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The Manager Is the Program

Why retention lives or dies with your managers, and how to hold them accountable without breaking them

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The short version

Managers drive most of the experience. Gallup has found that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement across teams.

Most companies measure managers on output, not on people. So a manager can lose half their team and still get a great review.

Accountability without support is just pressure. Public rankings and impossible spans of control push good managers out too.

Make it a loop. Measure it, set a clear standard, attach a real consequence, and give real support. Every quarter.

The leader everyone above him loved

I once watched a Market Vice President who was brilliant at managing upward. His bosses loved him.

Below him, it was a different story. He micromanaged everyone. People complained, through every channel they had. The complaints went nowhere.

The one time someone gave him a low score on the engagement survey, the response was essentially: if you don't want to be here, leave. After that, people stopped giving honest feedback. They learned the lesson he was teaching.

So they left. Good people took pay cuts to move into other industries, just to get away from him. It had nothing to do with the company or the pay. It was him.

He was not the only problem. The system that measured him only on results, and promoted him for managing upward, was the bigger one. Nobody was measuring how many good people he was costing the company.

People leave managers

70%

of the variance in team engagement is driven by the manager (Gallup)

45%

of people who quit had no conversation about their future in the 3 months before leaving (Gallup)

Gallup has found that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores across business units. If you know who someone's manager is, you can predict a lot about how engaged they are.

In Gallup's 2024 study of people who quit, 45% said no manager or leader talked with them about their satisfaction, performance or future in the three months before they left. When asked what could have kept them, better interactions with their manager was one of the most common answers.

Managers are also the most controllable part of retention. Pay needs budget. Promotions need open roles. A manager who checks in, closes the loop and treats people with respect costs nothing.

What changed when we stopped ranking people publicly

When I took over a struggling region, it was in rough shape. A new competitor had just pulled away many of our pharmacists. Two district managers quit almost right away. Turnover across the region was running at about 61% a year.

Part of the problem was how we measured leaders. Districts were stack-ranked against each other. The bottom of the list got called out publicly. Nobody at the top would share people with a struggling district, because helping someone else could drop you down the rankings. Everyone held on to their own staff, even while stores nearby could not open.

So we ended it. Instead of ranking district against district, we measured our region against other regions. Suddenly every district leader was on the same team.

- 1. Stores stayed open.** Leaders moved people to wherever they were needed most.
- 2. Talent got shared.** Strong districts helped struggling ones instead of protecting their rankings.
- 3. People stayed.** Region turnover fell from 61% to 18% in one year.

Our district leaders felt it too. Turnover among our 24 district leaders had been driven by the stress of constant store-level turnover. It went from about four leaders quitting a year to one.

You cannot manage 35 people

Some of our leaders ended up with about 35 direct reports. Do the math on just one 30-minute one-on-one a week with 31 people. That is more than 15 hours a week in one-on-ones alone, before any other part of the job.

It does not happen. So the one-on-ones stop. Reviews get rushed. Some leaders in that situation were turning to AI to write their people's performance reviews. Nobody felt seen.

Restructures made it worse. In one, leaders were given more stores and more span of control with no increase in pay. In another, leadership was split so one person ran the front of the store and another ran the pharmacy. Each leader's store count went from about 15 to 30, with no change management:

no conversation guides, no role plays, little explanation of why. It became one of our lowest engagement years.

If a manager's job cannot be done well, it will not be done well. Before you hold managers accountable for retention, make sure the job is possible.

The four-part accountability loop

Manager training without accountability is like teaching someone to swim and never checking if they get in the pool. A manager who only talks to people at review time is like a coach who only shows up on game day. The development was supposed to happen in practice.

- 1. Measure.** Every manager gets a short scorecard each quarter: their team's turnover against the company average, how many people on their team are flagged as Intervention needed or Critical, how often they actually hold one-on-ones, and whether flagged people got a real conversation. Their own manager sees it too.
- 2. Set a standard.** Write it down. For example: weekly check-ins for anyone flagged as Intervention needed or Critical. Every Critical person gets a real conversation within the week. Team turnover no more than five points above the company average without a clear reason and a plan.
- 3. Attach a consequence.** Retention shows up in performance reviews and promotion decisions. A manager who keeps losing good people is not promoted for strong output alone.
- 4. Give support.** Every manager below the standard gets coaching, a simple stay interview guide and a monthly check-in with their own manager until it improves. The goal is to build the skill, not to punish.

The loop only works if all four parts run. Measurement without consequence is a report. Consequence without support is fear. And fear is how you end up with a team that tells you what you want to hear.

Take action this week

CEO: Ask each leader who manages managers one question: what is turnover on each of your teams compared to the company average? If they cannot answer, you do not have manager accountability yet.

Manager: Count your direct reports. Multiply by 30 minutes. If that number is more than you can actually spend each week, tell your boss, and decide who gets weekly time and who gets every other week.

Supervisor: Hold one 15-minute check-in with each person on your team this week. Not about tasks. About how they are doing. Write down one thing to follow up on.

How EIP helps

Council View shows where turnover hides behind the company average. A company-wide number can look fine while one manager's team is losing people. Council View shows you which team, and our advisors go through it with you every month.

Flight Risk Score™ (patent pending) reads the manager relationship as one of its four areas, including manager changes, meeting frequency and teammates leaving, and flags who needs a conversation now.

Our Council of current and former executives reviews the findings before anything is recommended. Then we stay with you through the fix.

Start with a conversation: eip360.com | hello@eip360.com

Sources

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Tatel, C. and Wigert, B. "42% of Employee Turnover Is Preventable but Often Ignored." Gallup, July 9, 2024, updated February 16, 2026. gallup.com/workplace/646538

Stories and results are from the author's own career at a Fortune 10 company. Names, places and identifying details are withheld.