Building Better Managers
How to Develop and Measure Impactful People Leaders

the joshbersin company

Introduction

Companies have navigated endless change over the past few years, and managers have shouldered the brunt of it. When COVID-19 hit, managers suddenly had to become emotional support experts, supporting their teams during very uncertain times. The shift to hybrid and remote work further complicated matters, creating communication, productivity, and wellbeing issues—and compelling managers to consider new ways of working.

During the Great Resignation, managers had to cope with an even tougher workload as people resigned, quietly quit, or simply disappeared. Additionally, during rounds of layoffs, managers found themselves in the position of communicating changes to their teams, upholding the culture of the company, and supporting those who remained during the transition. Throughout all these challenges, managers were responsible for team output as well as their own work, leading to heightened stress and confusion.

Despite these obstacles, managers (particularly middle managers) have been called the "heart of the company."[1] Positioned between senior leadership and employees, they play a crucial role in embodying company culture and translating the mission and vision into outcomes at the frontline. Ultimately, the employee experience begins and ends with managers, who account for 70% of the variance in team engagement, surpassing any other contributing factor.[2]

The bottom line is companies have a real opportunity to empower their managers to move the business forward. And as stewards of employee experience and development, the HR function is uniquely positioned to take on this role and support managers in doing their best work.

In this report, we explore some of the challenges today's managers face and how organizations and HR teams can help them navigate these challenges. We also discuss how HR can measure the impact of effective management practices and demonstrate the business outcomes of having human-centered, change-ready leaders.

Challenges Managers Face Today

Before defining the solutions HR can use to help managers, it's important to have a deep understanding of the challenges managers are dealing with. Which challenges are a product of their role and the environment they're working in? What is perpetuating these challenges inside and outside the organization? Further, what might the root cause be? Let's dive into some of the general challenges managers are dealing with and what our research says might be behind them.

Too Many Hats

Managers frequently express that they're stretched too thin—not just in bandwidth but across multiple roles simultaneously. Many factors contribute to managers' workloads getting heavier over the past few years, broadening their scope of responsibilities. In fact, according to research from 2023, nearly two-thirds of leaders report having more responsibilities at work now than they did prepandemic.[3]

Our Organization Design research shows that managers often play multiple roles in the company.[4] The first is "work manager," delegating and managing projects for their team members and assuming responsibility for team-based outcomes. The second role is "people manager," responsible for supporting the growth, engagement, and development of their team members. And the third is "contributor," accountable for their own individual deliverables and outcomes.

1 "Middle managers are the heart of your company," Emily Field, Bryan Hancock, and Bill Schaninger/McKinsey & Company, July 17, 2023.

2 "How Influential Is a Good Manager?" Austin Suellentrop and E.Beth Bauman/Gallup, June 2, 2021.

3 "Layoffs, burnout, return-to-office wars: There's never been a worse time to be a middle manager," Gary Beckstrand/Fortune, March 7, 2023.

4 *The Definitive Guide to Organization Design*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

We find that this can be problematic for several reasons. One is that the skills required for each role are different; just because someone is a great project manager or individual contributor doesn't mean they're a great people manager. Second, too many responsibilities may create burnout and inhibit a person's ability to succeed. The same research that reported leaders having more responsibilities postpandemic found that they were also 26% more likely than nonleaders to say they had "nothing more to give in their jobs."[5]

When managers are constrained by bandwidth, the people management part of the role tends to fall by the wayside. This was a frequent concern when we spoke to organizations about the challenges their managers face. At ATN International, a leading provider of communication infrastructure and services, managers were overwhelmed with their existing workloads, so spending time with their team members simply was not a priority. The managers at Listrak, a marketing software company, were faced with an outdated and time-consuming annual performance review process, causing low completion rates. And at HFA, an architectural and engineering firm, some restructuring was needed to help managers who were having trouble with bandwidth support their teams.

Organizations must be mindful of their managers' workloads and work "spans." Without proper role clarity and bandwidth, managers simply can't do their best work.

One Size Does Not Fit All

While all managers share some key challenges and responsibilities, many types and levels of managers exist. Managers may have vastly different levels of people management experience or have differing preferences for using certain tools and technologies. Just like every employee is unique and experiences must be personalized, managers bring an assortment of backgrounds, technical skills, industry expertise, and leadership capabilities to the table.

Recognizing these differences is particularly important when it comes to manager training and expectations. What works and is relevant for a brand-new manager may be completely irrelevant for a seasoned manager. Furthermore, a manager of managers may need unique skills that a frontline manager doesn't need.

We also heard this challenge in our interviews: certain managers are eager to adopt new technology, continuous performance management, and human-centered leadership behaviors, whereas others are perhaps resistant or stuck in a management style that worked better for them in the past. Figure 1 outlines some differentiators to consider when designing manager training and development programs.

These differentiators can present a challenge, because personalized manager development can be expensive and

Figure 1: Manager Differentiators for Training and Development

Differentiator	Examples
Level of Management Experience	Brand new, seasoned, expert
Company Tenure	New hire, more tenured
Level in the Organization	Frontline manager, midlevel manager, senior leader
Team Working Model	Online, hybrid, remote, frontline
Unique Traits	Analytical vs. people-minded, introverted vs. extroverted, learning style
Engagement Level	Low vs. high
Experience with Technology	Low vs. medium or fluent

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2024

5 "Layoffs, burnout, return-to-office wars: There's never been a worse time to be a middle manager," Gary Beckstrand/Fortune, March 7, 2023.

often isn't prioritized for managers across all levels. In our Leadership Development research, we find that organizations tend to have limited budgets for midlevel or frontline manager development, spending most of their money on senior leaders. Nearly half of the companies we surveyed spend close to $2,000 per person per year on executives and senior leaders, whereas first-line and midlevel leaders are likely to receive about $500 each.[6] Organizations that don't prioritize development across all levels of leadership are likely to be outperformed by their peers that are democratizing and personalizing development opportunities.[7]

While developing customized manager training pathways may seem expensive or complex, the impact of a one-size-fits-all manager enablement program likely will be low if you're not providing managers with precisely what they need.

Disconnection from Team Members

With the introduction of hybrid and remote work, it's unsurprising that managers are less connected to their teams. But it's not just physical distance at play; recent research shows managers and employees are disconnected in their beliefs around what's important to each other and in their perceptions about leadership, growth and development, and productivity.[8]

For example, 85% of managers said they've had at least one conversation with their employees about the employees' career vision, while only 52% of employees reported having these conversations.[9] This shows a substantial number of employees and managers aren't on the same page, even in the conversations they are having.

Some organizations we interviewed spoke about their managers not connecting with their team members on a regular basis or not knowing what they're working on. While regular communication may have been built into an in-person work environment, it requires a much more deliberate effort in a remote world.

Furthermore, our research shows the "coaching and development" model is the most successful way to manage people, likely because this model requires managers to understand team members' needs, helps them prioritize, and coaches them on their individual growth and performance.[10] Adopting this style isn't possible when managers and employees are disconnected, as it requires regular conversations and alignment to work well.

Navigating Change

When COVID hit, leading through change and uncertainty became more than a tagline; it became a new reality. And this has carried forward as we continue to navigate rapid change at work. Change-readiness skills and behaviors in senior leaders alone are not enough; people managers at all levels need to be change-ready and have the ability to guide their team members through uncertainty and transition.

In fact, our latest Leadership Development research finds that when an organization's leaders have the skills to lead their teams through transformation, the organization is likely to perform better. However, only a quarter of surveyed organizations from this study say their leaders are equipped with this skill.[11]

Other transformation behaviors and skills matter, too. In Figure 2 on the following page, we list the transformation behaviors that high-performing organizations are reinforcing in their leaders. Many of these behaviors and skills may be new for managers and require a learning curve. These skills may also be new to the organization and need to be built into an evolving leadership model. Transformation-related skills require ongoing training and enablement as well as clear communication from leadership around just how essential they are.

6 *The Definitive Guide to Leadership Development*, Josh Bersin and Janet Mertens/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

7 Ibid.

8 *Helping HR Solve the Manager-Employee Disconnect to Fuel Productivity*, 15Five, 2023.

9 Ibid.

10 *Coaching at Scale: AI Democratizes Leadership Development*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

11 *The Definitive Guide to Leadership Development*, Josh Bersin and Janet Mertens/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

Figure 2: Transformation Behaviors for Leaders

Leaders are transparent about changes impacting the business and the teams.	**Our leaders have the skills and mindsets necessary to adapt to change.**
Leaders in our organization are open to new ideas, experimentation, and failures.	**Our leaders have the skills needed to lead their teams through transformative initiatives.**
Leaders in our organization are happy to receive feedback and adjust their leadership style accordingly.	**Our leaders are committed to helping their team members grow, even if that means choosing paths that take them outside of their current team/job/company.**

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2023

Solutions to Build and Support Better Managers

Managers, it seems, are in a tough spot. With little time to focus on employee development, how do they tackle the issue of disconnection from their team members? How do they make time for professional development when they're tasked with maintaining productivity on a lean team? Further, what structures and resources must be in place to set them up to be better leaders?

This is where HR can step in. While it cannot take on the role of the manager, HR can set up the frameworks and provide the tools, technology, trainings, and infrastructure to clarify what's important, free up bandwidth, and empower a more human-centered approach. Below are some ways to do just that.

- **Define competencies in alignment with culture, values, and business strategy.** What does it mean to be a great people leader at your organization? Our Leadership Development research shows that defining a leadership strategy and model that aligns with your unique culture, mission, and business is correlated with business success.[12] This model should not be static; rather, it should evolve and be revisited regularly with the nonstop change happening across the business landscape. And leadership models aren't just for executives; they can apply to any leader across the organization, including frontline people managers. Your leadership model should include clear competencies, or groups of skills, characteristics, and knowledge that leaders should have, as well as behaviors good leaders demonstrate.

  You don't have to build a complex leadership model to define competencies, and the competencies themselves can be a good place to start. In defining these competencies, consider your unique industry, culture, mission, and value proposition as well as core values of your organization. The list of potential traits of a great people leader can be extensive, so try to narrow it down to a short list of competencies that feels most important and relevant for your company.

  Moreover, don't just look to executives to help define which competencies are most important. The most successful organizations bring in perspectives from a representative group of employees across all levels of the company to ensure the leadership model is most relevant.[13]

12 *The Definitive Guide to Leadership Development*, Josh Bersin and Janet Mertens/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

13 Ibid.

- **Personalize training and development to meet managers where they are.** Professional development, in alignment with clear manager competencies, is a great way to support building better leaders. But if it doesn't feel relevant to the manager's unique development goals or interests, they're unlikely to carve out time for it from their already-busy schedules. This is why manager development should encompass both the company-specific leadership model and manager competencies while also providing opportunities to meet the unique needs of each manager.

  For example, HFA developed a people-leader training course called Engaging Leadership that highlights 15Five. Done in small cohorts, the course begins with a one-day intensive covering expectations and best practices for using the platform as well as information about other available management resources. Following that training, each leader gets ninety days of one-on-one coaching to focus specifically on where they'd like to improve. This personalized coaching helps empower leaders to better leverage their unique strengths.

  Although coaching is one scalable way to personalize development, it is still fairly exclusive, with only 19% of organizations making it available to senior leadership and even fewer democratizing the offering across all levels of managers.[14] That said, organizations that do offer coaching more broadly, even including all levels of employees, are eight times more likely to exceed financial targets than those that do not.[15]

  If one-on-one coaching isn't currently feasible at your organization, there are other ways to personalize manager training. Consider segmenting training by level of management experience or team or offering a variety of optional trainings recommended to specific managers based on skills assessments or evaluations. Vendors such as 15Five offer a suite of tailored training options for leaders in both live and on-demand formats, including video modules, group coaching, and one-on-one coaching. Personalized development may be more expensive than a one-size-fits-all model, but it's an investment worth making if it builds better managers across all levels of the organization.

  Managers can also learn from each other. Many of the most powerful management programs during the pandemic involved leaders just getting together to share challenges, new ideas, and solutions that work.[16]

- **Hold managers accountable for people leadership.** Human-centered leadership is a model that considers people first—hiring, developing, coaching, and inspiring employees. Leaders who embody this type of leadership prioritize the needs of employees, a business's greatest and most appreciable asset, which ultimately leads to more sustainable business success. Business-centered leadership, on the other hand, focuses on growing and improving the business first.[17] See Figure 3 on the next page for some key distinctions between business- and human-centered leadership.

  When managers are tasked with juggling their own workloads, the workloads of their teams, and their role as a people leader, the human-centered aspect of leadership often gets deprioritized. To address this, organizations can build aspects of human-centered leadership into their leadership competencies and evaluate and even compensate leaders based on these competencies.

  ATN International is working on building people leadership skills into its manager performance evaluations, including through upward reviews. HFA has built quarterly development conversations into expectations for managers, with a specific framework called "GAPS"—goals, achievements, progress, and strengths—to structure these conversations.

  Aligning around company-specific leadership competencies, providing tailored training and development so managers can foster the associated skills, and holding managers accountable for how they demonstrate these skills all reinforce building leaders who are essential to your organization's growth and success.

14 *The Definitive Guide to Leadership Development*, Josh Bersin and Janet Mertens/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

15 Ibid.

16 "The Joys Of Hybrid Work. Ten Things We Have Learned," Josh Bersin/joshbersin.com, June 24, 2021.

17 *The Big Reset Playbook: Human-Centered Leadership*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

Figure 3: Business- vs. Human-Centered Leadership

Business-Centered	Human-Centered
Lead the business, people coming along for the ride. Business First, People Second "People as a means to an end"	**Lead the people, they drive the business forward. People First, Business Second "People as the purpose of the business"**
▪ Goals, rewards, incentives, and alignment	▪ Inspiration, skills, empowerment, relationships
▪ Drive innovation with execution, innovation in a silo	▪ Execution demands innovation every day
▪ Focus on growth and change	▪ Learn from problems to evolve organization
▪ Proud, confident, knowledgeable, decisive	▪ Humble, empathetic, listener, growth mindset
▪ Focused on the inside, managing the company	▪ Focused on outside, listening to customers, market
▪ Pick favorites, rely on trusted confidants to succeed	▪ Look for diverse performers, open to new people
▪ Focused on problem-solving, accountability	▪ Focused on systems thinking, why problems occur
▪ Targets, budgets, plans	▪ Vision, goals, and growth perspectives
▪ Driven by financial success, job promotion	▪ Driven by purpose, mission, grit, and passion
▪ Massive change programs and initiatives	▪ Iterative change, series of small, measurable steps

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

- **Create opportunities for employees and managers to connect.** Human-centered leadership requires trust between employees and managers, and trust starts with communication. We hear all too frequently in our conversations with organizations that people managers simply have a harder time connecting with their team members in a remote environment. Without face-to-face on-site interactions and with increasingly large postpandemic workloads, this isn't surprising.

  Our research shows that organizations whose leaders communicate clearly and regularly with their employees outperform their peers. One of the top five practices our leadership study reveals is that leaders check in with their team members on career aspirations and goals.[18] These kinds of conversations matter.

  How can you create more opportunities for leaders to connect with their team members? Technology offers a huge advantage here. Performance management platforms such as 15Five, which keeps track of regular performance conversations, check-ins, and weekly one-on-ones, provide a structure for these conversations that fits within the flow of work. Furthermore, software can be used to improve both synchronous and asynchronous communication. When employees and managers can share project-related updates asynchronously, time in live meetings can be spent building trust, understanding obstacles, collaborating on solutions, and having career development conversations.

  Some platforms also now support managers with AI-powered assistants, which can offer real-time recommendations and coaching across management areas such as surfacing trendlines on team member engagement, conducting more effective one-on-one meetings, and creating more empowering, effective performance reviews, with suggestions on when to check for potential bias.

  HR can offer guidance around how often each kind of conversation should take place. While weekly one-on-ones are often seen as a best practice, this may vary based on teams and types of work within your

18 *The Definitive Guide to Leadership Development*, Josh Bersin and Janet Mertens/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

Figure 4: Ideas to Reduce Administrative Burden for Managers

People Manager Responsibility	Ideas to Save Time
Performance Management	▪ Use software that compiles continuous performance conversations. ▪ Facilitate growth in the flow of work.
One-on-Ones	▪ Provide a template with question prompts for managers to ask. ▪ Encourage asynchronous preparation for employees and managers.
Goal Progress Updates	▪ Store company goals or OKRs in one place, with reminders built in to update team goal statuses.
Other	▪ Cut down on unnecessary meetings.

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2024

organization. Being even more specific around how much time should be spent on career development conversations is also beneficial. HFA provides this guidance through its quarterly GAPS framework, intended to create a two-way dialogue focused on development rather than performance in a 15-minute conversation.

- **Remove administrative burden with technology, organization design, and work design.** A running theme here is that organizations ask a lot of their managers. Along with adding more emphasis to the behaviors associated with human-centered leadership, such as coaching, listening, professional development, and connecting with team members, organizations must simultaneously free up bandwidth from other responsibilities to avoid increasing manager burnout.

  In our Dynamic Organization research as well as our Global Workforce Intelligence (GWI) research, we talk about the value of employees operating "top of license"—where organizations remove obstacles and allow people to do their most meaningful and impactful work using the unique skill sets they were hired for.[19, 20] Managers need this kind of support as well, so they can fulfill their potential as great people leaders.

According to a survey by McKinsey, managers today spend half their time on nonmanagerial work and nearly one full day a week on administrative work.[21] Tackling the nonmanagerial work goes back to organization design, and distinguishing between work managers and people managers, as discussed earlier, can help here. If this kind of shift isn't feasible, another option is to restructure so that no one people leader has too many direct reports.

Organizational structure alone won't address the administrative burden many managers are dealing with regarding people management—related tasks such as performance management and career development for their teams. See Figure 4 for some ideas to help reduce that burden. Listrak's outdated performance review process took managers nearly two hours to complete each report's review. To tackle this challenge, they invested in new technology to support a more seamless, continuous performance management process and facilitate more regular touchpoints between managers and employees. As a result, Listrak was able to substantially improve review completion rates.

To get a better sense of what's bogging managers down, it's important to listen. This can be done through conversations, surveys, or even software analysis to help HR better understand what managers are spending their time on and uncover inefficiencies in their processes.

19 *Healthcare at a Crossroads: Filling the Talent Gap in Clinical Care*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

20 *The Definitive Guide to Building a Dynamic Organization*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

21 "Stop wasting your most precious resource: Middle managers," McKinsey & Company, March 10, 2023.

How to Measure Manager Effectiveness and Impact

Once you've taken the steps necessary to build more accountable human-centered leaders, how will you know your programs are working? Further, how will you measure the business impact of your investment in building more effective managers? We've divided this conversation into two parts. The first is measuring your managers' effectiveness based on adoption of target leadership behaviors and competencies. The second is measuring the business impact associated with these manager behaviors and competencies.

Behaviors and Competencies

You can assess how well your manager programs are working according to both adoption of behaviors and manager competencies based on reviews or assessments. While it can be challenging to quantify some of the characteristics of great people leaders, this can serve as a consistent and actionable way to ensure these leaders are adhering to best practices based on your model.

Behavior adoption is a quantifiable way to measure managers. Using a system that tracks manager behaviors such as one-on-ones, performance reviews, and check-ins allows you to measure these in one place (see Figure 5). One limitation of using behavioral measures alone is that they do not necessarily guarantee the behaviors are effective. For instance, recurring one-on-ones with direct reports can help build rapport and trust, but the quality of those interactions is what really matters.

This is why it's also important to consider manager competencies and feedback. This not only can be done through assessments built into competency training courses, but it also can be done through feedback and reviews. 360 reviews, where feedback is collected from direct reports, peers, and the manager's manager to ensure a well-rounded perspective, can be a helpful way to get feedback on manager skills. Reviews should ask consistent questions that evaluate managers based on a consistent set of criteria. In addition to measuring competencies, reviews can help evaluate PowerSkills such as empathy, humility, curiosity, and kindness,[22] which are all important skills that may be harder to quantify.

22 "We Are Becoming A PowerSkills Economy," Josh Bersin/The Josh Bersin Company, October 3, 2022.

Figure 5: Measuring Manager Behaviors and Competencies

Type	How to Measure
Behaviors	▪ Performance reviews completed ▪ Regular one-on-ones held ▪ Check-ins reviewed ▪ Trainings completed
Skills and Competencies	▪ Upward review ratings ▪ Peer review ratings ▪ Manager review ratings ▪ Training assessments

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2024

Business Impact

While behaviors, competencies, and feedback can help HR understand how managers are operating, these things alone don't indicate business impact. This relates to the question, "What problems are we trying to solve by building better managers?"

The following metrics can help address some of those key business challenges and provide insight into the link between manager effectiveness and business impact:

1. **Regrettable turnover.** Regrettable turnover happens when a high-performing employee willingly and unexpectedly leaves the company.[23] This may happen for a variety of reasons, such as finding a better opportunity to grow their career elsewhere. However, we also know managers strongly influence both an employee's desire to stay and their desire to leave an organization. This is why regrettable team turnover rates are one metric to keep an eye on.
2. **Engagement scores.** Employee engagement, typically measured through a survey or ongoing pulse, is a helpful measure tied to productivity, performance, and retention. According to *Gallup Business Journal*, 70% of the variance in team engagement across the organization is explained by the quality of the manager.[24] Therefore, engagement can be a helpful indicator of manager effectiveness, particularly when comparing scores across

23 "How to Measure HR Effectiveness with 12 Key Metrics," Nicole Klemp/15Five.

24 "How Influential Is a Good Manager?," Austin Suellentrop and E.Beth Bauman/Gallup, June 2, 2021.

teams. Employee net promoter score (eNPS) is another helpful metric to understand an employee's satisfaction with and loyalty to an organization.

3. **Team performance.** Managers are responsible for driving high performance and productivity on their teams, and effective managers should be facilitating these outcomes. Team performance can be measured quantifiably based on objectives and key results (OKRs) or goal attainment, depending on the team's function. If a team is disengaged or underperforming, it's important to consider the role of the manager and whether or not they are well equipped to help their team succeed.

The above metrics can be measured on a team level, alongside individual manager behaviors and competencies (see Figure 6). While correlation does not necessarily indicate causation, showing a link between manager skills and actions and metrics such as regrettable turnover, engagement, and performance can help determine whether your manager program is effective.

Furthermore, each of these metrics has a financial impact your organization may already be tracking. A positive correlation can justify continued investment in manager enablement programs, whereas an inverse correlation, such as high scores on manager behaviors and competencies but low scores on these impact metrics, might indicate there are other factors at play—or it may be time to revisit your manager behaviors and competencies to ensure they're driving a positive impact.

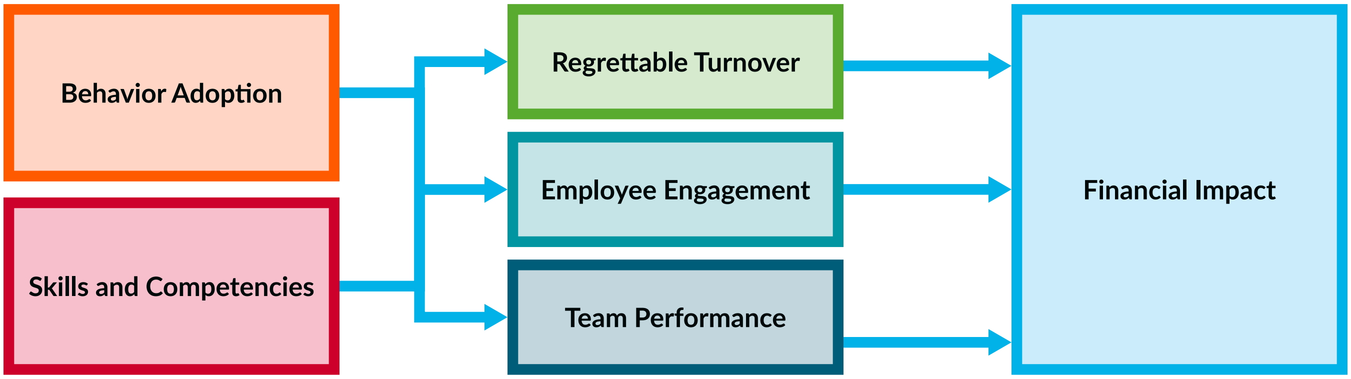
Platforms such as 15Five take this a step further, with dedicated measures of manager effectiveness. These help measure the skills and behaviors needed to be an effective manager and connect them back to business performance. With the ability to view customized data for individual managers and the company in aggregate, HR leaders can pinpoint areas of strength and improvement while maintaining psychological safety.

Conclusion

Today's managers face unique challenges, with the added responsibilities of navigating uncertainty, operating in a talent shortage, and managing a pixelated workforce—on top of day-to-day functional and people accountabilities. Managers must be adept at driving performance while also being more transformation-ready and human-focused than ever before.

While many organizations still overlook supporting managers outside of senior leadership, the impact of building great managers at all levels is clear. HR has a unique opportunity to step in and take on this strategic role by addressing the fundamental challenges managers face today and demonstrating the real business impact of building effective, human-centered leaders.

Figure 6: Measuring Manager Effectiveness and Key Business Metrics



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2024

ATN International Brings People Management to the Forefront

ATN International is a leading provider of communication infrastructure and services. For more than 35 years, the organization has focused on delivering connectivity to underbuilt and underserved communities around the world. With more than 2,500 employees across 8 telecommunication brands, ATN is a mission-driven organization invested in meeting the critical needs of rural and remote areas with the best digital connectivity possible.

ATN International has separately functioning HR teams at each of its eight business units. Chris Hadley, VP & head of HR for ATN, the parent company, was brought on in 2021 to lead HR for that brand and provide consulting and strategic HR services for all the other operating companies. “My top-level goal is to create an ecosystem that at least ensures they’ve got the right talent systems in place,” said Hadley.

One of the areas Hadley was tasked with early on was rethinking performance management. The original system he inherited was ranking employees on how well they were doing their jobs, just based on tasks. “It was really just a litany of their job responsibilities, and here is how well they did against them.” The responsibility of the manager in this process was solely “work management”—focused on performance but not on employee development.

Hadley quickly discovered this was more than just a process issue—it was a people issue. “You can have a policy and a process and a system, but if you don’t have effective managers, it doesn’t work.” This became evident as he started having conversations with managers, who really saw their roles as their own work output and the work output of their teams. Some of the managers had been fantastic individual contributors, but that didn’t necessarily equip them to lead teams. Further, managers were overwhelmed with their existing workloads, and spending time coaching and developing their team members was simply not a priority.

To reshape performance management, Hadley saw a clear opportunity for HR to better support and uplevel managers. In need of a technology platform to support these initiatives, the team found 15Five to be a natural fit because of its specific focus on building effective managers. “When I’m thinking about performance management, I can’t just think about the system. I have to think about the other inputs, and one of those inputs is people and the talent behind that,” said Hadley. The built-in objectives and key results (OKRs) frameworks, performance reviews, one-on-one templates, and manager training programs brought structure to these important manager processes and also focused on leadership development.

The team rolled out the new platform slowly—starting with check-ins and one-on-ones—encouraging more connection points between managers and employees, with questions and prompts as shortcuts. With the pandemic well underway, employees were largely distributed, so many managers were hardly even connecting with their teams at that time. Next, they rolled out the year-end review process to replace the old performance appraisals. Feedback was immediately positive—with users reporting that it felt simpler and more intuitive than the previous process.

ATN was also an early adopter of the Manager Accelerator program, a live cohort-based training delivered in a set of sessions, with practice time built in between each one. This complements ATN’s in-house manager training, which is more “Manager One-on-One” around policies and procedures and focuses on the skills and capabilities of being a good people manager.

While change management has been a process at ATN, many managers have begun adopting a more people-first approach and have really enjoyed the new resources to support them. Hadley also recognizes that one-size-fits-all management “rules” may not work and, while certain processes such as weekly one-on-ones are encouraged, they are not mandatory.

Instead, his team has focused on providing education and training, encouraging regular touchpoints through an easy-to-use platform, and demonstrating the value of good people management in driving performance. In fact, starting soon, managers will be evaluated not only on their work deliverables but also on their people leadership skills, including through upward reviews.

Today, four of the eight companies that make up ATN International are using 15Five, and the goal is to move all brands over soon. In addition to upward reviews, HR will be adding leadership competencies to the system to further define the role of a people leader. HR at ATN has taken on the important role of helping to build better leaders; Hadley described HR's role as establishing leadership culture, providing frameworks and processes, and coaching and training managers to operate at their best. While HR cannot take on the job of the manager for them, it can create the building blocks, infrastructure, and resources for leaders to step into the role with confidence and conviction.

Credit Repair Cloud Builds an Ecosystem to Support Manager and Employee Engagement

Credit Repair Cloud is a U.S.-based software company founded to help entrepreneurs run and grow their own credit repair businesses. Since its inception in 2017, Credit Repair Cloud has helped more than 20,000 active users build consumer-facing businesses. At the center of how the team operates are its core values—empowering the team, supporting new ideas, and fostering transparency. These aspects of the company's culture have also informed the processes in place today to help both managers and employees grow and succeed within the organization.

2020 was one of the most profitable years for Credit Repair Cloud—and a time of rapid growth and change. Prior to that time, as a small but growing organization, there was no formal HR function in place. When SVP of People Operations Gabriela Paniagua joined as the first HR hire, she was tasked with building people processes from the ground up.

One of the key gaps Paniagua identified was that she didn't have an ongoing pulse on how employees were doing. With a fully distributed team and a lot of change happening, quarterly pulse surveys weren't enough. Simultaneously, she needed to rethink performance management, as the previous framework in place was not scalable. Paniagua remembered thinking, "I see a lot of people working, but how do we tie this to performance? How do we know we are all working well and working toward the same goals?"

This prompted the need for a connected system—something that could tie together employee engagement, sentiment, and performance with company performance, aligned around shared goals. The team started by rolling out objectives and key results (OKRs) on the goal and performance side and, eager to integrate this with other facets of performance and engagement, Paniagua sought out a new software solution.

She decided to bring on 15Five, a performance management platform focused on improving employee engagement, developing effective managers, and aligning team impact to growth for the business. She rolled out the many features one by one—starting with high fives, real-time recognition that was quickly adopted. Next, she added weekly check-ins for employees to share how they're feeling and what they're working on. Weekly check-ins are linked to quarterly OKRs, which are stored in the system to keep employees focused on the right areas. The weekly check-ins also help feed quarterly reviews, making it easy to refer back to week-over-week progress.

Among the high fives, check-ins, one-on-ones, OKRs, and reviews, there were a lot of new features for employees (particularly managers) to adopt. Part of Paniagua's role has been continued reinforcement around the "why" behind this new system. Her team put together training for leaders—a combination of platform resources and their own videos—to get managers comfortable using the features and connecting regularly with employees. "We are consistently monitoring that people are using it. We're reminding them of the importance and the why," said Paniagua. And the why is not just about measuring performance and sentiment; it's about creating a positive, safe, and connected environment for employees.

To further reinforce the important role managers play, the People team keeps an open dialogue with leaders. They have a weekly meeting where they flag employees with low scores on their check-ins to make sure managers reach out. The People team also uses this as an opportunity to listen; for example, when Paniagua heard resistance from a leader to having weekly one-on-ones, she gathered resources, put together a mini training, and used that as an opportunity to better reinforce the importance of those regular employee-manager check-ins for everyone.

"Some managers have old systems or maybe some old beliefs where these types of tools were not in place. But once you work with them, they're like, 'I love this, this is so easy.' But it requires a dedicated effort," said Paniagua. With this continued effort, adoption has increased with 15Five from the previous tool by about 35%.

Along with listening, Paniagua and her team have worked hard to support manager wellbeing. Early in the pandemic, they offered lots of new resources and events around wellness, mindfulness, and education. When they realized engagement was dropping in these areas, and people were missing just having fun together, they made 2023 the “Year of Fun,” with quarterly events for the leadership team to gather and do something unrelated to work. “Managers are also employees, and their employee experience matters,” said Paniagua.

Going forward, the People team will work on new manager training to better support incoming and aspiring leaders at the organization. This will complement the existing culture around learning and development, where employees are encouraged to invest in themselves and their personal growth. Overall, this growing ecosystem surrounding performance and engagement has been incredibly valuable in connecting employees with managers and the company at large, and Paniagua looks forward to continuing to listen and iterate on the system to support the team.

HFA Transforms from Traditional to Human-Centered People Leadership

HFA is a full-service architectural and engineering firm headquartered in Bentonville, Arkansas. Founded in 1990, the organization has helped hundreds of brands across all 50 states design, streamline, and scale their programs. Today, HFA has more than 350 employees and, through a people-focused culture, the company empowers its diverse team to deliver the highest quality work for its clients.

When Chief People Officer Michelle Page joined HFA in 2011, people management processes were fairly traditional and focused on evaluating performance. People managers, or "leaders," as HFA calls them, held performance evaluations with their teams once per year, and the time was used to rate employees using a points system, which would then determine pay raises or bonuses. "It was very one-sided, directive; it was not a conversation," said Page. "When you have somebody talking at you, it doesn't really give the employee the opportunity to interact and envision how to improve."

In 2019, the founder of the organization appointed a new CEO who prompted a much-needed shift toward human-centered leadership. At the time, Page was advocating for more continuous people development so, with the additional executive support, the time was right to provide more structure and resources for people leaders and empower them to take a more human-centered approach with their teams.

Page's first change was to increase the frequency of performance development conversations from once a year to quarterly. When she received some initial pushback that managers didn't have time or know how to facilitate these more frequent conversations, she developed a framework called "GAPS" (goals, achievements, progress, and strengths) to provide clearer structure. The framework was built to create a two-way dialog focused on development rather than performance and can be done in about 15 minutes.

Managers were initially logging these GAPS conversations in digital documents and eventually in the HR information system (HRIS) for reference. Page attended a conference where she observed other organizations using more advanced technology to support employee development, so she decided to explore these tools herself. When she looked at 15Five, she was immediately drawn to all the opportunities the platform creates for connection—not only through more regular interactions between employees and managers but also across the organization through features such as high fives for recognition. This was especially important, as HFA had more than doubled in size between 2020 and 2021, so many of the newer employees had never connected in person. Further, bringing all the conversations and data such as check-ins, performance reviews, objectives and key results (OKRs), and recognition together in one place would be a huge win.

As her team rolled out the platform in 2021, Page wanted to continue to help leaders adopt the new management tools and resources now available to them. She went on to develop the Engaging Leadership course, a training program for people leaders. It begins with a one-day intensive that goes through all the features of 15Five, expectations and best practices for using the platform, and other management resources available to the team, including Gallup's CliftonStrengths. It also asks participants what their current baseline is with using the software to understand where more training or value demonstration is needed. Following that daylong training, every leader gets ninety days of one-on-one coaching to focus specifically on where they'd like to improve. This personalized coaching helps meet leaders where they are, empowers them to better leverage their unique strengths, and further builds out their human-centered leadership skills.

When it comes to increasing adoption of these practices across the organization, change management is ongoing. All employees are expected to fill in weekly check-ins, and senior leadership leads by example, with the CEO and COO filling theirs out faithfully every week. Managers are also expected to review their team's check-ins and, since the People and Culture (P&C) team can see who has or hasn't reviewed their team's check-ins, Page can coach specific managers around this and reinforce the value of such reviews. For the managers who were having trouble with bandwidth to support their teams, Page has worked on some restructuring such that no one people leader has more than four or five direct reports.

The shift toward more human-centered leadership has had a profound impact on the culture. The Engaging Leadership course has helped leaders see the value in continuous touchpoints with their employees and increased adoption and excitement about using the software and tools available to them. This cultural shift has also brought more connection to the team as a whole and created more psychological safety, where employees feel comfortable opening up to their managers about what might be going on that's influencing their work. "Showing that you actually do care what's going on beyond just what they're producing is a big part of what we try to communicate," said Page. "We've worked really hard to create this environment where people do feel safe."

The P&C team has embraced the opportunity to expand human-centered leadership at HFA through the Engaging Leadership course, coaching around strengths, and providing the resources and technology for leaders to connect with their teams more frequently and in a meaningful way. Moving forward, they are excited to leverage a new career development feature, tie that back to mentorship, and give people more visibility into their career path at HFA—which will only further the opportunity for leaders to be coaches and focus on development paths. When defining the role of leaders at the organization, Page compared it to coaching in sports. "The coach helps the players do their best," she said—and that underlies the philosophy her team subscribes to in supporting and building better leaders.

Listrak Boosts Adoption of Continuous Performance Management

Listrak is a marketing software company that helps brands achieve accelerated growth through an integrated, cross-channel communication platform. Headquartered in Lititz, Pennsylvania, the company has about 350 employees today and offers a hybrid working model so teams can perform at their best. To offer leading-edge technology and experiences for its customers, Listrak prioritizes creating a positive employee experience internally and has been praised as one of the “Best Places to Work” in Pennsylvania.[25]

In early 2022, Listrak was experiencing the pain of an outdated performance management process. In addition to completing annual reviews using a clunky system, managers were supposed to be connecting with their team members monthly around performance and development, but they had no formal way to document the conversations. Managers would painfully spend upwards of two hours on each employee’s annual review with nothing to reference, which was a clear culprit in the low completion rate of around 50%.

Paul Barber, VP of HR at Listrak, had been talking to the CEO for years about the need for a more continuous process, but the current technology was not set up to support that transition. “Nobody should ever be surprised about where they sit,” said Barber. “This is an ongoing conversation.”

Erica Legieko, who was director of HR delivery at the time and has since been promoted to chief of staff, led the evaluation process to find a new tool that could facilitate seamless, continuous performance management and make it easier for managers to connect with employees regularly. She decided to involve leaders across the organization in the evaluation so they could ensure it met the criteria of each individual team.

15Five’s performance management software felt like a natural fit, and Legieko began a pilot to start collecting data and making adjustments in August 2022 before formally rolling out level by level starting in November. While improving performance management was the initiative of focus, fostering better relationships and communication among teams was at the core. “With the continuous piece, we also wanted to strengthen that manager-employee relationship,” said Legieko. “It’s also helped to strengthen the relationships within the departments—so employees feel comfortable sharing and receiving feedback as part of that continuous process.”

To facilitate this change, Listrak uses weekly check-ins, one-on-one templates, and high fives for recognition. They also recently launched their first engagement survey and have transitioned to quarterly performance reviews, now with the ability to easily access information from recurring check-ins that happened during the quarter. Recently, objectives and key results (OKRs) have been rolled out at the most senior level of the organization and will soon be used more broadly. Releasing new features to leadership first has been intentional and beneficial. Executive and leadership buy-in to the program, from their involvement in the evaluation to leading with feature rollout, have been essential in helping with adoption on their teams.

To further facilitate leadership adoption and support managers, Legieko sees her team’s role as a supportive one—to be that “partner and coach that’s available to help guide managers through situations that they may or may not be familiar with navigating,” said Legieko. HR also helps define the culture, but it is really up to leaders to relay that to their teams. This has translated similarly in the software rollout, where HR has provided the resources, framework, and technology to remove administrative burden, but it is the leaders and managers who must actually use what’s available to them.

The results are significant across the board—starting with HR having data to report on, which was sparse in the past. Coming from a roughly 50% completion rate of annual

25 “2022 Best Places to Work in PA,” Best Companies Group.

reviews, Listrak saw 100% of self-reviews completed at the end of 2022, with 98% of manager reviews complete. They're also seeing high adoption with check-ins, showing a 90% submission rate in the first half of 2023 and a 94% manager review rate. These data points were coupled with praise for the system in the engagement survey, with employees sharing they now feel like they have a voice. Employees are also feeling more connected and supported through the check-ins in the remote, distributed environment.

Moving forward, Listrak is working on implementing a more formal manager training program. They plan to divide the training into cohorts of newer managers and up-and-coming managers who are still individual contributors. They're also rolling out OKRs throughout the organization and are excited to help tie them back to individual performance. Once they've been using the platform for a full year, Legieko and Barber look forward to seeing how much simpler the end-of-year review process becomes.

About the Authors

Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.

Julia Bersin

Julia is a senior research analyst for The Josh Bersin Company where she studies how businesses are transforming work for the future. Her current research areas include the extended workforce, employee listening and communication, and employee engagement. With an educational background in psychology and math, Julia has spent nearly 10 years working at technology companies—including HR tech enterprises—across various growth stages. She has extensive professional experience managing multifunctional projects and driving marketing and growth strategies. Julia is also passionate about health and wellbeing and brings these areas into both her research and personal life.

The Josh Bersin Company Membership

The Josh Bersin Company provides a wide range of research and advisory services to help HR leaders and professionals tackle the ever-evolving challenges and needs of today's workforce. We cover all topics in HR, talent, and L&D. The Josh Bersin Academy—built on our research and powered by Nomadic Learning—helps HR practitioners grow key foundational skills. Our corporate membership program provides HR teams and senior leaders with the skills, strategies, and insights to build cutting-edge HR and people strategies through a combination of research, assessments, professional development, exclusive events, and community. In 2022, The Josh Bersin Company introduced the Global Workforce Intelligence (GWI) Project to guide market-leading businesses and their leaders through the challenges of industry convergence while remaining future-focused.

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