

How HR Can Build Leadership Skills Across the Workforce

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UNDER PRESSURE: How to Build Managers in a Hard-to-Manage World

By Darcy Eikenberg, PCC

In its *State of the American Manager* report, Gallup estimates 70 percent of team members' engagement depends on what managers do and don't do. If you're a manager, that's a lot of pressure.

One of the managers in a cohort I coach admitted as much while painting this picture of the stress he felt: "I'm expected to be a sponge. I'm supposed to soak up all the issues and struggles each day. But I never get the chance to wring it all out before there's more. And my team is standing in a flood. Help!"

How can we in human resources help managers manage in a hard-to-manage world? How can we retain and retrain managers while keeping our organizations moving forward? And how do we help these mission-critical employees balance the tricky tripod formed by the needs of their people, senior leadership and themselves?

Here are three actions HR leaders can take right now to strengthen manager development efforts. Each of these approaches significantly reduces stress and prevents turnover while increasing the odds managers will succeed even as their world becomes harder to manage than ever.

Reinforce What Managers Do and Don't Control

At the manager level, demands to be all things to all people can be intense.

Yes, managers are bosses, with all the accountabilities and assumptions that come with occupying the role. At the same time, HR and senior leadership may be asking managers to serve as counselors, career advisors and point people for organizational initiatives. Manager might also be urged to act as watchdogs for organizational risks such as employee turnover or an inability to hire essential personnel—and they may be scapegoated for failures they did not cause. On top of all this, managers, like all of us, must care for their families and, hopefully, their own physical, mental and spiritual health.

Managers are squeezed harder than a size eight foot being stuffed into a size seven shoe, and with about as much pain.

We must help managers make better choices about where to spend time, brainpower and emotional energy. We can do this by reinforcing the reality that managers only control three things: what they think, what they say and what they do.

Your managers only control three things:

**Everything they think.
Everything they say.
Everything they do.**

That's it. But it's enough.

When we teach this concept to managers, we can almost see the weight lifting from their shoulders. They recognize that because they cannot control tomorrow, they can decide to focus on today, choose to stop fearing the future and, above all, relax. They also realize that while they cannot fix everything in the world that negatively impacts their people and their own performance, they can do their best in the present moment.

When I was struggling to learn this concept of control for myself, a Buddhist friend suggested I imagine picking up a handful of sand and squeezing hard. This would cause the sand to escape through my fingers. Holding the sand lightly, however, would keep it in place.

The lesson for HR is that we can help managers loosen their grips and know all will be well. When any of us begin to practice actively choosing our thoughts, words and actions—and letting go of trying to control our environment through worry, anxiety and fear of failure—we diminish the pressure we feel and build a stronger sense of power, safety, self-worth and freedom than we ever had before.



Reshape Managers' Job Expectations so They Can Prioritize People Over Projects

Too often, people get promoted to manager positions because they are the best at what they do. Senior leadership gives little consideration to whether a newly promoted manager understands how to build up other people. But, as every experienced manager knows (and every new manager eventually discovers), the skills needed to lead people are not the same as the skills required to take the lead on projects.

The distinction between leading people and leading projects has only grown sharper as hybrid and fully remote teams have become common. Research continues to prove that all human beings need connections and clarity to do their best work. The gold standards for creating those connections and providing that clarity are giving one-on-one attention, holding frequent conversations and caring.

As work becomes both more specialized and more collaborative, organizations will benefit from reducing or eliminating managers' project loads and responsibilities for dealing directly with customers or clients. Doing this increases the time managers can spend on internal people responsibilities. It also acknowledges the growing impossibility of a manager being an expert in anything other than leading people. The most effective managers enable their people to gain and exercise the expertise needed to complete assignments.

Building up people take time. And people leadership does not always scale. Empowering managers to prioritize people—adjusting measures of managers' performance and affording them the space and resources they require to do people-focused work—is the only way to win in a talent-first world. No metaverse or productivity app can compare.

Help Managers Find 'TA-DAs'

When I coach managers, I often observe that pressure to “be efficient” and get more done more quickly causes them to start meetings or conversations by listing everything that is going wrong or everything that is still undone. The lists never end.

How depressing! Managers who make the choice to focus on challenges and setbacks instead of accomplishments and progress unintentionally create an atmosphere that feels exhausting. There is an easy fix for this.

In *The Progress Principle*, Harvard researchers Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer show that the single most important factor influencing how positively people feel about their work is whether they make progress on something meaningful to them. Positive feelings about work follow even if the progress made seems small. This points to the need to help managers identify “TA-DA” moments when reviewing their own work and the work of their teams.

TA-DAs are celebratory. Think of winning Olympic athletes, circus folk and toddlers waddling proudly toward their parents with their arms outstretched. Think of someone flashing the V for victory, of throwing back one's shoulders and pausing, just for a moment, to bask in the glory of what one has accomplished.

Managers and employees can celebrate a TA-DA even if the work is imperfect. After all, an acrobat will throw their arms in the air and take a bow even if they failed to stick their landing. And a toddler might fall only to—TA-DA! —get back up again.

Work today is complex, and project timelines are long. We can help managers find numerous TA-DAs among the thousands of good decisions and productive actions taken each day. Celebrating good behavior and highlighting progress reinforce best efforts. In this way, reinforcing the little things that keep projects on track and move the team toward its goals goes a long way in creating a culture of appreciation and active engagement. And when we help managers see and speak about the TA-DAs more regularly, it releases the pressure valve of perfection by linking small moments to a larger, more meaningful story.

Moving Forward

If ever there was a time for our organizations to recalibrate resources toward enhancing the manager experience, it is now. Nothing is getting easier to manage, and change creates opportunities to hit reset on assumptions and practices.

Now is the time to mount a rescue mission for the all-important manager role before more managers fall overboard. A refreshed manager experience—one in which employees thrive in the role rather than seeing it as an unhealthy burden—will improve the experiences of everyone throughout your organization, of its customers or clients, of your community and of the wider world.

Darcy Eikenberg, PCC, coaches leaders and managers on strategies for managing today's constant change and preparing for the future with clarity, confidence and courage. She is also the author of Red Cape Rescue: Save Your Career Without Leaving Your Job (Page Two, 2021). Connect with Eikenberg [on LinkedIn](#). —*NE*