more disruptive, than in the adoption of artificial intelligence.

In this new reality, managing change isn't a special skill managers pull out occasionally. It's the operating condition they navigate every day.

For managers, especially those in the middle layers, the challenge is twofold:

- Deliver results in a business landscape where priorities shift constantly

- Lead people through uncertainty without losing trust, engagement, or clarity

And while the scope of change is broad, the urgency of AI adoption has created a high-stakes test for every manager's ability to lead in an era where both technology and human needs evolve in real time.

AI: NOT JUST A TECHNOLOGY SHIFT, BUT A HUMAN ONE

AI is transforming workflows, decision making, and customer engagement, but these shifts are only part of the story. AI adoption changes how work is done, who does it, and how people see themselves in the organization's future. The danger lies in treating AI as a purely technical rollout. That mindset reduces adoption to a checklist of installations, integrations, and process changes, ignoring the fact that people are the ultimate adopters. Without their understanding, trust, and participation, AI initiatives stall or fail.

Research consistently shows that up to 70% of transformation failures are not the result of flawed strategy, but of people's resistance. When AI is introduced without attention to the human experience, resistance can take many forms, such as fear of job loss or skill redundancy, anxiety over keeping up with the pace of change, and erosion of trust when leaders focus on efficiency without addressing "what's in it for me." These reactions are not signs of unwillingness; they are natural responses to uncertainty. The difference between resistance that derails progress and resistance that fuels healthy debate lies in how managers address it.

THE MANAGER'S ROLE IN AI ADOPTION

Managers are the bridge between executive vision and team reality. They translate high-level strategies into day-to-day actions, interpret messaging, and maintain engagement during times of disruption.

IN AI ADOPTION, THE MANAGER'S ROLE IS AMPLIFIED TO INCLUDE:

INTERPRETER	SENSE-MAKER	TRUST-BUILDER	CAPABILITY COACH
Explaining AI's purpose in practical, relatable terms	Helping teams understand what's changing, why it matters, and how it will affect their roles	Addressing concerns openly, normalizing questions, and ensuring employees feel heard	Guiding reskilling efforts so employees see AI as an enabler, not a threat

Consider a customer service manager whose company has just introduced AI-driven chatbots. Without guidance, the team fears automation will make them redundant. A proactive manager reframes the technology as a tool to handle routine queries, freeing the team to focus on higher-value interactions and personalized service. They set up role-specific AI training sessions and regularly check in to address concerns. Over time, adoption rates rise, not because the tech improved but because trust and clarity did.

When managers are equipped and aligned, AI adoption accelerates. When they are unsupported or unclear, adoption stalls.

RESPONSIBLE AI ADOPTION: BEYOND THE TECHNICAL PLAYBOOK

The push for AI integration often comes with a "move fast" mindset. Leaders feel market pressure to pilot tools, automate workflows, and prove ROI quickly. But speed without alignment is risky, as people will not use what they do not understand.

A responsible approach to AI adoption includes:

- **Transparency:** Explain AI's role, limitations, and benefits in plain language
- **Involvement:** Engage employees early in defining use cases and guardrails
- **Role clarity:** Show employees where they fit in the AI-enabled future
- **Human recognition:** Celebrate human contributions alongside technology gains

For example, a finance department rolling out AI-based forecasting tools involves analysts in testing the system before launch. The team identifies areas where the AI misses subtle market signals, and their feedback shapes the final configuration. By launch, adoption is high because the team helped shape the tool, rather than having it imposed on them.

When people understand that AI is there to augment their work, not erase it, they become allies rather than skeptics.

FEAR IS THE SILENT KILLER OF AI ADOPTION

Fear doesn't always announce itself. It can appear as slowed engagement, minimal participation in training, or subtle resistance to new workflows. Left unaddressed, it becomes a drag on morale and execution. Fear triggers in AI adoption may include:

- **Job threat narratives:** "Will this tool replace me?"
- **Skill relevance concerns:** "Will my experience still matter?"
- **Change overload:** "Another transformation? I'm still catching up from the last one."

Managers can't eliminate these fears entirely, but they can name them, frame them, and navigate them. This approach might include:

- Reskilling programs that show commitment to employee growth
- Clear communication about AI's scope and limitations
- Safe spaces for employees to ask questions without judgment

THE CHALLENGE OF MANAGING THROUGH CONTINUOUS CHANGE

Even without AI, the pace of change today outstrips most organizations' capacity to absorb it. Traditional change models, such as Kotter, ADKAR, and Lewin, were designed for episodic transformation and assume stability between changes, clear start and end points, and time to embed new ways of working. Today's reality is different. Multiple transformations happen simultaneously, change cycles overlap, and the "end" of one initiative is often the start of the next.

FROM MANAGING CHANGE TO LIVING IN CHANGE

Managers can no longer frame change as a temporary disruption. Instead, they must embed adaptability into the team's culture, processes, and mindset. This will require them to:

- **Normalize change:** Position it as part of the job, not an exception to it

- **Empower decision making:** Give teams autonomy to adapt without constant top-down approvals

- **Reduce resistance early:** Spot friction before it slows execution

- **Celebrate progress:** Recognize small wins to sustain momentum

In another example, a marketing team faced three major changes in one year: a rebrand, a CRM overhaul, and the introduction of AI-driven campaign analytics. Their manager set up a standing "change readiness" meeting every two weeks, where team members shared updates, challenges, and successes. This ritual normalized change, kept communication open, and maintained morale through overlapping projects.

EQUIPPING MANAGERS FOR THE AI + CHANGE ERA

Success in this dual reality of AI integration and constant change requires a modernized skill set. Managers need:

- **Change mastery:** Comfort leading in ambiguity, applying flexible frameworks that allow for iteration

- **AI fluency:** Understanding AI's capabilities and its implications for workflows, roles, and culture

- **Trust architecture:** Building and maintaining psychological safety in times of uncertainty

- **Communication agility:** Translating complex changes into accessible, actionable information

- **Emotional intelligence:** Recognizing, validating, and responding to the human side of transformation

Another example I can draw on is how a retail operations manager introduced AI inventory systems while managing seasonal staffing changes. By combining AI fluency (understanding system limitations) with trust architecture (explaining how the tool supports, not replaces, staff decisions), they ensured adoption while reducing turnover risk.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

To enable managers to lead effectively through AI adoption and constant change, organizations should do these five

things. Align leadership messaging to ensure all leaders speak consistently about AI's purpose, benefits, and limitations. Invest in change leadership development by providing practical toolkits, peer learning forums, and scenario-based training. Build transformation networks, using cross-functional teams to track readiness, surface resistance, and accelerate adoption. Measure trust alongside adoption by tracking both technical integration metrics and employee sentiment. Finally, integrate change into the culture, and make adaptability a core competency, not a crisis response.

THE LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

AI and constant change are not separate challenges. They are overlapping realities. Managers who can navigate both will define the next era of organizational success.

They are not just implementers of strategy, but rather the human bridge between innovation and adoption, between disruption and stability. When they have the skills, trust, and clarity they need, they transform uncertainty into momentum, resistance into engagement, and disruption into a lasting competitive advantage.

The organizations that thrive will be those that invest in their managers now, equipping them to lead confidently in a world where change is the norm and AI is the catalyst. Because the future isn't waiting, and neither should you. CQ

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Why Humans Remain Indispensable in the Age of AI

BY GREG SHEWMAKER

Artificial intelligence sits at the center of how leaders design teams, set strategy, and measure success. Across industries, executives are reorganizing divisions and redefining roles in a rush to hand over every task that looks automatable to AI agents. If an algorithm can draft proposals, screen resumes, or manage customer outreach, why keep people in the middle?

The logic sounds unassailable. Machines don't sleep, complain, or ask for raises. But efficiency isn't the same as strategy. Leaders owe their organizations, and the people who keep them running, an honest look at what's being overlooked in this rush to automate.

▍ THE IRREPLACEABLE HUMAN SPARK

AI can parse patterns faster than any human team. What it cannot do is imagine what doesn't yet exist or rally a group when circumstances turn. Research published in MIT Sloan Management Review ("Does GenAI Pose a Creativity Tax?") shows that lasting competitive advantage depends on human

creativity, and creativity requires empathy and judgment that no model can reproduce.

When a company is faced with a crisis, such as a product recall, a major cyber incident, or a supply chain collapse, it isn't algorithms that rebuild trust with employees or customers. It's leaders who steady workforces, reassure stakeholders, and inspire confidence in uncertain conditions. AI may calculate probabilities, but it cannot project belief, purpose, or shared vision. Those are human traits, and in critical moments, they are the difference between collapse and recovery.

RELIABILITY AND TRUST: BIAS, BLIND SPOTS, AND ERRORS

AI systems also absorb the flaws of the data they are trained on. A 2025 London School of Economics and Political Science study reported by *The Guardian* ("AI Tools Used by English Councils Downplay Women's Health Issues, Study Finds") showed how tools used by English councils downplayed women's health issues compared to men's. The finding underscores a broader truth: When flawed data feeds these systems, flawed decisions follow.

It is easy to see how this pattern could manifest in other ways, from hiring systems that downgrade nontraditional career paths to lending models that penalize minority applicants. When managers outsource judgment to algorithms without oversight, they may miss key opportunities and risk eroding trust among both employees and customers.

Even the best models misfire. Hallucinated answers, shaky reasoning, and breakdowns under new conditions are not rare glitches. They are expected behaviors. A 2025 Live Science report ("AI Hallucinates More Frequently as It Gets More Advanced — Is There Any Way to Stop It from Happening, and Should We Even Try?") noted that the most recent reasoning-focused models from Open AI, o3 and o4-mini, hallucinated 33% to 48% of the time. In healthcare, aviation, or finance, one mistake can cascade into safety hazards, lost livelihoods, or market instability. Even in less critical settings, minor errors damage trust and disrupt the customer experience.

Executives often describe AI failures as "outliers," but those outliers come with a predictable frequency. That should reframe how leaders design safeguards. When the risk of error is baked into the system, human oversight is essential.

WHY SO MANY AI PROJECTS FALL SHORT

Breakthroughs dominate the headlines, but inside most organizations, the story is frustration. A recent MIT Sloan report covered by Fortune ("MIT Report: 95% of Generative AI Pilots at Companies are Failing") found that 95% of generative AI pilots fail to deliver meaningful returns. The problem lies in the gap between what AI promises and what it actually delivers. Leaders are told it's both a world-changing breakthrough and a low-cost replacement for human labor. That contradiction drives fear-based adoption: fear of missing out, of becoming obsolete, of falling behind.

Leaders often leap in without a clear plan, assuming AI can be rolled out like any other software with immediate payoff. In reality, organizational complexity makes adoption much more complicated, and many companies are instituting cost-cutting because the more challenging strategic questions remain unanswered.

Instead of pausing to understand how AI is reshaping the competitive landscape and clarifying how their organizations should respond, many leaders rush straight into deployment. By skipping the more complex strategic work, they treat AI as a quick fix rather than a transformation. That shortcut leaves initiatives without a clear foundation, so they look promising on paper but rarely scale or endure.

AUTOMATION'S ECONOMIC AND ETHICAL RISKS

Disruption and inequality. It's easy to frame AI adoption as purely cost-saving. Replace a role here, a department there, and the numbers look good. But management cannot confuse short-term efficiency with long-term strength.

An International Labour Organization 2025 report ("Generative AI and Jobs: A Refined Global Index of Occupational Exposure") estimated that one in four jobs worldwide could be exposed to

generative AI, rising to one in three in high-income countries. Middle-skill roles, once the foundation of stable employment, are the most vulnerable. When those jobs disappear without alternatives, communities suffer and companies lose seasoned talent. The ripple effects hit consumer demand, turnover costs, and institutional knowledge.

Consider regional economies built on steady, middle-income work, such as insurance adjusters, customer service specialists, and paralegals. When those roles vanish, the immediate impact is unemployment. The long-term effect is a weaker customer base and lower demand for the very products AI was supposed to deliver more efficiently.

The ethical minefield. Delegating decisions to machines raises an uncomfortable question: Who is accountable when AI makes a mistake? Regulators are already pressing for answers. The European Union's AI Act ("Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 laying down harmonized rules on artificial intelligence") mandates stringent standards for transparency and accountability, with obligations increasing in proportion to the risk level.

Companies that stumble face reputational damage, legal exposure, and regulatory fines. The speed of consequences often outpaces the speed of correction. When managers treat AI outputs as final answers rather than inputs to human judgment, they risk making mistakes and abdicating the trust placed in them as leaders.

MANAGEMENT IN THE AGE OF AI: A HUMAN-CENTRIC APPROACH

The agent-only vision misses the essence of management. Real leaders don't just allocate tasks. They create environments where people thrive, innovate, and commit to a purpose greater than themselves.

The real opportunity is not to replace people but to make them more capable. That shift requires a new playbook:

Coach, don't boss. Employees don't need reminders that AI works faster. They need leaders who help them adapt. As Harvard Business Impact observed ("AI-First Leadership: Embracing the Future of Work"), management is moving from directing tasks to enabling human and AI collaboration. Equipping managers with AI literacy ensures that they can guide teams without ceding control.

Build trust through transparency. Explaining how AI works, where it falls short, and how it complements human judgment helps reduce fear and build engagement. Some organizations now publish clear guidelines for AI use and hold open forums for employees to raise concerns. These actions aren't cosmetic. They set cultural expectations for openness.

Integrate ethics into daily work. Efficiency and fairness collide every day. Ethical choices cannot be relegated to annual training. They must be practiced continuously. When a manager decided how to allocate AI-generated leads, for example, he is making both a business and an ethical choice.

Lead across generations. In 2025, Pew Research ("How the U.S. Public and AI Experts View Artificial Intelligence") found optimism among AI experts and deep skepticism among the public. Managers can bridge that divide by fostering shared learning and dialogue. In practice, pair younger employees who are enthusiastic about AI with veterans who know the organizational context and customer history.

Stay adaptable. McKinsey's 2023 resilience survey ("The State of Organizations 2023: Ten Shifts Transforming Organizations") found adaptability to be a defining trait of successful organizations. The pace of AI change makes this skill non-negotiable. Leaders must normalize experimentation, learn from failures, and treat adaptability as a core competence, not an afterthought.

LOOKING AHEAD

The hype of AI's potential will continue to grow. New models will launch, investment will surge, and headlines will predict the end of management. I don't buy it. Leading in the AI era is not about handing control to agents. It is about guiding teams through uncertainty, balancing human and digital contributions, and keeping purpose at the center.

The leaders who succeed won't be those who chase automation for its own sake. They will be the ones who recognize the enduring value of human judgment and the responsibility that comes with it.

We don't face a choice between people and machines. We face a choice between leaders who abdicate responsibility and leaders who rise to it. A practical starting point is to audit how AI is used inside the organization, convene cross-functional teams to weigh risks and opportunities, and establish regular ethics reviews. When we build these habits, we create organizations that prepare managers to lead in an AI-enabled future.

If there's one lesson to carry forward, it's that technology rarely rewrites the fundamentals of leadership. Every era brings tools that promise to change the game. What separates the durable organizations from the fragile ones is not the toolset, but rather the mindset of their leaders. The AI era will be no different. Managers who embrace that truth will not only keep their organizations resilient, but they will also keep them human. CQ

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Communication About AI Initiatives Matters

BY DONNCHA CARROLL

You may be trying to roll out AI tools at work, but your employees were probably already using AI.

Even before your organization made formal investments in artificial intelligence use cases or provided employees with AI-related tools, employees had access to AI in their daily lives at home and at work. Free or subscription-based access to tools such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini is now commonplace. This access has given most individuals some insight into the power of AI, allowing them to evaluate its impact firsthand.

Although AI is evolving rapidly, organizations and individuals alike are in the experimental phase. Few companies have made significant large-scale investments quite yet, but some are already seeing improvements in work quality and efficiency. Thus, employees are understandably beginning to worry about whether their role will change in ways they cannot navigate, or if their job will go away entirely.

To address anxieties, leadership teams may downplay or even misrepresent the current or potential impact of AI on the organization, despite employees already being well versed

in AI capabilities. Therefore, downplaying AI's impact on an organization will almost certainly undermine employee trust in leadership capability or intention, leading to lower employee engagement, performance, and retention. In fact, you may even compromise the company's ability to adapt to the new ways of working that are essential to remaining relevant and competitive.

ESTABLISH TRUST THROUGH TRANSPARENCY

First and foremost, building trust requires that leaders be open and transparent about what they know and what they do not. Leaders must help their teams understand what changes are coming and highlight areas where they plan to increase investment.

When disclosing these changes, it's important to connect every change back to the mission and overall business strategy to help employees understand the "why." Explain how AI improves outcomes for visible strategic initiatives, customers, the company, and ultimately employees themselves. This inevitable shift toward the greater automation of transactional work is a great opportunity to realign the workforce and strategic capabilities with future needs.

Take care not to make unrealistic promises. Many leaders are reeling from a long period of low unemployment, increasing labor costs, and record lows in engagement scores, and it can be tempting to try to shield employees from uncomfortable truths. Telling employees that nothing will change, their jobs are secure, and the company is safe from disruption is unrealistic and unproductive. While this approach may be well-intentioned, employees and teams need and deserve better guidance from senior leadership. Instead, focus on helping the workforce navigate this evolution to a better working environment and future.

Another common mistake is to speculate too far into the future about how AI will impact the organization. Making low-confidence bets on the future increases the cognitive and emotional load on employees unnecessarily and has the very real risk of creating uncertainty, discomfort, and disengagement. Leaders need to be clear about the intended use of new tools in ways that reinforce the mission and strategic direction of the business.

Set the stage by reminding employees about the connection to company goals and avoiding specifics that cannot be supported with evidence of investment or outcomes. Providing clarity on short-term initiatives is a great place to start. For longer-term initiatives, articulate the intentions and outcomes the business is pursuing while inviting employees to get involved by looking for opportunities to use these new tools in their own work and to support others who want to do the same.

Building trust requires that leaders be open and transparent about what they know and what they do not.

MAKE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN AI AND DAILY WORK

To help employees make a meaningful connection between AI-driven business changes and their role within the organization, leaders must communicate how these changes will impact their work directly. One catalyst to this connection is encouraging low-risk experimentation with the smaller-scale AI tools already available. For example, employees can begin using tools such as Grammarly to refine documents or transcription tools to capture and summarize meeting notes.

These low-stakes activities help employees understand and appreciate how valuable AI can be in increasing efficiency and quality in performing daily tasks, while building confidence that they can adapt and use new tools as they become available.

Leadership should also share what they would like employees to do differently in their roles now that AI is in the mix. Offering in-house training modules or more formal certificate-based training programs from an outside entity can be useful, but they won't move the needle in ways that add value. Instead, explicitly ask employees to become familiar with AI tools and work with others to identify ways to optimize existing processes, keeping efficiency and quality in mind. Make it clear that AI can be used to elevate employees' work by saving time on some tasks and allowing them to spend more time on other higher-priority pursuits.

ENGAGE A NETWORK OF AI ADVOCATES

When planning initiatives to use AI capabilities to automate or improve important work processes, leadership teams should start by engaging with roles and individuals who not only have domain-specific knowledge but also the tribal knowledge and community credibility needed to ensure success. These individuals are both experts in their department and well-regarded influencers of company culture. Respected by their peers and teams alike, they can influence the speed at which everyone, including AI skeptics, is willing to adopt new technologies. Look for people who are strong critical thinkers and come with an innovation-centric mindset and a healthy level of comfort with manageable risk.

The success of any technical implementation is ultimately dependent on the people involved and the human behavior that results from changing the status quo. Selecting the right

talent will determine whether the changes work well in the beginning stages. Failure to engage these individuals also has longer-term consequences, including whether or not AI initiatives can be scaled to drive value for the business in today's environment.

Further, continue to open a channel for employees to provide continuous feedback along the way. Feedback from managers and employees describing challenges with using AI tools should be considered carefully. Some of their concerns will uncover gaps in the capability of the tools, while other feedback will highlight employee resistance to change. Distinguishing legitimate concerns from unhelpful critiques will allow leaders to address valuable feedback and establish credibility with employees, while still moving toward AI-related business objectives.

USE LANGUAGE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

Employee confusion arises less from the specific terms used and more from leaders applying them without proper context. Technical terminology such as agentic workflow, large language models, artificial general intelligence, data pipelines, and vibe coding can come across as buzzwords and jargon to individuals not embedded in the AI world. Without connecting to outcomes that matter, these terms will seem irrelevant—or worse, intentionally opaque.

Of course, explaining the meaning of a term is helpful, but leaders should focus less on how the technology works and more on what it helps an organization achieve. For example, if you are looking to explain large language models, instead of focusing on the mechanics, highlight that they are statistical machines that can help translate or navigate complicated topics in simple ways for different audiences.

EQUIP SENIOR LEADERS WITH TOOLS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Another mistake leaders should avoid is communicating new AI processes to senior audiences, such as managers or directors, without providing direction on when and how to cascade messaging across their teams. Equally important, senior audiences need to be able to translate messaging about AI plans that will resonate with different audiences. Use examples to illustrate their application so that the ideas can be communicated simply and consistently.

Leadership teams must provide clear guidance on what is expected from managers and then hold them accountable for execution. Keep it simple so that the cascading process leverages existing forums and is easy to implement. Give managers the freedom to use their own voice while also adhering to narrative guardrails. This will encourage ownership, reflect authenticity, and build trust.

SHOWCASE SUCCESS AND IDENTIFY PAIN POINTS

As AI is applied across business processes, tracking and reporting on measurable results will help to communicate its success. Ask senior leaders to create and share insights from measures that demonstrate whether quality and efficiency are in fact improving. More broadly, leaders should track and trend usage on internal AI tools to determine if employees are successfully adopting them. Doing so will also help pinpoint specific departments or areas where AI messaging is not resonating with employees and can be strengthened.

If the implementation of AI is successful, the organization should begin to see higher levels of employee productivity, which will then show up in high-level, enterprise-wide measures such as operating margin and revenue per employee. In the short term, demonstrating the success of strategic AI initiatives and usage trends will give leadership confidence that implementation and experimentation are going well.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION IS AN AI IMPERATIVE

Leaders who prioritize bringing their employees along on the AI-adoption journey will make all the difference in how this change is met. Rest assured, employees are already using AI and starting to wake up to its potential, which can be both exciting and scary. Savvy employees will quickly notice if company leadership is either unsure about the future of AI or downplaying its capabilities.

Businesses that are successful will be led by those who build trust, use transparent communication, provide clear and consistent direction about the future, and get people excited about what that means for everyone involved. CQ

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