

Only 5% of Managers Think Manager Training Works. Here's What Needs to Changeⁱ

Uptick Staff Writer | October 23, 2020

This summer, Uptick conducted a survey in which we asked managers about how manager training prepared them for their roles. Their answer was clear: it didn't.

Of the 82 managers we surveyed, only 1.3% said that manager training made them feel "very prepared" to start their job. And that's hardly surprising since most managers reported that they received little, if any, training. In our survey, managers shared stories about the situations they felt unprepared for, most managers reported that they receive little, if any, training.

In our survey, managers shared stories about the situations they felt unprepared for. Most of them centered on handling interpersonal conflict and navigating the emotional strain of the job. They also shared their ideas on how to improve manager training and suggested tools that helped them grow. In some questions, we asked them to grade how training prepared them for various parts of their job, from 1 (not at all prepared) to 5 (very prepared). There was a significant variety of responses, but only one question in which "very prepared" got the most votes. (25%percent of managers reported being very prepared to use their offices management software and tools.)

These stories paint a picture of a manager training culture that has failed to evolve, even as the manager role has changed over time. The insights here are indispensable for any company that cares about leadership development.

What's Missing in Leadership Training for Managers?

There were several areas in which managers reported feeling unprepared, but they all had a common theme. They all centered around personal interactions with team members, especially conflict. For instance, only 5.1% of managers felt "very prepared" to give negative or critical feedback when they started their job; 53.2% felt not at all prepared or not very prepared, their job; 53.2% felt not at all prepared or not very prepared.



Likewise, only 6.3% of respondents said they felt “very prepared” to manage their team’s interpersonal dynamics.

One pair of questions really highlighted the problems around managing individual relationships. We asked managers how prepared they felt to run team meetings, and 45.6% answered that they felt highly prepared (a 4 or 5). But when we asked how prepared they felt to run one-on-one meetings, only 24.4% responded with a 4 or 5.

To dig deeper into these issues, we asked managers to describe a situation they felt unprepared for as a new manager. Those anecdotes reveal some specific pain points.

Managing Team Conflict and Confrontation

We asked managers to describe one situation they felt unprepared for and explain how they dealt with it. Many said they were unprepared for dealing with strong emotions, especially when they had to directly confront a team member with negative feedback. Here are a few key quotes.

(All quotes have been edited for length and clarity.)

- ***“Interpersonal conflict between employees.*** I dealt with it by trial and error at first then sought out information on approaches to deal with these types of situations on my own time in order to improve my ability to manage these situations.”
- ***“Confrontation during team meetings.*** It was difficult to know how to not get confrontational back but instead deal with the situation to calm the session down and offer leadership guidelines and solutions to the problems that started the confrontation.”
- ***“Dealing with people emotionally.*** Mainly dealt with through self-education (several books on management) and practice.”
- ***“The first time someone cried during a review.*** I did the best I could to console them however reiterate what needed to improve. I was really at a loss for words in acknowledging their feelings and turning them to a discussion on how they can remedy the situation and discuss what they can put into place in order to improve.”

A common thread with these answers is that many of the managers felt they had to educate themselves on handling conflict. That seems to indicate that they didn't have supervisors or mentors they could go to for advice.

Holding One-on-One Meetings

Several managers specifically mentioned feeling lost in one-on-ones. That should be a major red flag in any organization, given how critically important these meetings are for professional growth and retention.

- “I wish I had more formal knowledge/training on what 1:1s should be about. It became a status report of work. I've managed to move away from it and have made it more about the employee rather than work.”
- “When my first direct report started, I had no idea what I was supposed to cover in our intro meeting. What had HR already told her? Were there any formal processes I should be following? I didn't think so, but I didn't know!”
- “What are one on ones supposed to be? Work related or person goals related? Still not sure how to deal with this.”

Employee Terminations

Having to let a team member go is tough, no matter what, but several managers reported feeling totally unprepared for how to do it kindly and firmly.

- “The first time I was involved with a termination.”
- “Letting an intern go. I googled best phrasing for letting someone go and hoped they understood when it happened.”
- “The first time I had to let someone go after catching them stealing. I couldn’t do it, I let the guy stay. That was one of my biggest mistakes.”
- “I had to restructure our team and let go of 20% of the team. I took a fairly methodical and pragmatic approach, but managing the emotional reactions to this change for those losing their job and those who were still with the team and had to change their day-to-day as a result was difficult.”

Firing an employee is a process that every manager needs to be prepared for and supported in. Not only does that minimize any legal risk for the company, but it also alleviates the manager’s guilt and anxiety.

The Manager Training That Managers Want

So far, we’ve covered the situations that managers feel unprepared to deal with. But our survey asked what kind of training has helped these managers prepare for these challenges. In general, they said they wanted more support from their supervisors, more formalized training opportunities, and more preparation for the emotional challenges of leading a team.

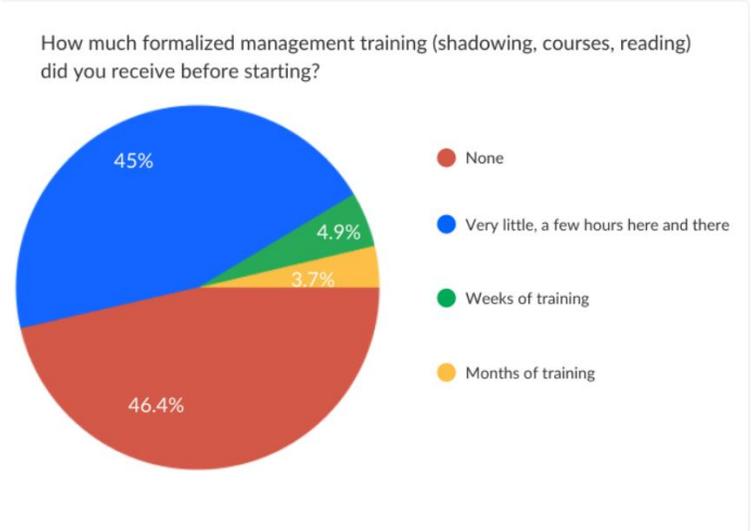


Managers Want More Training

The number-one thing managers want from management training is more of it. Of the managers we surveyed, 75.3% think more or different training would have made them a better manager. That's unsurprising, given that many of the managers reported that they weren't so much groomed for leadership as they were thrown into the deep end.



Also, as we alluded to earlier, 91.3% of managers received either little or no formal training.



When organizations don't train new managers before promoting them, they miss the chance to draw a demarcation point between being a worker and a leader.

Managers Want Mentoring and Supervision From Superiors

We asked managers to describe how they felt management training could be improved. Many said they would have appreciated more opportunities to work with another manager before getting promoted and more chances to touch base with their superiors after starting in their new role.

- “Management is definitely ‘learning by doing.’ Some sort of associate position / shadowing other managers / practical, hands-on training would make a lot of difference.”
- “I would have liked a coach/buddy/resources to walk me through the situation, and be my go-to as I knew things came up. Perhaps it could have even been a chat bot or an app that went to a live person if it weren’t something typical.”

Managers Want More Formal Training

Hands-on training is an important part of learning to be a manager, but so are structured learning opportunities that teach management techniques. In particular, multiple respondents independently listed situational leadership training as a tool that helped them manage emotions and conflict and tailor their style to each individual report.

- “The most helpful experience I had when managing a team for the 1st time was a manager-wide formal training course.”
- “At first, I didn’t really understand that you have to manage each employee differently. About a year into my first management role, my organization offered the Situational Leadership course, and it was a game-changer for me. It taught me about managing each employee for each task, depending on the stage of mastery. It taught me about what kind of management style I prefer, and how to mitigate that when it’s the wrong style for an employee to succeed.”
- “I was eventually given situational leadership training. This helped immensely, but I wish there would have been more follow up and reinforcement of these concepts.”
- “I believe you need to treat management just like you’d treat a new hire training: you have to start with the basics and slowly work your way up to more difficult tasks. I think the combination of virtual and in person trainings are the most helpful.”

Managers Want More Clarity About Job Expectations

A lot of managers reported that they’d appreciate training that included more information on what they’re expected to do. Should they prioritize their team’s short-term productivity goals or career growth? Who should they ask about thorny HR issues? Manager training needs to give

new managers a thorough grounding in the company's fundamental managerial philosophy and goals.

- “Managers need clearly defined expectations. It's hard to create a rulebook on how to be a good manager – it's really about wanting to help people succeed in their role and advance in their career. But knowing what the org expects for reviews/goal setting, what the path to promotion is, etc, is all important.”
- “I think there's a lot that's up to plain old experience to figure out, so you can't be truly prepared or trained on it. But I do think I could have had a better understanding of my org's processes for basic managerial duties.”
- “Guidelines from upper management about how to implement policies in practice.”

How to Improve Manager Training

Our survey results point to some significant shortcomings in how organizations prepare people for leadership roles. But they also point the way to addressing those blind spots. It's a process that needs to start before managers are promoted and continue long afterward.

Create Leadership Opportunities Before Promoting People to Managers

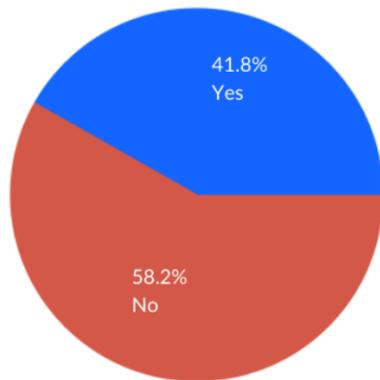
As one survey respondent quipped, “Management is a practice in being unprepared.” Still, it's crucial for future managers to have low-stakes opportunities to familiarize themselves with the challenges of leadership. Let them learn how to deal with clashing personalities by taking the lead on a project before putting them in charge of a team. Let them hone their mentorship skills by helping to train a new employee. These trial runs will show future managers their strengths and weaknesses, and they'll weed out people who aren't really suited to the emotional Demands of the job.

Continue Training New Managers After They're Promoted

Just because someone is promoted to management doesn't mean their training should come to an end. Yet 58.2% of the managers we surveyed reported that they didn't receive any formalized training after getting promoted.

“Management Is A Practice in Being Unprepared”

Did you continue receiving formalized training after you started as a manager?



The most crucial part of this ongoing training is making sure managers have a close relationship with their supervisors. New managers need regular one-on-one meetings with their bosses to get their feedback on dealing with tough situations. One-on-ones are also a chance for senior management to model the kind of relationships they want managers to build with their teams.

Set Manager Expectations with Documentation and Tools

If you want to train managers who do more than keep their team on deadline, you have to explicitly set those priorities. Manager training should include materials that specify how often managers are supposed to meet with team members, how they're expected to prepare their team for promotions, and how to encourage ongoing learning. In particular, businesses need to give new managers the tools to prioritize their team's development and to build their emotional intelligence (EQ). One-on-one software like Uptick is designed to facilitate this work with one-on-one agendas that foster growth and build relationships.

More Confident Managers Mean Stronger Teams

In today's business world, managers are being asked to juggle a whole host of roles. Managers are supposed to be cheerleaders, therapists, coaches, the good cop and the bad cop. Each of these roles is essential, but without adequate support and training, those demands are both overwhelming and thankless. One of our respondents summed it up nicely: "Companies really need to make a conscious effort to build great managers through training, mentorship, and clear milestones to hit. When you fail to train your managers, you're essentially building a house on top of a shaky foundation. As managers fail to give their teams what they need, the whole house starts to crumble and fall

ⁱ Uptick. Staff Writer/Blogger. October 23, 2020. Only 5% of Managers Think Manager Training Works. Here's What Needs to Change. <https://uptickapp.com/blog/only-5-of-managers-think-manager-training-works-heres-what-needs-to-change>