

# > The Frontline Leader Project

## Exploring the Most Critical Segment of Leaders

Transformation from individual contributor to leader.





# ➤ *Frontline Leader Research Project*

## Exploring the Most Critical Segment of Leaders

For decades, DDI has studied and worked alongside frontline managers through their transformation from individual contributor to leader. In our work, we've seen a common theme of anxiety—felt both by frontline leaders and the people around them. This lack of confidence is critical because frontline leaders are responsible for more than 80 percent of an organization's workforce and are directly responsible for executing an organization's strategy.

The Frontline Leader Project explores research behind the anxiety of frontline leaders, including their path to leadership, the challenges they face, and the expectations on them by other people.

## Explore the topics:

- The Road to Becoming a Manager
- Challenges Leaders Are Facing
- The Secret Life of Bosses
- What Do People Want From Their Frontline Leaders?



The road to leadership is often a bumpy ride.

## ➤ *The Road to Becoming a Manager*

Did you know that the average age that people first become a manager is 36? In this portion of our research, we answer not only when people get their first opportunity to lead, but also who typically gets the opportunity and how their background contributes to their successes and struggles.

These findings also explore the gender gap, show how the label “high potential” can impact the development of a first-level manager, and answer if MBAs create better leaders.

In this portion of our research, we analyzed survey and assessment data from more than 23,000 frontline leaders\* to examine the path to leadership.

*\*Research is based on data from more than 9,700 frontline leaders surveyed for the Global Leadership Forecast 2018, as well as DDI's assessment data from more than 13,700 frontline leaders.*

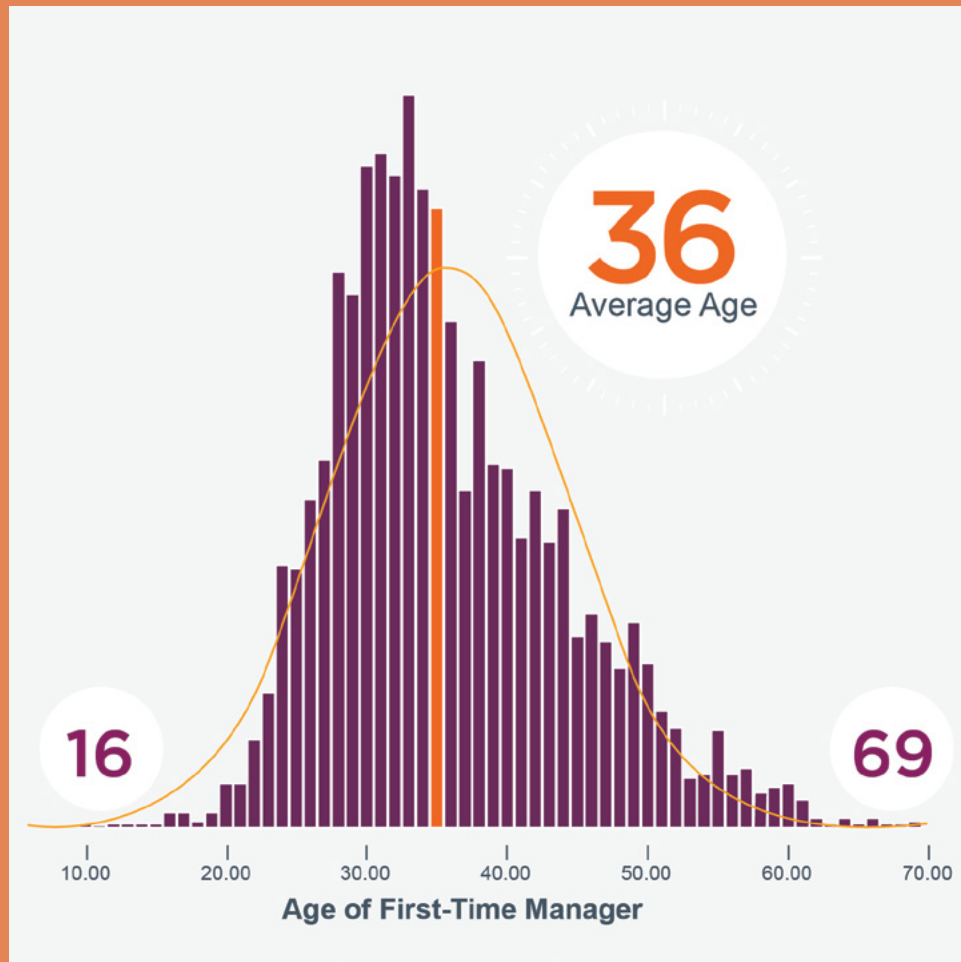
### **Explore the topics:**

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Challenges Leaders Are Facing

The Secret Life of Bosses

What Do People Want from Their Frontline Leaders?



What age do people first become managers?



# Become a Manager at Age 36

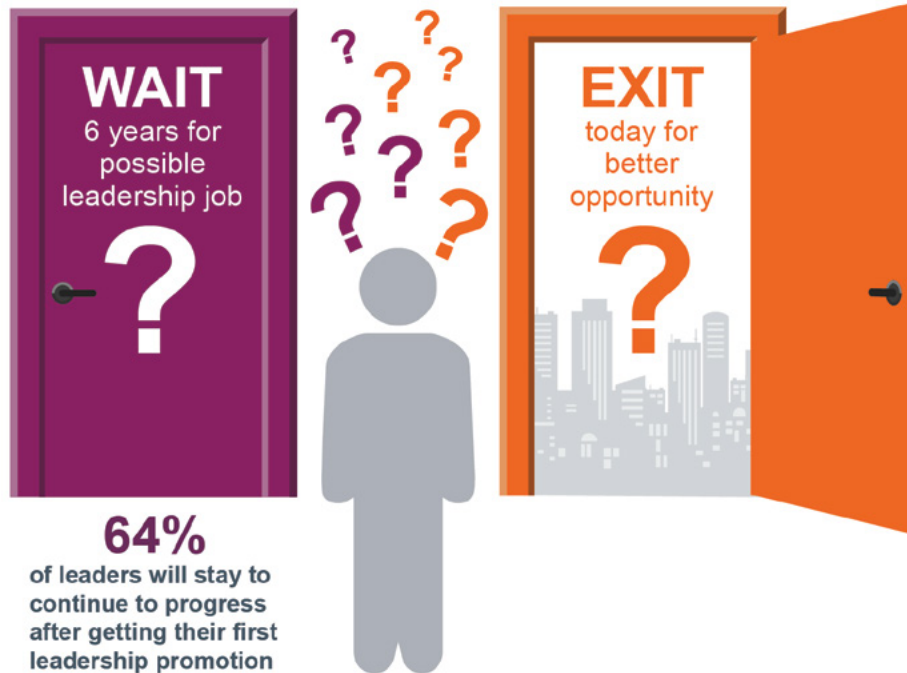
- ▶ The average age that people first become a manager is 36. While the majority of first-time leaders are between the ages of 25 and 38, people may be stepping into their first leadership job as young as 16 or as late in their careers as 69.

The varying ages people take on their first leadership role also has implications for their training and development. A one-size-fits-all approach likely won't fit the needs of both extremes—a young high-potential leader still getting comfortable in their first job has a very different learning trajectory than someone just promoted into their first leader role after having spent 30 or 40 years as an individual contributor.

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*“I was a bit worried [about becoming a leader]. I didn’t like change. I was quite set in my current job. I was coming into work, doing my time, and going home. I liked that.”*

— Operations manager, courier industry



To wait or not to wait?  
That is the question.



# To Wait or Not to Wait?

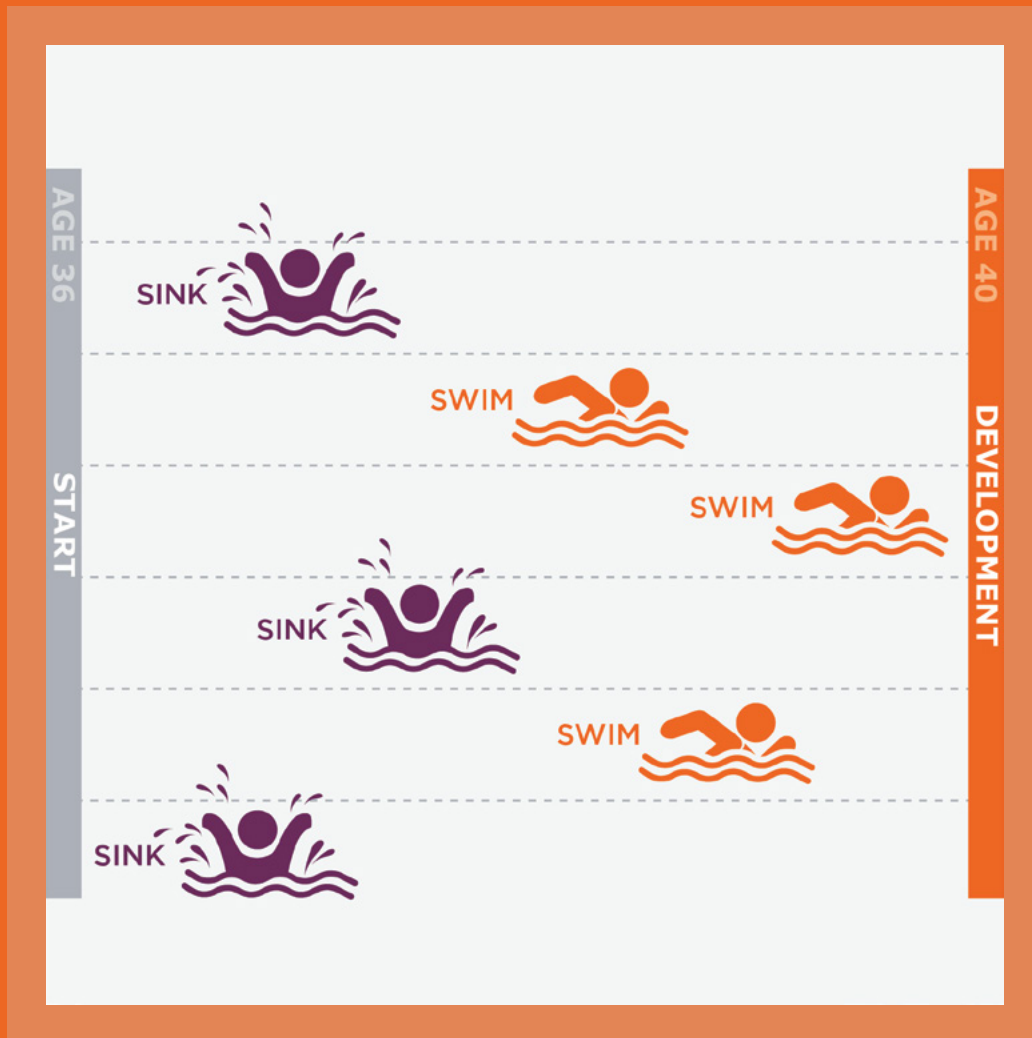
- ▶ The average organizational tenure of someone taking on their first frontline leader position is six years. However, as low unemployment rates persist and organizations increasingly rely on workers with specialized skill sets, top performers may not be patient and may feel they need to find a new employer to land their desired promotion. Therefore, companies that fail to promote leaders-to-be in a timely manner—or at least make it clear that they are on a path to leadership—may find themselves losing out on critical talent.

The good news is that the first step into leadership goes a long way toward retaining talented people: Once in a frontline manager role, 64 percent are willing to stay at an organization in order to progress to the next level of leadership.

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*“I had it in the back of my mind a few years ago that I wanted to progress, so when the opportunity came up at a new company, I jumped on it!”*

— Product design manager, software & technology industry



New managers often have  
little support during their transition.

# It's “Sink or Swim” in the First Four Years

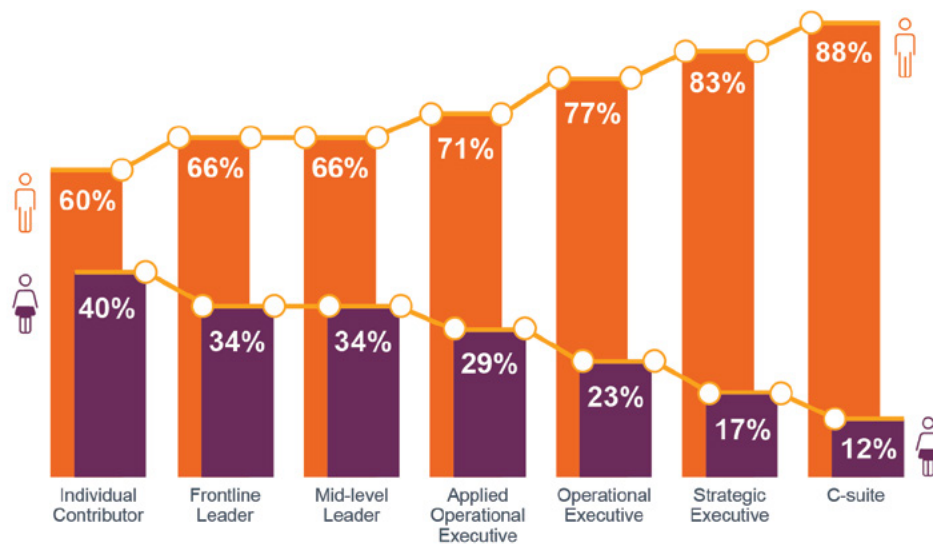
- ▶ Despite the difficulty of transitioning to a leadership role, new managers often have little support through the transition. Many leaders receive no training, and those that do receive training often have to wait several years for it. On average, people are 40 years old when they first go through leadership development courses—four years after the average age when people first become leaders.

What does this lack of timely training mean for the frontline leader? They may be making mistakes early in their leadership careers that may damage relationships with their direct reports or key partners, which could have long-term consequences.

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*“I was pretty overwhelmed to start with. My boss was pretty hands-off as far as actual training. I felt like he sort of shoved me in the pool to see if I could swim. The first couple of months were a little dicey for me and I was not sure I did the right thing by taking the job.”*

— Distributions manager, nonprofit organization



Women are progressively losing  
the chance to ascend.

# Gender Gaps Start Early

- ▶ Organizations with gender-diverse leadership see significant business benefits, yet women currently comprise less than one-third of all leadership roles, with the majority of those roles at the frontline. And when they do get the chance to lead, they often lead smaller teams. Our data shows female frontline leaders have a median of five direct reports, compared to seven for male frontline leaders.

These gender gaps form early, even before a woman steps into her first frontline manager role. Our data on leader candidates shows women are progressively losing the chance to ascend. Forty percent of all individual contributor candidates seeking first-time leader jobs are female, dropping to only 12 percent of C-suite candidates.

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*“I thought the whole ‘do business over golf thing’ was a cliché. It wasn’t. And by the second time I was passed over for a promotion, I got the message. I can’t fit in here.”*

— Female banker



## Hard Skills

Planning, Judgment, and Decision Making



## Soft Skills

Coaching Others, Facilitating Change,  
and Building Trusting Relationships

Performance is not explaining  
the gender gap.

# Performance Doesn't Explain the Gender Gap

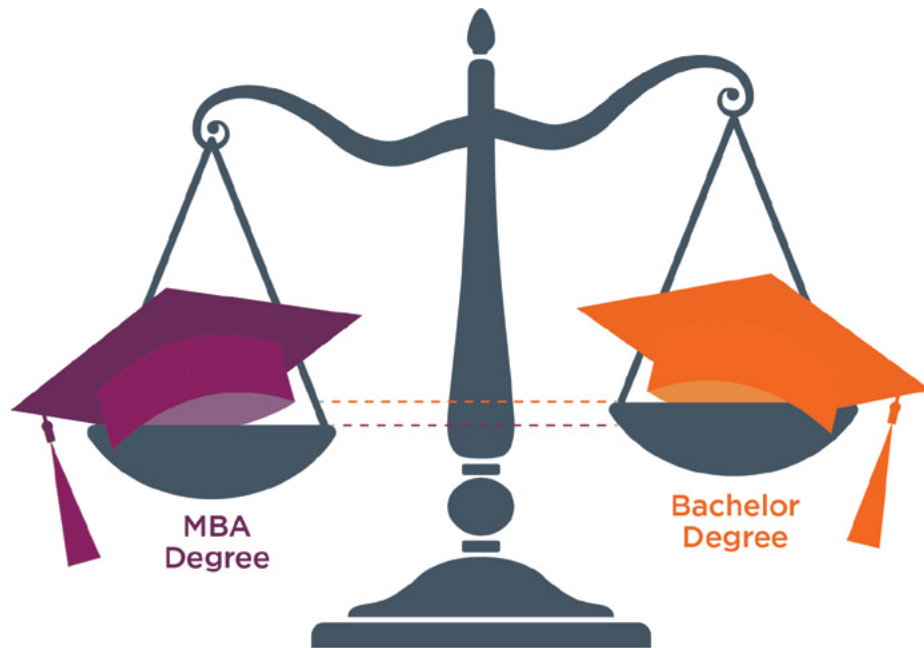
- ▶ One of the reasons often cited for the lack of women in leadership is that they may be naturally less qualified leaders. However, when comparing the leadership skills of women and men frontline leaders, women perform equally as well as men on the “hard skills”—planning, judgment, and decision making—and outperform men in both leadership and interaction “soft skills,” excelling in the areas of coaching others, facilitating change, and building trusting relationships. The evidence suggests that performance is not explaining the gap in access to leadership opportunities between men and women.

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*“I couldn’t figure out why he [male colleague with the same role] got to go to at least one conference every year. I was lucky to go to one every other year, even though I consistently get glowing performance reviews and my team’s engagement scores are off the charts.”*

— Director, healthcare organization





Managers with an MBA showed only minor increase in leadership skills.

# MBAs Don't Create Better Leaders

- ▶ Many people get MBAs for the sole purpose of landing higher-level leadership jobs, and these degrees don't come cheap. In the U.S., tuition averages around \$100,000. But does someone with an MBA outperform somebody without an MBA in terms of leadership capability? Frontline managers with an MBA showed only a minor increase in leadership behavior over those with bachelor's degrees in business who did not go on to achieve an MBA.

Organizations may be placing too much emphasis on only hiring candidates with MBAs for leadership roles, wrongly assuming the people they are hiring already have the skills to do the job, just because they have an MBA. In addition, they may be failing to provide enough leadership training for these groups, assuming that their MBA education had already covered it.

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*"I felt confident going into my first supervisory role. I even have an MBA, but I quickly found that it didn't prepare me to lead a team. I got feedback that made me question my interactions...some of my communication skills were definitely lacking."*

— Tool design manager, manufacturing

**45%**

of leaders get majority  
of development



**55%**

of leaders get left behind



Leaders not labeled as high potential  
get less development.

# More Than Half of Leaders Are Left Out

- ▶ If leaders want more training, they better hope they get labeled as a high potential. Forty-five percent of frontline leaders are formally identified as being part of their organization's high-potential pool, which means they get twice as much funding and 25 percent more development hours each year.

But what happens to the leaders left out of the pool? Leaders told they have low leadership potential show lower overall leadership ambition and a decrease in performance.

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*“Initial on-the-job training, let alone any long-term career development or coaching, was pretty much nonexistent for me.”*

— Manager, content development [not part of her company's “high-potential” pool]

### Strongest frontline leaders

- ★ Humanities
- ★ Healthcare
- ★ Mathematics

- Tie [
- ✗ Natural Sciences
  - ✗ Business

- Tie [
- ✗ Engineering
  - ✗ Social Sciences

- ✗ Information Technology

### Struggling frontline leaders

Education

The top- and bottom-ranked educational degrees across leader skills.

# Well-Rounded Leaders Study

## Humanities

- ▶ While science and technology degrees are often touted as offering better career options than degrees in the humanities, assessments show that people in STEM fields often struggle more to gain the key leadership skills they need to succeed at higher levels in the organization. Assessment results of leaders with different educational backgrounds showed deep disparities in critical leadership skills.

Leaders with humanities backgrounds showed the strongest performance in leadership skills focused on people and interactions. Conversely, our research shows leaders with degrees in business or the hard sciences (Math, Natural Sciences, Engineering) exhibited stronger performance in common business-related skills like judgment, problem analysis, and planning and organizing, but struggled with interaction-based skills.

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*“My background is in chemical engineering. How to talk to people, manage a team, motivate them...this is the stuff they don’t teach you in school. To say I felt ill-prepared to be a manager would be an understatement.”*

— Manager of R&D, chemical company



On the job, frontline leaders are grappling with substantial challenges that stand in the way of success.



## ► *Challenges Leaders are Facing*

Find out what frontline leaders are grappling with most—including which skills they feel least prepared to master, what they feel is lacking from their current development, why some leaders struggle to understand organizational purpose, and more.

In this portion of our research, we analyzed survey and assessment data from more than 23,000 frontline leaders\* to understand the challenges they face in their roles—from where they are struggling most to where they are thriving. A better grasp on the hardships of these leaders will lead us closer to understanding the root of the anxiety both within and surrounding their roles.

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**90%**  
of HR  
say their  
company  
has a

**28%**  
of leaders  
say their  
company  
has a

# MISSION Statement

Purpose is getting lost in translation.

# Struggling to See Purpose

- ▶ Our research shows purpose-driven companies outperform the market by 42 percent financially, and many corporate HR departments work tirelessly to create and perfect mission statements to drive purpose and inspire their leaders. Of the HR respondents we surveyed, 90 percent said their companies had mission statements.

Yet, only 28 percent of first-level leaders say their companies have a mission statement. On top of this, one third of the people we surveyed don't feel that the leaders in their organizations behave in a way that exemplifies the stated purpose of the organization. Somewhere along the way, purpose is getting lost in translation. While HR is creating documentation around organizational purpose, their messaging isn't getting to the front line.

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*“When I was asked if my company had a mission and vision statement, I drew a blank.”*

— Supervisor, oil and gas

only

**7%**

of leaders say  
failure is strongly  
embraced for innovation



To what extent is failure embraced  
in pursuit of innovation?

# No Room to Fail

- ▶ Business leaders often talk about the importance of “failing forward,” which means learning from failure to become even better. While this concept is embraced in theory to drive innovation, 14 percent of the first level managers we surveyed feel failure is not at all embraced in their organization in pursuit of innovation or different ideas, and only seven percent believe failure is embraced to a very great extent.

Managers taught to be risk-averse could be missing out on new ideas and the shared learning that comes from making mistakes. Not to mention, as the folks who lead the majority of an organization’s workforce, they could be engraining the idea that failure is unacceptable in the minds of their teams, who then allow their pursuit of perfection to squash innovation—a requirement for organizational success.

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*“In my first eight months of being a manager, I got some of my best learning out of trial and error. This was from both my own failure in leading and from witnessing the failure of others.”*

— Customer service manager, insurance



The critical skills frontline leaders  
need in the next 3 years.

# Digital Skills a Must

- ▶ When it comes to the most critical skills managers need in the next three years, HR rated skills surrounding intellectual and cultural curiosity, 360 degree thinking, digital literacy, leading with digitalization, and leading virtual teams as most important. The problem is all of these skills currently have a low development focus at organizations, showing that managers could be falling behind on developing the skills they'll need most to be successful in the future.

Identifying and developing talent is also a skill rated by HR as being critical for the future, and our research reveals leaders are only moderately effective in this area. While it's certainly positive that this is a current heavy focus area for frontline manager development, this is also an incredibly challenging skill to master, making it unlikely that they will be fully prepared to select the right talent for their teams in the next three years. Managers could be headed into the future already behind on the skills they'll need the most to thrive.

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*“When I first got into management, the one thing I didn’t anticipate was how time-intensive it would be to interview and hire. I wasn’t given any training on how to interview and trying to hire people and complete all my other work at the same time was a nightmare.”*

— Team lead, software



## MORE CONFIDENT



### What I Can **CONTROL**

- Determination
- Empathy
- Adaptability
- Alignment

## LESS CONFIDENT



### Working with **OTHERS**

- Providing inspiration
- Hyper-collaboration
- Developing talent

## LEAST CONFIDENT



### Going **DIGITAL**

- Digital literacy
- Leading with digitalization
- Leading virtual teams

Leaders rate their confidence in various skills.

# Unprepared to Lead a Digital Workforce

- ▶ Leaders reported relative confidence in skills related to their personal abilities—skills they have high control over—such as determination, empathy, adaptability, connectivity, and alignment, and reported less confidence in skills that depend on other people, such as providing inspiration, hyper-collaboration, driving execution, and developing future talent.

Skills related to the digital workforce have been rated by HR as among the most critical skills for the future, but leaders reported the least confidence, and even fear, in competencies surrounding digital literacy, leading with digitization, and leading virtual teams. This is problematic for management because skills surrounding the digital workforce are currently a low development focus for them, indicating a skill gap that is unlikely to close anytime soon—one that will likely only grow larger. What's more, leaders lacking confidence in even one realm of their skillset can affect their daily performance, as well as their ability to reach their full potential.

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*“The technology stuff, that is what’s most difficult for me. I can’t keep up with all the changes and I never feel prepared to teach what I’ve learned back to my team.”*

— Accounting manager, financial institution



Millennial leaders want more formal learning.

# Classroom is Still King—Even for Millennials

- ▶ Even more than they want additional coaching from their managers and external mentors, people want formal learning to help them develop their leadership skills. Of the first-level leaders we surveyed, 59 percent said they want more formal workshops, training courses, and seminars than they are currently getting.

Surprisingly, this finding extended to Millennial leaders, 65 percent of whom said they wanted more formal learning. While it's often assumed that the “digital generation” wants everything delivered via technology, it's also worthwhile to consider that they are the most educated generation in history and are highly used to a classroom setting. Our data on the learning preferences of Millennials concurs, revealing that what this subset of leaders is used to in terms of formal learning is also how they prefer to be developed.

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*“Of the leadership training I’ve participated in so far, I much prefer the training that’s in an actual classroom. Call me old school, but this is how I learn the best.”*

— Marketing manager, telecommunications



Frontline leaders are not getting  
the development they need.

# Craving Coaching

- ▶ In our research of frontline leaders, most indicated they are not receiving the type of learning and development they need to be more effective leaders in their organization. Nearly half of the people we surveyed said they wanted more coaching from their current manager than they are currently getting, and 57 percent said they wanted more external coaching than they are currently getting. And when it comes to their overall development needs—the activities that improve the skills, abilities, and confidence of leaders—nearly half of the first-level managers we surveyed (49 percent) said they are not getting the development support they need from their leaders.

It's clear that frontline leaders crave more coaching, and the external coaching they want most is often not an option at their organization. According to our research, only 42 percent of companies use external coaching for their employees and typically only for senior leaders.

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*“My leader only talked about how current work was progressing and upcoming assignments, rarely mentioning my management skills and leadership, let alone coaching.”*

— IT manager, manufacturing and research industry



of Frontline Leaders have  
**NEVER** had a formal mentor

Frontline leaders are  
missing critical mentoring relationships.



# Missing a Mentor

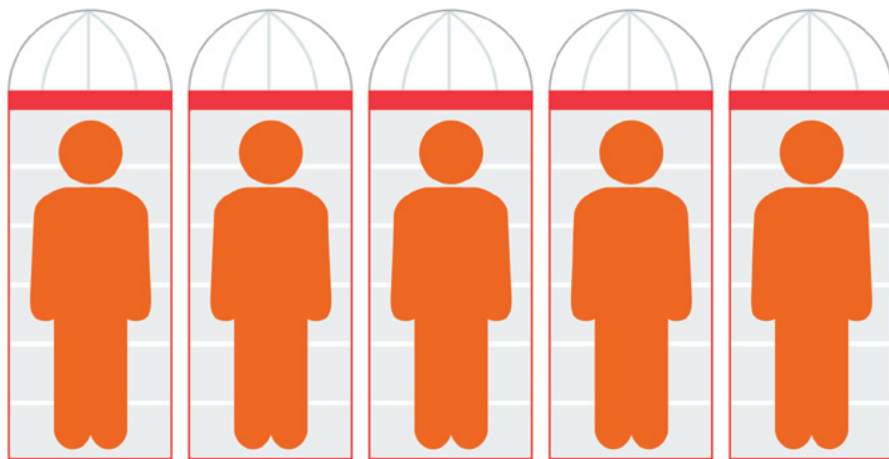
- ▶ Most people step into frontline roles without much guidance on what to do or how to grow as leaders, and few are getting the mentorship they need. In fact, 60 percent of the people we surveyed reported that they've never had a mentor. However, among organizations where leaders rated the overall quality of leadership in the organization as excellent, 53 percent said they've had some form of mentorship.

With mentorship clearly connected to better quality managers, organizations are missing out when they don't have a mentoring program in place. Furthermore, they are not helping to connect more senior leaders who can pass along their knowledge and experiences to their future successors. The data shows that only 22 percent of frontline leaders feel very prepared to capture organizational knowledge before it's lost, which is an urgent need as a rapidly growing number of Baby Boomers retire.

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*“My manager told me his door was always open and if I was unsure about anything, to pick up the phone. He always told me I could come talk about my career at any time, but it was never a formal thing.”*

— Shift manager, consumer products



**52%** of leaders say individuals  
at their organizations work in silos

Do individuals work  
across organizational boundaries?

# Working in a Vacuum

- ▶ Only 48 percent of first-level leaders said that individuals in their organizations work across organizational boundaries to accomplish goals and solve challenges. Similarly, many reported that they feel their collaboration skills aren't very strong, with only 54 percent feeling confident that they take action based on input from multiple sources or perspectives.

This is concerning considering organizations that have strong collective leadership make better-informed decisions and are more confident in responding to the competitive environment and acting on customer needs, not to mention having a five times higher likelihood of a strong leader bench and twice the rate of “definitely engaged” leaders. Organizations should focus on creating leadership teams that cut across boundaries and give their managers of all levels the skills that enable them to work collectively. Without this focus on collaboration, organizations risk that the majority of their leaders will be lacking the commitment and engagement necessary to drive their teams towards common goals.

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*“I moved from one functional area in the organization to a completely new one when I became a manager. I was surprised to see that everyone was kind of ‘working in a silo’ over here, where I was used to more discussion and collaboration.”*

— Production manager, manufacturing



Get in the minds of leaders.

## ▶ *The Secret Life of Bosses*

Recent survey data from frontline leaders further exposes the stress people feel as they transition from individual contributor roles to managerial positions. Get in the minds of these new leaders and learn why they accepted their first leadership role, how many levels of leadership they'd like to climb, what stresses them out the most, and more.

Survey data was analyzed from over 1,000 leaders, executives, and individual contributors to gather authentic feelings and experiences related to the challenges of being a frontline manager.

### **Explore the topics:**

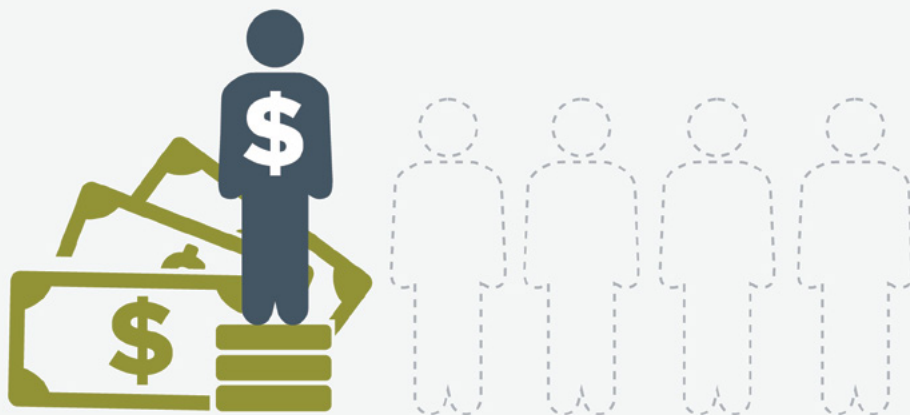
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**1 in 5 Leaders are in it for Money**

About one in five leaders say their move to leadership was primarily motivated by money.

# Surprise, You Got a Promotion!

- ▶ Our research points to a concerning issue: the majority of those who become managers weren't planning on it, an indicator their readiness could be lacking. A full 70 percent of frontline leaders weren't expecting their first step into leadership. Among them, 20 percent of leaders were surprised but excited to be given a promotion, and 17 percent accepted the role because it seemed like the next natural step in their career. Because most leaders didn't necessarily intend to make the leap to leadership when the opportunity came along, it's critical organizations provide them with the support and early training they need to be successful.

Another reason managers accept their first leadership role is for an increase in pay. About one in five leaders (19 percent) say their move to leadership was primarily motivated by money. While these leaders said they enjoyed their promotion and the extra pay, they also reported they aren't motivated to lead others and weren't as prepared as they would have liked going into their first leadership job. Overall, the leaders who aren't motivated to lead said their transition was stressful and they continue to feel the most stress at work trying to find time to advance their skills. Organizations should be wary of selecting individuals without the motivation to lead because they have more stress surrounding their roles, which could trigger an eventual departure.

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*“Leadership wasn’t something I chased. It just sort of happened automatically for me.”*

— Tool design manager, manufacturing



Few managers have C-suite aspirations.



# Skittish About the C-Suite

- ▶ Few managers feel their future could include a seat in the C-suite, an alarming fact to organizations that need lower-level managers with potential for higher-level roles to build a strong leadership bench.

Of the managers we surveyed, 76 percent indicated a desire to advance to higher leadership roles over the course of their careers. Thirty four percent want to move one step beyond their current roles into operational leadership, by becoming a mid-level manager, director, or department leader. Additionally, 31 percent want to move up two positions of power into strategic leadership. But when it comes to having C-suite aspirations, only 1 in 10 frontline leaders (11 percent) see themselves moving into a C-level role. To combat this lack of interest in the highest levels of leadership, organizations should be proactive about assessing for higher-level leader potential within lower ranks of leaders, and when potential is uncovered, make it a priority to develop those leaders early.

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*“I’d like to keep climbing in terms of leadership roles, maybe even becoming a director someday, but I have no interest in steering the whole ship.”*

— Manager of R&D, chemical company

16%  
Felt Natural



**Stressed by Transition**

84%   
STRESSED

10%  
Well-Prepared



**Unprepared for Role**

90%   
UNPREPARED

Leaders say the transition  
to management wasn't easy.

# Natural for Few, Stressful for Many

- ▶ Upon looking back at their first step into leadership, leaders commonly say the transition wasn't easy. Our findings reinforce this, with the majority of managers we surveyed (84 percent) revealing they were stressed by taking their first leadership job. Only 16 percent said the move to leadership felt natural.

When it comes to being prepared for their new roles, only 10 percent said they felt well-prepared, while the remaining 90 percent said they felt unprepared to some extent. Three-quarters of leaders who felt unprepared indicated they were significantly stressed by the transition. This lack of preparation undoubtedly leads itself to a less than ideal chance of long-term success as most leaders are left “faking it until they make it.” It's no wonder 60 percent of new managers fail within their first 24 months. The bottom line is managers are looking for more support during their transition to leadership.

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*“Because I was so stressed upon taking my first manager position, I have become much more open to sharing my past experience...including talking about my failures with others who have just been promoted. This coaching makes a difference. Even experienced people who are becoming manager for the first time will encounter unfamiliar challenges.”*

— Sales Manager



What stressess frontline leaders most?

# What's Keeping Leaders Up at Night?

- ▶ When it comes to what stresses leaders out the most, three sources stand out. Frontline managers emphasized discomfort with navigating organizational politics, having time to do everything that needs to be done, and finding time to advance their skills as their top three stressors.

Research from the 2019 LinkedIn Learning Report also sources time as the number one barrier that holds people back from learning. Leaders are among the most time-strapped and are at risk of spending their days juggling urgent matters nonstop, leaving little time for their own development. The report goes on to say that employees who spend over five hours per week learning are more likely to know where they want to go in their careers, find greater purpose, and feel less stressed. Planned development is critical for leaders to continue to advance, and organizations that build in formal time for growth and skill building are giving their leaders what they need to be more prepared for their transitions.

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*“I was surprised to have spent nearly the entirety of the first six months in my new role getting comfortable with a whole new set of office politics.”*

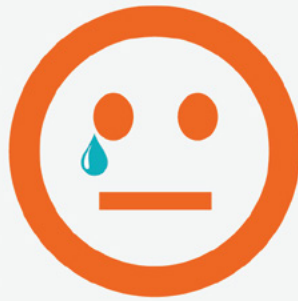
— Sales Director, financial organization



40% love being a leader

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20% of leaders



**REGRET**

taking a leadership role

One in five leaders say  
they regret becoming leaders.

# Love It or Regret It

- ▶ It's clear the stress of taking on a new role makes it harder for leaders to love their job. Even the 40 percent of leaders who say they love their role reported areas where they struggle, indicating that dealing with complexity and ambiguity in their roles is a hardship, as well as working with senior leaders. This data point reinforces that even organizations with high levels of satisfaction among its leaders should still take time to understand where development may be lacking.

On the flip side, about one in five leaders we surveyed (18 percent) said they regret taking their role in the first place. Another two in five leaders (41 percent) admitted they have had a few moments of doubt, but they mostly enjoy leadership. These leaders are a prime audience for organizations to engage and to support their development. They're highly motivated to lead, but if the company can't help them navigate their challenges successfully, they might leave to pursue another opportunity elsewhere.

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*"I love being a leader. Especially when everything's clicking: everyone is contributing and everyone's having wins. It feels like an exponential curve and you get that slingshot effect where you build momentum and peoples' success kind of builds off each other and that's fun. But when everything's not clicking, and I'm dealing with challenges beyond my control, it's just plain hard."*

— Marketing director, consumer products



**Gen X 23%**

**Millennials 13%**

Some leaders can't disconnect from work.



# Millennials Lead Work/Home Separation

- ▶ Overwhelmingly, leaders say the skills they learned as a leader also improve the quality of their personal relationships. Although they admit they have less time and energy to pursue personal interests, they are proud to tell friends and family about their work.

There are generational differences, however, in how this translates to their work-life balance. Of the Gen X leaders we surveyed, 23 percent reported that no matter what they're doing, they feel like they must check their email or be connected to work, compared to only 13 percent of Millennial leaders. This contradicts a common image of Millennials—a generation that grew up constantly connected to the digital world. Of the generations, Millennials were most likely to indicate they feel more stressed at home and that they keep their personal and work life completely separate. The digital separation could be a countermeasure to mitigate stress and freeing time for a better balance, that as leaders they will model for their teams.

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*“The leadership skills I’ve learned at work—how to use esteem and empathy in my interactions—have greatly benefited the conversations I have with family and friends in my personal life.”*

— Administrative professional



Leaders most commonly feel positive  
about their roles.

# What Drives Leaders?

- ▶ While stress is a common theme for leaders, 60 percent still feel positively about their roles.

Across leader level, gender, and generation, the top three feelings leaders selected to describe their own leadership experience were: excitement, pride, and confidence. Leaders report being driven by their connections with others and helping their teams and colleagues across the organization succeed. They also feel rewarded by having more influence over what happens in their organization.

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*“I feel motivated by giving my team the motivation they need to succeed here. Whether it’s the motivation to get through challenges with a new system or influencing them to participate in things that will help them grow, I’m encouraged by seeing them do well.”*

— Healthcare Department Head



How do other people view frontline managers?

## ► *What Do People Want from Their Frontline Leaders?*

This portion of the Frontline Leader Project provides insight into how other people view frontline managers. We're looking at the data from two perspectives. The first is what individual contributors say they want from their bosses. The second is what senior leaders say they wish lower level leaders would do differently. The combination of these two perspectives helps to give a full perspective of the pressures frontline leaders are facing from others.

We analyzed recent survey data from over 1,000 leaders, executives, and individual contributors to gather authentic perspectives from the people who surround frontline managers.

### **Explore the topics:**

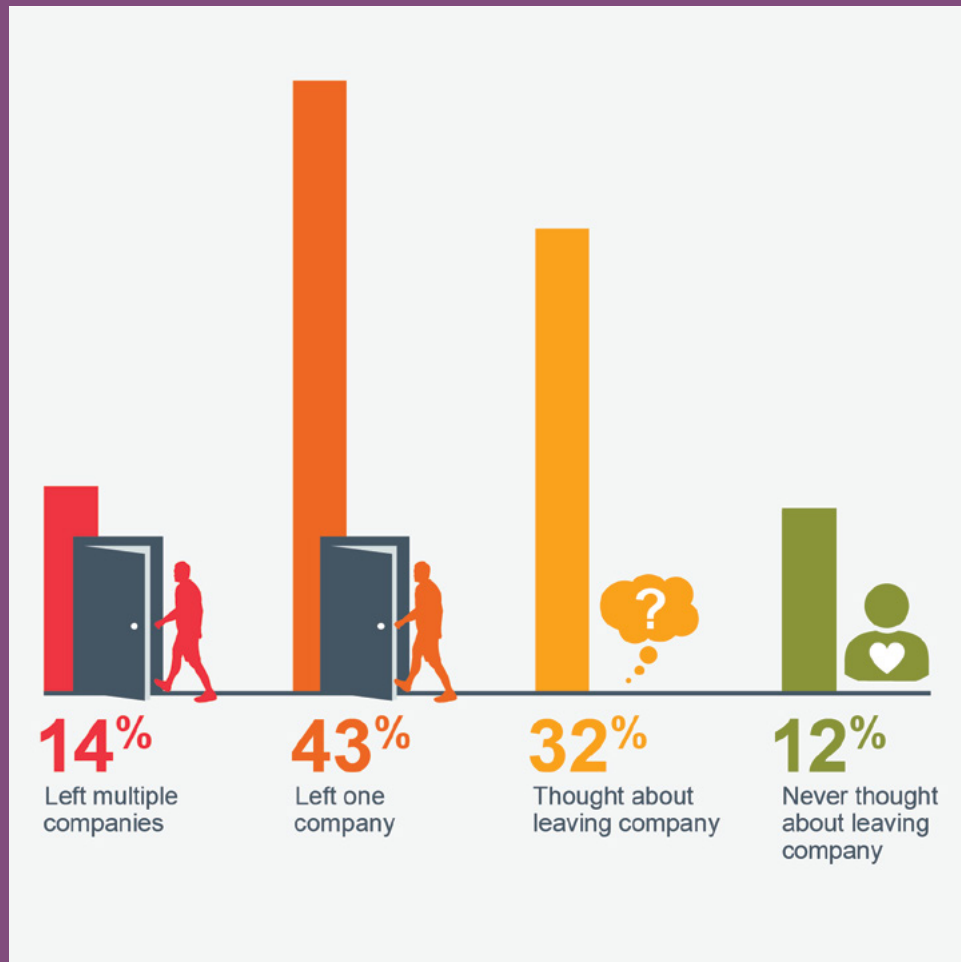
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► What Do People Want From Their Frontline Leaders?

*\*Research is based on data from more than 9,700 frontline leaders surveyed for the Global Leadership Forecast 2018, as well as DDI's assessment data from more than 13,700 frontline leaders.*



How many people have quit  
because of their managers?

# Reasons for Leaving a Job: You Make Me Quit

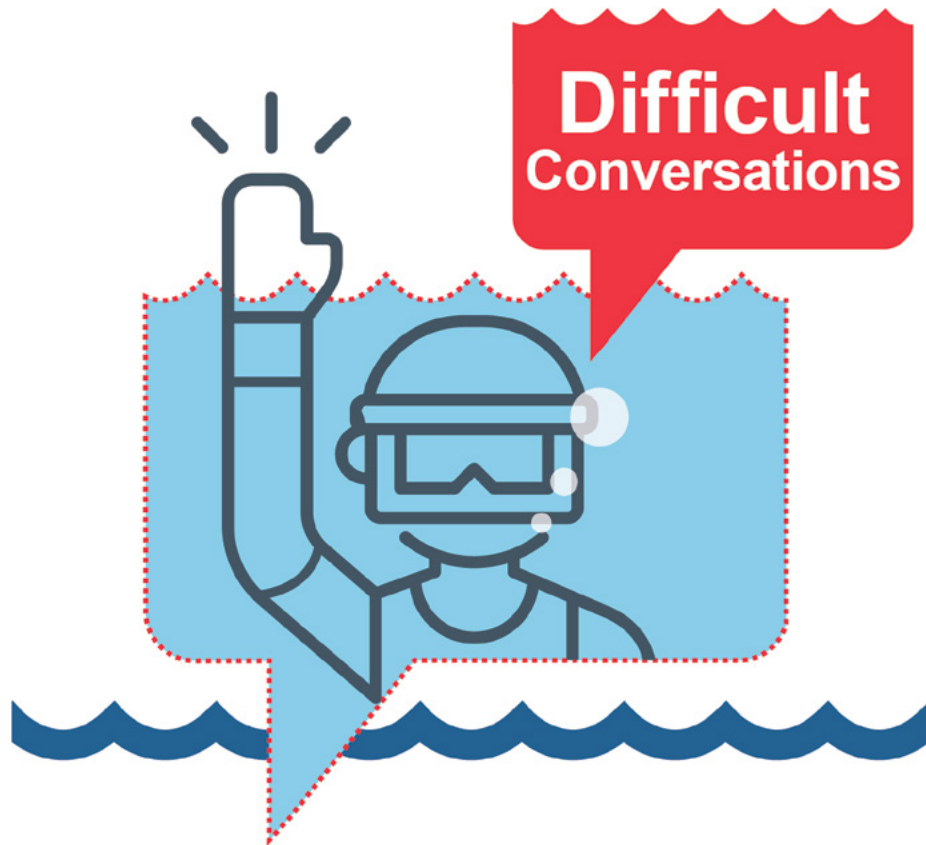
- ▶ Our research proved the old trope that “people leave managers, not companies.” In fact, only 12 percent of people are among the lucky few who have never quit—or at least seriously considered quitting—because of their manager. A full 57 percent of people have left a job specifically because of their manager. Furthermore, 14 percent of people have had to leave multiple jobs because of management. Another third of people (32 percent) haven’t yet quit because of their boss, but have seriously considered it.

What was it about managers that made people quit? Most often, people said their manager did not show respect for their work, was unprofessional, or didn’t listen to their concerns. In addition, many people cited a lack of empathy, which is a key principle of good leadership and an important factor in leadership success. Luckily, while empathy is a skill that takes practice to master, it can be developed to help leaders become more effective.

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*“I couldn’t get on the same page as my manager. I was going to quit unless I was promoted and, luckily, I was promoted into a job with a different, better manager. That’s the only reason I stayed.”*

— Technical manager, manufacturing



The number one weakness of frontline leaders is their ability to have difficult conversations.



# Drowning in Difficult Conversations

- ▶ Senior leaders say the number one weakness of their organizations' leaders is their ability to have difficult performance discussions with direct reports. They also rank leaders low on their ability to coach others and engage and inspire their teams. And the senior leaders are right; frontline leaders agree that they are weak in these areas. They cite having difficult conversations with direct reports as the area where they need the most help.

These findings are reflected in how individual contributors view their performance reviews. Conducted annually in most organizations, 76 percent of direct reports say these conversations are a positive experience. Direct reports say their managers are good at maintaining self-esteem and giving clarity on direction, but struggle with coaching for improvement.

One way to solve the problem is to have more regular coaching conversations. Frequent coaching enables people to make small adjustments to their work to optimize results over time. It's also significantly less pressure than waiting to have one big conversation at the end of the year, which may also be tied to promotion and compensation decisions.

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*“As a newer manager, I never expected how much work management was going to be. From performance reviews to one-on-ones to on-the-fly visits at my door, conversations with my reports are how I spend a good part of my day. It’s also proven to be my biggest challenge.”*

— Data science manager



**9** out of 10  
individual contributors  
stressed at work



The majority of people feel stressed at work.

# Time is of the Essence

- ▶ Nine out of ten individual contributors feel stressed at work. By far, their two biggest problems are finding the time to get everything done and navigating organizational politics. This mimics frontline managers' own greatest stressors, suggesting that the same sources of stress affecting managers are reflected in their team.

The struggle to find time is also leading individual contributors to do more to manage the workload. On average, individual contributors are working 46 hours a week. However, senior leaders may not realize how many hours people are putting in on the job, especially since they only expect managers to work about 45 hours a week. The need to help people prioritize their time and effort is rapidly becoming one of the most pressing issues for leaders not only at the frontline, but every level of the organization.

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*“I feel buried every day at work. I come in and try to keep my head above water, but it’s almost impossible to catch up when my day has ended, and I still didn’t complete the first task I had on my list from last Thursday.”*

— Software engineer



Individual contributors  
**are not involved** in  
key decisions that  
affect their work



Individual contributors  
say their leaders  
**do not explain** why  
decisions were made

Many leaders do not involve their teams  
in their decisions.

# Tell Me Why

- ▶ As companies continue to focus on driving employee engagement, one of the big missed opportunities is leaders involving their teams in their decisions. Though leaders meet frequently with their direct reports, they are not excelling at sharing their rationale or involving their reports in key decisions. Individual contributors indicate their leaders do not regularly explain why decisions are made (51 percent) and 60 percent are not regularly involved in key decisions affecting their work. This lack of involvement can have a significant negative effect on engagement as people don't understand the purpose behind what they're doing.

Leaders on the frontline, like all levels, need to balance involving individuals on their teams without removing responsibility or ownership. Individual contributors praise their leaders for allowing them the freedom to do their job, but if they are not regularly involved in making decisions or do not understand why changes are being made that impact them, they are at greater risk of becoming disengaged.

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*“I would never call my current supervisor a micromanager, but she doesn’t involve me in anything much other than to tell me what my next project is going to be.”*

—Financial analyst

98%

Senior leaders say leadership  
development is ...

**WORTH THE INVESTMENT**  
**BUT DON'T HAVE THE TIME**

Senior leaders recognize their frontline leaders struggle  
to find the time but get the support for development.

# You Know We Need Support, but Why Don't We Get It?

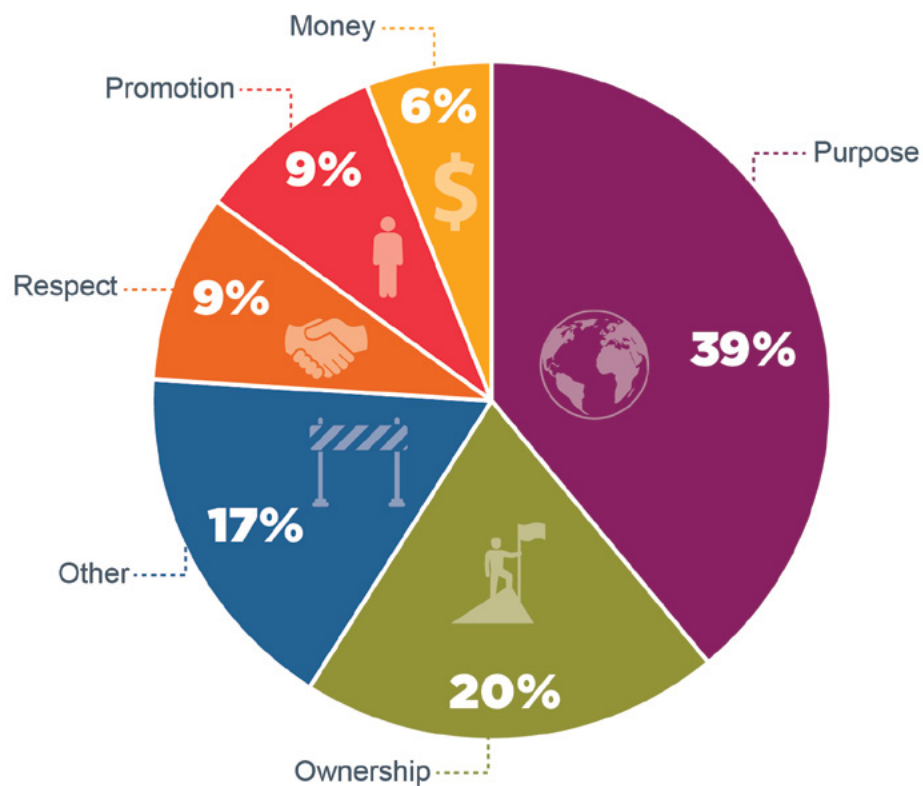
- ▶ Senior leaders say those at the frontline have four barriers inhibiting their success: they have too many responsibilities, are left to their own devices to figure out their jobs, they don't have enough time to develop their skills, and many weren't suited to be leaders to begin with. While senior leaders recognize their frontline leaders' struggle to find the time and get the support they need to make development happen, 98 percent say leadership training is a worthwhile investment. Similarly, 78 percent of senior managers say leadership skills are essential to being effective and they wish they had more guidance when they stepped into their first leadership role.

These senior leaders also admit knowing it is their responsibility to support the development of first-level managers. Research from the 2019 LinkedIn Learning Report shows how crucial manager involvement is to encouraging development. The report reveals the number one way learners discover the skills they need to improve or progress in their roles is when their manager provides specific direction or guidance.

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*“My manager suggested I get signed up for leadership training, but when it came down to it, I didn't feel I could dedicate the time to attend with all my other responsibilities.”*

— Customer service manager, insurance



The top 5 factors that drive teams.



# How to Improve Employee Engagement

- ▶ Purpose is important for all generations in the workforce, but perhaps even more so for older generations than it is for Millennials. Thirty-one percent of Millennials say they want their work to have a positive impact on the world, compared to 41 percent of Gen X and nearly half (49 percent) of Baby Boomers.

Senior leaders said that engaging and inspiring their teams is one of first-level leaders' greatest weaknesses and "inspired" shows up very low on the list of words direct reports select for how their manager makes them feel daily. While frontline leaders aren't great at inspiring their teams, they can act on the five factors that individual contributors say drives them to be better at work. By demonstrating how their direct reports have an impact, helping them own their work, respecting their efforts, helping them step into leadership, and acknowledging that money isn't a high driver, and recognition is, they'll be tapping into the things that matter most to their teams, jump starting their engagement.

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*"It took me several years in management to learn how to inspire my team. Ironically, I learned it from one of my direct reports. He was walking out of the office one day with me when I was very down and told me what a good job I was doing despite the hardships our team had faced. That meant the world to me at that moment and really inspired me to continue on."*

— Shift manager, consumer products



## Kudos to Bosses

In closing, while direct reports aren't shy about pointing out the weaknesses of their bosses, they also aren't shy about giving them kudos. Individual contributors say their managers' biggest strength is giving them the freedom to do their jobs as they see fit. In fact, 40 percent of direct reports selected this as their manager's top strength.

Individual contributors are most likely to say that in one word, their manager makes them feel valued. Most of the direct reports surveyed (65 percent) selected a positive sentiment when they describe how they feel daily. They feel valued, confident, motivated, and hopeful for the future!

*Need to develop  
your frontline  
leaders but  
not sure where  
to start?*

Build the core skills your  
leaders need for everyday  
success.

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## About DDI

DDI is a global leadership consulting firm that helps organizations hire, promote and develop exceptional leaders. From first-time managers to C-suite executives, DDI is by leaders' sides, supporting them in every critical moment of leadership. Built on five decades of research and experience in the science of leadership, DDI's evidence-based assessment and development solutions enable millions of leaders around the world to succeed, propelling their organizations to new heights. For more information, visit [ddiworld.com](http://ddiworld.com).



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