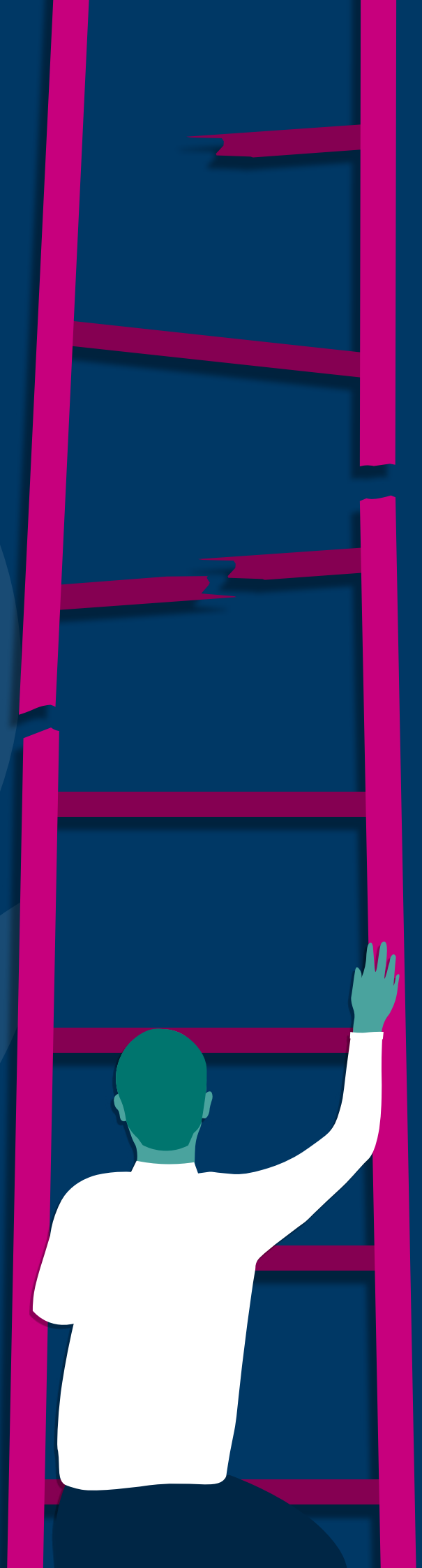


THE BROKEN LADDER

Why people are avoiding
manager roles – and how to fix it

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| FOREWORD

If you're reading this paper, you most likely know how much management matters. The impact managers have on the wellbeing and work experience of those they manage is profound. That impact can be a positive one, leading to higher levels of motivation, performance and loyalty. But it can also be, unfortunately, a negative one, with poor people management leaving employees disengaged, demotivated and ready to quit.

As anyone who has been a manager knows, managing people is not easy. Not everyone is cut out to be a manager. However in the UK we continue to promote people into management positions based on strong technical skills – according to a 2024 survey by Mindtools, 80% of managers agree they were promoted because they were good at their job, not because they wanted to manage people. But being good at your job doesn't automatically make you a good manager. A good manager has to be someone that's curious about people, has a high degree of humanity and takes time to understand people as individuals in order to get the best out of them.

As this paper explores, the UK has a reluctant manager problem. We have too many people in management positions who don't want to or shouldn't be managing other people (perhaps never receiving support to learn how to do so). As a result, we risk turning a generation of people off ever becoming managers. One stark statistic we uncovered in research commissioned via YouGov finds that only 18% of non-managers see becoming a manager as inspirational and aspirational.

Perhaps that's not surprising when we think about the reality of being a manager today. Organisations are getting flatter and middle managers are often overloaded. They are expected to deliver in areas that don't always sit comfortably together, like driving commercial performance while looking after employee wellbeing. We need more recognition that management, while having the potential to be hugely rewarding, isn't an easy job. And managers need support beyond a two-week management training course (although many don't even receive that).

Supportive management is so critical to organisational performance and employee experience. Investors in People's previous research, *When The Perks Don't Work*, found that supportive management was the number one driver of job satisfaction for employees. But leaders and HR teams need to create the conditions that enable and empower managers to deliver this kind of management. We need to invest in making management a more attractive, fulfilling and sustainable job in and of itself, or we risk a future leadership gap, which could have a devastating impact on future organisational performance.

At Investors in People, we exist to Make Work Better. Managers play such an important role in making work better for those they manage, but we can't neglect making work better for them too. I hope this paper offers some provocations and ideas for helping you do just that.

Paul Devoy, CEO, Investors in People

18%

THE PROPORTION OF EMPLOYEES WITHOUT MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES WHO VIEW MANAGEMENT ROLES AS ASPIRATIONAL AND INSPIRATIONAL

Investors in People / YouGov Survey, March 2025

WHY MANAGERS MATTER

We've all heard that adage: people don't leave organisations, they leave managers. But it's become somewhat of a cliché for a reason: it's true.

Managers have a profound impact on the experience people have at work. According to research by McKinsey: "Relationships with management are the top factor in employees' job satisfaction, which in turn is the second most important determinant of employees' overall wellbeing... only mental health is more important for overall life satisfaction."

This was reflected in Investors in People's 2024 research into employee wellbeing, which found that 86% of employees felt having a supportive manager was the most important driver of job satisfaction – the top-rated driver. As that paper explored, employers can offer a range of shiny wellbeing benefits (yoga classes and mindfulness apps, anyone?) but it's the relationship people have with their immediate managers, and how that plays out in flexibility, autonomy and trust, that have the biggest impact on overall wellbeing in the workplace.

When Investors in People surveyed more than 2000 employees on their perceptions and experiences of management for this paper, 93% said management was important to their overall job satisfaction, with 59% rating it as 'very important'. Only 5% said it wasn't important to them.

It's no surprise then that, according to Gallup, managers are essential to employee engagement. A whopping 70% of variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager. And while a bad boss can be responsible for people leaving (2022 research by people analytics company Visier found that more than half of employees actively looking for a new role were doing so because of their manager), a good one drives retention and loyalty (the same survey found 38% of people had stayed in a role longer than intended due to a good relationship with a manager).

93%

of employees say having a supportive manager is very or fairly important to their overall job satisfaction

86%

of employees say having a supportive management is the most important driver of job satisfaction

70%

of variance in team engagement is down to the manager

43%

of UK employees have quit a job because of a bad manager and 53% of those seeking a new role are looking to do so because of their current manager

25-35%

variance in productivity accounted for by Great individual managers

“I have had very good managers in the past who helped me learn and grow, I’ve also had some terrible ones – so I left.”

Investors in People / YouGov Survey, March 2025

Beyond individual experience, good management has an outsized influence on overall organisational productivity. Research by the Chicago Booth School of Business and the University of Southern California found that replacing a poor manager with a strong one can be equivalent to adding a fifth employee to a team of four, with individual managers accounting for a 25-35% variance in productivity.

On the other side of things, experts have long suggested that poor management practice in UK businesses is a major contributing factor to the country’s faltering productivity. According to The Resolution Foundation’s The Economy 2030 Enquiry: “Bad managers are an area in which Britain stands out – only a small proportion of UK firms are as well-managed as the best 25% of US firms.”

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) has found that ineffective managers have a deep impact on employees, including on their motivation, satisfaction and likelihood to leave their job. Research conducted by the CMI in 2023 uncovered that workers who rate their manager as ineffective are significantly more likely to leave their organisation in the next 12 months compared to those who say their line manager is effective (50% vs 21%).

“Line managers impact productivity,” says Professor Sir Cary Cooper, 50th Anniversary Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at the Manchester Business School, University of Manchester. “Thinking

of my own career, I know that I delivered the most to the people who valued, mentored and trusted me. Those are the people who drove my productivity.”

The comments we received from employees about the positive impact a supportive manager has had on them personally brings this to life. People shared stories of managers supporting them through health crises and bereavements, boosting their confidence and enabling them to thrive, learn and grow, while giving them the flexibility they need to balance work and live for the betterment of both. But we also heard stories of poor management sapping people’s motivation and ultimately causing them to leave. “I have had very good managers in the past who helped me learn and grow,” said one respondent. “I’ve also had some terrible ones – so I left.”

In short, management – and managers – matter. But, as we will explore in this paper, UK organisations are facing an incoming crisis of management. As roles become ever bigger and more demanding, middle management is becoming a less sustainable, aspirational and attractive proposition. If employers don’t face up to this, thinking deeply and creatively about how to build better support and development paths for managers, organisations could face a future leadership crisis, with top talent deciding against management pathways and a generation of even more stressed out, burned out middle managers.

SO, WHY DON'T PEOPLE ASPIRE TO BE MANAGERS...

Moving up into management positions has traditionally been seen as the natural path to career advancement and success. But there are signs things are changing, with many employees increasingly reluctant to take on management responsibilities. A 2025 poll by CV Genius found that 48% of UK workers don't want to be managers at any point in their careers. Another piece of research by recruitment firm Robert Walters on Gen Z workers found that many among this generation find the idea of going into a management role particularly distasteful, with 52% saying they do not want to enter middle management and 72% preferring to remain individual contributors, focusing on their skills rather than leadership.

Investors in People's study reflects these findings, and offers some insight into why management is increasingly perceived as unattractive, lacking in aspiration and unsustainable. Among 2000 employees (some of whom held management responsibilities), only 32% saw management as inspirational and aspirational while 40% saw management as necessary but unappealing and 12% viewed it as overwhelming and undesirable, actively avoiding leadership responsibilities. To put it another way, more than half (52%) of people working today do not see management as an aspirational career path, even actively avoiding it (concerningly, that includes people who already hold management responsibilities).

52%

of people working today do not see management as an aspirational career path, even actively avoiding it.

Investors in People / YouGov Survey, March 2025



When we look at those who currently do not have any management responsibilities, only 18% said they saw management as inspirational and aspirational and a role they would like to step into in the future, 47% see it as necessary but personally unappealing and 15% perceive it as overwhelming and undesirable. One survey respondent expressed their feelings on the matter thus: "It's a balance between progression and being diverted away from doing the job I trained for, for managing people. It's a risk/reward equation of how much hassle it is to be a manager versus how much extra money and is it worth it."

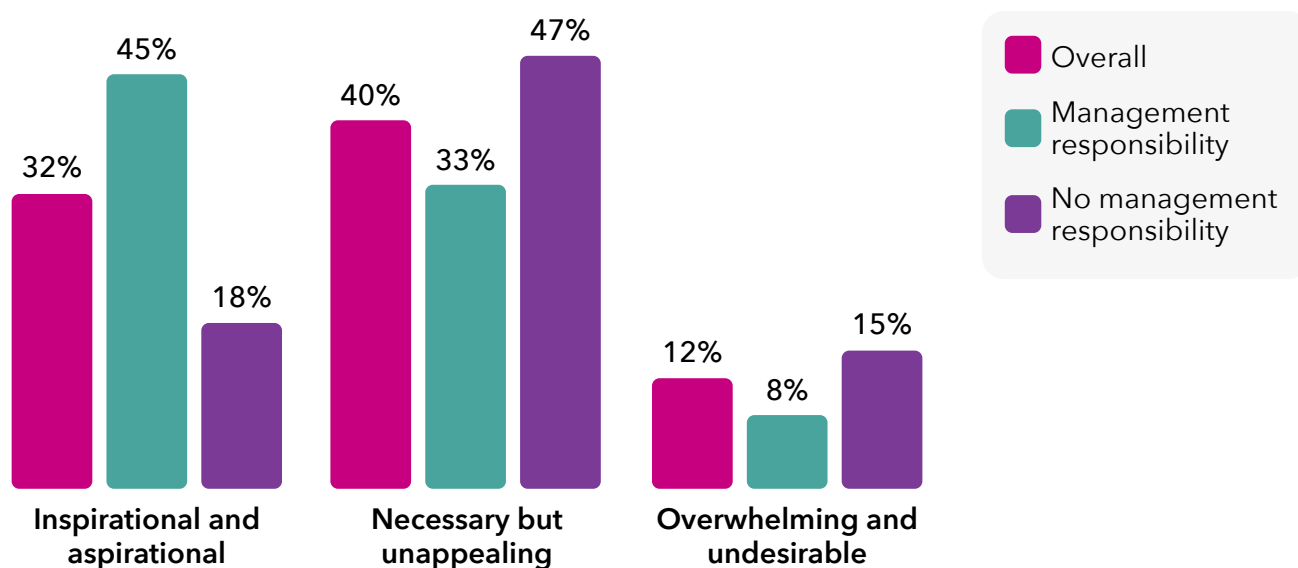
There is a clear gender difference, with female employees significantly less likely to see management roles as inspirational and aspirational: while 36% of men surveyed said they viewed management roles as this, only 27% of women did. With most organisations experiencing

a gender gap at leadership levels, there is evidently continued work to do in making management roles aspirational and inspirational to women.

Our data also reveals a significant proportion of 'reluctant managers'. Among those who do have management responsibilities, a third (33%) say they view management as necessary but personally unappealing and 8% as overwhelming and undesirable. It is safe to assume that many of these managers are not doing the best job managing other people, given it's something they simply do not have the appetite or will to do, even finding it overwhelming and wishing they could actively avoid it. This could lead to a vicious cycle, whereby a lack of positive manager role models puts others off aspiring to management positions.

HOW ASPIRATIONAL IS MANAGEMENT?

How do you perceive the role of manager in your organisation?



What is it about management roles that is putting people off them?

According to our survey, the main reason is that management is seen as stressful: 54% of those who don't want to become managers said it was because they perceived management roles as involving too much stress.

In addition 43% of those who don't want to be managers said they don't enjoy managing people, 30% said the pay wasn't enough to justify the role and 25% said they preferred doing technical and specialist roles. Of course, not enjoying managing people is a good reason not to put someone in charge of others, especially given the impact a manager has on an individual's wellbeing and work experience. This raises the importance of ensuring we are selecting and promoting managers for the right reasons.

The desire to avoid unnecessary stress is a bigger issue for those aged under 35, with 68% of this demographic citing it as the reason they don't want to become a manager, perhaps a reflection of the shift towards prioritising wellbeing and work-life balance among younger generations (according to Deloitte's 2024 Gen Z and Millennial survey, work-life balance is the top-rated priority for this cohort when choosing an employer), as well as increased awareness of mental health. This group were also more likely to feel the pay doesn't justify the role (38% compared to 30%) and to say that they don't enjoy managing people (59% compared to 43%).

So, those are some of the reasons people don't want to become managers. What drives those that do? Extra pay is an overwhelming incentive for 42% to become managers. After that, 28% mention career growth, 27% say they want to positively impact the business and other people and 25% say they enjoy working with and developing people.

While it would be churlish to deny the value of a salary bump during a cost-of-living crisis, employers should consider what motivations beyond pay could make someone aspire to become a manager. Positive psychology research states that intrinsic work motivation leads to enhanced performance, greater job satisfaction and higher engagement, as well as contributing towards greater creativity and innovation. While pay irrefutably matters, it would be concerning if this was the sole reason for someone choosing a manager position. As Sir Cary puts it, employers should be seeking to attract those who derive satisfaction from creating and developing a team into management rather than "technocrats who are only interested in climbing the greasy pole or [who are] financially motivated."

Positive psychology research states that intrinsic work motivation leads to enhanced performance, greater job satisfaction and higher engagement, as well as contributing towards greater creativity and innovation.

43%

Don't enjoy
managing people

17%

42%

The extra pay

15%

28%

Career growth

27%

Want to positively
impact the business
and other people

14%

30%

Pay isn't enough to
justify the role

25%

Prefer technical/
specialist work

14%

17%

20%

6%

54%

Too much stress

12%

25%

Enjoy working with
and developing
people

- 15% - Lack of support
- 14% - No inspiring leadership examples
- 14% - Too much admin, not enough people focus
- 12% - Organisation doesn't invest in leadership
- 6% - Don't feel trusted to make managerial decisions
- 20% - Great learning and development
- 17% - Helps me reach my goals
- 17% - Want to be part of a leadership-supportive culture

■ The reasons people
don't want to become
managers...

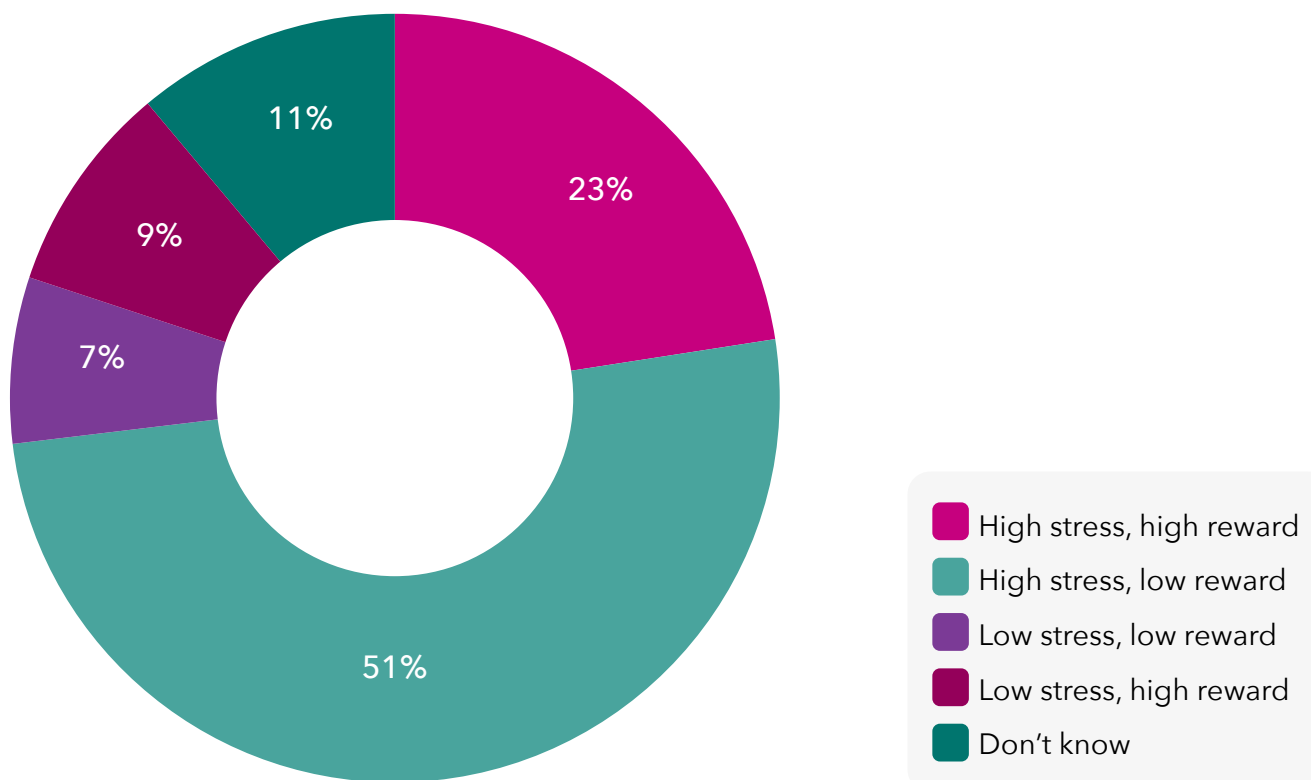
■ And the reasons they
do...

MANAGEMENT IS SEEN AS HIGH STRESS, LOW REWARD

With perceived stress the main reason putting people off becoming a manager, it's not surprising to see that the majority of people view middle management roles as stressful: 74% describe them as such. Just over half (51%) see middle management as high stress, low reward while 23% see it as high stress, high reward. Only 16% describe middle management as low stress. Only 16% describe middle management as low stress.

High stress, low reward is hardly an aspirational combination, and when managers are stressed out, their teams suffer, and by extension organisational performance as a whole. The CMI's Francke makes the point that when managers are under pressure, it's the things that employees value the most, like coaching conversations and one-to-ones, that can disappear. This can lead to a vicious cycle given it is often these things that can, however intangible or 'soft' they may seem, add the most value.

Middle management is viewed as...



Investors in People / YouGov Survey, March 2025

WHAT DOES GOOD MANAGEMENT LOOK LIKE?

According to the CIPD, managers need to display five core behavioural traits to effectively support the engagement and wellbeing of their people. These are: being open, fair and consistent; handling conflict and other people management issues; providing knowledge, clarity and guidance; building and sustaining relationships; and supporting development.

These core traits are reflected in our survey, which found that 68% of employees believe the most

helpful manager behaviours are being approachable and fostering open communication. The same proportion (68%) said they valued being recognised and rewarded for contributions and achievements, while 59% cited having clear goals and expectations and 58% receiving constructive feedback and coaching. But managers consistently displaying these behaviours won't just happen by chance, it requires intention and hard work.

What people want from their managers

We asked more than 2000 employees what they considered to be the most helpful manager behaviours:



THE IMPACT OF GOOD MANAGEMENT

We asked over 2000 employees to share examples of where a manager had had a positive impact on their work experience, and received hundreds of stories of how supportive, humane management had transformed people's careers, motivation and even personal lives, ultimately leading to improved performance, productivity and loyalty. Here are just some examples of how good management impacts individuals, and why it matters so much.

"My manager has enabled me to shine and develop new skills. I look forward to when she is in as I wonder what skill I'll be taught today!"

"When I was promoted I was overwhelmed in my new role but the assurance from my manager that I was doing a good job prevented me from stepping down; my manager being supportive of my work/life balance stops me applying for other jobs even though there might be better opportunities for me because I don't want to lose that support."

"I still remember with gratitude a manager from over 20 years ago who made me believe in myself and gave me the confidence to move on to better things."

"Being given autonomy to make decisions and take ownership of projects allowed me to grow professionally and develop problem-solving skills."

"My manager helped me feel guided in my role; made me want to do more; made me feel like I was making a difference."

"My manager's support during a mental health crisis meant I was able to keep my job whilst engaging in mental health support."

"My manager allowed me to try something new and daunting but ensured I knew they were there to catch me if I stumbled or failed."

"My manager's open-door policy and willingness to listen to concerns created a safe and supportive work environment, allowing me to share ideas and address challenges without hesitation."

"Managers who provide high-quality coaching enable me to do my job better and quicker."

Investors in People / YouGov Survey, March 2025



Professor Sir Cary Cooper:

CHOOSE THE RIGHT MANAGERS TO IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY

"In the UK we still tend to recruit and promote into managerial roles based on technical skills, which means we promote and recruit the wrong kind of people. Rather than looking at credentials, we should ask ourselves: 'Would I like that person to be my boss?'"

What we're looking for is more emotionally intelligent and socially skilled line managers. And we need that, as poor people management is the fundamental problem we have around productivity in the UK. Line managers impact productivity hugely. When I think of the people I've worked for, it's the people who valued me, mentored me and trusted me that drove my productivity.

We need managers who get intrinsic satisfaction from supporting and nurturing people and creating a successful team, rather than technocrats who are only interested in the bottom line and climbing the greasy pole. This is what the next generation is demanding: they want a good quality of working life. If we

want to attract and retain them, we need to give them good work quality. Good quality management is part of that.

Demands on managers have increased hugely and they are expected to do everything. But if we get the right kind of people, more collaborative people, into management roles, then they will know how to delegate and how to engage. That should translate into productivity and success, and drive greater rewards for everyone. My top tip for any manager today? Be a human being. Be yourself rather than trying to be what you think a manager should be."

Professor Sir Cary Cooper is 50th Anniversary Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at the Manchester Business School, University of Manchester. He is co-author of How To Be The Line Manager You Never Had, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2025.

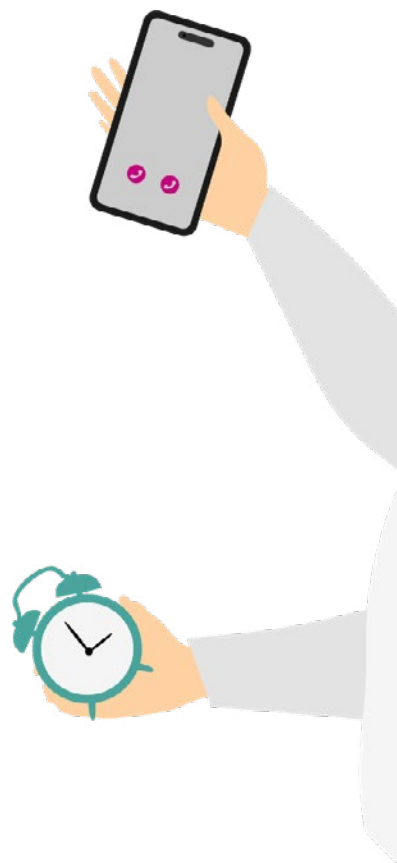
THE ROLE OF THE MANAGER TODAY

One question immediately comes to mind when looking at the various roles and responsibilities managers today are expected to play: is this sustainable?

Managers find themselves squeezed on all sides. Leadership expectations in a tough economic market necessitate performance, productivity and doing more with less.

"The demands on managers are enormous now, things have changed massively," says Sir Cary. Alongside delivering commercial results and managing team performance and output, managers are increasingly expected to play a role in areas like DEI and ESG, and to support individual employee wellbeing and requests for flexibility, which are very rarely 'one size fits all'. Employee expectations have risen about the support an organisation should offer around wellbeing and flexibility in particular, and the most natural place for this expectation to fall is on the manager, even if they have limited control over what they are able to offer. And managers are the ones on the frontline dealing with the challenges related to hybrid working, including seeing people less frequently in person potentially making it harder to pick up on issues early and proactively.

As central HR, finance and IT teams have shrunk or shifted their focus from the operational to the strategic, managers are expected to self-serve, dealing with day-to-day people, finance and technology administration and management. This is not necessarily a negative: CMI chief executive Ann Francke believes that the best run organisations, those taking management seriously, are those that devolve managerial tasks to the line. But, as we will explore later, the crucial point is that managers are trained in being able to do such tasks, given the space and time to do them, and that the organisation and leadership sees the value in them.



The relentless pace of change, driven by macro external drivers like technological advancement, demographic shifts, geopolitical upheaval and climate change, and continued, destabilising uncertainty puts all of us under pressure, but things are particularly acute for managers, who are often 'squeezed' between the expectations and demands of those above and below them. While delivering and dealing with the impacts of organisation change, managers are often directly subject to its most stressful impacts themselves, with many organisations going through cycles of 'delaying' management roles (and then, somewhat inevitably, often adding them back in).

In addition to Investors in People's survey of 2000 employees, we also surveyed more than 500 business decision-makers. When asked what they see as the key responsibilities of people managers in their businesses, the sheer variety and volume of tasks stands out, as well as areas that could easily come into conflict if managers aren't adequately skilled and supported.

More than two-thirds (68%) of business decision-makers said managers were responsible for driving performance and productivity, for instance, while 64% said managers needed to support employee wellbeing, and 53% to deliver business targets. It's not hard to see how these three areas could easily come into conflict with each other, causing headaches for managers who may not have the skills to manage the inherent tension in balancing driving performance and productivity with supporting employee wellbeing.

Indeed, leaders expressed challenges inherent in managers balancing the tension between 'business' and 'people'. More than a third (36%) said meeting business targets while managing people was demanding, while a further third (34%) said balancing performance and wellbeing was a challenge.

Little wonder then that surveys of managers have been finding rising levels of burnout over recent years. According to a 2022 survey by Slack Technologies Future Forum, a record 43% of middle managers reported feeling burnt out (higher than any other cohort in the business). Another study by the Workforce Institute at UKG found that 46% of middle managers were considering quitting in the next 12 months due to work-related stress.

As we will explore in the next section, perceptions of management as a high-stress, low-reward role are putting many employees off pursuing this career path. However, more encouragingly, Investors in People's survey of more senior leaders found that while 17% of senior managers found management stressful with limited recognition, 40% said it was stressful but still ultimately rewarding, and 31% found the challenges manageable.



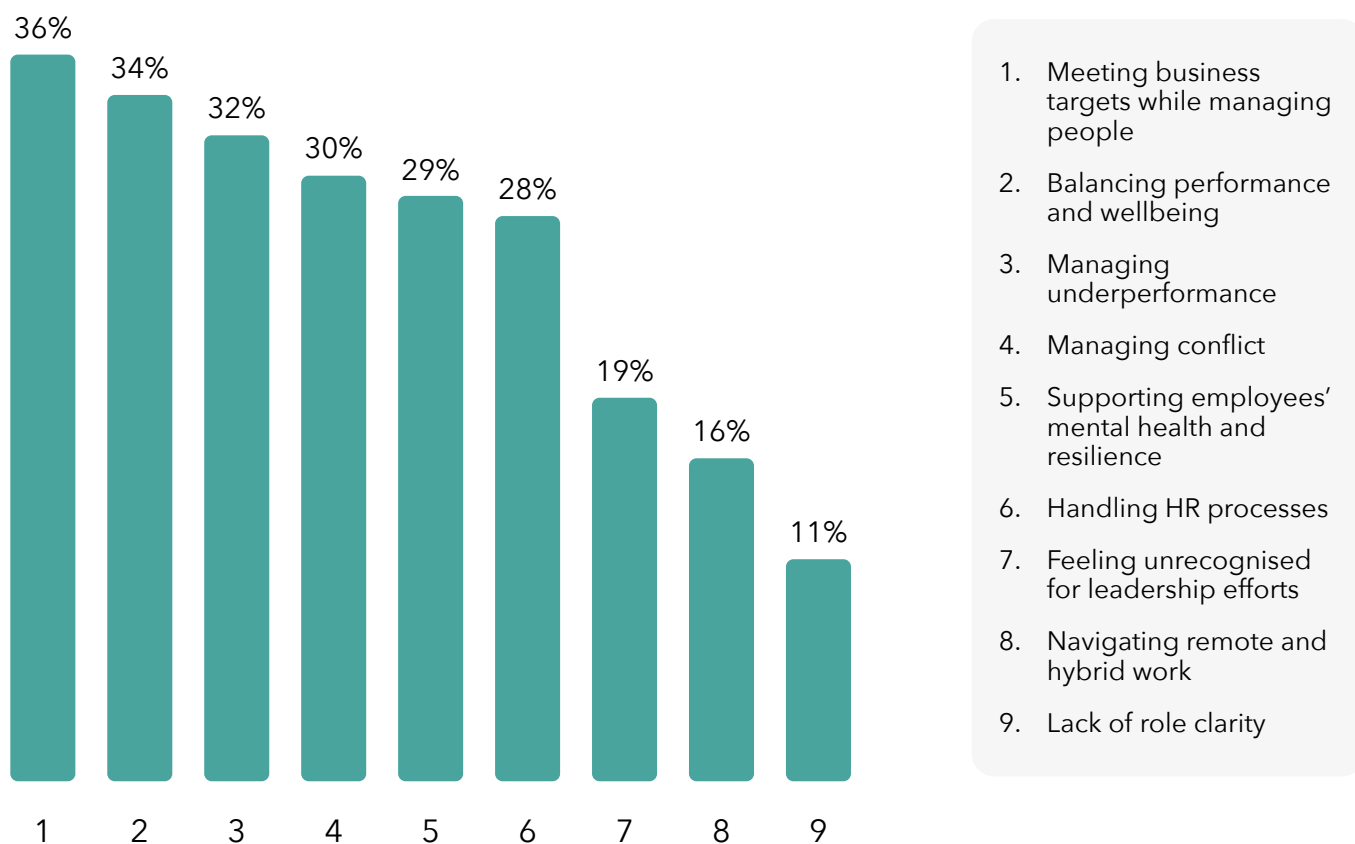
Key responsibilities of people managers, according to leaders:

Base: 500+ business decision-makers



The most demanding aspects of management

Base: 500+ business decision-makers



Investors in People / YouGov Survey, March 2025



THE COACH

Support employees to develop and grow while delivering high performance



THE THERAPIST

Engage with and support employee wellbeing, including having a good understanding of mental health



THE HR ASSISTANT

Complete people-related administration and act as first line of defence for people issues within the team



THE FINANCE WHIZZ

Manage budgets and team financial planning



THE VISIONARY

Help team members understand the company vision and their part in it



THE PRODUCTIVITY DRIVER

Ensure team members are as productive as possible, wherever and whenever they happen to be working



THE TECH GURU

Have a good understanding of organisational systems and platforms, ensuring team members have the same



THE MEDIATOR

Deal with conflict within the team without escalating to HR and formal grievance where possible



THE SOCIAL SECRETARY

Create a sense of social connection and cohesion within the team, particularly if using hybrid working patterns



THE DEI CHAMPION

Create an inclusive team culture and contribute to company DEI goals



Ann Francke:

MANAGEMENT ROLES ARE TOO IMPORTANT TO BE LEFT TO CHANCE

"A lot is demanded of managers and it has increased over the years. And yet, most managers are simply not very good at doing those things. So it becomes stressful for them and stressful for the people they are managing.

The root cause of this is that managers aren't trained enough. Our research finds that 82% of people aren't trained when they are promoted into management roles. We value functional expertise and promote people who excel in finance or marketing, for example, to be managers, but they are not given the training or support they need to be able to do that multitude of tasks. Managers are indeed responsible for driving performance, for supporting employee wellbeing, for managing conflict, but those are the skills people need to learn - and that's the support that is often absent, not only in the form of training but also in the form of positive role models.

We do have a problem with management not being seen as aspirational. The acceleration of boom, bust and layoff cycles puts people off wanting to do management roles. So what can we do? We need to show we value good management and leadership at every

level, training people to be good managers. We need to celebrate those people and encourage them to create time for management. We need great role models and to start people young with management responsibilities.

The best run companies - and the ones that value management and leadership the most - are the ones that devolve managerial tasks to the line, but they train their managers on an ongoing basis and value the role of the manager. They realise that line management is absolutely critical to creating a good organisational culture and make time for people to be a manager. It's not HR's job to do it for them; it's HR's job to make sure managers are equipped to do it.

Management matters at every level. CMI research shows that when you have trained managers you get better organisational outcomes and better employee engagement. But this isn't going to happen by osmosis: you've got to work at it."

Ann Francke is chief executive of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI)

MAKING MANAGEMENT ASPIRATIONAL AGAIN

Organisations and individuals need good managers. If management is becoming less attractive, aspirational and sustainable for a large proportion of employees, organisations risk a future leadership crisis, with top talent choosing to pursue individual contributor paths instead of stepping into management positions (or even opting out of traditional employment entirely, choosing to freelance or start their own businesses). So, how can employers make management aspirational again?

When asked what would make management roles in their organisations more desirable and sustainable, employees ranked good training and preparation before stepping into management as their top priority (55%). But unfortunately, getting this is far from the norm in many businesses. According to research by the CMI, 82% of new managers are 'accidental managers', meaning they have received no formal training or development before stepping into a management position. This is damaging for both managers and the people they manage. As Ann Francke says: "A lot is demanded of managers and it has increased over the years, and yet most managers are simply not very good at doing those things. It becomes stressful for them and stressful for the people they're managing - and the root cause is that managers aren't trained enough."

Other popular suggestions for making management roles more attractive included recognition and rewards for good managers (50%) and realistic workloads with fewer administrative responsibilities (49%). The rise of AI should

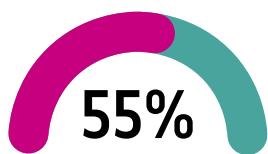
take away much of the administrative burden for managers, lightening the load here. But as AI takes away day-to-day management tasks, it makes the people side of management, the emotional intelligence and softer skills a machine cannot (yet) bring, even more important, making the selection, promotion and development of managers more critical.

More than a third (38%) also agreed managers should receive ongoing coaching and mentoring and 35% believed organisations need to offer a clearer path from middle management to senior leadership. A further 30% believed managers should receive stronger mental health and wellbeing support, reflecting a need for more support in dealing with the pressures of the role.

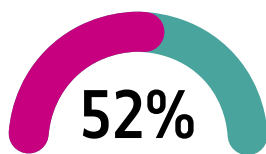
Senior leaders felt enhanced financial and non-financial recognition would be the most powerful tool in making management roles more attractive to employees (52%), followed by greater access to professional development (40%) and a reduced administrative burden (37%). Leaders also felt stronger career progression pathways (36%) and clearer leadership expectations and purpose-driven roles (33%) could make a positive difference in attracting more employees into management.

Making management more attractive

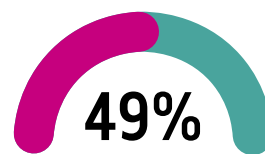
What would make managerial roles more desirable and sustainable for employees:



Good training and preparation before stepping into management



Recognition and rewards for good managers



Realistic workloads and fewer administrative responsibilities



Ongoing coaching and mentoring for managers



A clearer path to senior leadership

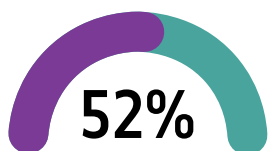


Stronger mental health and wellbeing support for manager



Opportunities for managers to give feedback on their role

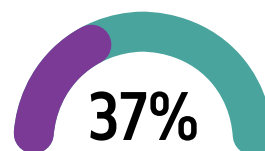
What senior leaders feel would make management roles more attractive to employees:



Enhanced financial and non-financial recognition



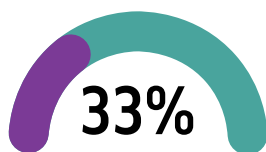
Greater access to professional development



Reduced administrative burden



Stronger career progression pathways



Clearer leadership expectations and purpose-driven roles



More support for managing team wellbeing and engagement



Greater autonomy and decision-making influence



A workplace culture that values leadership



Gary Cookson:

HOW TO PRACTICALLY SUPPORT MANAGERS

"Middle management is not a very well thought through position in many organisations. These managers are often promoted because they were good at the job underneath it and not necessarily good at the things that managers need to do. It's not a job or a function in and of itself. But one of the best ways to demonstrate the value of middle managers is to get rid of them and then see what doesn't get done, the vacuum that's created by the absence of a middle manager. Managers can see organisational cultures in a way that the top team and the front line can't.

In a previous organisation, we put thought into the role profile of the middle manager, defining and clarifying what we needed the role to be. Working on that role profile helped those lower down the organisation understand what those managers were doing and helped create career pathways and aspirational expectations.

Middle managers do best when they are prepared for it, when they know before they become a manager what it's all about and are consciously guided to develop the attributes needed to become successful in that role. If they can't develop them, then they don't go into that role – there's no accidental promotion, but conscious

effort behind it. Preparation is key: we don't want somebody to get into that type of role only to be surprised by what it's all about. Helping people think through the demands of the role, the requirements and how they match up is really important. We need to show them the realities of the role. People who aren't capable of doing it don't need to be pushed up the organisation, they can be moved somewhere else.

As well as investing in formal training, creating a community of practice is really helpful, where managers can talk to each other – not just about budgets and performance but their problems. Action learning sets and peer coaching can really help, as can having a digital community where managers can vent and share. Any management position is isolating: it's about helping people feel part of a collective experience. Having a space where people can talk about their issues and support and learn from each other is absolutely critical."

Gary Cookson is the founder of EPIC HR and author of HR for Hybrid Working and Making Hybrid Working Work. He is currently working on a book about middle management called The Squeezed Middle.

CONCLUSION: SUPPORTING YOUR SUPPORTIVE MANAGERS

Good, supportive management is the key to organisational performance and employee job satisfaction, but as the CMI's Ann Francke points out, it doesn't just happen "by osmosis". Managers need the scaffolding, space and support to manage well, and all too often the pressures of everyday commercial delivery can push this down the agenda for organisations.

Our data shows that in the UK, management is seen as a high stress, low reward position and the majority of non-managers simply do not see it as an aspirational and attractive career path, turned off by how stressful they perceive the job to be. Those that do see it as an attractive path are motivated more by money than a desire for career development or an interest in building and growing teams.

Even among those who have management responsibilities, a significant proportion can be classed as 'reluctant' managers in that they view management as unappealing, overwhelming or undesirable. These reluctant managers may unintentionally be creating a vicious cycle, whereby their poor or disengaged and

disengaging management style is putting others off aspiring to a management position, leading to a future management and leadership gap.

With most organisations currently desperately seeking a productivity boost, we need to focus on rather than forget about good management. As advancing AI tools progressively pick up much of the administrative and operational burden, the people side of management becomes even more important in an increasingly volatile, often relentless and unpredictable working world.

Managers have the potential to provide added value through increasing motivation, engagement and performance, but they need the support (formal and informal) to be able to do so. Organisational leadership must show they see the value of good management, allowing the space and time for managers to be able to do it well – a challenge given the range of issues management jobs now have to deal with.

Management roles are not easy, and it would be foolish to pretend that they are. But if organisations do not focus on creating the cultures and conditions that enable and empower managers to thrive, we risk setting them up to fail, and putting other people off wanting to become managers in the process.

As one employee in our research simply puts it: "A supportive manager really changes everything." Organisations need to invest in creating the cultures and conditions that enable and empower managers to deliver on the promise of that quote.





Blaire Palmer:

WE MUST MAKE MANAGEMENT MORE HUMAN AND HUMANE

"Most organisations still have an outdated idea of what a manager is for - because they have an outdated idea of what their people are for. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they would often prefer that their people were more like machines: not too much emotion, resistance or too many opinions. The role of the manager then is to crank the handle on that machine.

The problem is, at the exact same time organisations are saying they need more from people than rocking up, completing the to-do list and going home. They want people to engage, to go above and beyond, to take initiative, to innovate, to drive change... That is not machine-like behaviour, and it places a contradiction at the heart of management: get people to do what we want them to do, but get them to bring their humanity. It creates an almost impossible job.

We haven't created organisational cultures, and therefore an approach to management, which values the humanity of people. We need to start by making organisations more humane and understanding what people contribute that machines cannot. If we create an environment that values what people bring, we can then rethink the role of the manager to not just crank the handle on efficiency and productivity but to reinforce a culture where people can share their ideas, point out what's not working, connect with each other, clients and customers on a human level. We change the role of the manager to someone whose job it is to liberate that humanity. Then the job becomes more interesting.

Today, people expect genuine engagement. Leaning on situational power is no longer enough. People's values and expectations of work have changed. If you aren't genuine about creating a humane environment, they will go join an organisation that is, or opt out of the system entirely, choosing to become self-employed. Investing in people as human beings is what will deliver a better, more sustainable, more profitable business.

There are two major skills managers need in this new future of work. Firstly, coaching skills: that ability to really listen and to ask open, curious and thought-provoking questions. It's rare that managers have those skills, even if they go on a coaching course, often because the organisation doesn't give them the time and space to use them. The second is self-awareness. The more enlightened and self-aware you are, the more strategies you have to question your beliefs and assumptions and to handle stress, the better manager you're going to be.

Coaching skills and personal development are the most important priorities for managers today. Technical skills can easily be learned, but they won't be implemented effectively if managers lack self-awareness and people skills."

Blaire Palmer is a culture specialist and future of leadership keynote speaker

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEOPLE PRACTICE

01

Invest in manager training

With the CMI finding 82% of managers don't receive any training before stepping into a management position, there is a clear and concerning gap to be addressed in many organisations. The scope of what managers have to deliver on a daily basis has widened and they need support and training, both formal and informal, in order to do so effectively, without burning themselves out, and for the good of their teams. Consider what development you could offer aspiring managers too, helping prepare the next generation of managers for the realities of the role and developing key management skills at every level.

02

Create communities around management

Management can be a lonely place, with managers sometimes feeling they are the only ones experiencing certain challenges. Creating peer communities for managers to come together, share their challenges openly and support each other through action learning and co-creating solutions can be a powerful tool for overcoming this loneliness and increasing connection, wellbeing and resilience. This could be through an online community (particularly helpful in multisite businesses) but should also involve opportunities to come together face-to-face at various points throughout the year.

03

Show that management is valued

With so much on their plates, it can be tempting for managers to let the 'softer' side of people management slide in favour of hitting commercial targets. This is short-sighted given that supportive management is the number one driver of job satisfaction (according to previous Investors in People research) and a major contributor of performance and wellbeing. All organisations are having to do more with less, but managers still need time and space to manage well. Organisations should show that good management is valued and rewarded, by recognising and celebrating examples of great practice, showcasing those role-modeling exemplary management behaviours, and promoting people into management based on behaviours as much as technical skill.

04

Prioritise 'soft' skills

As AI capability advances, much of the administrative and operational tasks that can take up much of managers' time are likely to be automated. However there is one thing that AI cannot bring: the emotional intelligence and humanity that is central to being a great people manager. Management selection, training and role defining should focus as much on people and behavioural skills, such as coaching and self-awareness, as hard-edged technical ones. These will increasingly be what set great managers apart. When it comes to selection and promotion of managers, people and soft skills should be at the forefront of picking new managers rather than technical expertise.

05

Don't neglect manager wellbeing

According to Microsoft's 2022 Work Trends report, 53% of managers report feeling burned out at work, more than employees in general. That's no surprise given increasing workloads, commercial pressures, constrained resources and ever-more demanding employee expectations. While managers are expected to look after the wellbeing of their teams, HR teams must ensure they don't neglect their own wellbeing. Design wellbeing communications and strategies to focus on the management population themselves as well as giving them resources around how they can support their teams. Encourage managers to put their own oxygen masks on first.

06

Define career paths

While there is a definite need to make management roles more attractive, aspirational and sustainable, there will always be people who simply don't want to manage others. Having those people in management positions, perhaps because management is perceived as the only way to progress, is counterproductive. It may lead to poor management practice and a lack of positive management role models that turn others off going into management themselves. To avoid this vicious cycle, organisations must clearly define what management roles look like, giving clarity of scope and expectations. Offering clear and defined career paths and options, including opportunities for progression that are not linked to managing people, is essential. Some organisations have found success in offering two clear career paths, one management and one functional or technical.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM INVESTORS IN PEOPLE'S PRACTITIONER NETWORK

- In smaller organisations or those with a flatter structure, consider introducing a 'bridging' role which allows aspiring managers to gain experience and develop skills before jumping up into a management position.
- With self-service on the rise, make sure your shared and central service functions systems (for example HR and finance systems) are fit for purpose. It is worth investing in making self-service as easy and accessible as possible as clunky, bureaucratic and unreliable systems will only lead to frustrated, stressed-out managers and greater inefficiency.
- Organisations should consider whether they are investing in management training as well as leadership development. All too often, the core essentials of management can be

overlooked in favour of more theoretical courses on leadership.

- In larger organisations, consider whether you can split management roles. For example, having technical mentor managers and coaching, HR-focused managers.
- Could no manager be better than a poor manager? Self-managed, entrepreneurial teams could present a creative solution to bad management.

About IIP Practitioners:

Practitioners guide organisations through the IIP frameworks to build healthier and more productive workplaces using evidence-based insights to spark reflection, celebrate strengths, and identify areas for development.



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Case study: Henderson Retail

BEHAVIOURS COME FIRST FOR MANAGERS

Henderson Retail is the retail division of Henderson Group and owns and operates more than 110 SPAR and EUROSPAR stores across Northern Ireland.

It employs 4078 people, of which 565 of those in retail are managers, with additional area and regional managers, as well as a central leadership team.

Head of retail operations George Rankin is clear that having good, supportive leadership is a major driver for keeping Henderson Retail at the forefront of food retail in Northern Ireland (it is the fastest growing food retailer in the country), as well as contributing to internal metrics like its high and growing ENPS score. "You can have the best policies written by the best people, but it's the management team out on the ground who bring that to life," he says. "We are a family business with strong core values," adds Justine McGreevy, people development and academy manager for the whole Henderson Group. "If our managers aren't living and breathing those values, we lose the family-centric ethos that is so critical to our business."

The challenges facing managers have changed since Rankin first became a manager about 25 years ago, he says. "I've certainly seen a greater drive towards efficiency, while still delivering the same standard of service, availability and new propositions to customers," he reflects. "The cycle of efficiency has sped up and if you don't give your management teams the right skillsets to deliver on that, that's when you see them becoming frustrated and stressed because it can feel like the budget is continually being cut. You need to give them the capability to cope with that change."

He adds that employee expectations of managers have also shifted, becoming more demanding of a higher standard of behaviour and not being afraid to speak up and push back when managers don't live up to that.

McGreevy notes that managers are dealing with balancing different priorities, which makes supporting them more important than ever. To that end, an online communications platform helps managers connect and share with each other digitally. In-person events across the year, including commercial business updates and awards celebrations, help to build a sense of peer community and support. "Being a manager can feel very lonely," says Rankin. "Sometimes you can be scared to put your hand up and say you don't understand something, so that network is really useful."



Henderson Retail has well established leadership pathway programmes in place (covering aspiring, emerging, developing and established leaders) to ensure managers receive ongoing training and development. It also offers a rolling programme for store managers. "A healthy portion of the training is about behaviours, helping managers understand their own behavioral tendencies," says Rankin. Workshops around mental wellbeing help equip managers with the skills they need to deal with the pressures of the role.

Behaviours and relationships are also central to how teams are put together, given the impact managers can have. Rankin describes a spreadsheet of behaviours and personalities, which is used to ensure the right managers are working together. "We try to put people together who are complementary," he explains. "It's about making sure we get those combinations of personalities, leadership styles and personal interests right."

Reward and recognition is an important element of keeping managers motivated and making the roles aspirational. Pay is sector-leading and complemented by other benefits and incentives, such as a recent trip to South Africa to the SPAR UK conference for the company's best performing manager and her husband. Managers can use instant recognition tools, such as e-cards and vouchers, for their teams. Clarity around the level of flexibility roles can offer is increasingly important in attracting managers, says Rankin.

McGreevy acknowledges that finding managers can be a challenge, but proactively creating noise about career opportunities in retail is helping. Rankin has built the importance of developing their teams into his team's metrics. "It's important to develop people from within," he says. "I still remember the day someone put their hand on my shoulder and said 'you could go a bit further in this organisation'. It's so powerful to know someone has that trust and confidence in you." In 2024 over 100 colleagues were developed on the organisation's retail development pathways.

"It's important to develop people from within, I still remember the day someone put their hand on my shoulder and said 'you could go a bit further in this organisation'. It's so powerful to know someone has that trust and confidence in you."

Tips:

1. Equip managers with the skills and resilience required to cope with fast-paced change through formal training and informal networks and support.
2. Create networks to connect managers, both digitally (helpful for multi-site businesses) and in person through regular milestone events.
3. Centre the importance of behaviours and increase manager self-awareness of their own via training, feedback and reward and recognition structures.
4. Invest in recognition, both financial and non-financial, at all levels and create mechanisms for managers to give instant recognition to team members.
5. Develop from within and create clear succession paths. Consider making talent development and succession planning part of metrics for managers.
6. Trust and empower managers to run the business like it's their own.

Case study: Horizon Healthcare Homes

IT ALL STARTS WITH COMPASSIONATE MANAGEMENT

As a provider of residential homes for adults with learning and physical disabilities, compassion is central to Horizon Healthcare Homes.

"We are incredibly values-based," says Learning and Development Manager Kath Howitt. "Our ethos is about helping the adults we support to live their very best lives possible. To shape excellence in service delivery, it's vital we apply those same values to our teams."

Management approaches form a key part of creating a compassionate and values-led environment. "We work hard to create psychological safety for staff, so people have a voice, feel heard, involved, supported and cared for," Howitt adds. Leadership and management development programmes place huge emphasis on behaviours and areas like compassionate leadership, managing your emotions and understanding the psychology behind people's responses.

"It's about putting this first as a priority for managers," explains Director of Operations Russell Leese. "We strongly encourage our managers to get out there and spend time with staff and the people we support. Know your business, know your people, be close to them and provide that support, through effective coaching and mentoring. Acting with compassion creates a positive cycle."

On making space for this kind of management in a challenging, busy

context, Operations Manager Michael Craven points out that managers are likely to feel that they "don't have time not to be compassionate". "If you're not, it creates major issues going forward," he adds. "It can be time consuming, but it's the right approach to take." Leese agrees, adding: "It means we spend less time reacting and more time being proactive."

Managers are encouraged and supported to take a coaching approach, including in the more formal areas of their jobs such as supervisions (regular CQC-mandatory meetings around performance). As well as covering competency and performance, managers are also encouraged to include more pastoral elements during these meetings. "We promote a coaching style of supervision," says Leese. "That creates the right climate for people to feel safe and open up, helping to nip any issues in the bud earlier rather than later."

Bringing managers from different homes together for regular meetings helps create shared insight, solve problems and offers an extra level of support. "Very rarely do we have a curveball that nobody's come across before," says Leese. "It provides everybody an opportunity to share and to learn from each other."

As well as formal training for existing managers, Horizon Healthcare Homes offers a year-long programme which is available to all staff, subject to meeting specific performance-related criteria, giving those who are interested in becoming a manager the opportunity to develop their skills and gain insight into the role. The programme takes a blended learning approach, including coaching, regular workshops exploring leadership behaviours and competencies and project work to put knowledge into practice. The programme places a huge emphasis on developing self awareness through feedback and reflective exercises throughout, helping participants develop an understanding of how their behaviours affect and influence others.

"We're giving people the opportunity to understand what we expect from our leaders,"

says Howitt. Leese adds that even when going through the programme doesn't ultimately result in a management position, it helps people get more understanding into the realities of being a manager. The majority of participants do go into management positions while others take on champion roles and/or additional responsibilities.

When it comes to the importance of great management, Leese is clear. "When someone doesn't operate effectively or in line with our values as a manager, the whole system quickly comes down and it takes a lot of pulling back from that. It's a win-win situation to have supportive managers who are invested in their teams as well as the people we support."



"We work hard to create psychological safety for staff, so people have a voice, feel heard, involved, supported and cared for."

Tips:

1. Prioritise compassion in management and leadership approaches and include areas like compassionate leadership, self-awareness and understanding and managing emotions in training.
2. Hire and promote based on values rather than solely credentials. Consider using values-based interviewing techniques rather than competency-based questions.
3. Help managers create psychological safety to improve performance and resilience, including an awareness of the importance of this in any training and development.
4. Give aspiring managers an insight into the role early, for example via formal aspiring manager training programmes for those who are interested in moving into a management role in future.
5. Encourage managers to get 'back to the floor' and spend time with their frontline teams and customers rather than sitting behind a desk all the time.

Case study: John Sisk & Son

ELEVATING PEOPLE MANAGEMENT SKILLS TO DRIVE PERFORMANCE

With a workforce of what Head of HR UK Rob Oxley describes as “incredibly technically competent people”, construction company John Sisk & Son was facing a challenge that will resonate with many organisations.

“Historically, people tended to be promoted on their technical brilliance rather than their people skills, becoming a manager from a technical expert basis without necessarily having the tools to be an effective people manager,” Oxley explains.

In 2017 the team decided this issue needed to be tackled head-on, carrying out a gap analysis of management and leadership skills and behaviours across the business and building a tiered management and leadership development programme to fix those gaps. Areas of focus included how to have difficult conversations, how to have career and coaching conversations, and personal effectiveness and self-awareness.

The resulting programme, Elevate, has three tiers for different management levels. The first tier, Elevate Manage, has four golden threads that weave through the programme: understanding myself and becoming more effective (covering areas like emotional awareness); driving performance (with a major focus on coaching); brilliant conversations (including how to have tough and challenging ones); and influencing change (with a focus on stakeholder

management). Actors are used to role play challenging conversations. As managers move up, they learn more about leadership styles, coaching theory and approaches, and building high performing teams built on psychological safety.

Each programme also includes ‘Moments that matter’, which Oxley describes as the elements that will help “really turn the dial”. These include, for example, managers and leaders supporting team members in developing their own careers, taking a “torch bearer” approach to role modeling values and accountability, and empowering their team by supporting them to find their own solutions. Managers are also trained in how to support their teams’ wellbeing and spot the signs of mental health challenges.

Managers and the wider workforce are given a voice in strategy development through workshops. When the company’s most recent strategy was launched, managers were supported and empowered to communicate it to their teams in their own unique, authentic voice.



Ultimately the goal is to tip the balance so that managers prioritise their people as much as operational objectives. "I firmly believe that people leave a manager rather than an organisation," Oxley says. "And that's often because the manager hasn't created the right opportunities, recognised someone, looked out for their wellbeing or shown genuine care or empathy. We want managers to see the importance of engaging their teams."

To show managers this kind of behaviour is highly valued, employee engagement is built into KPIs for both managers and senior leaders. Oxley adds that it's also important to recognise and champion managers displaying exemplary behaviours, for example those who invest time in developing others. "They deserve to be put on a pedestal," he says. "The more you celebrate it, the more people will follow."

Since the introduction of the management development programme, John Sisk & Son has enjoyed more success than ever. Engagement, retention and profit are all up. "If you listen to your people and act on their feedback, you're creating a much better environment," Oxley says. "If managers are open, listen to and drive those changes, that will create a more engaged workforce who want to stick around."

Tips:

1. Make sure the people management side of management is as valued as the more technical and operational side of things, including through reward and recognition mechanisms.
2. Ensure any management development has a big emphasis on developing self-awareness and emotional awareness.
3. Empower managers to communicate wider business strategy and plans to their teams in their own voice to boost authenticity and engagement.
4. Support and empower managers to deal with poor performance in an empathetic way, but to tackle it proactively and head-on.
5. Help managers to understand the changing expectations of a multi-generational workforce, particularly those from younger generations who are just entering the workplace.

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Investors in People is a Community Interest Company and an agent of change, calling for a movement that puts people first – for the benefit of every person in every workplace, increased productivity across organisations, and a stronger, healthier and happier society.

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80% in our community report a Positive Impact on Staff Wellbeing

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SOURCES

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 519 decision makers and 2031 employees. Fieldwork was undertaken between 24th February - 2nd March 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of British business size and region.

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