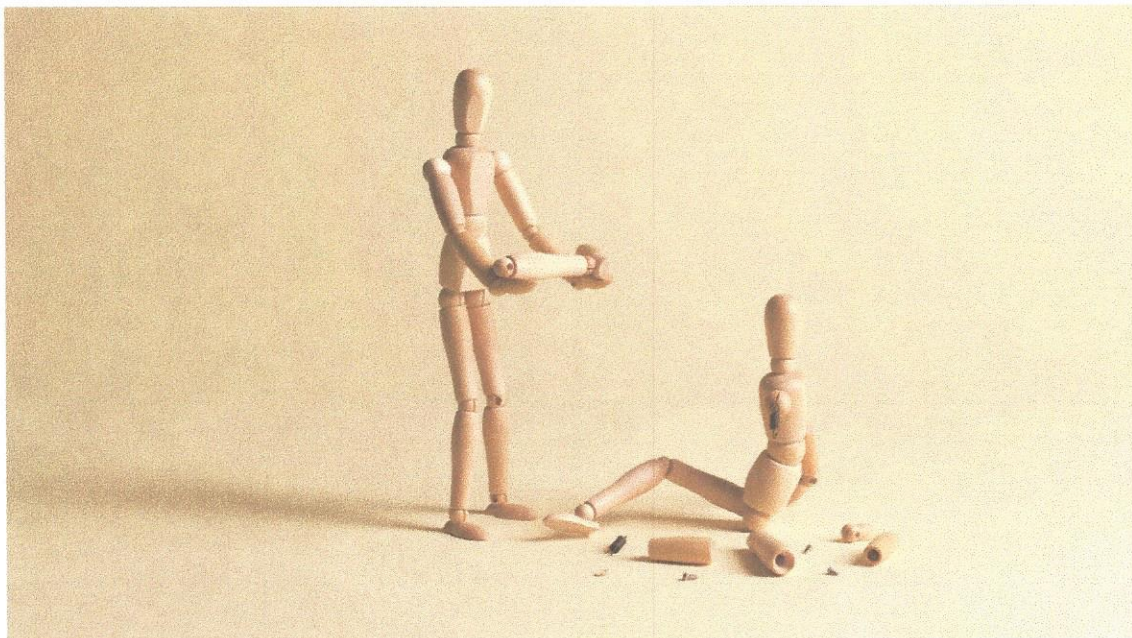


4 Reasons Why Managers Fail

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Summary. Gartner research has found that managers today are accountable for 51% more responsibilities than they can effectively manage — and they're starting to buckle under the pressure: 54% are suffering from work-induced stress and fatigue, and 44% are struggling to provide personalized support to their direct reports. Ultimately, one in five managers said they would prefer not being people managers given a choice. Further analysis found that 48% of managers are at risk of failure based on two criteria: 1) inconsistency in current performance and 2) lack of confidence in the manager's ability to lead the team to future success. This article offers four predictors of manager failure and offers suggestions for organizations on how to address them. [close](#)

The job of the manager has become unmanageable. Organizations are becoming flatter every year. The average manager's number of direct reports has increased by 2.8 times over the last six years, according to Gartner research. In the past few years alone, many managers have had to make a series of pivots — from moving to remote work to overseeing hybrid teams to implementing return-to-office mandates.

Gartner research has found that managers today are accountable for 51% more responsibilities than they can effectively manage — and yet they remain the load-bearing pillars of an organization. They carry the weight of leader expectations at the top, while responding to employee expectations at the base.

Managers are starting to buckle under the pressure. Fifty-four percent of managers are suffering from work-induced stress and fatigue, and 44% are struggling to provide personalized support to their direct reports. Ultimately, one in five managers said they would prefer not being people managers given a choice.

Digging deeper, our analysis of data collected from more than 9,000 employees and managers found that nearly half of managers – 48% – are at risk of failure, based on two criteria:

1. **Inconsistency in current performance:** Has the manager's team been inconsistent in meeting business goals over the last 12 months?
2. **Weak future outlook:** Does the manager feel confident in their own abilities? Is the team confident in their manager's ability to lead them to future success?

The danger is significant: Employees reporting to managers at risk of failure are 91% less likely to be high performers, three times more likely to want to leave their organizations, and four times

more likely to underperform on both customer satisfaction and innovation goals.

What Predicts Risk of Manager Failure?

Our analysis of more than 100 possible predictors found that, contrary to conventional wisdom, challenges such as inability to prioritize, lack of technical skills, unprecedented changes, and coaching ineffectiveness are not the top predictors of manager failure. The top four predictors of risk of manager failure are:

1. When Managers Lack Self-Awareness

By and large, managers are not struggling because they lack the right skills, as 82% of managers reported they have the skills needed for their current jobs. However, in a March 2023 Gartner survey of nearly 100 HR leaders, only one in five said managers at their organization are aware of their own strengths and development areas. Managers who are unaware of their own strengths and development areas are nearly three times more likely to fail as those who possess this self-awareness.

Warning signs that a manager lacks self-awareness include:

- Becoming defensive in response to constructive feedback
- Preferring not to delegate tasks, even when they don't have the right skills for them
- Seeking approval from senior stakeholders for decisions they should be able to make independently

One way leaders can build self-awareness in managers is by taking early action — before an individual contributor is promoted into the role of a people manager. For example, one U.S.-based health insurance company developed a simulation program to expose aspiring managers to the hardest parts of the role before they take

on the job. The program includes modules on key capabilities such as vulnerability, crucial conversations, uncertainty and resilience, and authenticity. Each module includes interactive exercises related or unrelated to work that let employees reflect on their own relevant life experiences to build confidence in handling the hardest parts of the manager role.

2. When Empathy Is a One-Way Street

The value of manager-led empathy cannot be overstated, and it has become even more important in recent years. Sixty-nine percent of HR leaders told Gartner that they expect managers at their organization to be more empathetic to individual employee needs than before the pandemic.

While managers are principally accountable for building an empathetic team environment, empathy is a two-way street. Gartner research has found that a lack of team empathy increases the risk of manager failure by 3.7 times. When we break down the factors contributing to a lack of team empathy, we find 35% is caused by a lack of upward empathy shown by employees toward their manager. Signs that employees lack empathy towards their manager include:

- Believing they have the skills required to do their manager's job
- Unwillingness or inability to adjust to their manager's working style
- Believing their managers are solely accountable for achieving team goals

Many organizations have development programs to help managers learn downward empathy, but only 9% of organizations have programs in place to teach upward empathy to employees.

One way progressive organizations are building upward empathy is engaging teams in exercises where employees discover their own communication styles as well as that of their manager. These sessions also equip employees to learn about approaches they can adopt when interacting with managers who have a different communication style.

3. When Manager-Employee Relationships Are Unproductive

The rapid growth of hybrid work has required managers to change how they interact with employees, and managers have largely succeeded in this regard: 71% of employees told Garter researchers that their manager has changed their interaction style in the post-pandemic work environment.

However, there is a disconnect between the work managers are doing to flex their interaction styles and the success of these changes. Only 47% of employees say they derive valuable outcomes from interactions with their managers; managers whose direct reports can't derive value from their interactions are 2.7 times more likely to fail.

Our research has found the most valuable employee-manager interactions occur when managers make some key shifts across these four dimensions:

- **Cadence:** From ad hoc or unplanned interactions to regularly scheduled meetings.
- **Ownership:** From managers setting the agenda or leading the conversation to employees driving the interactions.
- **Objective:** From output-focused conversations (what work employees complete) to behavior-focused conversations (how they get work done).

- **Orientation:** From more regular manager-employee one-on-one conversations to more regular team-based interactions. This isn't about increasing the level of social engagement; it's about creating opportunities for teams to discuss strategic initiatives or brainstorm together.

4. When Employees' Work Doesn't Align with Goals

Employees today are inundated with change; Gartner research revealed employees experienced five times as many changes in 2022 as they did in 2016.

When hit with disruptions, managers are 42% more likely to prioritize providing immediate work support over aligning work to broader organizational or individual career goals. However, when managers do not align their employees' work with both organizational and career goals, they are 2.4 times as likely to fail.

This misalignment can look like:

- Employee goals that are unambitious or inappropriate for their level
- Employees needing to spend significant time on undocumented goals
- Goals that are updated frequently, without proper communication or explanation

One global pharmaceutical company implemented an interesting approach to help align work with organization and employee goals: They designed a series of team-initiated goal ceremonies that give employees a more active role in the goal-creation process. These milestones include goal creation ceremonies, time for individual reflection, and collaboration/alignment

ceremonies. This process gives teams ownership of their joint goals as well as individual members' goals, and it helps employees see the connection between these goals and the organization's overall strategy.

Addressing the Top Predictors of Failure

With such far-reaching talent and business implications, organizations can't afford to let their managers fail first and then take corrective action later. In fact, when organizations are able to effectively address the four top predictors, Gartner research shows that the risk of manager failure drops from 48% to as little as 5%. To enable this, organizations should prioritize several actions:

- Include risk of manager failure into an organization's risk management portfolio. Measure, track, and minimize risk of manager failure the same way as organizations would address other business continuity risks, such as operational risk, financial risk, reputational risk, compliance risk, and cybersecurity risk.
- When addressing risk of manager failure, look beyond the individual manager. Much of the failure risk is caused by either the manager's team or the organizational processes that managers need to work within.
- Leverage engagement surveys or focus group discussions to ask employees if their managers are exhibiting any of the early warning signs of manager failure. Identify managers at risk and take proactive steps to prevent them from failing.
- Implement risk-mitigation strategies, such as investing in programs that build self-awareness in future managers, teach employees to become more empathetic towards their own managers, guide managers to interact with direct

reports in a way that drives the most value, and update the employee goal-setting process to ensure the work aligns with both organizational and employee career goals.

With organizations and work becoming more complex and employee needs becoming more diverse, the manager's job is only going to become more unmanageable. The right proactive strategies can mitigate manager failure and increase the likelihood of positive business and talent outcomes.

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