



# ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGERS: Literature Review

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# ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGERS

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# SUMMARY

Managers play a critical role in organizations. They connect organizational goals and agendas to their team's work and priorities and have a high influence on the overall employee experience. As a result, managers have been found to be one of the strongest drivers of employee well-being and engagement (Gallup, 2015b; Limeade & Quantum Workplace, 2016). This paper defines who managers are, explains why they matter and reviews the common struggles experienced by managers. It concludes with a discussion of how organizations can in turn support their managers.

# INTRODUCTION

A familiar saying in the work world is that employees don't leave organizations, they leave managers. A study by Gallup revealed that half of those surveyed cited managers as the top reason for leaving their job (Gallup, 2015a), insinuating that managers are often detested by employees. People **are** more likely to turnover when they have a horrible boss, but bad managers **are not** the number one reason people leave. A recent Facebook study discovered that those who left the organization voluntarily did not leave because of their managers – they left because they did not enjoy their work, they felt their strengths were not being utilized and there was no room for growth in their careers (Goler, Gale, Harrington, & Grant, 2018). Organizational literature indicates there are many paths that lead to turnover, including certain job attitudes, job design characteristics, organizational climates, other opportunities, and leadership (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Rubenstein, Eberly, Lee, & Mitchell, 2017), and that turnover is ultimately determined by multiple characteristics as opposed to solely reflecting poor management or low engagement (Heavey, Holwerda, & Hausknecht, 2013). People choose to stay at or leave their organization not because of managers, but because managers are largely responsible for what their employees experience at work (Goler et al., 2018). They are in a position to craft employees' jobs, provide them with growth opportunities, give them tasks that utilize their strengths and provide flexible work options that make balance possible (Allen et al., 2010; Goler et al., 2018).



Based on their influential roles, it makes sense that managers are also a large determinant of employee well-being and engagement (Gallup, 2015b; Limeade & Quantum Workplace, 2016; Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010). They are therefore largely responsible for the success of individual employees, teams, and resulting organizational success. Using both academic and organizational research, this paper defines who managers are, explains why they matter, and reviews the common struggles experienced by managers. It concludes with a discussion of how organizations can in turn support their managers.

## MANAGER DEFINED

Overall, we can define managers as organizational workers who either lead a team or lead several teams to coordinate action and drive output. While they are not considered senior leadership or executives, they do interpret and execute senior leadership agendas through effective management of their teams (Osterman, 2008). By the nature of their position in the organization, managers have the influence to motivate employees (Risher, 2010). As a result, managers also influence employee engagement, retention and teamwork (Arth, 2011; Brewer, 2005). They do this through a variety of means and may assume many different roles throughout the process.

## MANAGERIAL ROLES

As Mintzberg (1973) explains, roles are clusters of expected behaviors associated with one's position. Because of their given positions, managers put on a variety of different "hats" and assume many different roles within an organization. In his seminal work, Mintzberg (1973) organized and defined 10 expected managerial roles into three overarching role categories: informational, decisional, and interpersonal. For example, individual contributors look to their managers as collectors and disseminators of work-related information (informational category), allocators of resources and delegators of tasks (decisional category), and interpersonal leaders and liaisons that connect them with others across the organization (interpersonal category).

Though Mintzberg’s (1973) work on the nature of managerial work was influential in providing an understanding of the wide array of roles that managers tend to take on, the list of roles has since then evolved and increased in scope. For example, DuBrin (2012) expanded Mintzberg’s 10 managerial roles to 17 roles, and grouped them under 4 categories: planning, organizing and staffing, leading and controlling. Though these roles help organize and account for more contemporary managerial work activities, the relative importance of these roles may differ by organization, manager, team or individual. See Table 1 below for a list of these managerial roles.

## MANAGERIAL ROLE TAXONOMIES

MINTZBERG (1973)		DUBRIN (2012)		
CATEGORY	MANAGERIAL ROLE	CATEGORY	MANAGERIAL ROLE	
Informational	Monitor	Planning	Strategic planner	
	Disseminator		Operational planner	
	Spokesperson	Organizing and staffing	Organizer	
Decisional	Entrepreneur		Liaison	
	Disturbance handler		Staffing coordinator	
	Resource allocator		Resource allocator	
Interpersonal	Negotiator		Task delegator	
	Figurehead	Leading	Figurehead	
			Leader	Spokesperson
			Liaison	Negotiator
			Motivator and coach	
			Team builder	
			Team player	
			Technical problem solver	
			Entrepreneur	
		Controlling	Monitor	
			Disturbance handler	

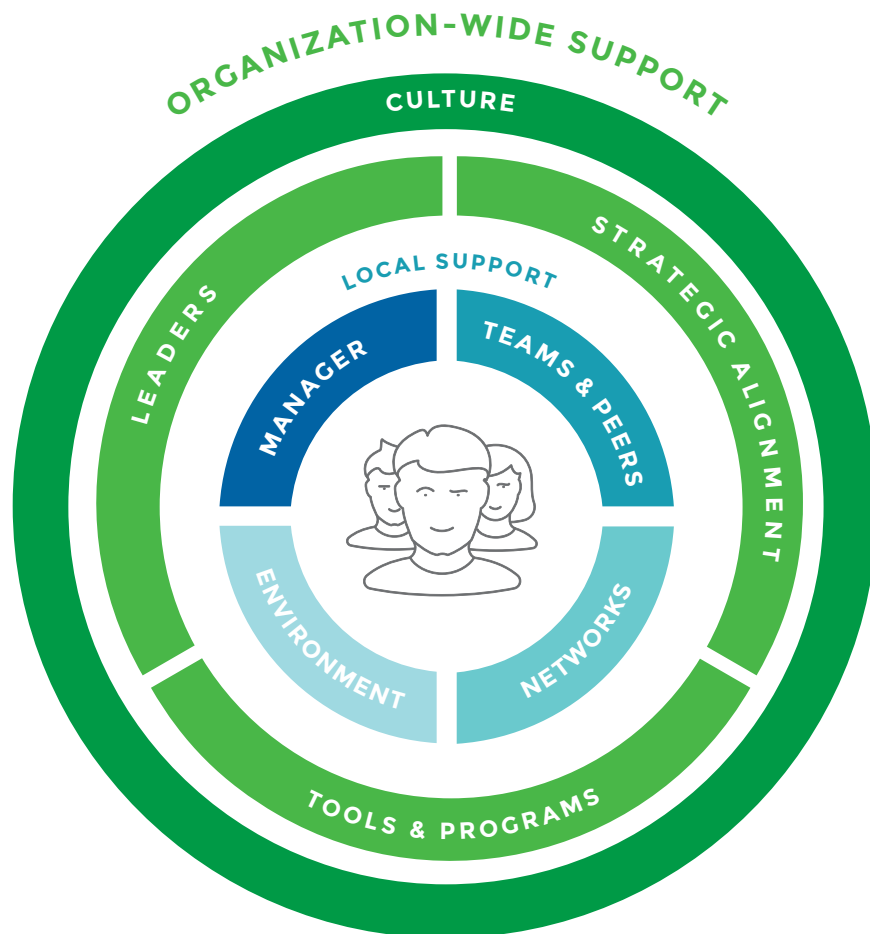


As Fuller and Shikaloff (2016) mention, since managers play many different roles to meet diverse demands, it is “difficult to measure and quantify what good management actually looks like” (p.2). It may come as no surprise, then, that an exhaustive taxonomy of managerial roles is ambiguous and difficult to establish (Hales, 1986). A consistent pattern that research has found, however, is that the level of management influences role assumptions such that allocator, spokesperson, and figurehead roles tend to be more expected from top managers while lower-level managers are more often concerned with technical problems, staffing, and monitoring subordinate performance (Yukl, 2013). Laud, Arevalo, and Johnson (2014), in an attempt to summarize the managerial role research to date, evaluated the extent to which established managerial role taxonomies capture the broader and dynamic experience of current managers. They conclude that managers today, while still maintaining some of the roles and responsibilities outlined above, are shifting from traditional models of management to a more inclusive and relational management style. This may reflect the overall shift of the current world of work towards a more holistic and relational employee experience (Bersin, Flynn, Mazor, & Melian, 2018; Morgan, 2017).

## WHY MANAGERS MATTER

Managers have been found to be one of the strongest drivers of employee well-being and engagement (Gallup, 2015b; Limeade & Quantum Workplace, 2016). It may seem counterintuitive that organizations are heavily influenced by what happens in the middle of the organization rather than the top (Currie & Procter, 2005), however most employees say their immediate managers matter more to their work experience than C-suite leadership when it comes to well-being support (Limeade & Quantum Workplace, 2016). Additionally, an internal analysis of the Limeade Well-Being Assessment revealed that the item, “my manager ‘looks out’ for me” was one of the statistically significant drivers of employees’ levels of engagement.

Managers play a key role in influencing the extent to which employees experience role clarity, autonomy, purpose, and recognition – factors all correlated with a positive and engaging work experience (Grant & Hofmann, 2011; Herzberg, 2003; Morgeson, Garza, & Campion, 2012; Pink, 2009; Ventrice, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). All in all, managers are an integral part of the organization and overall employee well-being, as visualized in the Limeade Organizational Support for Well-Being Model (see Figure 1).







## COMMON STRUGGLES EXPERIENCED BY MANAGERS

Given the wide range of roles that managers may assume in order to meet the diverse demands they face (Laud et al., 2014), it makes sense that the pace of managerial work is often hectic and seemingly without boundaries. In addition to managerial responsibilities, managers often have their own individual contributor work responsibilities and deadlines to meet as well. In the midst of many demands and constraints (both organizational and personal), “managers receive almost continuous requests for information, assistance, direction, and authorization from a large number of people, such as subordinates, peers, superiors, and people outside of the organization” (Yukl, 2013; p. 24). This makes the content of managerial work quite varied, fragmented, and fraught with frequent interruptions and disjointed activities. In other words, managers are often quickly switching between different “hats”, called role expectations, based on what others may need from them at any given time (Hales, 1986; Yukl, 2013).

The nature of managerial work roles therefore opens the door for managers to experience role conflict: conflicting pressures and expectations of how the manager is to behave to any given time (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975). Role conflict may involve disagreements about how managers should do their work, what they should focus on, or how they should prioritize their work. For example, while certain team members may expect hands-on guidance from their manager around work task organization, pressures from senior leadership may take up time and availability of the manager to effectively dedicate personal resources to both. As an example, “in trying to reconcile conflicting role expectations, a manager is likely to be more responsive to the expectations of superiors, because they wield more power over [the manager] than do subordinates” (Yukl, 2013; p. 31).

Additionally, managers with larger teams report having less time for interpersonal relationship building and for providing the support, encouragement, and recognition their subordinates desire (Ford, 1981; Goodstadt & Kipnis, 1970; Yukl, 2013). Heller and Yukl (1969) found that as span of control (i.e., the number of functions, teams, or subordinates a manager is responsible for) increases, managers spend less time with their teams and rely instead on more delegation and autocratic decision-making to effectively deal with the overload of responsibility.



In the midst of these challenges, however, research suggests that managers who are able to reconcile competing demands and expectations of their leaders and teams are more likely to be effective (Mann & Dent, 1964; Tsui, 1984). Next, we review some strategies for organizations, managers, and individual employees to help support managers in this pursuit.

### LIMEADE MANAGER POINT OF VIEW

Managers play a critical role in organizations. They help foster employee motivation, well-being and engagement. It is important for organizations to support managers and their well-being and provide resources for them to manage and support their teams well.

## HOW MANAGERS CAN BE SUPPORTED

Given the weight of responsibilities that fall on managers, both with their own work tasks and the well-being and responsibilities of their team, managers are especially prone to experiencing stress and burnout. As research has identified, workload, role conflict, role ambiguity and job demands as work stressors that may lead to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Without any organizational support to manage others and maintain their own well-being, it is unrealistic to expect managers to responsibly accomplish their respective tasks and objectives while also covering multiple role expectations, building interpersonal relationships with their subordinates and providing the necessary resources and support to their own team(s). The Limeade product, as it targets customized content and activities to managers to drive coordinated and data-backed action, is a resource for managers to understand what their teams need from them and where they need to focus their limited resources and energy. Below are some additional recommendations for how organizations, managers and employees can further support organizational managers.



## ORGANIZATIONS

- 1. Clarify goals and expectations.** The process for communicating goals from leaders to the rest of the organization is typically a “cascade” down the hierarchy from the CEO to managers to all other employees (Garr, 2011). An unintended consequence is that, many times, goals become progressively less clear as they cascade. This creates conflict and confusion as managers constantly balance competing deadlines and priorities. A reason for this confusion may be that organizational goals are often communicated once through a summary e-mail, leaving managers to interpret these larger goals into practical, individual actions for employees. Providing software and other systems to keep track of organizational goal conversations may be helpful, and consistent communication of goals, responsibilities, and expectations of managers is essential to avoid role conflict.
- 2. Provide manager self-care opportunities.** Organizations should provide managers opportunities for self-care to further an environment of manager support. While all employees need support, managers need to care for themselves first so that they can, in turn, care for others well. This may include, but is not limited to, paid time off benefits, ample health care benefits, or organization-sponsored activities. Self-care in managers will, by example, instill healthier self-care in employees. Moreover, given the overload of roles and responsibilities that may be expected of them, managers may be especially susceptible to burnout if their demands are not met with recovery to replenish their limited personal resources (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). It is therefore important for organizations to invest in an intentional culture of manager support that strongly encourages, enables, and expects manager self-care.
- 3. Enable managers to support employees.** To help managers best support their teams and employees, organizations should focus on providing managers with the tools and resources to effectively do so. For example, organizations should encourage and give time to managers to have frequent one-on-one meetings with their employees to discuss their work and whole-person well-being. Since these one-on-one discussions may include identification of potential roadblocks and barriers, it is important that managers have the power, discretion, resources and time to help their employees navigate them successfully. However, as mentioned earlier, these types of meetings are not always feasible.



It is therefore important for organizations to consider alternative resources to provide to managers that enable them to best manage and support their teams. For example, tools that can help foster team trust, inclusion and social recognition would be of great aid to managers that are already expected to do this for their teams (Thompson, 2011).

## MANAGERS

- 1. Avoid unnecessary activities.** In addition to requests from leaders and direct reports, managers are often turned to with requests from teams outside of their own, including members outside of the organization itself. It is easy for these types of requests and activities to add up and consume a manager's schedule, especially since managers often have their own individual contributor work tasks to complete as well. It is therefore essential for managers to avoid unnecessary tasks by preparing tactful ways to say "no". This can include suggesting other individuals within the organization who may be able to accomplish the task, directing them to the right content online, explaining where the requested activity falls on the current list of priorities, or by discussing how other important tasks may be delayed or impacted as a result of the specific ask. Often, the individual who requested the task in the first place may realize that they can adapt or respond accordingly. Or in some cases, they may realize that the task is not needed after all. In any case, managers need to be especially mindful and intentional about limiting the amount of avoidable activities on their plate.
- 2. Build in recovery time.** Managers should focus on taking time to take care of themselves and their own well-being, such as using their own personal/sick days to recover. Not only will this allow managers to recover from the demands of their role, doing so will encourage the members of their team to do the same. For example, managers should openly let their team know when they are taking time to work from home or recover from a demanding project. Recovery from demands can take many different forms but can include relaxation time, blocked focus time on calendars, or detachment from work. Given the numerous requests managers face throughout the day for assistance and direction, it is also important to build in times throughout the work day for focus, reflection, and recovery – even if just for a few minutes between meetings.



**3. Time management – plan (and stick to) your schedule.** Managers should also actively consider boundaries of work and promote whole-person well-being. As Yukl (2013) explains, typical managers already work long hours and find it difficult to forget about their workload when at home. It is therefore important for managers to hold themselves accountable to plan and stick to a schedule that considers their whole-person well-being. This can be as simple as refraining from sending emails during PTO, over the weekend or after work hours unless necessary (Fuller, Shikaloff, Cullinana, & Harmon, 2018). Managers should know that by holding themselves accountable, they also play an influential role in setting the tone for what is acceptable and encouraged within the organization and their team.

## EMPLOYEES

- 1. Clarify your expectations.** It is important for role expectations to be discussed and clarified in order for managers to understand what is desired and required of them – both from superiors and subordinates. Although this may feel awkward and uncomfortable, it is important for employees to communicate their expectations regarding factors such as manager support and goal clarity. Team members may differ in their desired level of manager involvement in their work and should review and check-in with their managers on a regular basis. Not only will this help the manager better understand which specific managerial roles are more valued and expected of them from their team, but will allow the individual employees and the organization as a whole to benefit from fulfilled expectations (Turnley, Bolino, Lester, & Bloodgood, 2003).
- 2. Give your manager feedback.** Just as managers provide their team members with constructive and consistent feedback, managers also need quality feedback on how they are supporting their teams. Attaining this employee feedback may be difficult, as employees may avoid giving their managers feedback out of fear. For example, our internal interviews revealed that employees hesitate to give their managers feedback as to avoid real or perceived hurt feelings (Moses, 2018). However, there are many ways in which employees can give feedback to their managers, including company-wide surveys or anonymous feedback platforms.



**3. Respect their time.** Team members and direct reports should be mindful and sympathetic of the hectic nature of managerial roles and respect their manager's time and well-being. Although it is important to maintain consistent communication and awareness of relevant work-related information, respecting time may include limiting unnecessary meetings and emails that can overload a manager's schedule. Additionally, although individual contributors look to their managers as collectors and disseminators of organizational information and interpersonal liaisons that connect them with others across the organization (Mintzberg, 1973), individual employees should challenge themselves and make active efforts to reach out to other individuals within the organization that may be of help for any particular task or question.

## CONCLUSION

Managers play a critical role in organizations and have an important influence on employee well-being, engagement, and the overall employee experience (Gallup, 2015b; Limeade & Quantum Workplace, 2016; Morgan, 2017). Given the weight of responsibilities that fall on managers, it is important for organizations to enable and support their managers by investing in focused and intentional manager support. Generally, managers need to be supported in the same way all employees do; however, managers do need focused support because of the unique demands that accompany their roles.



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