Build a Better Manager

Giving managers the tools to help themselves, their teams, and your organization





Introduction

Managers are the keystones of organizational success, profoundly influencing workplace productivity, employee engagement, and workforce well-being. Their impact reverberates throughout the company, shaping not only daily operations but also long-term financial performance and market position.

Effective managers can significantly boost employee engagement and performance, while poor management can lead to decreased motivation and higher turnover rates. Work led by Gallup showed, for example, that managers account for up to **70% of the variation in employee engagement scores**.

Managers also have a powerful impact on employee mental well-being. A global study by UKG's **Workforce Institute** showed that managers have as powerful an impact on mental health as a spouse (69% of employees agree) and substantially greater impact than a doctor (51%) or therapist (41%).

Despite—or perhaps due to—their pivotal role in workforce well-being and performance, manager well-being has taken a relatively larger hit than that of individual contributors since the pandemic.

Drawing on research conducted by meQ, this report details the benefits of resilient, empathetic managers for the workforce and explores key challenges your managers may be facing.

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Managers are Pivotal in Virtually Every Way

MENTAL WELL-BEING

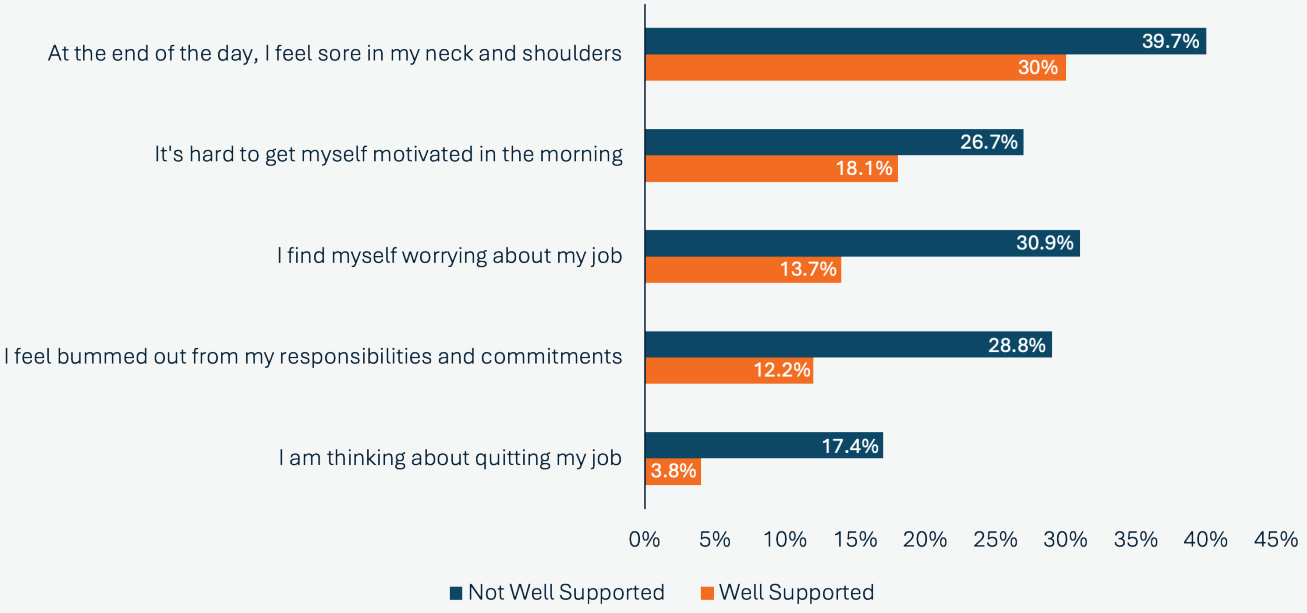
It's difficult to overstate the impact of manager support for mental well-being on employee outcomes. meQ members surveyed for a **recent Workforce Well-being Report** were asked whether they felt their manager did a good job supporting their individual mental well-being. Comparisons across a series of outcomes (stress, motivation, burnout) were made between employees who reported they felt strongly supported and those who felt less well supported.

The results were startling. Well supported employees were 25% less likely to struggle with somatic symptoms of stress, 33% less likely to have a hard time getting motivated in the morning, and 56% less likely to have high work stress. Further, the prevalence of burnout is 58% lower among employees who enjoy strong manager support for mental well-being.

The cumulative impact of strong manager support is aptly summarized by the retention risk differential noted in FIGURE 1: Employees who don't feel well supported by their manager are 4.5 times more likely to be a retention risk (17.4% vs 3.8% considering quitting their job).

Well-Being Outcomes and Perceived Turnover Intent by Degree of Perceived Manager Well-Being Support

Percent of employees agreeing or strongly agreeing with each statement (n=2,911)



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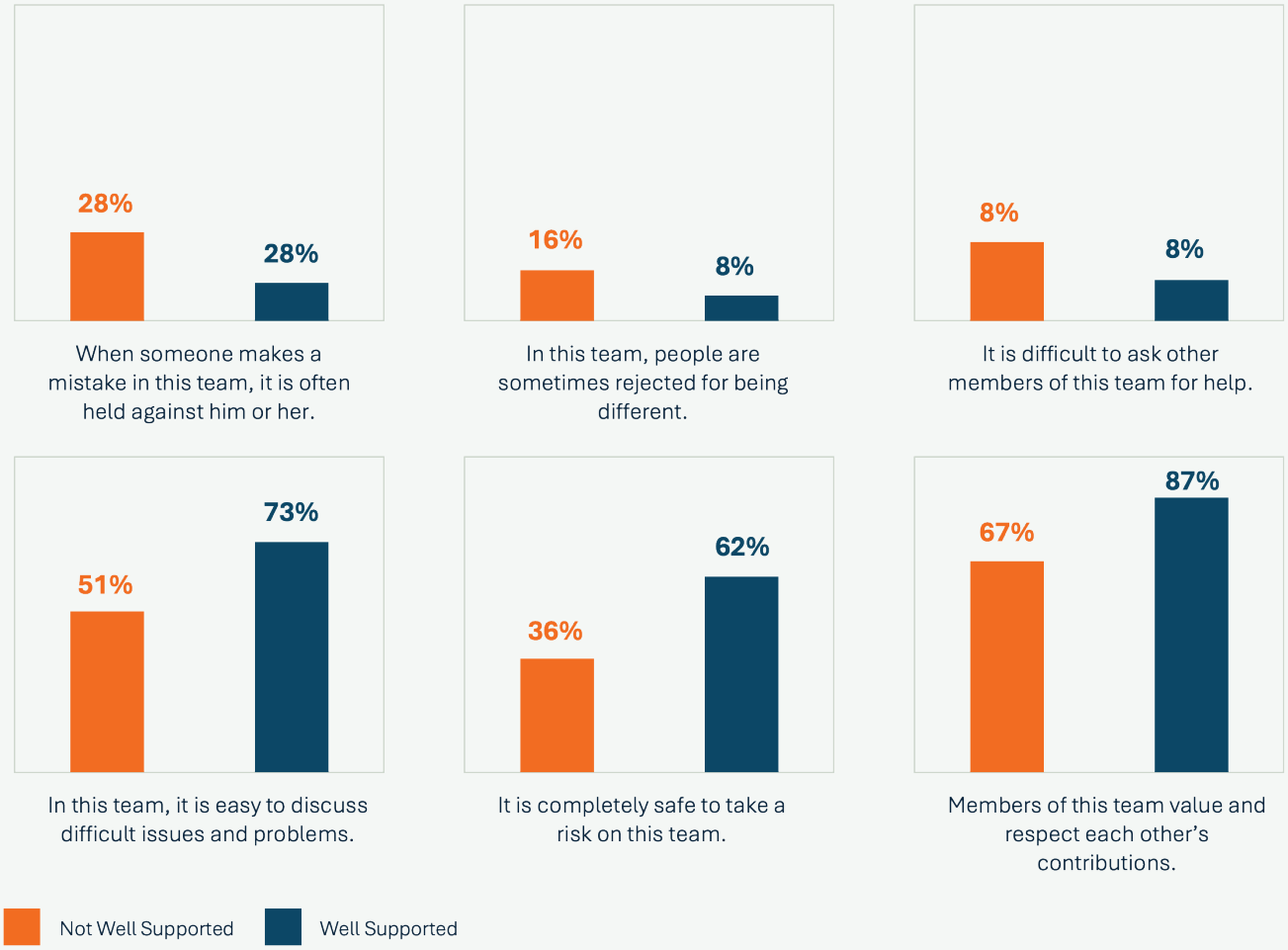
PRODUCTIVITY & PERFORMANCE

Research consistently demonstrates that effective management is pivotal in driving productivity. A study by Bloom et al. (2012) found that improving management practices was associated with a 25% increase in productivity across a range of industries. In retail, individual managers can account for **25–35% of the variation in productivity at the store level**. The same study suggests that replacing a bad manager with a good one can boost productivity by more than 10%.

Managers also have a powerful impact on innovation and creativity. Managers who are looking out for the mental well-being of team members create psychologically safe environments, where employees feel comfortable taking reasonable risks and sharing ideas. Psychological safety has been shown to be the **key factor driving team innovation and creative output**. Our research shows that managers who are attentive to employee well-being also multiply psychological safety—in many cases improving the environment as much as twofold (FIGURE 2).

The differences in perceptions of psychological safety between individuals with strong and less strong manager support are substantial. Strong managers boost psychological safety by as much as 42%.

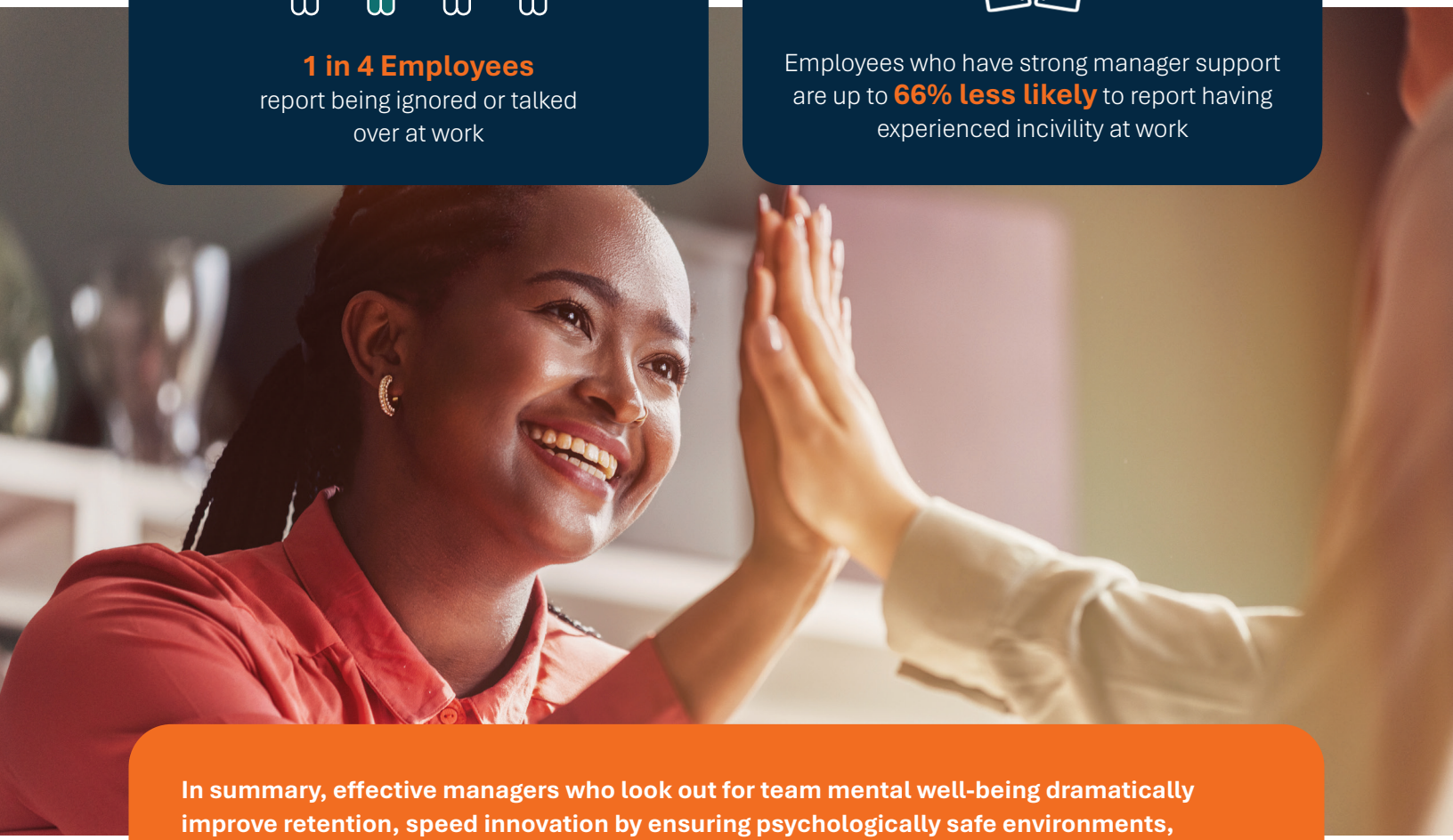
Employee Perceptions of Psychological Safety by Degree of Manager Support



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WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

Effective managers are the frontline defense against workplace incivility, too. Given the deepening polarization on political and social issues coupled with widespread economic pressures, it is unsurprising that workplace incivility is on the rise. Recent meQ research shows that mild forms of incivility are, in fact, quite common among employees, with as many as 1 in 4 employees reporting being ignored or talked over at work. Employees who have strong manager support are up to 66% less likely to report having experienced incivility at work.



1 in 4 Employees
report being ignored or talked over at work

Employees who have strong manager support are up to **66% less likely** to report having experienced incivility at work

In summary, effective managers who look out for team mental well-being dramatically improve retention, speed innovation by ensuring psychologically safe environments, cut burnout risk, reduce churn risk, boost productivity, and provide an important buffer against incivility.

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The Manager's Tightrope: Leadership Amidst Upheaval

THE EVIDENCE THAT MANAGERS ARE CONSEQUENTIAL FOR WORKFORCE WELL-BEING AND PERFORMANCE IS INDISPUTABLE.

Equally indisputable are the challenges that managers face on a daily basis. Managing people requires a diverse set of skills and the ability to navigate ever-shifting challenges. Managers must balance the needs of their team members with organizational goals, often under pressure and with limited resources. They need strong interpersonal or "soft" skills such as emotional intelligence, empathy, communication, and conflict resolution to build trust, motivate their team, and foster a positive work environment. At the same time, managers require "hard" skills like strategic thinking, financial acumen, and project management to make informed decisions, allocate resources effectively, and drive results.

The manager role demands adaptability, as managers must constantly shift between different responsibilities, from mentoring and coaching to problem-solving and decision-making. They also face the challenge of maintaining professional relationships while making difficult personnel decisions. Moreover, in today's rapidly changing landscape, managers must continually update their skills and knowledge to lead effectively in the face of technological advancements, evolving work cultures, and shifting market dynamics.

The already challenging role was further complicated by the pandemic, as managers not only took on additional work, but were also thrust into providing a higher level of care for their teams–which in many cases were newly remote. With the dramatic and sudden changes in the nature, scope, and structure of work that accompanied the pandemic, managers disproportionately took on new tasks and roles, and typically showed poorer well-being outcomes than the teams they led.

Data collected by meQ from our member population at that time showed that managers were nearly 40% more likely than non-managers to have taken on new roles and responsibilities during the pandemic.

Unsurprisingly, the expanded roles and responsibilities came at a cost, with **2.3x higher burnout and 4.1x greater job stress** accompanied by large degradations in motivation and sleep quality.

While the pandemic is mostly in the rearview mirror, it's clear that managers' roles have not returned to "normal." The key drivers of stress have merely shifted from a viral threat to challenging economic conditions and the rise of significant political and social polarization.

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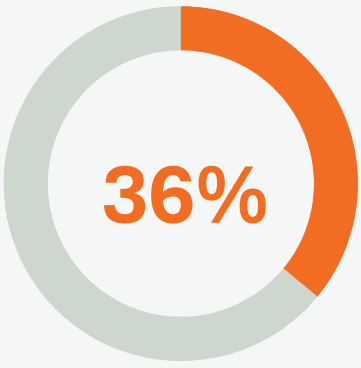
Ironically, Managers Feel Less Supported By Their Own Leaders.

The expanded roles and responsibilities managers have taken on, coupled with a more challenging economic, political, and social climate all combine to make their jobs both more difficult and more important than ever before.

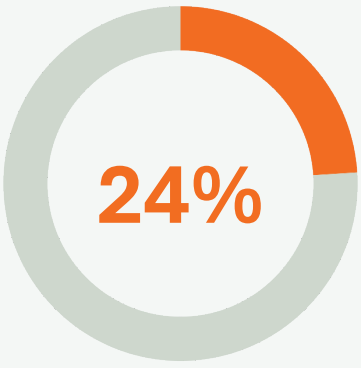
Unfortunately, however, managers do not seem to get the lift of supportive management from further up in the hierarchy. Data from a recent meQ Workforce Well-being Report shows that managers are 10% less likely than non-managers to report that their own manager supports their well-being. The lower perceived support from leadership, not surprisingly, has a negative impact on the well-being of managers, and is associated with greater stress and burnout risk. Recent data from meQ members shows that, compared to non-managers, managers are 36% more likely to report feeling burned out and 24% more likely to report considering quitting their job in the next 6 months.

MANAGERS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN WORKFORCE WELL-BEING AND PERFORMANCE, BUT FACE INCREASINGLY COMPLEX CHALLENGES IN TODAY'S RAPIDLY EVOLVING WORK ENVIRONMENT.

Recent data indicates that managers are experiencing higher levels of stress, burnout, and turnover risk compared to non-managers, partly due to expanded responsibilities and a perceived lack of support from their own leaders. Despite their importance to organizational success, managers are under greater strain than ever before, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to support this critical group.



Increase in **burnout** for managers vs. non-managers



Increase in **turnover** for managers vs. non-managers



Managers are **10% less likely** than individual contributors to feel their manager strongly supports their well-being

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So What? Now What?

It's easy to point out the challenges, problems and pain points. These data underscore the **growing concern** among HR and risk professionals about ineffective leadership.

IN ADDITION TO DRIVING BUSINESS OBJECTIVES, MANAGERS MUST ALSO PROVIDE FOR THE "CARE AND FEEDING" OF THEIR TEAMS.

These are skills that are not taught in business school or easily delivered by a learning management system. Soft skills are more important than ever, and those often get overlooked. They require a mindset shift both for themselves, as well as in the way that they lead.

This mindset shift includes reprioritizing managers' well-being, which has far-reaching impacts on workforce performance and business results. meQ's research, as well as our 20 years of experience training leaders, suggest a series of key actions to make managers' well-being a top priority:

Deploy Evidence-Based Techniques for Building Resilience

To enhance managers' effectiveness in leading their teams to success, organizations should implement comprehensive, evidence-based resilience-building programs. These programs should focus on equipping managers with practical tools to improve team interactions, communication, and collaboration.

Digital cognitive behavioral therapy tools can play a crucial role in helping managers recognize and replace unproductive thought patterns with more effective alternatives. By teaching managers how to lead with and model resilience, organizations can create a positive ripple effect throughout their teams. This approach not only strengthens the managers' ability to handle challenges but also empowers them to foster a more resilient and adaptable workforce. As managers develop these skills, they become better equipped to maintain clear communication channels, inspire collaborative problem-solving, and guide their teams through periods of change or uncertainty. Ultimately, investing in leader resilience translates to improved team performance, increased productivity, and a more positive work environment that drives organizational success.

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Prioritize Self-Care for Leaders

As in airline safety, a manager needs to put on her oxygen mask first before tending to the needs of others. This means actively encouraging and facilitating time for managers to engage in activities that promote their own mental and physical well-being. This could include setting boundaries on work hours, encouraging the use of vacation time, and providing resources for stress management and personal development. Organizations should consider implementing policies that explicitly support manager self-care, such as mandatory "disconnect" periods or sabbaticals. By prioritizing self-care for leaders, companies invest in the sustainability of their leadership pipeline and set a positive example for the entire organization.



Ease Access to Acute Mental Healthcare Resources

Typical utilization of employee assistance programs is 2-6%. Across the meQ book of business, more than 1 in 6 managers is struggling with symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. Improving access may include strategies ranging from contracting with an enhanced EAP program, working to reduce stigma and providing mental health first aid training, and using AI to confidentially help direct managers who are struggling to access resources already in your benefits ecosystem.



Foster a Supportive Culture

Create an environment where discussing mental health is destigmatized and modeled at the most senior levels in order to normalize and encourage help seeking as needed. Ensure there are regular check-ins, not by your managers but for your managers. Check-ins can easily fall off the calendar in favor of task management or project management meetings. Ensure that check-in meetings happen, and that there is adequate space for senior leaders to check in with their manager direct reports regularly. Practice authentic listening to build trust and foster open communication.



Promote Physical Wellness

Physical health is inextricably linked to mental well-being, and organizations should take active steps to support the physical health of their managers. This can include offering gym memberships or on-site fitness facilities, providing standing desks and ergonomic office equipment, and organizing group fitness activities or challenges. Companies might consider implementing "walking meetings" or outdoor brainstorming sessions to combine physical activity with work tasks. Additionally, offering health screenings, nutrition counseling, and wellness workshops can help managers take a proactive approach to their physical health. By investing in the physical wellness of managers, organizations can boost energy levels, reduce stress, and improve overall mental resilience.

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TOGETHER, THESE STEPS WILL IMPROVE MANAGERS' ABILITY TO HANDLE STRESS, COMMUNICATE CLEARLY, AND RESOLVE CONFLICTS, CONTRIBUTING TO ENHANCED MENTAL WELL-BEING AND, IN TURN, INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY AND INNOVATION WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION.

Mentally healthy managers are more likely to foster strong relationships with their teams, promote work-life balance, and serve as strong role models for positivity and successful stress management in the face of change. This not only enhances overall team performance but also reduces turnover rates, ensuring stability and continuity in leadership.



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