What have we learned about management two years after the first lockdown?

Looking back two years ago, I think about managers who were, in an instant, shoved into leading teams and businesses from the isolated confines of their homes. Having to navigate lockdowns was stressful enough. Let's not forget that it was on top of a global health pandemic, the end of which no one had sight.

That period of time was incredibly challenging and exceptionally trying for both novice and experienced managers.

'Manager' took on a _whole new meaning_ for a while. Even more than in the pre-pandemic era, employees looked to their managers for psychological and emotional help as well as for professional support. In addition to sweeping layoffs and furloughing, we were dealing with really frightening cases of illness.

There was no shortage of stress going around and managers were charged with a lot – setting up team members remotely, maintaining and in many cases exceeding output targets, motivating team members, dealing with often-times harsh economic and business realities, all while demonstrating empathy and putting on a brave face for their teams.

New managers have been hit the hardest

If experienced managers were thrown into the deep end of the pool, first-time managers were drowning. We tend to under-estimate the importance and value of in-person human interaction until it suddenly goes away. Imagine trying to get to grips with managing people for the first time ever through a screen with no social engagement cues from face-to-face communication. How do I build personal connections with my team? How do I know who is doing what? How do I monitor output? What should be an email, chat, video call or a regular call? Am I micro-managing? How do I know who is struggling?

For the majority of managers who didn't already have fully or mostly remote teams, tooling was a complete nightmare. Overnight, oversight of team progress, process, workload, wellbeing, and everything else had to move online. Managers grabbed whatever they had at their disposal – Google Docs, sticky notes, chat windows, physical paper, anything and everything. The result was a lot of unstructured information that could be neither tracked nor actioned. Any existing bad management habits were amplified 100-fold during the pandemic.

We are in a real crisis right now with the number of people managers ready to throw in the towel. Managers are twice as likely to be looking for a new job than individual contributors; and burnout among managers increased 25% in 2021 alone.

Things have since improved but there's still work to be done

Two years since the start of the first lockdown, are managers better off than in early 2020? Yes and no. Yes, organisations are coming to terms with the fact that the workforce is changing and evolving. Younger employees are looking for participatory leadership.

They want coaching and mentorship, not simply directives, which requires a new kind of manager.

Yes, this new 'normal' of hybrid work has given way to a slew of new

productivity technologies that make remote working easier and remote managing more efficient.

On the other hand, organisations still haven't fully woken up to the colossal impact managers have on everything from operations and employee retention to the bottom line. Companies have yet to crack how to develop better managers. Instead of in-person management seminars, we now have online ones and more frequent employee engagement surveys. This isn't moving the needle. The truly forward-thinking organisations will invest in ongoing leadership development and support as part of day-to-day life to bring out the very best in teams because they can see the value of stellar people managers from top to bottom.

No one sets out to be a bad manager

Every manager wants to be successful but, traditionally, organisations have given very little thought to what being a "good" manager really entails. Instead, individuals are promoted to managerial roles and left to learn an entirely new set of skills on the job and by themselves.

So what can organisations do to upskill and support their managers in today's world of hybrid-to-fully-remote working? The answer is a solution that combines technology and behavioural science techniques which can be used by individual managers to improve their performance in a measurable, ongoing and lasting way.

At Piper, we are building tools and technologies that can develop managers by providing analytical data about their specific performance as a manager, revealing targeted opportunities for improvement and upskilling. These will make their lives easier and drive manager performance by facilitating greater communication and greater empathy. In addition, they can provide contextual learning which can be integrated into everyday work.

There is a time and place for training, whether in-person or virtual. However, removing managers from the realities of their day-to-day environment and responsibilities is less effective and lasting than learning that is integrated into various real-life management scenarios and designed to engender incremental behaviour change. Redefining management in this way will make work better for everyone – and for good.

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