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# Exploratory Study of Leading U.S. Companies Post-COVID-19 Manager Engagement Practices

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Managers are crucial to employee satisfaction, serving as the bridge between leadership and staff. Although managers are important for employee engagement, recent research highlights a significant issue in organizations: managers' low engagement levels. The purpose of this study was to examine the practices leading companies are using to engage managers and support their performance post-COVID-19

Informants from six Fortune 100 and three Fortune 500 companies were recruited through purposive sampling and interviewed for this study. Each participant was required to have worked regularly on their company's enterprise-wide manager engagement programs within the previous year. Data were analyzed using content analysis.

Examination of the interview data revealed that companies consider the manager role critical, although managers are affected by competing priorities and limited capacity, resources, and bandwidth. Most companies examined reportedly utilize various practices to support manager engagement and performance in some fashion.

These exploratory findings indicate that organizations wanting to support manager engagement may wish to implement structured manager engagement programs, formalize leadership roles, ensure alignment of the manager programs with the larger organizational system, develop manager expectations and accountability, foster collaboration between Human Resources and other cross-functional support teams to implement the programs, streamline communications and planning, and address manager bandwidth and capacity issues.

Recommendations for future research are also provided.

Companies recognize that manager engagement is critical to employee engagement. To better understand the implications of such a statement, this study examines the practices leading companies are using to engage managers and support their performance post-COVID-19.

Gallup (2022) defines a manager as someone responsible for leading a team toward common objectives. For the purposes of this research, the term "manager" refers to middle managers defined by their reporting structure as individuals who report to the senior layer of leadership in a company.

Managers are crucial to employee satisfaction, serving as the bridge between leadership and staff, balancing expectations from both sides (Barrett & Wigert, 2023). 70% of team engagement variance is determined by the manager, and notably, half of all employees have left a job due to their manager (Gallup, 2022).

Recent research highlights a significant issue in organizations: managers low engagement (Gallup, 2022). This can result in reduced productivity, higher turnover rates, and a decline in overall organizational performance. “In the post-COVID-19 environment, managers are more likely than non-managers to be disengaged at work, burned out, looking for a new job, and feeling like their organization does not care about their wellbeing” (Barrett & Wigert, 2023, para. 2).

This exploratory study examines nine Fortune 500 companies with manager populations ranging from 2,500 to more than 100,000. It produces some initial insights into how they are engaging with and supporting their managers, a topic currently underexplored in the context of rising disengagement and evolving work environments.

By investigating specific practices and systems in place, the study identifies potential gaps in current approaches that can inform ongoing research and practices aimed at improving managerial support systems and enhancing managers engagement, performance, and retention.

After reviewing the relevant literature, we we'll outline the study's methods and present the findings. We'll then discuss the data and conclude with recommendations to enhance manager programs through improved support, alignment, and engagement.

## Literature Review

### Manager Engagement

The manager role is considered critical to employee engagement because of managers' significant direct influence on employees' experiences. Kahn (1990) defined engagement as being fully physically, cognitively, and emotionally connected with one's work roles. Subsequently, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) described employee engagement as “a positive, persistent, and pervasive work-related psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption toward job and organization” (p. 295).

Manager engagement is essential, as managers serve as the primary link between organizational leadership and employees. They are responsible for translating organizational strategies into actionable tasks and ensuring team alignment with company goals (Schein & Schein, 2016). Engaged managers are more likely to inspire and motivate their teams, leading to higher employee engagement, productivity, and retention. In contrast, disengaged managers can negatively impact morale, increase turnover rates, and reduce overall organizational performance (Macey et al., 2009).

Engaged managers excel at setting clear expectations, providing constructive feedback, and recognizing employee achievements, which collectively enhance team productivity and morale (Kouzes & Posner, 2019). Research demonstrates that employees led by engaged managers are more likely to be engaged themselves. Such managers foster a supportive and motivating work environment that promotes employee development and satisfaction (Gallup, 2022). Elevated employee engagement subsequently results in increased productivity, improved customer service, and reduced turnover rates (Moore & Hanson, 2022).

Manager engagement also significantly shapes organizational culture. Engaged managers exemplify the values and behaviors the organization seeks to promote, thereby reinforcing the desired culture within their teams. Additionally, they play a critical role in communicating and implementing organizational changes, ensuring these changes are accepted and effectively executed throughout the organization (Macey et al., 2009).

Conversely, disengaged managers often lack motivation and commitment, which can result in poor decision-making, insufficient team support, and diminished team and organizational performance. These managers are also more susceptible to burnout, further undermining their leadership effectiveness (Macey et al., 2009).

## **Organizational Practices and Design for Enhancing Manager Engagement**

Organizational practices refer to the structured and strategic activities, policies, and procedures that organizations implement to achieve their goals. These practices encompass a wide range of functions, including management processes, communication methods, performance evaluations, training programs, and cultural initiatives (Eskildsen & Nussler, 2000). Creating and optimizing practices to enhance managerial performance and improve employee experiences have long been a dominant focus within organizations (Schein & Schein, 2016, 2019).

### ***Galbraith's Star Model as a Framework***

Galbraith's (1977) Star Model serves as a framework for analyzing organizational practices, their interconnections, and their effects on organizational functioning and outcomes. This model offers a comprehensive framework that aligns the elements of Strategy, Structure, Processes, People, and Rewards.

The strategy component establishes the direction for organizational growth and defines the framework for the mission, vision, competitive advantage, goals, and values.

The structure component describes the organization's arrangement, encompassing hierarchy, reporting relationships, roles, and responsibilities. It determines where decision-making authority resides, whether organized by geography, function, product, customer focus, or by centralization or decentralization.

The process component encompasses the flow of information and the organization's workflows. It includes systems and procedures that coordinate activities, decision-making, and communication across the organization. Processes are designed to ensure that tasks are completed efficiently and effectively, aligning with the organization's strategy. It impacts how quickly and accurately information is shared, how decisions are made, and how work is coordinated across different departments and teams.

The people component contains human resource policies that shape employees' mindsets and skill sets, including staffing, selection, performance management, learning and development, succession planning, and leadership development. Macey et al., (2009) emphasize that trust in the organization and its management is essential for employee engagement; without trust, engagement initiatives are unlikely to succeed. In order to ensure that managers are clear on what is expected of them and to build trust with employees, another recommended people practice includes having a code of good behavior for managers that maps to the company's culture (Eskildsen & Nussler, 2000).

The rewards component includes systems that motivate individuals to achieve organizational goals (J. Galbraith, 1977), and includes goals and metrics, recognition, compensation, and the monitoring of progress, successes, and failures. Effective reward systems support organizational strategy and foster a high-performing workforce (J. R. Galbraith, 2014). Practices such as feedback provision, leadership reviews, surveys, and structured leadership development programs promote accountability and build managerial capabilities (Eskildsen & Nussler, 2000).

The Star Model consists of policies that leaders can control and that can affect employee behavior (J. R. Galbraith, 2014). Each component interacts with and influences the others, ensuring alignment and collective progress toward common goals. This integration supports strategic objectives and cultivates the behaviors and capabilities needed to shape organizational culture and improve performance. Examining an organization using this model can help reveal insights about the causes of high performance as well as problems, obstacles, and possible stagnation.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative approach was selected to provide an in-depth analysis of the research problem, allowing for the exploration of concepts, opinions, and differing approaches and meanings, hence offering significant insights into the topic.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The study employed a purposive sampling approach, utilizing both convenience and snowball sampling approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Inclusion criteria included holding a role related to manager engagement at a Fortune 500 company (as defined by the 2023 Fortune 500 list).

Recruitment involved personalized email invitations sent through professional networks, assuring strict confidentiality and detailing privacy protection measures.

Participants were encouraged to forward the invitation to qualified colleagues, initiating the snowball sampling approach. A supporting social media advertisement was also used for broader dissemination.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher developed the interview script for this study based on the relevant literature. The interview opened with an introduction to set the context for the study. The remainder of the script contained five demographic questions and 31 questions about the participant company's practices to engage managers.

#### *Demographic Questions*

Five demographic questions were asked regarding participant tenure, role in manager engagement, department, employee size, manager population size, and company global reach and sector. Four questions were asked about the company's definition and segmentation of managers.

#### *Manager Role and Engagement*

Seven questions inquired about the company's view of the manager's role in employee engagement. A final question in this section sought a comprehensive overview of the organization's approach to manager engagement, providing context for subsequent questions.

#### *Approach to Communication and Mobilization*

Based on the literature, participants were presented with four general options:

**Option A:** No formal coordinated efforts to collectively communicate to and mobilize managers, episodic learning (Bale & Pillay, 2021).

**Option B:** A distributed leader-led approach to communicate with and mobilize managers (J. R. Galbraith, 2014).

**Option C:** Direct-to-Manager experiences from a centralized division to communicate with and mobilize managers and deliver learning (J. R. Galbraith, 2014).

**Option D:** A tiered, matrixed system used by senior leaders for key announcements and a centralized team with dedicated channels and full-time resources to communicate directly with managers (J. R. Galbraith, 2014).

Participants who responded that their companies reflected Option A were asked 10 follow-up questions that explored various aspects of informal practices, reasons for the lack of formal processes, managers' roles and

responsibilities, how managers received critical information, their involvement in supporting organizational culture, and changes in managerial expectations post-COVID-19.

Additionally, the questions covered measurement and reward practices as well as training requirements for skill development.

Participants who responded that their companies reflected Options B, C, or D were asked 15 follow-up questions designed to examine how organizations mobilize managers to enhance employee engagement and align with business strategies.

The questions explored the expectations, values, and guidelines for managers, the formalization of engagement efforts, and the objectives of these programs. Questions about team structure, executive sponsorship, and oversight committees were posed to uncover support mechanisms for managers.

A final closing question was asked of all participants to solicit any additional insights to promote a comprehensive understanding of the company's manager engagement practices.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview was scheduled to last one hour. Audio recordings were transcribed using [Fireflies.ai](#). The researcher took supplemental notes and complemented the interviews with follow-up emails to ensure parity and clarify details as needed.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection to potentially evolve questions, identify emerging themes, and organize the final report structure. The researcher “winnowed” the data, aiming to aggregate themes into a range of five to seven for each research question.

### ***Coding***

Data analysis followed Tesch's eight steps in the coding process (as cited by Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process began with getting a sense of the whole, clustering similar themes, and taking notes on topic groupings to develop categories and perform a preliminary analysis.

### **Analysis**

### ***Validity and Interpretation***

Given the study's premise of uncovering both common and exemplary best practices, findings were validated using multiple validity procedures. The researcher triangulated the participant responses and evaluated the quantity of similar responses. The analysis was subjected to a second review by an academic researcher to ensure accuracy. The areas of disagreement were discussed, and the revisions to the analysis were determined.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Each participant was required to sign and return an informed consent form before completing an interview. All transcription and concurrent notes were securely stored in a password-protected file.

The study adhered to all human subject protection protocols. Contact information was stored separately from transcribed documents and codes.

## **Results**

### **Participant Demographics**

All participants identified as being part of HR, with one additionally identifying as being part of the People Experience Team and the rest identifying as being part of their company's Learning and Development Team when they worked on their company's manager initiatives. Participants' tenure at their companies ranged from two to 30 years.

### **How Leading Companies Think About the Manager Role**

As we mentioned previously, all the leading companies in our study strongly emphasized that managers are critical to employee engagement.

However, levels of investment, internal support structures, and learning opportunities for managers varied widely, and in many cases were getting a reboot after companies deprioritized and sometimes disbanded manager programs altogether during COVID-19. Additionally, all companies reported that their managers have limited bandwidth, resources, and capacity, as well as competing priorities.

### **Practices Leading Companies Use to Engage Managers**

Question two examined the practices that leading companies use to engage managers, and revealed nine top themes reported by most participants.

#### ***Manager Engagement Is Led by Human Resources***

In all nine companies, managerial initiatives were reportedly spearheaded by Human Resources (HR) to engage managers. In seven companies, participants noted that the Learning & Development (L&D) department within HR acts as the primary functional lead for designing and delivering manager development programs.

Many interviewees did not immediately claim full ownership of manager programs, but eventually conceded that responsibility for manager experience oversight seemed to live in HR, most often in Learning & Development, with support from other partners and functions.

It was also noted that without active senior executive sponsorship, manager programs often stagnated or were deprioritized. Where there was an engaged senior leader, focused investment followed.

### ***Manager Program Objectives***

The first objective of manager initiatives was to ensure managers embody and promote the organization's culture. The second was to confirm that managers understand, execute, and communicate the company strategy to their teams. All companies reported cascading strategy throughout their businesses, with managers holding individual and organizational responsibilities aligned with strategic goals, measured by OKRs or similar frameworks.

Most companies noted that cultural objectives are now integrated into their strategies, and seven companies identified compliance as a key objective. Building connection, fostering community, and supporting psychological safety were also common priorities. As one company summarized, "The essence of our (manager) programming is all about creating that connection with their teams."

### ***Segmented Manager Audiences***

Eight of the nine companies were reported to segment managers by various criteria, such as grade, level, characteristics, scope and span, tenure, skill needs, and job location (e.g., field v. office). Segmentation apparently aided them in providing targeted development and communication for manager subpopulations.

Seven companies reportedly had company-wide programs for different levels of leadership, though these were often under development or offered in a limited fashion.

### ***Structured Manager Programs that Include Manager Training***

Most companies, when asked about what they do to support and mobilize managers in their company, began by citing learning and development programs. While ongoing learning for all managers was mixed, all companies reported that they offer a form of Manager Essentials training for managers new in role or new to the company.

All nine companies reported that they utilized Learning Management System (LMS) sites to offer managers self-directed learning opportunities. These platforms provide access to a wide array of resources, including e-learning modules, videos, and supplemental materials.

### ***Shifts in Manager Support, Training, and Investment Surrounding COVID-19***

All nine companies reportedly held more in-person learning events for managers on a much larger scale before COVID-19. Many said they had halted or reduced learning requirements for managers during COVID-19 and were in the process of planning for, revamping, or launching new programs for managers post-COVID-19.

Eight companies reported that post-COVID-19, manager training in their organizations was mostly virtual due to cost constraints and logistical challenges of organizing in-person sessions.

### ***Coordinated Communications to Managers***

All nine organizations emphasized they worked with their Communications departments to support manager initiatives. Many were also beginning to develop forums to coordinate programs and communications among key stakeholders, aiming to streamline message delivery. They all had a dedicated intranet platform for managers. Six relied primarily on email to communicate with managers, as participants noted that managers prefer receiving updates by email rather than through the intranet or other platforms.

### ***Cross-Company Collaboration***

Manager engagement across all companies required close collaboration among multiple functions. All nine companies reported partnerships between Learning & Development, Communications, and Performance Management to support manager initiatives. Many also partnered with HR business partners, culture, organization development, diversity and inclusion, talent management, employee relations, legal, technology enablement, and change management teams to provide comprehensive support for managers.

Eight companies partnered with HR Business Partners to communicate business priorities, implement change programs, and develop learning plans tailored to organizational needs. Three companies reported that they had begun using cross-functional teams to plan communications and programs affecting managers over specific timeframes.

### ***Models of Manager Behavior, Expectations, and Accountability***

The study found that manager engagement is most sustainable when organizations clearly define behavioral expectations and consistently reward behaviors that support their purpose, values, and performance goals. Nearly all companies recognized this need; all but one reported using frameworks to guide manager behavior in line with their culture. Five companies were developing or updating their manager behavioral expectations post-COVID-19.

Participating companies reported using various accountability measures to meet expectations. Two companies already rewarded managers for meeting behavioral expectations and achieving business results. Five companies recently integrated manager behavioral expectations into their performance management systems or plan to do so. One company did not plan to include them, and another was still updating its system.

## Measuring and Listening to Sentiment About Managers

All the companies interviewed had an annual survey component to measure sentiment within the teams a manager manages. However, beyond annual surveys, all were at various stages of developing measurement and listening systems to support managers and drive growth. Six companies referred to pulse or mini-surveys that were used for just-in-time manager feedback or company-wide sentiment listening. Three companies noted that while they had the data, there was no centralized team for managers in their company with the remit to act upon it.

## Effects of Implementing Practices to Engage Managers

Most companies acknowledged they had not yet established ongoing, measurable ways to demonstrate how manager effectiveness influences overall company performance and culture. Among the eight companies with formal manager behavioral expectations, all considered this important and were actively seeking methods to assess impact and recognize positive manager behaviors.

Five companies reported that their culture and performance management teams were either integrated or worked closely together. Four companies assigned their culture teams to measure managers' impact on culture, but these programs were too new to provide results or methodologies. Three companies stated that their performance management systems prioritize results above behaviors; two of these identified retention as a major challenge, while the third had challenges in creating psychological safety.

## Discussion

Although exploratory and based on a small sample, the data suggests that how organizations *think* about managers and how they take action to support and invest in them may not be well-aligned.

### How Companies Think About Managers

Examination of the interview data revealed that companies consider the manager role critical, and that managers were affected by competing priorities and limited capacity and bandwidth. Restructuring workloads to reduce managers' individual contributing responsibilities may prevent burnout and improve overall managerial effectiveness, leading to a more motivated and productive workforce. These changes might help foster a healthier organizational culture (Schein & Schein, 2016) and improve retention rates of both managers and employees (Gallup, 2022).

The data also suggests that senior leadership recognition of the critical role managers play in employee engagement is key to securing investment in the manager population.

## **Practices Used to Engage Managers**

### **Manager Engagement Is Led by Human Resources**

All nine organizations reported that manager engagement programs were led by HR in their companies, and seven noted that the Learning & Development (L&D) department within HR acted as the primary functional lead for designing and delivering manager development programs, including partnering with other functions that influence the overall manager experience.

However, despite all the attention given to the role of the manager, particularly post-COVID-19, it was initially difficult to find interview participants within the companies who had a role that reflected leadership responsibilities and accountability for the full scope of the manager experience and related manager engagement efforts. Many of the initial contacts would check with teams and express uncertainty before asking if a person from L&D works for this purpose.

### ***Manager Program Objectives***

Participants from all nine companies reported that their manager initiatives were directly aligned with their culture and strategy and focused on capability building to achieve their organizational outcomes and goals, which is in line with the objectives for cultural and organizational alignment (J. R. Galbraith, 2014; Schein & Schein, 2016).

### **Segmented Manager Audiences**

Eight of the companies reported that they targeted manager segmentation. As Barzilai-Nahon (2008) noted, ensuring that the right messages are delivered to the right audiences by the right teams enables strategies and practices to be properly implemented.

### **Structured Manager Programs that Include Manager Training**

All nine organizations identified the need for structured programs to support and engage managers, as evidenced by initiatives offering guidance, feedback, and training. Companies based their programs on Manager Essentials training and cited LMS systems as solutions to fragmented learning and development, though many also expressed dissatisfaction with them.

Two companies noted that younger employees were having a significant impact on their cultures and values, creating a need for managers to better engage this group. Responding to the impact of younger generations is cited by Zicari & Gamble (2023) as a consequential emerging need.

### **Shifts in Manager Support, Training, and Investment Surrounding COVID-19**

Participants also reported notable shifts in manager engagement since the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, changes in manager development investment levels and a shift from in-person to mostly virtual delivery of

manager support and training. Participants noted that manager training was often used to build connections and that it was harder to establish those ties through virtual, self-directed learning post-COVID-19. As previously noted, professional development can motivate managers (Eskildsen & Nussler, 2000), so determining the appropriate modalities for delivering learning is important.

### *Coordinated Communications to Managers*

All nine organizations emphasized the need to collaborate with their Communications departments to support manager initiatives. As Neinaber and Martins (2020) noted, clear communication structures and an effective partnership between Communications and HR are essential for engaging managers.

However, as Barzilai-Nahon (2008) indicated, HR teams in some companies indicated they may face information gatekeeping by Corporate Communications, leading to political power struggles over access to managers.

### *Cross-Company Collaboration*

All nine companies collaborated with functions such as Communications, Performance Management, HR Business Partners, Culture, Diversity and Inclusion, Legal, Technology Enablement, Organizational Development, and Change Management. This collaboration ensured that strategic objectives were met, manager expectations and culture were consistently reinforced, and policies to reduce managerial overwhelm were implemented. As Eskildsen & Nussler (2000) noted earlier, this helps managers focus on their most important tasks and uphold their code of behavior.

### *Models of Manager Behavior, Expectations, and Accountability*

Eight companies reported using or developing models to guide manager behavior in line with their culture. Five companies said they were embedding or updating these expectations within performance processes and, in some cases, rewards, to ensure accountability. Four companies identified “three-word behavioral models” with related competencies or practices as a popular approach.

Measuring manager effectiveness and impact and rewarding desired behaviors are two related but separate areas of focus, and no company said they felt their managers were adequately rewarded for meeting their behavioral expectations at this time. This is consistent with research that noted a lack of empirical evidence and theoretical foundation for employee engagement measurement practices, and, by association, manager engagement practices (Beer et al., 2022; So et al., 2021).

Three companies indicated that their performance management systems were designed to reward delivering results above all else, leading to less reinforcement of positive managerial behaviors. The same three companies also reported that managers in their organizations were deprioritizing,

mishandling, or ignoring the people side of the equation, with a moderate to highly negative effect on culture and retention. This observation aligns with the Galbraith (1977) Star Model construct.

### *Measuring and Listening to Managers*

Participants from all nine companies reported that their organizations' annual engagement surveys include a manager component. Six companies used some form of pulse survey in addition to their annual survey. As noted, performance management, measurement, and the rewarding of expected behaviors seemed somewhat disconnected or still in development, which aligns with findings on employee engagement measurement (Beer et al., 2022; So et al., 2021).

Listening includes gathering feedback on managers' performance and understanding their support needs. Four companies reported using informal groups of managers or business partners to share insights on the manager population, while two regularly convene formal manager focus groups to discuss relevant topics.

### *Effects of Manager Engagement Practices*

Many companies noted that they paused, reduced, or stopped manager programs during COVID-19, and that they were just starting to ramp back up and create new programs or get more investment approved. As the manager initiatives mature, the data indicates that these initiatives may lead to improved manager effectiveness, higher employee engagement, better organizational performance, and reinforce the importance of strategic and cultural alignment (Beer et al., 2022; Galbraith, 2017).

## **Recommendations**

Although the findings must be considered exploratory, the connections drawn to past literature and research provide justification for each recommendation.

### **Implement Structured, Formalized Manager Programs with Culture and Connection in Mind**

Past literature emphasizes that structured programs are crucial for manager engagement and performance. Engaged managers foster higher employee satisfaction and productivity, leading to better organizational outcomes (Gallup, 2022; Moore & Hanson, 2022).

As L&D teams face tradeoffs with budgets and prioritization, it may be useful to consider creating cohort-based social learning and engineering ways to build connections across individual and generational boundaries, which may include the creation of manager communities to share best practices, resources, and build networks.

## **Assess and Monitor Alignment Across the System**

The Galbraith (1977) Star Model supports this integration by highlighting the need for alignment across various organizational dimensions, including strategy, people, processes, and rewards. Regularly assessing and monitoring the company's manager engagement program alignment leads to effective manager development programs aligned with the broader organizational strategy and culture, including behavioral expectations for managers.

## **Codify Manager Expectations, Ensure Accountability, and Reward Good Behavior**

OD is well-positioned to assess and support cultural and behavioral expectations aligned with performance management practices and ensure that programs are measurable at both the systemic and individual levels.

As new research emerges on measuring employee engagement and rewarding values, mission, and meaning (Beer et al., 2022; So et al., 2021), it is advisable for companies to explore innovative ways to recognize effective managers both individually and for their cultural impact and establish clear approaches for addressing managers who do not meet behavioral expectations.

## **Formalize Manager Engagement Leadership**

Dedicated, cross-functional, integrated manager engagement teams with formal group structures, clearly identified leaders, and regular meetings should be encouraged among the departments and functions supporting managers.

Furthermore, visible and vocal support from senior leadership, such as the CHRO and CEO, can go a long way toward driving and supporting these initiatives.

## **Foster Integration and Collaboration Between HR/Learning & Development and Other Cross-Functional Support Teams**

Collaboration between HR, Learning & Development, and other support functions ensures that managers have the skills and resources they need (Gallup, 2022). To support effective partnerships, it is essential to clearly define each team's roles and responsibilities.

Teams that establish and regularly review listening channels to identify managers' priority needs, address employee issues that require managerial attention, set guiding principles for manager engagement, and are authorized to develop system-wide responses to critical issues are more likely to ensure the efficacy of programs (Kouzes & Posner, 2019).

Additionally, it is important to include all relevant partners in these discussions. Although research highlights managers' critical role in strategic success and employee engagement (Schein & Schein, 2016), in this research,

no company reported involving the strategy team in ongoing manager planning and coordination. This may present an opportunity, given managers' ongoing responsibility for strategic execution.

### **Address Manager Bandwidth, Resource, and Capacity Issues**

Addressing workload and resource constraints is crucial for manager engagement and effectiveness. Providing adequate support and resources can prevent burnout and improve performance (Gallup, 2022).

### **Streamline and Send Timely Communications to Managers**

Effective communication practices are essential for fostering shared understanding and employee buy-in at all organizational levels (Neinaber and Martins, 2019). Providing managers with critical information prior to its dissemination to employees is necessary to support trust-building within teams (Macey et al., 2009).

Predictable, efficient communication channels that deliver only essential information to managers reduce the burden of filtering multiple messages from various sources to identify business-critical tasks.

Regular cross-functional meetings involving all relevant stakeholders should be conducted to proactively develop communication strategies, establish priorities, coordinate timelines, address urgent concerns, clarify requirements, and streamline information. These measures help reduce managerial overload and ensure alignment with organizational goals and expectations.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

### **Limitations**

This study faced three main limitations. First, the small sample size resulted from recruitment challenges associated with the purposive sampling strategy. Future studies should allocate more time for recruitment to address this issue.

Second, inconsistent definitions of key concepts led to potential misunderstandings and data variability, requiring follow-up with participants to ensure shared understanding. Future studies should clearly define key concepts or include a second interview round to clarify and ensure accuracy.

Third, the broad scope of the study may have limited the depth of data analysis and interpretation. Future research should allow adequate time for analysis and consider narrowing the focus to specific, well-defined areas for more detailed results.

### **Suggestions for Research**

The findings of the present study are meant to encourage future research to pursue more comprehensive data collection and a more robust understanding of effective managerial engagement programs.

Our observation suggests that implementing an extended recruitment time and prescreening would ensure appropriate participant selection. Employing a standardized glossary and conducting a pilot study would enhance clarity and consistency in data collection.

Additionally, allocating a dedicated analysis phase to review the mixed-methods approach of in-depth interviews would help assess the significance of the results and facilitate thorough and nuanced data interpretation. Triangulating findings will validate results and ensure robustness.

Providing sufficient time for thorough data analysis and interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data, and detailed surveys incorporating Likert-scale questions to quantitatively assess participants' views on various aspects of managerial development programs, may yield actionable insights.

The results of this research also highlight the importance of evaluating manager behavioral expectations programs and related measures using a longitudinal, outcome-based approach.

Future studies could begin with an initial assessment to establish baseline metrics for key outcomes, including employee engagement, performance, and retention, using surveys, interviews, and performance data. The process could also include implementing and regularly monitoring development programs, as well as reviewing internal and external training resources. Measure short-term outcomes quarterly and assess long-term outcomes annually, focusing on engagement scores, manager performance surveys, retention rates, and overall productivity.

Further research may want to explore segmenting the manager population. Effective managerial practices require a clear understanding of the distinct roles, responsibilities, and needs within the managerial hierarchy. Developing a manager engagement framework tailored to these roles and responsibilities is crucial.

### **Summary of the Study**

People, processes, structure, strategy, and rewards must work together to shape the performance, behavior, and culture that define the manager and employee experience. When senior leadership resists changing culture or performance standards or fails to support ongoing manager development, existing systems can perpetuate employee disengagement and block positive change. Senior leadership engagement is therefore essential for successful manager engagement programs.

This research shows that companies are starting to recognize the need for these key practices to support manager engagement and, post-COVID, are at different stages of building more aligned systems. Many are only beginning to work in an integrated way, creating a significant opportunity for leadership structures, systems, and cross-functional collaboration to intentionally evolve as companies seek to further engage managers to better engage their employees.

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