

Strengthening the core

Re-engaging the managers
of frontline workers



Contents

03

Introduction

04

Why are frontline managers so critical?

06

What's going wrong?

07

Challenge #1: Communication breakdown

09

Challenge #2: Manager disengagement

10

Challenge #3: Burnout

12

Professional development

13

Career paths

14

The tools and technology required

17

How Humanforce can help

Introduction

Most businesses are only as strong as the employees who work there. It's their passion, their hard work and their loyalty that can push average company performance towards exceptional performance. It's also why the employee experience (EX) has been prioritised over the past few years.

However, some employers might be neglecting one vital element of the EX: frontline managers and their role in creating happy, engaged and productive workers. Although these managers are crucial in every business, in shift-based (or 'deskless') workplaces they play an even more important role.

When we mention 'frontline manager' who do we mean? It's literally those people managing teams in frontline workplaces like retail, hospitality, healthcare, etc. In their ranks you'll find supervisors, section chiefs, store managers, site managers, nurse unit managers, and so on.

They might be public facing, or they might be toiling behind the scenes to supervise all aspects of activity and productivity, while keeping an eye on day-to-day operations such as rostering and scheduling, time & attendance, training, etc.

For many, this will be their first managerial role, so they are also important for potentially filling future leadership roles.

According to Harvard Business School professor Linda A Hill, they are "critical to sustaining quality, service, innovation and financial performance".

So, why do we often leave them to their own devices? Our eBook shines the spotlight on these overlooked and under-appreciated workers.

We cover:

- The critical role of frontline managers
- What's going wrong – the common roadblocks holding frontline managers back
- The skills and support they require
- The technology they need so that 'admin overwhelm' is eased



Why are frontline managers so critical?

You've no doubt heard the phrase, "people join an organisation and leave a manager". That's partly true. Research from CultureAmp¹ has found that people do indeed leave bad managers, but it's usually not the number one reason why people leave a company (lack of development, poor leadership and poor pay also play a role).

Their research also found that in 'good' companies, managers do make a genuine difference. However, in 'bad' companies, good or

bad managers make little to no difference to a person's decision to leave.

Nonetheless, it's fair to say the impact that a manager can have on their direct reports is significant.

This infographic and the accompanying text demonstrates the scope of their responsibilities. It's no surprise that some managers may be struggling.



We expect our frontline managers to:

- Performance manage
- Cascade organisational goals
- Promote communication
- Implement organisational strategies/policies
- Coach and support employees
- Manage admin/compliance and safety
- Develop skills
- Manage/handle conflict
- Provide feedback
- Engage and inspire
- Coordinate operations
- Represent the team

Frontline managers...

Represent the team. In dealings with senior leaders and other departments, it's the frontline managers who will typically represent their team. In many cases, they communicate the needs, concerns, and ideas of those they manage and defend their interests.

Coordinate daily operations and implement organisational strategies. They ensure their team can execute key activities at the operational level. That might involve clarifying objectives, priorities, tasks to be performed, etc. They also plan, find and distribute the resources needed to carry out these daily operations. That includes rostering, time & attendance, leave management and countless other workforce management tasks.

Coach and support the workforce. They are typically responsible for guiding and supporting staff members. They ensure staff have the resources and skills to carry out their daily operations and achieve their objectives.

Manage admin/compliance and safety. There's a lot of paperwork involved in being a frontline manager! Whether it's reporting a safety incident or doing performance reviews, there can be a danger of admin overwhelm.

Provide feedback. Most workers thrive on constructive feedback and it's often the direct manager who provides that feedback. They also recognise their success, encourage them to improve their performance and help identify areas where they can improve.

Manage conflict. Whether it's team members butting heads or irate members of the public unhappy with the service they've received, it's often the frontline manager who must handle conflict. They need to be able to read a situation quickly, intervene, mediate and facilitate constructive dialogue to resolve the issue – or else understand how to escalate the situation.

Manage performance. It's up to direct frontline managers to ensure employee performance is up to expected standards, to set goals and track key performance indicators (KPIs), to provide support and feedback for underperformers, and to ensure high performers are receiving the recognition they deserve. Regular catch-ups with team members and more formal performance meetings are all part of the daily routine for frontline managers.

Cascade organisational goals. Related to the above, it's often the frontline managers who must interpret and ensure that team members understand broader organisational goals so that everyone is working towards the same things. The same applies to organisational vision and values – managers need to be demonstrating these 'north star' cultural aspects every day, and ensuring their team does the same.

Develop skills. It's long been debated whether managers need to be able to do the jobs of the people they manage. While technical knowledge and know-how is always welcome, it's not essential. Just as important is being able to mentor others and work with them to formulate career paths and the development required to move along those paths.

Frontline managers influence everything that gets done in organisations. Gallup research suggests they occupy the single most important role in workplaces throughout the world. Not only do they translate strategy into action, but they also greatly impact employee morale, turnover, productivity, safety, and so much more.

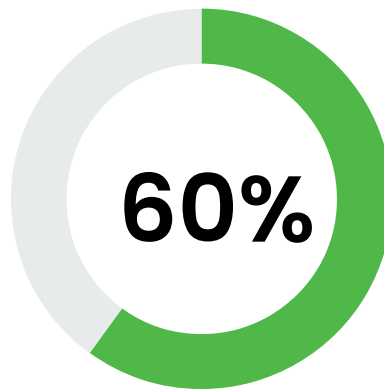
Let's take a deeper look at why too many organisations are not optimising this great resource.

What's going wrong?

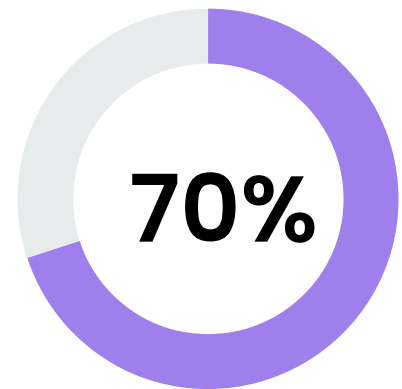
The statistics cited on this page highlight several defining characteristics of this cohort of workers. First, they are significant in number. In a 24/7 world, most frontline workplaces require a large number of frontline managers to cover different shifts – up to 60% of a company's total management team in industries like healthcare and retail consist of frontline managers.

Second, their impact is significant. Indeed, Gallup said their "most profound finding, ever" was that 70% of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the direct manager.

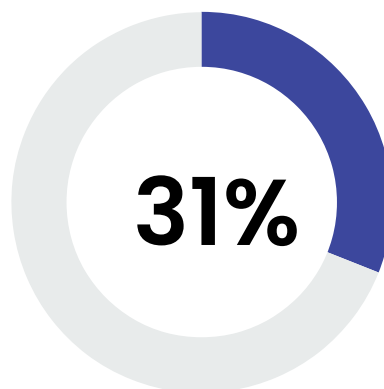
However, there are clearly challenges around holding onto and nurturing this talent. If just 31% of managers are engaged, as Gallup's research has found, what impact does that have on the people they lead? And if so many managers are looking for jobs elsewhere, what does this mean for knowledge loss, succession planning and the talent pipeline for more senior roles? Part of the problem may lie in the lack of support and development these managers receive – more on that later.



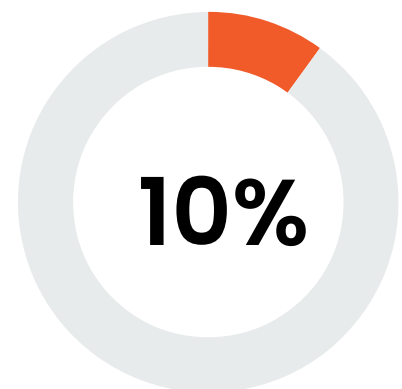
of a company's total management team in retail, healthcare and other industries consists of frontline managers, who are responsible for up to 80% of the workforce.²



of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the direct manager.³



of managers are engaged and 55% are watching out for or actively seeking a new job.⁴



of surveyed senior leaders and employees say their company's training programs are effective in preparing managers to lead.⁵

Challenge #1:

Communication breakdown

Frontline managers can be viewed as communication conduits. Not only are they the link between executives and workers, but they also impart important health and safety information, along with operational issues like rosters and schedules. They provide feedback upwards and downwards, and translate sometimes vague or general strategy into practical action plans. And in many ways it's up to them to interpret and disseminate corporate culture foundations such as vision, values and behaviours.

However, when training specialists Axonify⁶ surveyed frontline workers in 2023, just 65% of corporate leaders believed their communication is effective (35% of frontline workers said the same), and only 70% of frontline managers felt 'in the know' about what was going on in their organisation (51% of frontline workers said the same).

More worryingly, 58% of frontline workers said that key communication wasn't reaching them, and 68% of frontline managers agreed. The only point on which frontline managers and workers agreed was the role of technology, with 41% of both groups saying they would like to use technology to fix fractured communication.

The report also found that frontline workers are still very reliant on their direct managers to share information. When workers were asked who they receive information from, the prevailing response for 8 of the 10 categories was "direct manager."

We know that how we communicate in all aspects of life is so important, but it's difficult to do well in a busy workplace. It's not just about the channel (phone, text, comms app, email, in-



person, etc.) being used but the language used, and if it's in-person it's the intonations, the body language, etc.

Your frontline managers may benefit from a refresher course in effective communication. They might need reminders that communication with direct reports needs to be:

Timely: This is critical. Delays in information can lead to confusion, second-guessing, and if it's related to health and safety, potentially put people's lives at risk. The same applies to rewards and recognition or acknowledging important milestones – the further away from the event that occurs, the less meaningful it is. Acknowledging someone's hard work at the time it happens is more impactful.

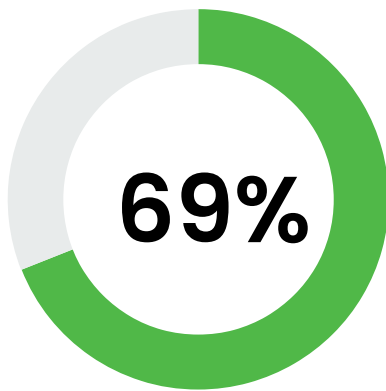
Coherent: It's important to understand team and department functions – how they work together, how information is shared, what they need to know and when, and so on. That way, managers can communicate with everyone in a logical manner. For example, do people really need to wade through pages of text, or can it be conveyed more effectively in a video or using a combination of words and images? Managers should try to ensure they're not communicating in drips and drabs – structure messages so people can understand it quickly.

Clear: Giving out information is useless if managers aren't communicating in a clear and concise way. Wherever possible, they should be using facts and/or data and not opinions. No one should have to assume what a manager meant to communicate. Managers need to keep in mind cultural or language issues, or simply how people digest information – and consider different ways to reach every person.

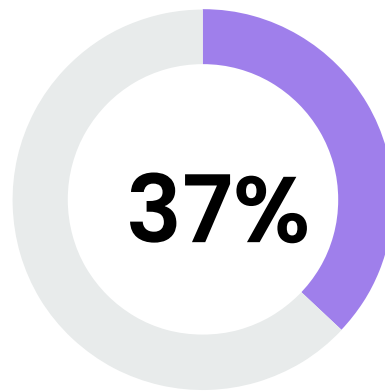
Consistent: Nothing kills the impact of a message like inconsistency. Managers need to be sure about what they are communicating, especially if it involves multiple groups of people or different departments. Switching up the

messaging or changing what they've originally communicated leads to confusion and damages trust in leadership.

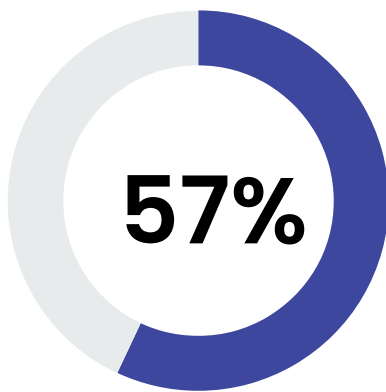
Respectful: Things can get chaotic in the workplace – think of retail during the Christmas rush or emergency departments in hospitals. But just because things get frantic doesn't mean the communication should too. Managers should aim to keep their tone of voice and the language used courteous and respectful. That applies as much to verbal communication as written communication. All managers should be using inclusive and non-discriminatory words.



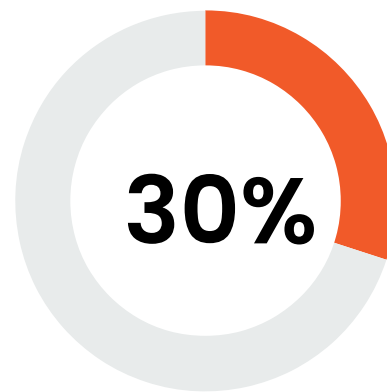
of managers said they were often uncomfortable communicating with team members²



of managers said they were uncomfortable having to give direct feedback on performance²



of deskless workplaces use verbal updates from managers as their main communication channel (second only to email)⁵



of frontline workers don't understand their role in business success – indicating issues around communicating strategy⁷



Challenge #2: Manager disengagement

To put it plainly, if your frontline managers are disengaged, so too will their team members. Gallup[®] research shows that employees who are supervised by highly engaged managers are 59% more likely to be engaged than those who are supervised by disengaged managers, leading to higher productivity, lower turnover, and higher profitability.

However, Gallup also found that two-thirds of managers are either not engaged or actively disengaged in their work and workplace. To improve the situation, it's important to understand why disengagement is occurring. Here are six factors that contribute to frontline manager disengagement:

Too many reporting and compliance obligations: From incident reporting to tracking key performance indicators for team members, to the time-consuming task of compliant roster creation – especially if this is done manually – and liaising with other departments like HR and payroll, it's no surprise that 'admin overwhelm' is a real and present danger to the engagement levels of managers.

Filling team gaps: Just about every workplace that relies heavily on frontline workers is suffering from skills shortages. With the time taken to fill roles growing, it often falls to managers to step in and put more assignments – or entire shifts – on themselves. Some may applaud the 'get in there and do it myself' attitude, but it means that time is inevitably taken away from being a true manager, let alone a leader.

Wide spans of control: The jury is still out on whether there's an ideal span of control, but most management research suggests that having no more than 20 direct reports is ideal. However, with the above-mentioned skills shortages, financial pressures to reduce costs, and high turnover of managers, it's highly likely that many managers have larger teams to look after.

Lack of financial incentive: The pressure to increase frontline wages means that the gap between management and individual contributor wages has shrunk. Indeed, for hourly workers, the opportunity to pick up more overtime and take additional shifts (sometimes in other companies) means they may in fact be earning more than their managers, who are working equally long hours without the compensation.

Lack of development: Like the mechanic who services everyone else's car but not their own, sometimes managers can neglect their own professional development. Or, they simply aren't offered any further development, with the perception being that if someone is technically excellent in their job, they don't need to develop management or leadership skills. According to Gallup, less than 30% of managers strongly agree that someone at work encourages their development. But just like all employees, frontline managers and supervisors need to have jobs where they feel they are continuously developing.

Challenge #3:

Burnout

COVID-19 was a valuable reminder of just how crucial frontline workers are to the smooth running of society. It's no surprise that the pandemic and its aftermath took a huge toll on these workers and their managers.

Microsoft's Work Trends Index, based off a global survey of multiple industries, found that more than half of managers (53%) report feeling burned out at work – a slightly higher figure than employees in general. A Harvard Business Review article said the result was “not surprising” and explained:

“Managers have had to guide their employees through a pandemic and its aftermath, facing situations that have required them to lead with empathy while managing escalating demands with potentially fewer resources – all while receiving little recognition for their efforts. This untenable situation has left many managers struggling.”¹⁰

There are six broad buckets that can spark the feelings most often associated with burnout, including exhaustion, cynicism and a perceived lack of professional accomplishment. These buckets include:

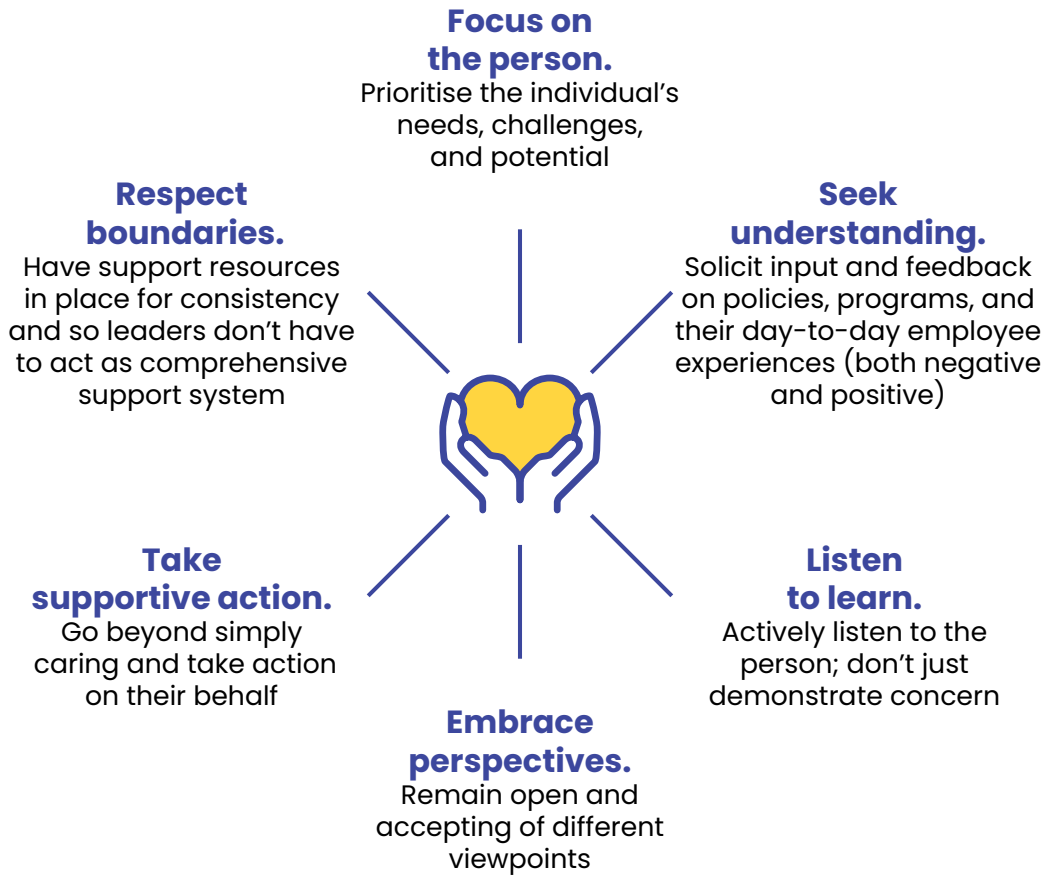
- Having an unsustainable workload
- A perceived lack of control
- Insufficient rewards for effort
- A lack of a supportive community
- A lack of fairness
- Mismatched values and skills

To mitigate the risk of manager burnout, employers should prioritise three key areas:

1. **Create a culture of psychological safety and support.** Managers often hide the fact that they might need support – it's a fear of appearing to be a weak link, of being unable to shoulder the burden put upon them. Psychological safety can only be created when people feel they can speak up. One-on-ones with their own direct managers should focus on questions like ‘how are you coping?’, ‘how can I help?’, etc. Offering support services such as counselling as part of an employee assistance program (EAP) might also assist. Providing dedicated ‘recharge times’ throughout the work period and having leaders who help to normalise showing vulnerability without fear of negative repercussions are other options.
2. **Prioritise learning and career development.** Microsoft suggests that offering managers new projects (that don't add to the sense of overwhelm) might provide a burst of energy at work and involve having open conversations about what skills are needed to help them achieve their goals while also presenting them with potential career paths (more on professional development in the next section).
3. **Ensure ‘practical empathy’ is practiced.** As outlined in Humanforce's [2024 HR Trends eBook](#), practical empathy can be applied to all employees, including frontline managers, to help guide them through uncertain times. A report by O.C Tanner Institute¹¹ defined the term thus:

“Practical empathy hinges on identifying, understanding, and actively meeting employee needs. Not only does it increase employees’ sense of belonging and connection, it improves business outcomes like attracting and retaining talent.”

The report found there are six active components to practical empathy in the workplace:



For the empathy to be effective, it must include supportive action. In the O.C. Tanner Institute study, both leaders and employees said they had been “left frustrated” by empathy initiatives that were perceived as “warm and fuzzy” programs with little practical use, and nearly half (47%) of employees reported a lack of follow through on company promises.

So, what does supportive action mean? This could be offering greater flexibility in a job, giving managers a stronger voice or more autonomy, connecting them with additional resources, or just some helpful problem-solving. Practical empathy does not always entail an immediate solution, but it must both acknowledge and address the problem at hand.

Meeting the challenges



1. Ensure professional development continues

Professional development for frontline managers has been a constant theme throughout this eBook but it's apparent that frontline managers receive little training. Indeed, McKinsey & Company¹² research shows that frontline managers receive just 9% of training & development, compared with 27% for frontline employees, 25% for technical specialists, and 23% for executive leaders. See McKinsey's graph below for what frontline managers are taught.

Increasing the total number of hours dedicated to training and providing training programs that develop leadership and interpersonal skills could help managers improve their performance.

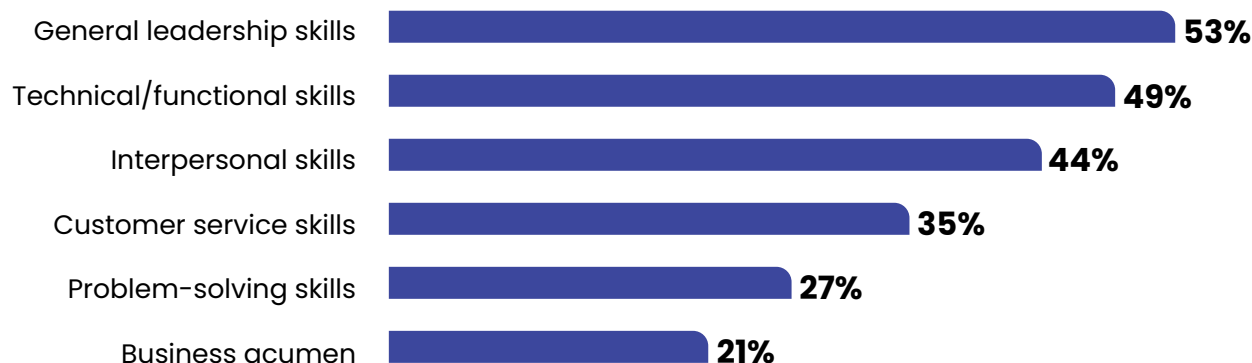
Harvard Business Review¹³ suggests that managers and team leaders need to have coaching conversations with their manager, just like they are expected to with their employees.

And although carving out the time to enhance existing skills or upskill managers is often a luxury many frontline workplaces can't afford, it's suggested that the most effective learning programs are "not a compilation of one-time events, but rather teach fundamentals of coaching, including deep learning on strengths, critical employee engagement elements, and performance coaching".

HBR further notes that the best programs help managers develop within the context of who they naturally are. They state: "All managers become better coaches by developing competencies such as building relationships, developing people, leading change, inspiring others, thinking critically, creating accountability, and clearly communicating – if they aim their unique strengths at each competency."

Types of development programs for frontline managers conducted in past year

Total, n = 1,590



Although they make up or influence 80% of the workforce, **frontline managers receive only 20–30% of a typical company's leadership development efforts.**¹⁴

2. Offer career paths, especially from manager to leader

“You manage things, but you lead people”. It’s a well-known quote and it’s still relevant. Managers in frontline workplaces are indeed often managing ‘things’: rosters, timetables, leave requests, numbers on a spreadsheet, inventory, and on it goes. It is any wonder why they often don’t have time to actually lead their teams, to move beyond the transactional day-to-day activities, to act as coaches, and – to cite another famous quote about leaders – to be someone who “knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way”?

The role of ‘manager’ and ‘leader’ is becoming blurry. Leaders have traditionally been seen as big-picture thinkers and stewards of strategy; managers were seen as the ones who ‘get things done’. However, this has changed. Managers today fill far more than supervisory roles. They are increasingly expected to move with agility, problem solve, track and manage budgets, resolve conflicts, be adept at using metrics and data, and contribute suggestions and recommendations up the hierarchy.

Nonetheless, the shift from manager to leader is a significant adjustment. Help your frontline managers by moving away from traditional classroom-based professional development formats which focus on the theoretical and abstract. Instead, try to use mentoring from a team of your best managers. Practical exercises and role-play all play a key role in manager training to test out various on-the-job scenarios, keeping in mind that some people will learn best by listening, watching or reading, while others learn best by doing.

And of course, provide flexible learning delivery methods. Deskless managers are always on the go, so consider offering bite-sized, microlearning modules delivered via mobile devices. Make it as easy as possible for them to access learning ‘in the moment’ so they don’t need to tag additional time onto their already busy working lives.

Where to start? Gallup’s study¹⁵ of more than 550 job roles and 360 unique job competencies found that the following seven leadership competencies are usually found in managers who create successful, high-performance teams in thriving organisations. In short, they are on their way to being successful leaders, so it’s worthwhile understanding their key competencies so these can be developed in others.

These managers need the ability to:

- **Build relationships:** Successful leaders establish connections with others to build trust, share ideas and accomplish work.
- **Develop people:** They help others become more effective through strengths development, clear expectations, encouragement and coaching.
- **Drive change:** They set goals for change and lead purposeful efforts to adapt work that aligns with the stated vision.
- **Inspire others:** They leverage positivity, vision, confidence and recognition to influence performance and motivate workers to meet their challenges.
- **Think critically:** They seek information, critically evaluate the information, apply the knowledge gained and solve problems.
- **Communicate clearly:** They listen, share information concisely and with purpose, and are open to hearing opinions.
- **Create accountability:** They identify the consequences of actions and hold themselves and others responsible for performance.





3. Give managers the technology and tools they need

Whether it's streamlining and automating time-consuming tasks or providing real-time insights, the right HR and workforce management software can have a genuinely positive impact on frontline managers. Here are four examples of that impact.

More efficient timesheet approvals

Electronic systems save time for managers. As an example, you might have a team of 25 people, each working 3 shifts a week. In this case, your manager has 75 timesheets to approve each week. Say each timesheet takes 2 minutes to check on average, and that the manager spends 20 minutes following up on missing timesheets, errors, sick days, or other discrepancies.

Using Humanforce's [Time & Attendance](#) solution, clocking and authorisation by exception features eliminate the need to manually review correct timesheets. All that's left is the 20 minutes needed to resolve unexpected issues – a saving of 2.5 hours of admin time each week.

More efficient rostering

If your managers are still manually building out rosters, scrambling to fill shifts with phone calls to suitable workers, and then posting rosters to noticeboards it's time for a rethink. Today's rostering software makes life infinitely easier for managers. Humanforce's [Rostering & Scheduling](#) solution helps managers optimise how their workforce is being utilised and can help them work within budgets and employment agreement conditions across one or many locations.

Our simple, drag-and-drop roster builder means you can see what's going on at a glance. It will also alert you of any potential scheduling clashes or errors. You can even micro-schedule short-duration tasks and breaks – and build costing, mandatory qualifications, employment agreement conditions, reminders and more into them. The shift offer and shift bidding features within Humanforce help managers fill vacant shifts effectively, without having to resort to agency staff or urgent phone calls to fill in for unplanned absences. Even better, employees are empowered to choose the shifts that suit their personal circumstances.

Faster, data-driven decision-making

Humanforce's [Workforce Analytics](#) solution helps managers and HR make more informed decisions supported by real-time, data-driven evidence. In-built reports covering project costs, tardiness reporting, hours worked to hours rostered ratios, causes of unauthorised timesheets, and more can improve visibility of what's happening across your business and show where planned and unplanned costs are occurring.

Alternatively, a custom dashboard builder can be used to visualise specific, business-critical information, enabling users to spot minor anomalies before they turn into costly issues. Ultimately, this process of 'datafication' can be useful not just to payroll teams but can also be used to develop strategic schedules, refine budgets, and enhance business performance.

Minimise admin overwhelm

Managing staff means managing administration. Documenting new hires with onboarding, ensuring offboarding is handled correctly, fulfilling compliance obligations, following performance management processes, reporting safety incidents, and keeping people informed of roster updates brings with it a risk of 'admin overwhelm'. Fortunately, technology can help.

For example, Humanforce's [Onboarding](#) solution enables new employees to complete pre-boarding steps such as sending and signing forms digitally before their first day on the job.

Humanforce's [Performance Management](#) solution helps schedule regular check-ins and automates key steps in the performance process with alerts and reminders. Just as critically, Humanforce's [Core HR](#) helps keep tabs on personal details for all employees, including their qualifications, and allows employees themselves to keep these details up to date.

Humanforce is dedicated to helping organisations manage their frontline workers in a cost-effective, compliant manner. That includes supporting frontline managers with the tools they need to ensure they can spend less time juggling administration, and more time leading.

For further tips on supporting your frontline managers, watch our [on-demand webinar](#).



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How Humanforce can help

Humanforce is the best-in-one platform for frontline and flexible workforces, offering a truly employee centred, intelligent and compliant human capital management (HCM) suite – without compromise. Founded in 2002, Humanforce has a 2300+ customer base and over half a million users worldwide. Today, we have offices across Australia, New Zealand, and the UK.

Our vision is to make work easier and life better by focusing on the needs and fulfilment of frontline workers, and the efficiency and optimisation of businesses.

Learn more about how Humanforce can automate and simplify all aspects of people management in your organisation.

[Schedule a demo](#)

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