Creating High-Impact Managers

A Guide to Upskilling Managers Effectively and at Scale

Torch

Introduction

Managers are a critical part of every workforce. They are hugely influential in lifting the performance, retention, and engagement of their teams and other teams they work with. In fact, according to RedThread Research's Managing Better in 2023: It Starts With You report, "organizations with highly effective managers have employees who are: 2.8x more likely to give a positive NPS score, 2.5x more likely to say their org is highly innovative, and 1.6x more likely to be highly engaged." In most organizations, managers balance their work as a player/coach, provide strategic guidance and oversight, and support the operational needs of the business. Over time, more and more has been asked of managers.

Unfortunately, most managers don't receive the training or support they need to succeed in their roles–whether that's as a new manager or a more tenured manager. Many organizations expect managers to know how to do the new elements of their jobs, learn by osmosis, or simply figure it out.

These approaches don't work. The skills that got a manager into their current role won't necessarily be enough to help them or your organization succeed in the future. In fact, 65% of the necessary job skills will change by 2030–and the most necessary are human skills, according to LinkedIn's 2024 Most In-Demand Skills report. It highlights that "human-centric, 'soft-skills' are evergreen places to invest learning energy." Topping the list is adaptability as the fastest-growing skill, while communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving are on the top 10.

The truth is that the skills needed to be a good manager aren't always obvious or intuitive, and existing managers simply don't have the time to spend on traditional interventions. As organizations ask more of their managers, it's important to stop and think critically about how effective current leadership development programs are at upskilling and creating sustainable behavior change in managers.

In this ebook, we'll examine where managers are struggling the most, why existing programs aren't working, and what you can do to better support and retain your new managers. Let's jump in.

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The importance of effective managers

Managers are at the frontlines of every organization. The importance of really great managers and their leadership impact on your business cannot be understated. As a result, they have a significant impact on many aspects of your organization, including:

☑ Recruitment

Regardless of market conditions, attracting top candidates is mission-critical to your organization. Having great managers that prospective employees want to work with can help attract and close the deal with your best candidates.

☑ Business outcomes

Managers can also have a significant impact on business outcomes. 77% of senior leaders see managers as important to help achieve business goals. Similarly, great managers can help drive significant business outcomes by motivating high performance from their teams and direct reports. That's why good managers increase employee performance by 25% and retention by 40%.

☑ Retention

You're likely familiar with the saying that people leave managers, not organizations. Studies find that there's truth in this: the number one reason employees quit their jobs is because of a poor quality relationship with their direct manager. In fact, 50% of people have quit a job at some point in their career to "get away" from their boss according to Gallup.

Managers play an important role across various organizational functions. Sadly, many managers aren't able to maximize their potential because they're not being given the tools or support they need to develop the appropriate skills. In the next section, we'll discuss why this might be the case.

"Great leaders... focus on vision, inspiration, focus, and change. These are roles for special people who can set a direction and help others figure out how to get there. They align teams, help people avoid wasting time, and clearly assign accountability. They embrace and encourage change, and they set an example as someone who will always help and coach others."

JOSH BERSIN

Why managers are struggling to succeed

It's no secret that many managers tend to struggle with basic management skills like decision-making, talent development, and inspirational leadership. That's why 70% of senior leaders are only somewhat or not satisfied at all with the performance of their frontline leaders. Even worse, 81% of managers aren't satisfied with their own performance. When we take a closer look, there are usually three fundamental issues that aren't being addressed:

1 Managing requires new skills

Whether the manager is shifting from being an individual contributor to managing others or working as a manager of managers, those are difficult career transitions that require new skill sets. An employee might find themselves struggling with the skills associated with being a manager - such as having tough conversations with direct reports or balancing all their new responsibilities. New managers, while experienced with cultivating their own personal and professional growth, may also have a hard time shifting their mindset and learning how to help others navigate their careers.

2 Development is ineffective

Despite the fact that becoming a manager is like transitioning into a new career, 58% of managers have never received any management training. Even among those who do receive training, only 10% of respondents say their companies' manager training is effective in preparing managers to lead.

3 Talent is scarce

Only 1 in 10 people has the high talent required to effectively manage a team. This statistic is based solely on *natural talent*, which means that—left to their own devices—most people would fail in a managerial role. But with the appropriate resources and tools, a significantly higher number of employees would succeed. It's also important to note that not everyone *wants* to be a manager - and shouldn't be forced onto this path - which makes the investment in the people who do want to be in this role even more critical.

It's clear that the current approaches to manager training aren't serving us well. In the next section, we'll explore common models for new manager training and how they stack up.

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> "Let me make it simple: of all the things we spend money on in HR, **leadership development is the most important.**"
>
> *JOSH BERSIN*

Common models for new manager training

When it comes to manager development, companies take various approaches. Here are some common ways organizations choose to develop managers, and a recommendation for how to effectively evolve the strategy to address any gaps and increase their impact.

Do nothing

You might be wondering: why is doing nothing being considered a model for manager training? Not investing any time or money into support managers is a deliberate choice. With this decision, organizations aren't setting their leaders up for success and can expect to see higher turnover rates, lower productivity levels, and unhappy managers (and employees)–which is why we don't recommend this approach.

Solution: If your organization is currently doing nothing when it comes to manager training, we recommend getting started as soon as possible–even if it means you have to start small. While it requires investment, you'll reap the benefits of a more skilled managerial team, and capture the benefit of the ripple effect of their behavior change within your organization. In fact, a Torch study recently found that 94% of people whose manager received coaching reported seeing positive changes in their manager as a result of coaching.

Stale program

It's also common for companies to have manager training programs in place that have gone stale. In other words, the training hasn't been updated in a significant amount of time and doesn't serve the current needs of managers. Sometimes these programs get reinvestment based on early-stage metrics that show high engagement or participant satisfaction but don't ultimately result in lasting behavior change or achieving organizational outcomes (employee engagement, retention, etc.) This is an inefficient use of resources that no L&D or HR department has time or money for.

Solution: It's time for an upgrade! The good news is that you already have a structure in place. Now you need to reconnect with your goals, gather data (like employee engagement scores), collect feedback from managers, and then identify where the training is failing to meet its purpose. From there look at ways you can either add more value to your existing program or pivot to a program that can offer the scalable, sustainable change you're looking to deliver.

Best-in-class

Companies with best-in-class manager training have taken the time to craft a custom program for their employees. This type of training usually offers a wide array of resources - from leadership assessments to 360-degree feedback to coaching (individuals, groups, and teams) - in an effort to meet managers where they are and offer personalized skill development. A best-in-class manager training also combines best practices in management thinking and learning design with the specifics of the organization.

Solution: A best-in-class program needs maintenance and you should expect to periodically iterate on your program. Just as the needs of the workplace are constantly changing, your manager training also needs to evolve to stay relevant to the needs of your organization and employees.

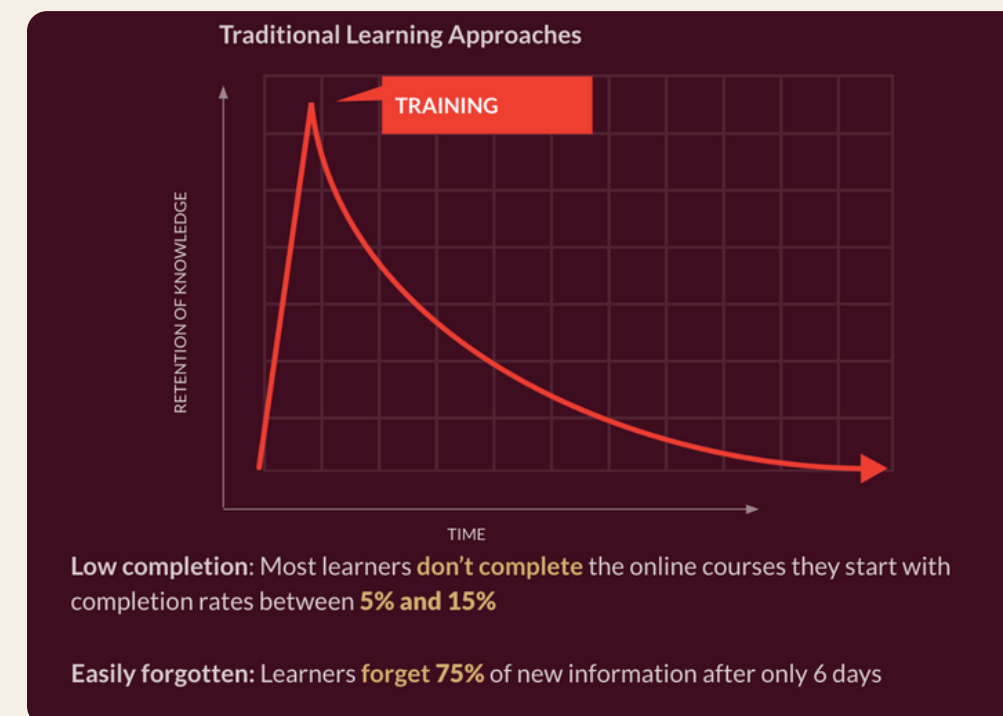# Why current approaches to manager training are ineffective

Now that we've covered some of the common models for manager training, let's take a closer look at what causes some of these approaches to fail. When it comes to stale programs, in particular, there are a number of specific challenges we can identify:

A lack of investment

Investing in any form of human capital can be expensive. But in a two-year study on leadership development, The Josh Besin company found that "more than 60% of companies spend less than $500 per year on management and leadership development (per person)." He goes on to say he thinks that is almost the coffee budget and shuts down the argument that leadership development is 'a nice to have,' saying, "That's simply not true. If you don't talk about leadership, bring leaders together, and set in place a set of behaviors, values, and skills for your leaders, the company sits on shifting sand." While costs can scare companies out of making any substantial investments in their managers, failing to invest ultimately leads to bigger, more expensive problems for an organization.

Inconsistency

It's common for manager training to be inconsistent. The programs tend to be either one-off learning opportunities or stop-and-go training. This lack of continuous engagement and cohesion makes learning challenging for managers who often shed their learning after getting back into the day-to-day (often called "the forgetting curve"). "One and done" workshops and training also don't provide the accountability over time that managers need to actually see sustainable behavior change.

Traditional Learning Approaches

RETENTION OF KNOWLEDGE

TRAINING

TIME

Low completion: Most learners **don't complete** the online courses they start with completion rates between **5% and 15%**

Easily forgotten: Learners **forget 75%** of new information after only 6 days

A one-size-fits-all approach

Everyone has different learning styles - including managers. That's why an off-the-shelf approach to new manager training tends to be unsuccessful. This approach doesn't enable managers to personalize the training experience to meet their unique needs, preferences, or method of learning and will ultimately not be useful to them.

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Why current approaches to manager training are ineffective (*continued*)

No one-on-one support

Managers need support - both from their peers as well as more experienced leaders. Unfortunately, many training programs don't have built-in support systems, which can leave managers feeling lost or frustrated when they don't have anyone to turn to with their problems and concerns.

Lack of immediate application

Learning is stickiest when it's put into practice quickly–applied to relevant situations that a person encounters. Learning that is only theoretical or consists of time away from their role full of role-playing is a great way to introduce concepts, but real behavior change comes from applied skills (and feedback on that application) in the context of the manager's day-to-day job. Simply learning about how to have difficult conversations doesn't come close to the skill-building that occurs when someone 1) creates a plan based on a real need, 2) practices it live at work with a direct report, and 3) then digests it in a safe environment, and reflecting on successes and opportunities to improve in future applications.

A heavy lift

Designing, launching, and implementing a new manager training program requires a lot of heavy lifting - especially from an administrative perspective. HR teams have to come up with a process for keeping track of their participants (and their progress), find ways to keep engagement high, and use multiple tools to manage various aspects of the program. All of these factors make manager training programs challenging to scale.

Now that you have an understanding of what makes current approaches to new manager training so ineffective, you can address them head on. In the next section, we'll dive into best practices that you can focus on instead.

"Deliberate practice involves attention, rehearsal and repetition and leads to new knowledge or skills that can later be developed into more complex knowledge and skills."

CAMPITELLI & GOBET, 2011

Best practices for onboarding and training new managers

To address these common issues with new manager training, we put together a list of best practices to help you either launch or revamp your own program.

Onboard new managers like they are new employees

Most company leaders are aware of the importance of onboarding for new hires. Research shows that a strong onboarding program can improve retention by 82% and productivity by 70%. It's clear that giving employees the time and space to ramp up in their new roles, ask questions, and be guided through the expectations of their job are critical to their success.

The same mindset should be applied to managers as well. As we mentioned before, being a first-time manager is equivalent to starting a new career. Given this, managers also need to be guided through a formalized onboarding process. This is the time to provide them with information about job expectations, available resources and tools, and an overview of skills they'll need to develop over the next few months or years.

Provide a continuous experience

Manager training shouldn't be a one-time event, but rather a process that's consistently applied over time. The experience has to feel like a value add and a support mechanism since managers are often already overburdened and overwhelmed. Many organizations try to address this by creating self-paced learning opportunities and while those resources do provide value, they don't deliver sustainable behavior change.

Instead, we recommend the accountable, consistent, and personalized experience of coaching with related value-add materials to support busy managers. These materials support their specific journey with their coach and their manager experience and can be in the form of videos, short articles, blog posts, and other easily digestible content.

Make it personalized

For training to be engaging, learning needs to be personalized to the needs and preferences of the manager. It's important for a program to leverage the natural talents and abilities of the manager and help them identify, understand and close their specific development gaps. Using a generic set of objectives or skills to work on won't offer your managers the value they want or you need from a program, and so you will see diminishing returns over time.

Establish accountability

With managers juggling so much, it can be challenging for them to be held accountable to a training program–especially one that's self-guided. That's where it helps to have a support system they can turn to for motivation, or even feel accountable to.

Organizations can support managers by forming peer groups of managers in similar situations both within and outside the organization. Establishing these types of one-on-one connections have been found to increase learning. You can also provide mentoring and coaching with experienced leaders or professionals as a method of effective one-on-one support.

Use software

Using a people development platform, like Torch, can relieve a lot of the administrative burdens that come with maintaining a manager training program. Software allows you to select, track, and engage your participants across programs or cohorts and measure effectiveness beyond participant satisfaction.

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Retaining your best managers

An effective training program for managers is the first, critical step. It's equally as important to retain them. Employee attrition is costly for organizations–beyond the investments made in developing an employee, there is a loss of institutional knowledge, cultural impacts, and more. There are many ways to encourage your managers to stay. We've compiled a few top strategies below:

Offer leadership coaching

Leadership coaching can be a powerful motivator in getting managers to stay with a company. A Torch study found that when comparing groups that have received coaching to those that have not, providing coaching has increased the likelihood of retention by 30-50%. Similarly, the Human Capital Institute found that employees at companies with strong coaching cultures are more engaged than those at organizations that do not, which is a significant factor in retention. When it comes to leadership coaching:

- ☑ Consider using an integrated platform to deliver these leadership development opportunities

- ☑ Make sure to use a platform that can help managers track leadership development towards specific goals and ROI to keep them motivated

- ☑ Take advantage of tools like leadership assessments and 360 feedback to maximize the benefits of coaching and mentoring

Recognize your top managers

Most of the time, managers are on the giving end of recognition. But it's important to remember that managers–especially new ones–need to be recognized as well. Unfortunately, research shows that 87% of recognition programs focus on tenure, which leaves out first-time managers and might be demotivating for them. To better recognize your first-time managers:

- ☑ Focus on performance and progress, not just years of experience as a manager

- ☑ Include managersin your recognition efforts - not just individual contributors

- ☑ Diversify the way you recognize your managers - it can be anything from a quick "thank you" message on Slack to a hand-selected gift that's personalized to their interests

- ☑ Invest in them- support their growth and success in their role with personalized opportunities that will help them learn, grow, and excel

Provide opportunities for growth

While companies focus heavily on employee learning and development, it's easy to forget that managers need those same opportunities–even when they're no longer "new" to their roles any more. But the truth is that 76% of managers say that they want more training and development opportunities from their companies. And 47% of managers who want more training and don't get it, are thinking of quitting their jobs. To meet the growth needs of your managers:

- ☑ Offer a learning and development budget

- ☑ Give them the opportunity to explore different types of projects and roles

- ☑ Have a training program that extends beyond just the "new" phase and dives into the skills needed by more experienced or tenured managers

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Lattice Creates a Coaching Program Leaders Crave

Lattice works with people teams across the globe to turn employees into high performers, managers into leaders, and companies into the best places to work. It's a mission they take seriously.

When they were looking to develop their own leaders, they turned to the people development platform, Torch, for coaching and mentoring. Specifically, they wanted a development opportunity that demonstrated their investment in their leaders, supported them through key moments of growth or transition, and supported their goals of being equitable.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

- ☑ The L&D team reviewed data and applied their values around culture and inclusion to make sure the program was equitable across the board. To build greater equity, they created a six-month rotational coaching program–which means they swap existing participants for a new cohort every six months.

- ☑ The coaching investment is focused on managers. It's seen as a benefit and an explicit investment in managers and talent at Lattice. Because of the inclusive nature of selection, even though the program is highly sought after, "coaching is something that people could work towards and earn but not something that felt so out of reach for them," says Kelsey Poleyeff, Learning and Development Program Manager at Lattice.

- ☑ The administration of the programs is easier with Torch. "Coaching [with Torch] is pretty easy in comparison to some other coaching processes I've been through," said Kelsey. "Without a platform, you might be scheduling individuals on your own and you may not be able to vet coaches fully. The ability to have that centralized in one place, and having the Torch team be hands-on in that process is a big benefit for Lattice."

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Managers are one of the most valuable assets your organization has

Managers are one of the most valuable assets your organization has. Investing in a training program that sets your managers up for success is well worth the time and money. Remember: people are what make your business succeed. Managers are the most influential levers in your business. Investing in their development, specifically leadership skills, benefits everything from your recruiting efforts to your bottom line.

We hope this eBook was helpful to you as you think about how to support managers at your organization. We'd love to partner with you in creating and supporting a strong manager development strategy. Learn more about how Torch's people development platform, specifically coaching, can help you effectively develop managers at scale.

Request a demo

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