

Lyra

# Managing Expectations

Protecting the managers in your workforce from burnout



George\* loved his job as an engineering manager overseeing a team of six developers at a startup. Though he was very busy, he enjoyed his day-to-day work. But when his department was going through a reorganization, he took on five additional team members. At the same time, he was helping plan major strategic initiatives and projects with other team leads. His days went from routinely managing projects and helping his team members navigate their workloads to being in back-to-back meetings, sometimes for as long as nine consecutive hours.



“There were days when I couldn’t even find time to eat,” he said. “I had 11 one-on-ones per week, and the team really needed those touch-bases, especially the new members of my team. This was in addition to all of the other meetings I was in. I was trying to get work done and write documentation early in the morning and late at night. When you work from home and can’t find a moment to get a glass of water, that’s too much.”

Eventually, this fatigue started extending beyond work. “At the end of the day, I was completely exhausted and all I wanted to do was go to sleep,” he said.

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**I didn’t even have the energy to engage in conversations with my family. I was mentally and physically drained. I also started dreading Mondays, which wasn’t like me at all.**

George cared about his team and wanted to be there for them. While he was able to help alleviate their stress, especially through the transition, he felt himself quickly getting overwhelmed and burning out.

\*Name changed to maintain anonymity

## More than a manager

Managers are a vital part of any organization. They fill the gap between upper leadership and individual contributors and, like George, many managers spend much of their time supporting their team members. They help them navigate not just day-to-day work, but also changes in team structure, process, and policy, which are often stressful for employees.



**Managers are the glue for any organization. They bridge leadership, strategy, and vision from the top and are responsible for cascading them throughout the organization.**

– Keren Wasserman, Organizational Development Program Manager  
on the Workforce Transformation team at Lyra Health



of surveyed workers felt their manager impacted their mental health as much as their spouse

Source: [UKG](#)

This is especially important with [remote and hybrid workforces](#), where in-person interaction is limited and information has to be purposefully disseminated. Managers are also often the main point of contact throughout the day for their team, and may have insight into what is and isn't working on the team.



of middle managers are at risk for burnout

Source: [Future Forum](#)

This level of contact means managers have a profound impact on their employees, both personally and professionally. Almost [70 percent of the workforce](#) felt their manager impacted their mental health as much as their spouse.



The weight of all of this responsibility takes a toll. Research shows that mid-level managers are reaching burnout more than other workers. A [recent survey](#) found the highest levels of stress and [burnout](#) and lowest levels of [work-life balance](#) are in the middle-management level. This same survey showed an astounding 43 percent of middle managers are at risk for burnout.

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**Managers are just as susceptible to burnout as other employees and may start exhibiting the typical signs and symptoms. They may start feeling overwhelmed by the work and could begin disengaging as a result.**

**– Keren Wasserman**

Since managers are vital to both overseeing work and the employee experience, their disengagement could have devastating effects on their team.

### **Manager engagement is declining**

Recent [Gallup polls](#) showed employee engagement dropped for the first time in a decade. According to these polls:



Managers had some of the biggest declines in engagement



There has been a significant increase in manager burnout



Managers saw the steepest declines in feeling that they have clear expectations and someone who encourages their development

Source: [Gallup](#)

# Where is manager burnout coming from?

With an increasing emphasis on mental health, why is this vital section of the workforce seeing an increase in burnout? The answer is as complex as burnout itself, and multiple factors can be involved.

## Managers are shouldering the burdens of their team

[Managers are often the first point of contact](#) for employees struggling with professional and personal stress. While they want their team members to thrive, they may or may not be equipped to provide help.

“I had team members dealing with some significant personal issues,” said George. “They were doing great at work, but I knew the stress was getting to them. Sometimes all they really needed was to share what was happening in their lives. Other times I had to step in and support them, whether that was by facilitating medical leave or helping rearrange their priorities. I wanted to help them, but I also felt like I was taking on a lot of their stress myself.”

Providing some level of emotional support has become a more central part of being a manager since the pandemic, but training to help managers navigate this new responsibility hasn't kept up. In a [recent Lyra survey](#), nearly two-thirds of managers felt their role had become more important and more difficult since 2020, and that they were ill equipped to provide support.

This also puts [managers at risk for compassion fatigue](#). Similar to burnout, this form of stress is caused by providing emotional support to others. Compassion fatigue has seen a dramatic increase in the workplace since the beginning of the pandemic and, like burnout, can result in an inability to be empathetic toward employees.

## Managers are trying to preserve work-life balance for their team members

Similar to providing emotional support, managers may be trying to reduce stress by keeping their team from working too many hours or taking on too big of a workload. They may take on more requests rather than delegate to their team. But taking on bigger workloads while also managing a team can backfire.

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Often, managers are shielding their individual contributors from poor work-life balance, so they take on extra tasks. As a result, they may experience higher levels of burnout because they are both executing the work and managing it.

– Keren Wasserman

### Teams may be facing role and priority ambiguity

Just as [role ambiguity and a lack of clear priorities](#) are factors in burnout for employees, they can also add stress to managers. When priorities across the team, department, or organization are unclear, it can cause confusion and friction. Managers of different teams and departments may have conflicting priorities, which can cause friction between teams that need to work together. This may make it unclear which responsibilities fall to which team, often leaving managers to over-extend themselves into other areas to ensure projects are finished, or to protect members of their team from conflict or excess work.

### New managers may not be fully supported as they grow into their role

When individual contributors are promoted to managing teams, the support they previously had from their managers may no longer be there, or it may be reduced. In some cases, they may become an authority figure overnight, with almost no training on how to lead.

“New managers are often left to fend for themselves,” noted Wasserman. “They may not necessarily [know how to lead a team](#) right away. Organizational leaders need to take the time to check in and provide support—something all people and all levels within an organization need to be successful.”

## Managers are responsible for sharing sometimes difficult news with their teams

When there's difficult news to share, it's usually [managers who are tapped to](#) communicate it with their teams. Often, this means explaining decisions they had no part in making. From workforce reductions and changes in team structure to new policies around remote and hybrid work, managers are the ones talking their teams through the transition. They're also helping their team tactically navigate new circumstances while also helping them deal with any accompanying emotions. In many cases, such as with George and his team's restructuring, change is just as challenging for the manager as the employees, both logistically and emotionally.

# Supporting those who support your workforce

There's a lot riding on the shoulders of managers, but there are steps organizations can take to protect the mental health of their workforce at all levels.

## Align priorities throughout departments and teams

One of the most important steps to prevent burnout for all employees is for department leaders to clearly define priorities and role responsibilities. Removing ambiguity can help reduce friction and anxiety about what needs to happen next, and who's going to do the work.

"If priorities are aligned and everyone is clear on the work scope, then the manager will know what they and the team need to focus on to deliver the best possible results," noted Wasserman.

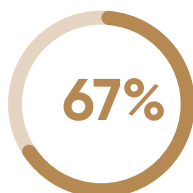
## Offer ongoing training

Just as learning should never stop, leadership training should be a continuous effort. Training can help managers not only learn to lead a team, but also how to navigate helping team members through personal stress, delegate responsibility when needed, and support their team by offering greater [job autonomy](#).

"Consider coaching managers to provide their individual contributors greater job autonomy," said Wasserman. "More autonomy can lead to greater job satisfaction across the board. When individuals feel greater ownership over their work, managers are free from providing detailed oversight so that they can focus on other priorities to avoid becoming consistently overloaded."



It's important that managers know what training is available to them. According to a [Lyra survey](#), only 53 percent of supervisors said they have the resources and training needed to cultivate a supportive work experience. In contrast, 67 percent of benefits leaders said managers have these types of resources and training, so evangelizing these resources is just as important as providing them.



**of benefits leaders said managers have the resources and training needed to cultivate a supportive work experience.**

Source: [Lyra Health's 2023 State of Workforce Mental Health](#)

### Provide support at every level

Ongoing support also plays an important role in preventing manager burnout. Managers often have regular one-on-ones with team members, but sometimes managers aren't able to have the same touch-base with their own supervisors, which can feel isolating. Continuing to check in at every level can create opportunities for managers to ask for help when they need it.

"My director is great and we have our own one-on-ones," George said. "I told him I was reaching my limit. He asked how he could help and he encouraged me to use PTO to rest and reset. It helped tremendously to take a break and know that my team was still being supported while I was offline."



**During check-ins, managers should be encouraged to talk through the challenges they're experiencing, including their stress levels. When senior leaders help devise solutions, managers don't feel they have to find all of the answers themselves.**





**There's no stage within a career ladder where suddenly people don't need coaching, guidance, or support in their role.**

**– Keren Wasserman**

### **Offer individual mental health benefits and encourage managers to take advantage of them**

Mental health benefits are widely offered as part of a comprehensive benefits package, but if they aren't publicized, employees may not know support is available to them. By promoting the benefits and normalizing their use, employees and managers are more likely to utilize them. Start by having company leaders talk openly about their mental health and the available benefits. This encourages managers to not only seek support but also feel more comfortable helping their team members find help when needed.

#### **How Lyra can help**



Lyra's [workforce assessment program](#) evaluates which work factors are causing mental distress for employees as well as managers. This can help employers understand what's underlying the distress so they know how to provide targeted tactical training to empower managers. In addition, Lyra's training programs can help managers learn the skills they need to lead and support their teams.

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## About Lyra Health

[Lyra Health](#) helps leading companies improve access to effective, high-quality mental health care for their employees and their families. With Lyra's innovative digital care platform and global provider network, members receive the best care and get better faster.

Learn more about supporting the well-being of your employees and their families.

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