

**KEY INSIGHTS REPORT**

# **HOW LEADING COMPANIES ARE MANAGING MANAGERS NOW**

**BY CHRISTINA WATT, CPCC, ACC**

**FINDINGS FROM A RESEARCH PROJECT PRESENTED  
TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRAZADIO BUSINESS  
SCHOOL, PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY**

**THESIS PUBLICATION DATE:  
AUGUST 2024**



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Christina Watt** is a communications strategist and organizational development practitioner with three decades of leading ground-breaking culture and consumer programs for some of the world's most iconic brands, including Starbucks, Amazon, and Microsoft. Early in her career, she helped architect Starbucks culture narrative with former CEO, Howard Schultz, and most recently, she played a central role in Microsoft's cross-functional efforts to define and launch a global framework for Management Excellence. Christina holds a master's degree in Organization Development from Pepperdine University and combines her background in executive coaching, systems thinking, and storytelling to help leaders clarify purpose, align teams, and create conditions where people and organizations can do their best work.

**“People leave managers, they don't leave companies. I'm sure you've heard that a gazillion times and it's very true.”**

**– Tech L&D Director**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted an exploratory study of nine Fortune 500 companies with manager populations ranging from 2,500 managers to more than 100,000. **The study revealed a shared conviction: companies enthusiastically believe manager engagement is critical to employee engagement.**

Despite this, many organizations lack a dedicated structure, system, or team tasked with managing and advancing the everyday manager experience beyond learning & development. In fact, many struggled to fully explain their programs that support managers and were unclear about who was truly responsible for the manager population.

**This research reveals the gap between intent and infrastructure**—and offers a window into the challenges, practices, and recommendations that can shape the next evolution of manager support. Interviews conducted with senior HR and Learning & Development (L&D) leaders show a clear need for greater investment, clarity, and collaboration around engaging and enabling managers, who serve as a key enabler of culture, performance, and connection across today's organizations.

Having helped architect and manage Microsoft's Management Excellence program, I was curious what other leading companies were doing to engage this important audience that sets the tone for organizational success in so many ways. The study specifically asked how organizations are structured to support and engage managers along 5 key parameters. When these parameters of Galbraith's Star Model are aligned - **people, processes, structure, strategy, and rewards programs** – they are proven to lead to better performance and culture outcomes. <sup>1</sup>

I came to call this **Manager Engagement**, referring to the systems-level best practices to address this subset of employee engagement and their unique experiences and needs.

What I found were remarkably consistent trends and concerns in the gap between intent and desire to better support managers and the lack of investment and infrastructure to actually provide the support deemed necessary. However, none of this was for lack of trying or care on behalf of those tasked with making a difference for managers.

**This document is intended to bridge that gap and help teams supporting managers create a strong foundation to accelerate their success.**

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### **In this report, we'll cover:**

- Research Findings: The 5 key Manager Engagement practices that can make a difference for managers and the business
- The case for Manager Engagement today
- A realistic assessment of the challenges managers are facing
- An understanding of the key areas to invest in now
- Perspectives from my experience leading manager work
- Recommendations to structure manager programs for greater support, alignment, and engagement

“The manager role is seen as critical to engagement also because they have the most direct impact on the employee's experience. And we need to have motivated, dedicated employees now more than ever.”

-Technology, L&D Leader

## THE CASE FOR MANAGER ENGAGEMENT

Post-COVID 19, there was a renewed emphasis from media, consultants, and companies touting the role of the middle manager and their unique position in creating a meaningful impact on a company's bottom line, and perhaps most importantly – culture.

The leading companies in our study enthusiastically emphasized that their company believes managers are critical for employee engagement. However, levels of investment, internal support structures, and learning 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, while some companies have announced the flattening of their hierarchy to eliminate managerial roles as they restructure to meet economic pressures and emerging AI trends, it's an echo to past market contractions, where the middle management layer becomes an easy target for cost savings.

Despite those instances, most companies say that managers still make a key difference in the success of their business, and having fewer managers means it's more important than ever to be sure those managers are aligned to business strategy and keeping their teams productive, and ideally, engaged.

### Why Managers Matter (By the Numbers)

**According to Gallup's State of the American Manager Report<sup>2</sup>:**

- **Only 30% of employees report being engaged at work.**
- **Managers account for 70% of the impact on employee engagement.**
- **One in two employees have left a job to get away from their manager at some point in their careers.**
- **Employees with engaged managers are 59% more likely to be engaged.**
- **Engaged managers improve culture, trust, productivity, and retention.**
- **Disengaged managers weaken strategy activation and employee well-being.**

“So if (company) continued to not invest in managers in any way, shape or form, it already is, and would continue to be, impactful in the sense of regarded attrition.”

-Technology, L&D Leader

“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.”

- Barret & Wigert, 2023<sup>6</sup>

## MANAGERS AND THEIR UNIQUE CHALLENGES

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Participants shared a definition of managers, which we focused on in our study:

- The term manager refers to middle managers who are defined by their reporting structure as individuals reporting to the senior layer of leadership in a company.
- This includes frontline managers who directly interact with and manage individually contributing employees as well as the managers of managers who communicate both up to the top layer of senior leaders and down to their teams.
- Some companies also refer to this population as leaders or people leaders.

### Employee Engagement initiatives go TO and THROUGH Managers.

Managers are not only responsible for the employee experience, they have their own experience too.

## THE CHALLENGES MANAGERS ARE FACING

The companies in our study reported common issues that impact managers (reported by at least 8 out of 9 companies):

- 1. Limited capacity and bandwidth.** Managers are also individual contributors, with some reported to be spending up to 70% of their time on non-managerial tasks.
- 2. Lack of resources.** From layoffs to budget restrictions, managers are continually asked to do more with less.
- 3. Competing priorities.** It's no secret that business pressures are unrelenting, and new AI technologies are adding additional complexities.

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While you can find a wealth of literature advising these managers and companies on what managers should be good at, there is very little literature that tells you **how to build the best company systems to support your managers**, and by association, your employees.

In the coming pages, we'll cover the five key practices that leading companies employ to support their Manager Engagement programs. If a practice was included, it was being used, was in the process of being implemented, or was a recurring theme from at least eight of the nine participating companies.

Notably, nearly every person interviewed also expressed a desire to do more for the manager population, acknowledging the importance of the audience and the challenges they face. Somewhat ironically, they also said they were struggling to get the resources in their own roles to feel like they were adequately supporting manager programs, something we also address by highlighting these best practices.

# THE FIVE KEY MANAGER ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

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## **PRACTICE 1:** **FORMALIZE MANAGER** **PROGRAM LEADERSHIP**

Manager programs need enterprise-wide dedicated leaders and leadership sponsors to continually promote, manage, and advocate for aligned manager experiences.

## **PRACTICE 3:** **BUILD CAPABILITY,** **CULTURE & CONNECTION**

Learning for managers must reinforce culture and nurture connection - both across managers and so that managers can model desired behaviors for their employees.

## **PRACTICE 5:** **LISTEN & ADAPT CONTINUOUSLY**

Who and what you listen to will shape manager program investments, priorities, and sustainable success. Ensure listening systems are regular, data-driven, comprehensive, and well-supported, empowering teams to act upon and communicate about insights.

## **PRACTICE 2:** **COORDINATE** **STAKEHOLDERS, PLANNING &** **COMMUNICATIONS**

Proactively integrating and prioritizing all programs and internal partners that touch managers helps drive productivity, culture, and business success.

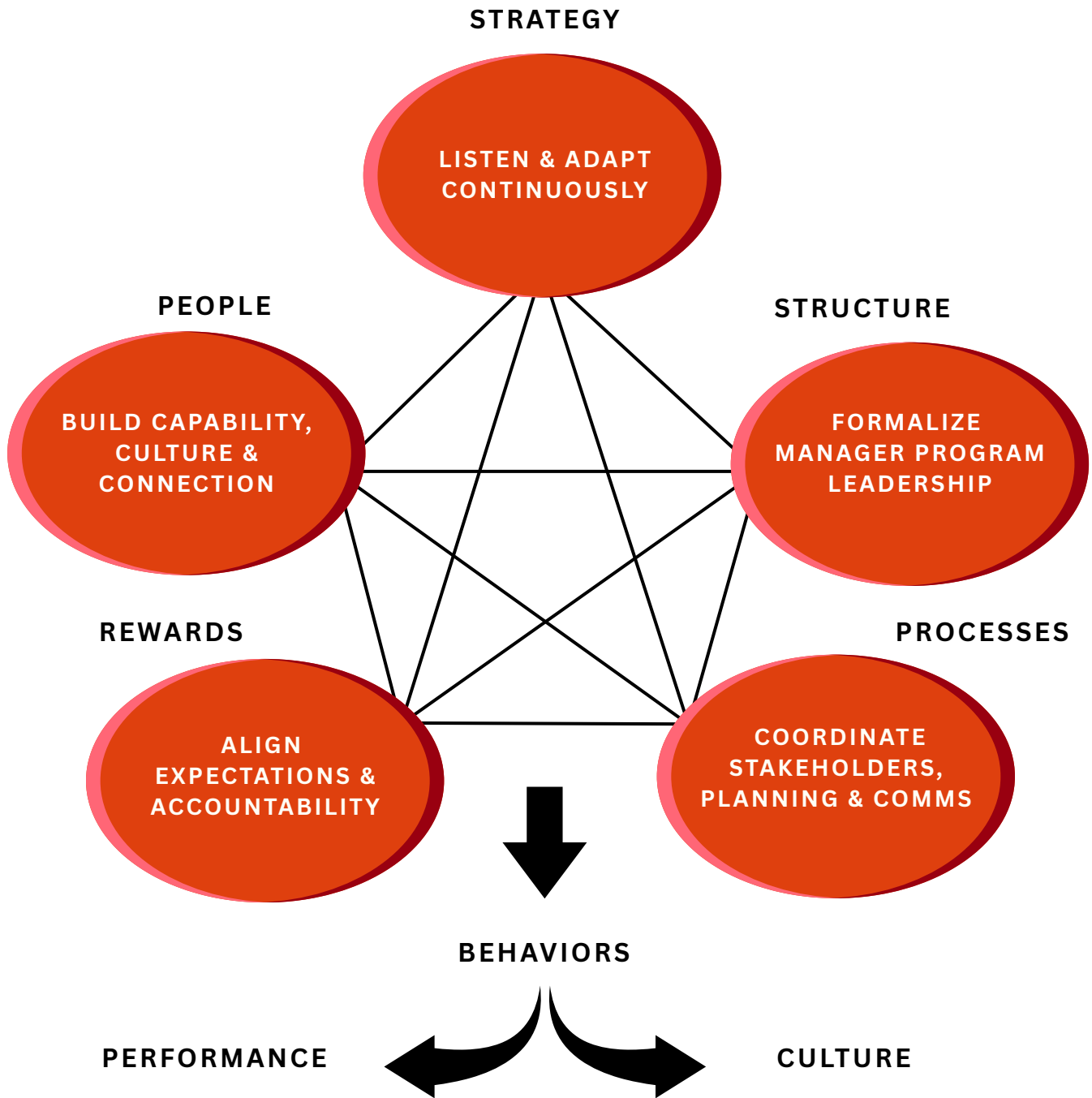
## **PRACTICE 4:** **ALIGN EXPECTATIONS AND** **ACCOUNTABILITY**

You get the behaviors you reward. Ensuring that you know what great management looks like and that you reward great managers is critical to building your desired culture and delivering great results.

**“THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR.  
ECONOMIC GROWTH IS SLOWING.  
AND IF WE DON’T INCREASE  
GLOBAL GDP,  
EVERY OTHER PROBLEM GETS  
HARDER TO SOLVE.  
SO, WHAT CAN LEADERS DO TODAY  
TO POTENTIALLY SAVE THE WORLD?**

**GALLUP HAS FOUND ONE CLEAR  
ANSWER: CHANGE THE WAY YOUR  
PEOPLE ARE MANAGED.”<sup>4</sup>**

# MANAGER ENGAGEMENT MODEL™



**“We have the support of the (new) CHRO to make investments in this space, which we did not have for so long. It’s like, when your refrigerator is relatively bare, you’ve got to pick what you’re going to put together. And I think that managers have not been on the “table” (as a priority). It’s been more like, ‘Be stable and don’t add,’ and ‘What can you think up? Be creative.’”**

**-Technology L&D Director**

## **1.FORMALIZE MANAGER PROGRAM LEADERSHIP (STRUCTURE)**

### **Who runs Manager Programs?**

Despite the insistence that managers are critical for employee engagement, study participants very often described loose and informal structures for manager engagement efforts. As I asked my network for help identifying people to interview, it was surprisingly difficult for employees to identify participants within most companies who had a role that reflected leadership responsibilities and accountability for the full scope of the manager experience and related manager engagement efforts.

When pressed, many interviewees themselves did not immediately claim 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.

The executive sponsor most often mentioned (though several companies struggled to name one), was the CHRO, followed by the CEO. 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.

Most companies said they did not have an executive-level steering committee for their manager program work. Two companies said they previously had a steering committee but disbanded them due to a lack of ongoing investment in manager programs.

### **Implementation Recommendations:**

- 1. Ensure senior leadership buy-in and active advocacy for manager programs.** This may be as simple as naming an executive sponsor and creating a formal steering committee.
- 2. Stay visible to protect investment.** For more mature programs, this may mean a regular drumbeat of communication to all employees and execs so that the importance and success of manager programs remains top of mind and secures ongoing investment.
- 3. Formalize day-to-day Manager Program leadership & oversight.** If you have not already, clarify who is responsible for the day-to-day implementation and overall strategy of manager engagement and communicate this to relevant partners.

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### **Practitioner POV: Lessons from the Work**

It is worth noting that most companies have existing systems, cultures, and performance structures, so it can be a matter of refinement or evolution to bring the needs of managers into the mix.

However, it all starts at the top, and there’s a reason why managers are sometimes called the frozen middle – managers can get comfortable with how things have been done, so it may require a strong commitment from leadership to communicate new expectations and hold managers accountable to them.

This is why strong senior leadership engagement tops the list of recommended actions.

“We actually launched what we're calling the People Leader Integration Forum, where everyone that has something to do with supporting or communicating to people leaders comes together. We look at a three-month rolling calendar of what's happening. We look for opportunities to subtract and combine and clarify and simplify through all these different things that are happening in the life of a people leader... to respect the different levels of noise.”

- Manufacturing, L&D Director

## 2.COORDINATE STAKEHOLDERS, PLANNING & COMMUNICATIONS (PROCESSES)

Despite managers' undeniable influence, many organizations lacked an intentional, coordinated approach to equipping, listening to, or supporting them.

All companies said that enhancing manager engagement and performance relies heavily on collaboration across many different disciplines, and named: Learning & Development, Communications, Legal, additional HR functions & HR Business Partners. Companies also said that managers are critical in modeling culture and implementing strategy, and yet, **it was rare to see company strategy teams mentioned as a part of the manager program partners and planning teams.** This may be an area of partnership opportunity to explore.

There was much discussion of the emerging need for some sort of governance and cross-functional integration and planning in the manager engagement work, **suggesting that this is an area that has likely been relying on loose coalitions for collaboration, and might be underdeveloped, underfunded, or in need of more formalized structures within organizations.**

Communications teams were noted as particularly strong and necessary partners, though support varied, with some centralized and some decentralized to business units or HR, and the need to streamline communications to managers came up often. **Most companies relied upon email for key manager communications – and felt chagrined to admit it, even though they also noted that it seemed to work.**

### Implementation Recommendations:

**1.Data Segmenting and Targeting is Needed – and Complicated.** Segmenting is helpful, and sometimes critical, to target training and communications. The segmenting criteria included grade, level, scope and span, tenure, skill needs, and job location (e.g. field vs. office). Every company that was doing this work noted the complicated nature of segmenting audiences that have significant overlap (such as managers and managers of managers), and most said they were still trying to figure it out. (A few expressed deep frustration with the difficulty of doing this work.)

**2.Create integrated planning forums and clarify partner roles and responsibilities.** Companies were beginning to develop forums to bring key stakeholders together to proactively map out the myriad of programs and communication impacting their managers in a given timeframe in order to streamline the delivery of messages.

**3.Develop principles for best communications practices.** The structure and systems for communications to managers appear to be an area of opportunity in many companies, The communications team was reported to be a critically important partner, working closely with the HR teams to determine what and when to send things to managers, with the communications team serving as the gatekeeper and in most cases, owning the delivery channels.

**“Corporate Communications is a centralized team and they own the responsibility of communicating to the organization. They have a designated person that partners with the function of HR. And then that's a partnership between HR and the corporate communications teams to then roll out communications and a comms plan throughout the year. Whether it's through our [company] news, our email, leadership briefing meetings, or our global talent meetings. They help centralize some key programs and initiatives or messages and direct them at designated times.”**

**- Technology, L&D Director**

### **Practitioner POV: Lessons from the Work**

Everyone struggles with pushing information to managers, versus managers pulling information as needed. While internal Facebook-like platforms sound cool, the truth is, most managers don't know what they need to prioritize or where to find it, and email is still a preferred channel, as evidenced by the many anecdotal stories from our research participants.

That being said, not all programs deserve the same level of priority. It's important to spend time on segmenting, planning, and streamlining what goes to managers and being ruthless in an effort to spare their time and inboxes. Using manager-branded communications channels can also ease the burden on managers to know what is most important to pay attention to and achieve greater cross-company alignment. When I led Microsoft's manager-branded communications, we enjoyed a more than 80% open and satisfaction rate year over year, demonstrating the efficacy of this strategy.

**“There's required training for all new managers. That includes training on culture. So, the expectation of modeling our culture starts with learning what's expected of you, what are the cultural attributes and the values, and then it includes training on people practices as well, so things like understanding the process around having meaningful quarterly or twice-yearly mini performance check-ins and our rewards process. What's expected of managers and what biases they could be aware of. All of that is included in the manager training.”**  
- Technology, L&D Manager

### **3. BUILD CAPABILITY, CULTURE & CONNECTION (PEOPLE)**

All companies saw the need for structured, formalized programs to engage managers and support the business that include three consistent objectives:

1. Emphasizing the importance of managers embodying and promoting the organizational culture.
2. Ensuring managers understand and can execute on the company strategy and share it with their teams.
3. Building capability for people management.

This underscores a key finding: culture and strategy no longer exist in silos. Companies talked about them as one in the same and used culture to launch and reinforce business strategies through manager cascades, especially during yearly planning cycles.

**“Culture is a strategic objective. If I think about the focus priorities at the highest level of the organization, there's five. And culture is the sort of bow around all of them. They're actually not separated. And we spend more time talking about the connection between the two than maybe anything else.”**

- Manufacturing, L&D Director

While these are important objectives, how they are being implemented varies widely. Manager development was severely diminished for nearly all companies as learning went virtual during COVID-19, with some companies cutting it altogether, and budgets for in-person learning were absorbed into other parts of the business.

Most companies were only just beginning to rebuild and redefine support systems at the time of our interviews, mid-2024. Many companies were starting new manager learning initiatives or (re)building their behavioral expectations, and much ongoing leadership development has been decentralized - pushed into businesses and is now led by HR Business Partners.

Every company had a centralized form of Manager Essentials training for new-in-role and new-to-the-company managers. However, most companies are wrestling with what it looks like now to provide centralized ongoing learning for experienced managers on limited budgets.

Many said that people who remember the former in-person learning experiences have a lot of nostalgia and affection for them, and felt they were very effective at building teams and connections and would like to see those experiences return. Additionally, some noted that without the in-person experiences, it feels as if their company is not investing in them like they used to.

**“We know that one of the things people really enjoy about leadership development programs is the opportunity to collaborate with people they don't know, meet people from other parts of the business, other countries, make connections. I've seen some pretty cool problems get solved “live” from people just getting to know one another. But we cannot afford to replicate that at scale, at quality, those broad week-long programs, or these big drawn-out cohorts.”**

-Manufacturing, L&D Director

## Implementation recommendations

**1. Implement structured, formalized manager programs and learning with culture, strategy, and connection in mind.** Evaluate your manager learning programs with in-person and building connections at the forefront wherever possible.

**2. Embrace Experienced Leaders.** Innovation relies on shared systems, connections, and values, as well as deepening interpersonal awareness and evolved management practices. Develop an engaging plan for ongoing learning & development for experienced managers to build the business and help managers of managers scale. Peer learning cohorts are useful at this level.

**3. Explore manager learning communities to share priorities, business information, and best practices.** These can be global, local, or in-business, and include learning, speakers from HR, and other business units.

**4. Watch out for Over-reliance on LMS for Ongoing Learning.** There was a heavy reliance on self-directed online LMS learning to fill in learning gaps, with some companies saying most of their learning was delivered that way, even though most said they knew that people did not use or enjoy it.

**5. Consider Centralizing Key Leadership Development Programs.** Survey business units to understand key needs, and design centralized programs to ensure core capabilities and culture-building is consistent and accrues to the desired overall outcomes you want and need.

**6. Mind the Generational Gaps.** Managers are beginning to struggle with the significant impact that younger generations are now having on their culture and values systems, and companies need to look at how to address this with additional training and awareness.

## Practitioner POV: Lessons from the Work

Amongst issues of resourcing and economic pressures, the elephant in the room continues to be how much time managers spend on their individual contributor work versus management work. While companies struggle to determine how to define and reward this, there are also attempts to create dashboards and other tools to streamline admin work, with varying degrees of adoption success.

This is the balance – while tools may ultimately reduce workload, they also have a learning curve and often require much change management to truly become part of the flow of work. Work to ensure new management tools are truly reductive, not additive, starting with a simple MVP and scaling features as use increases.

**“More recently, we have just implemented a refresh of our expectations of leaders (noted a three-word behavioral model). And in that is our philosophy of leadership, as well as eight behavioral competencies with specific expectations for each of those competencies. We just rolled that out, and now we are beginning the process of infusing that into training and into other HR programs to help create the reinforcement of those competencies.”**

**- Distribution, HR Director**

## **4. ALIGN EXPECTATIONS & ACCOUNTABILITY (REWARDS)**

**“You get the behaviors you reward.”**

This simple truth underscores a central theme in our research: what organizations signal as important—through recognition, reinforcement, and role modeling—shapes how managers show up, prioritize, and lead. However, behavioral expectations or values alone are not enough. Without aligned systems of accountability and meaningful reinforcement, even well-intentioned behavioral aspirations can fade into abstraction.

Our study found that manager engagement is most sustainable when organizations are intentional about this formula: clarifying behavioral expectations and consistently rewarding the behaviors that align with their purpose, values, and performance goals. This alignment forms the foundation for trust, clarity, and follow-through—elements that are essential in today’s dynamic, often ambiguous work environments.

Most companies recognized this critical need, with all but one company saying they used or were creating frameworks to provide guidance for expected manager behavior that was aligned with their culture. To ensure accountability for the behaviors, they had embedded or were in the process of embedding those expectations into performance management. There was a distinction, however, when asked if managers were rewarded for good management. Most companies said that they believed this was not yet fully realized, and that managers of managers needed more training to do this well.

Four of the companies interviewed said they were in the early stages of developing or re-developing their behavioral expectations for managers post-COVID. All the companies experimenting with behavioral expectations and related accountability said their efforts were still in the early stages and had plans to collectively listen to and measure manager impact and effectiveness, but needed more time to see results.

**No Manager Accountability = Low Employee Engagement.**

Notably, there were three companies that did not follow the full behavioral expectations and accountability formula. These companies stated that their performance management systems were designed to reward delivering results above all else, leading to less demonstration of positive managerial behaviors. The same three companies also reported that they were challenged in their organization by managers who were deprioritizing, mishandling, or ignoring the people side of the equation and that this was having a moderate to highly negative impact on retention, culture, and morale.

**“The only things they're really held accountable for is they have their required courses that they have to take.”**

**-Biotech, L&D Leader**

## Implementation recommendations

**1.Codify behavioral expectations while ensuring they can be held accountable in performance management.** Get clear about what great behaviors look like for managers in your organization. Most frameworks have accompanying behavioral competencies in order to demonstrate what it looks like to make the expectations measurable and specific.

**2.Three-word behavioral frameworks help managers remember the expectations.** An example is the Model, Coach, Care<sup>4</sup> framework outlined by Microsoft's former CHRO, Kathleen Hogan. The three-word neuroscience-backed leader behavioral frameworks<sup>5</sup> were popularized by NLI's Dr. David Rock and seem to have taken hold in leading companies. These three-word frameworks are customized to a company's culture, and were noted by four of the companies for manager expectation frameworks.

**3.Reward good managerial behaviors.**

Expectations should be designed, validated, and embedded into reviews and rewards, and managers of managers should be trained to performance manage to them.

**4.Include feedback loops.** Provide opportunities for employees to give regular feedback on their manager. Ensure the feedback is acted upon by the manager, and prioritized in performance management by the manager's manager.

**"Our philosophy, at least it's never been said, but it's implied, based on behavioral norms within the company, is we are okay to turn and burn employees. And it's something that I think a lot of us internally have never understood because it's way more expensive. Because who you see leaving most frequently are tenured employees, more senior and more tenured. And so if you think about that in a sense of financial and culture, it makes no logical sense."**

**-Technology, L&D Leader**

## Practitioner POV: Lessons from the Work

Employees are an important change management lever in driving successful manager program adoption. Employees should know about the expectations for managers, and it should be safe for them to speak up when their manager is potentially out of alignment.

Creating an environment where feedback is given freely and regularly is the holy grail of employee engagement strategies. Work with your performance management team to ensure feedback systems include psychologically safe ways for employees to give feedback to their managers. To enhance a culture of feedback, consider required enterprise-wide training for "collaborative conversations," giving employees at all levels a shared model for learning and growing together.

Recognition is also an important and often overlooked component of rewards and performance management systems – this topic came up in the research, with many bringing it up spontaneously and saying they had awareness that there was a need to do more with recognition and they were "working on it."

**“I don't think there's anyone looking comprehensively at the overall sentiment about the managers at the company and whether or not there are actions to take or some sort of correlation with the company culture.”**

**- Technology, L&D Director**

## **5. LISTEN & ADAPT CONTINUOUSLY (STRATEGY)**

You cannot set and forget culture in a company – it’s living and breathing in the systems and behaviors of employees, and their managers – always changing and growing, and must be actively monitored and nurtured. You need valid, verifiable data to make decisions about how to best nurture your culture, and since managers have an outsized effect on employee engagement and business success, understanding sentiment and the experience at this level is critical.

However, understanding the manager ecosystem is complex and requires synthesizing input on multiple levels. So how are leading companies listening and building programs for manager engagement today?

Annual employee engagement surveys are, not surprisingly, used ubiquitously, and all of the companies interviewed had a survey component to measure sentiment within the teams a manager manages. However, beyond annual surveys, all companies were in various states of developing measurement and listening systems for manager support and growth.

### **No Centralized Team, No Centralized Action.**

Notably, several companies said that while they may have the data on managers from their annual surveys, there was no centralized team or person responsible for overall manager engagement in their company to act on it.

Additionally, no company said they had figured out how to offer ongoing measurable evidence of the impact of their manager’s effectiveness, though all companies said it was important to them and they were “working on it.” Several companies noted that their culture teams were responsible for figuring out the impact of managers on the company’s culture.

### **Implementation recommendations**

**1. Assess and monitor manager program alignment and integration across the ecosystem – throughout your processes, structure, strategy, people, and rewards.** Look to your organizational development and/or business analytics team who can help you diagnose, monitor, and develop programs to align the manager work across the ecosystem to your strategy, culture, and systems.

**2. Create a cross-functional team to develop measurement and listening systems for manager effectiveness, support needs, and impact specifically on culture.** Given the complexities, it is useful to identify a taskforce with a leader dedicated to determining the best ways to listen and benchmark engagement and experience for this audience. Many companies cited culture teams that were responsible for determining how managers fit in their culture measurement.

**3. Establish formal and informal listening opportunities to monitor emerging sentiment.** From manager communities and manager Q&A sessions, to sharing insights and gathering emerging sentiment within manager planning committees that include relevant business partners, it’s important to add structure and credibility around listening opportunities. Ensure that a specific team has responsibility for monitoring listening channels and give them the ability to take action on emerging sentiment and issues. Include regular, formal channels to collect data, test assumptions, and pilot interventions.

**“So, if we're looking at a manager on a larger scale, we're looking at things like my manager removes roadblocks for me, my manager has the skills required to lead me effectively, those (pulse) questions are done daily. There's a handful of manager-specific questions. So again, we're getting a [company] benchmark for that. But there's nothing central that says what you have to do with that data.”**  
**-Technology, L&D Director**

## **Practitioner POV: Lessons from the Work**

Listening takes many forms, so it's most useful to determine the objectives of your listening needs and tailor the listening tactics accordingly, ensuring you have senior leadership support for the goals.

It cannot be understated - the effectiveness and impact of listening systems depends in large part upon the prioritization and investment in manager work by senior executive sponsors. This is also an area where it's important to formalize leadership structures and responsibility, as data can come from many disparate areas of a company, and potential internal partners may need assurances that their data is cleared to share cross-company.

And finally, promoting what you learn is important – and can be a delicate dance. As with any transformational process, it takes courage to surface new insights, particularly those that may indicate resistance or areas of growing concern in a company's business operations or aspirational culture. Ensuring manager leadership is empowered and building open and transparent processes for sharing and acting upon insights are key steps to shaping and nurturing your manager programs - and your desired culture.

# CONCLUSION

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The research shows that companies are beginning to recognize the need for the 5 key practices for manager engagement, and are in various levels of building more aligned systems post-COVID. However, many companies seem to be just beginning to work in an integrated fashion, so there is plenty of room for leadership structures, aligned systems, and cross-functional interdependencies to intentionally evolve as companies look to further engage managers to better engage their employees.

## TURN THESE INSIGHTS INTO YOUR MANAGER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

**Ready to start or strengthen your manager engagement strategy? Schedule a consultation to learn more and discuss your needs.**

**[BOOK HERE](#)**

**Interested in partnership opportunities? Let's discuss how we can collaborate and deliver success together.**

**[BOOK HERE](#)**

## CONTACT

[www.purposefulnarratives.com](http://www.purposefulnarratives.com)

[christina@purposefulnarratives.com](mailto:christina@purposefulnarratives.com)

206.334.3868

[www.linkedin.com/in/christinawatt](http://www.linkedin.com/in/christinawatt)

# APPENDIX: ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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**Title:** Exploratory Study of Leading U.S. Companies' Post COVID-19 Manager Engagement Practices

Want to learn more? Access the full research study [here](#).

## Methodology

Confidential one-hour qualitative structured interviews conducted with nine companies, six in the Fortune 100 and three in the Fortune 500. Industries included Technology, Manufacturing, Distribution, Energy, Biotech and Retail. All companies were global but one and had manager populations ranging from 2,500 to more than 100,000 managers. Participants were identified through network connections, who were sent inquiries asking to speak with someone who was responsible for the day-to-day manager experience at their company. All participants interviewed were in HR, with all but one in Learning & Development.

## Academic Context

This research was conducted as part of my Master of Science in Organizational Development (MSOD) thesis at Pepperdine University's Graziadio Business School. The exploratory study employed structured interviews to explore the practices leading companies in the U.S. are using to engage managers and support their performance Post-COVID 19.

### Three research questions were examined:

1. How do leading companies think about the manager role?
2. What practices do leading companies use to engage managers?
3. What are the effects of implementing practices to engage managers?

To explore the practices leading companies use, questions were designed using the Galbraith Star Model<sup>1</sup> of organization design, assessing people, processes, structure, strategy, and rewards. Using grounded theory and thematic analysis, the interview answers were anonymized, summarized, and blended into trends.

## Key Sources

(1) [Galbraith Star Model](#)

(2) [Gallup State of the American Manager Report](#)

(3) [Gallup State of the Global Workplace Report](#)

(4) [Fast Company](#)

(5) [NeuroLeadership Institute](#)

(6) [Gallup: The Manager Squeeze](#)