

Developing Middle Managers: How HR Can Support These Overworked Leaders

HR Executive | Jill Barth | April 3, 2025



Middle managers have become the unsung heroes of the workplace after steering the ship through the disruption of the pandemic and the culture changes brought on by shifts in remote work. However, HR leaders must be aware that they are increasingly becoming the most vulnerable workforce population. Far from the glamorous leadership roles portrayed in corporate narratives, today's managers are navigating an unprecedented scene of challenges that threaten their professional effectiveness—and their very wellbeing.

Middle managers and workplace dynamics

Mike Dolen, CEO of manager support platform Humancore and former HR executive at Home Depot and IBM, warns of a looming crisis in middle management burnout. He points to companies flattening hierarchies during layoffs, which leaves middle managers with fewer peers, increased workloads and greater pressure to perform.

Recent research in LinkedIn's Work Change Report: AI is Coming to Work provides insights into what business leaders want from their workforce. The report reveals that 80% of C-suite executives believe AI will kickstart a culture shift where teams are more innovative. However, the blend of AI and human skills is a key marker of adaptability and growth, yet remains hard to find, according to LinkedIn.

Global HR leaders struggle to source management-level talent with the right mix of technical and soft skills. This technological revolution is expected to reshape how managers operate, adding layers of complexity to their already challenging roles.

The 'manager's dilemma'

The AI-driven transformation of work has been swift, says Dolen. Technological disruption has converged with pandemic-induced restructuring and rapidly changing workforce expectations to create a perfect storm for middle management. Dolen describes this phenomenon as a "manager's dilemma."

The numbers tell a stark story of increasing complexity. In a July 2024 Gartner survey of 805 HR leaders, 75% said managers are overwhelmed by expanding responsibilities, and 69% noted that managers are not equipped to lead change. This compression creates a strain on managers who are expected to do more with less.

Meanwhile, Dolen says, the role of a manager has expanded beyond traditional oversight responsibilities. Today's middle managers are expected to be mental health supporters, career coaches, cultural architects and change management experts, he says.

In many organizations, Dolen adds, managers also must simultaneously navigate hybrid work environments, bridge generational workplace differences and maintain team productivity.

According to Dolen, over the past decade, organizations have been steadily reducing hierarchical levels in pursuit of greater efficiency. He says this trend has accelerated since the pandemic, pointing out that global companies like Amazon, Google and Citigroup have implemented notable layoffs, particularly targeting middle management positions.

Perhaps the most alarming problem that middle managers face is the profound lack of organizational support, says Dolen. About 30% of employees report having bosses who are too stressed to support them at work, according to LinkedIn's latest Workforce Confidence survey. Two-thirds of managers report struggling with heavy workloads, and managers consistently score lower than executives or individual contributors on work/life balance, based on LinkedIn's Workplace Learning Report 2025.

Low-impact solutions for middle manager stress

Dolen points out a mismatch between business leader intentions and actual outcomes. "The message is always the same: 'People are our most valuable asset,' " he says. Yet, when companies undergo transformation or aim to do more with less, investing in people is often the first thing to be deprioritized, according to Dolen.

He says many are trying to make meaningful advancements in boosting managers—it's just that they don't always move the needle. U.S. companies collectively spend millions annually on manager development, according to Dolen.

But when asked what organizations are measurably achieving in this area, Dolen says the response is clear: They're implementing well-intentioned programs with strong content, yet utilization remains low. He says he's found that even top digital platforms, despite their best efforts, consider a 15% monthly utilization rate a success.

Because of this, managers often struggle to find timely, relevant support. Dolen says that many managers say their company's training programs are well-intentioned but designed for long-term development rather than immediate needs.

When faced with urgent challenges—like preparing for a critical meeting the next day—leaders are often directed to generic solutions: Watch a video, sign up for a training program months away or consult a coach—if they even have access to one, says Dolen. He notes that these options lack the immediacy, personalization and company-specific context that managers need.

As a result, many turn to colleagues or their boss for advice. While this can be helpful, it has limitations, according to Dolen; if the boss is part of the issue, seeking their guidance isn't an option. He also says that many managers believe that asking their boss for help too often could raise doubts about their competence. He adds that peers might lack the necessary expertise, and external contacts won't understand the company's unique culture. "So, even [when] seeking advice from humans, which is the natural inclination that most people resort to, there's a variety of deficiencies there," says Dolen.

How HR leaders can support managers

This is where AI, if harnessed correctly, is expected to help bridge the gap. Dolen recommends leveraging tools that provide personalized advice based on individual personality assessments, specific workplace contexts and immediate problem-solving needs.

However, change for the sake of change isn't a reasonable direction, so HR leaders should identify the specific problems that fester in their organization's middle management workforce. A July 2024 Gartner survey of nearly 500 HR leaders found that 73% reported employee fatigue from constant change, while 74% said managers are unprepared to lead it effectively.

To improve change effectiveness and minimize disruption, Gartner researchers say that HR leaders should focus on identifying transformation hot spots, collaborating early with business leaders to ease buy-in, and leveraging key employees embedded in the process to drive engagement and adoption.

Dolen notes that many organizations are aware of the hurdles facing middle managers but have stalled on delivering effective action. This is where HR leaders can step in with expertise. He compares the situation to reading a report on the obesity epidemic in the U.S. while sitting in a fast-food restaurant, eating a large order of fries, and thinking, "Someone should do something about this," while expecting the problem to fix itself.

"The manager crisis requires immediate attention," according to Dolen, "not just for the wellbeing of leaders themselves, but for the health and sustainability of the entire organization."