

# The Perk - Blog 1

**Title Tag:** How to Train Managers to Be Leaders: A Playbook

**Meta Description:** Learn how to train managers to become leaders: diagnose skill gaps, build core competencies, design the program & measure what actually drives results.

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# How to Train Managers to Be Leaders: The Complete Development Playbook

Real talk: most leadership gaps don't start with a bad hire. They start with something way more common — promoting your strongest individual contributor, handing them a team, & crossing your fingers that they'll figure out the "leading humans" part on their own.

Sometimes they do. Plot twist: usually, the promotion exposes a gap nobody saw coming. This person knows the work inside & out. Leading the people doing it? Nobody ever taught them that part. That's not a character flaw, it's a development gap, & it's one of the most common (& most expensive) ones we see.

Training managers to become leaders isn't a two-day workshop or a one-&-done seminar you check off a list. It's a structured program that changes how people think, communicate, & decide over time, with real accountability built in. Here's how to build one that actually holds.

## What the Actual Manager-to-Leader Gap Looks Like

The signs tend to show up long before anyone's brave enough to name them:

- High turnover concentrated on specific teams
- Disengaged direct reports on otherwise healthy projects
- Decisions piling up at the manager level because nobody below feels equipped, or trusted, to make the call

These aren't personality problems. They're development issues, & they cost you real money. A manager who creates dependency instead of capacity becomes a bottleneck. A manager who dodges hard conversations lets performance quietly drift. A manager who was never taught to coach will keep confusing supervising with leading.

Moving from managing tasks to leading people takes a whole different skill set, & no, nobody's born knowing it. It's learned.

## The Business Case for Developing Your Managers

Need to win over a CFO or CEO? Good news, the math is already on your side. Frontline manager quality is the single biggest driver of team engagement, & engagement is tied directly to retention, productivity, & customer outcomes. Gallup found that managers account for roughly 70 percent of the variance in team engagement. Seventy percent. That's not a rounding error, that's basically the whole ballgame.

The research backs the investment: organizations that intentionally develop their middle managers are far more likely to retain top talent & hit their financial targets. Running a development program for 15 managers costs a fraction of what it costs to replace three or four of their direct reports every year. It also costs a lot less than the quiet drag of teams running at 60 percent capacity because their manager never learned to coach, delegate, or build trust.

Leadership development isn't a line item to trim when budgets get tight. It's infrastructure. Treat it that way, & the returns will compound!

## Step 1: Diagnose Before You Design

Every manager deserves a path that fits them, so lean into building for the individual rather than running everyone through one assembly-line program. The first move is sorting your managers into two groups:

- **Foundational first:** managers still building the basics; like setting clear goals, giving feedback, running effective 1:1s, & managing performance.
- **Ready to lead:** managers who've nailed the basics & are ready for the next layer; like strategic thinking, coaching others, building psychological safety, & influencing across the organization.

Run a leadership program with someone who hasn't nailed the fundamentals yet, & you'll create frustration, not growth. This diagnostic step is the difference between a real development program & a training event everyone sits through, nods along to, & forgets by lunch break.

360-degree feedback, direct-report surveys, & honest conversations with each manager's leader are your treasure map! They'll show you exactly where everyone stands before you draw up a single module.

## Step 2: Build Around the Right Competencies

A development program needs a clear model of what good leadership actually looks like inside your organization. Skip that step, & you're developing people toward a vague, undefined standard, & measuring them against nothing.

The competencies that matter most for managers in the middle:

- **Self-awareness & emotional intelligence:** understanding how their behavior lands on others, & adjusting based on what they hear back
- **Coaching for growth:** moving from solving every problem for the team to helping the team build the skills to solve problems themselves
- **Strategic thinking:** connecting day-to-day decisions to the bigger goals, & helping their people see why the work actually matters
- **Psychological safety:** creating a team where people feel safe raising problems, asking questions, & owning mistakes early
- **Building unshakable trust:** keeping words & actions aligned, following through on commitments, & being straight about what's still uncertain

Every one of these competencies is learnable. They take practice, feedback, & reinforcement, not a slide deck with a good quote on it. (For a closer look at the specific skills this builds on, see [12 Power Skills Every Middle Manager Must Master](#).)

Inside our [Middle Manager Protocol](#), these show up as the actual modules managers work through, so the competency model & the development plan become the same thing. The competency model & the development plan aren't two separate documents living in two separate tabs; they're the same living thing, working together like a good pair of shoes. A manager doesn't read about giving feedback & then, separately, hopes to practice it someday. They open the module on feedback & they're already doing it. Learning & doing become one motion instead of two, & that's exactly the kind of tight loop that makes growth stick!

## Step 3: Design the Program

For most organizations between 100 & 1,000 employees, cohort-based programs beat individual tracks, time & again. Cohorts build peer accountability, a shared language, & a support system that outlasts the formal program itself...we've even heard it's created a sense of FOMO within the company, everyone wants in on it!

A strong program blends:

- Structured learning modules covering the concepts, frameworks, & skills
- Experiential work like stretch assignments & real situations with a structured debrief
- Peer discussion & accountability pods
- Individual coaching or manager check-ins built into the rhythm

A 90-day sprint is a realistic starting window. It's long enough to see real behavior change & short enough to keep everyone's momentum up. Build in real assessments at the midpoint & at the close so you can actually see what's moving & what's still stuck.

## Step 4: Give Every Manager a Personal Development Plan

Generic programs produce generic results, every time. Each participant needs a personal leadership development plan that ties the competency model to their specific gaps & goals.

A Plan That Sticks is built from:

- Two or three priority competencies to focus on during the program
- Specific behaviors to practice, not just outcomes to hit
- A clear feedback loop, like a 360-degree survey, a manager check-in, or peer input
- A 90-day goal they're genuinely held to

Plans that live in a drawer don't change anyone, no matter how beautifully they're formatted. The real magic happens when accountability gets baked into the rhythm, so bring each manager's leader into the loop to help set the plan & cheer on the progress. Skip that layer & development quietly slips into "someday" territory. Keep that layer & it becomes the habit that actually sticks.

## Step 5: Measure What Truly Matters

Most organizations track exactly one thing at the end of a program: did people like it? That's a satisfaction score, not a development metric, & the two are not the same thing.

Here's what's actually worth watching.

### Leading indicators:

- Shifts in 360-degree survey scores at cohort close, measured against a baseline
- Changes in direct-report engagement at the team level
- Team retention in the six months after the program
- Whether direct reports start sharing feedback upward, a solid proxy for psychological safety

Lagging indicators tie straight back to the business. Did teams hit their goals? Did high performers stick around? Did manager-caused attrition drop? Decide how you'll measure all of this before launch, not after everyone's already forgotten the baseline.

## The Part Most Programs Get Wrong: Sustainment

Most leadership development falls apart at the exact same moment: the day the formal program ends. People go back to the same environment, the same pressures, the same old habits. With nothing reinforcing the change, it fades fast.

Sustainment comes down to three things:

1. Each manager's leader actively reinforces the new behaviors, rather than just quietly noticing them.
2. The organization keeps the competencies alive with ongoing practices: peer coaching groups, quarterly development conversations, or short refreshers tied to real situations.
3. The behaviors actually show up in how performance gets evaluated.

The program is the investment. Sustainment is the multiplier, the thing that turns one great sprint into a habit that compounds year after year!

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How long does it take to see results from a manager development program?

Behavior change takes time, there's no way around that. Most organizations see measurable movement in 360-degree feedback scores & team engagement within 90 to 180 days of a

well-designed program. Lagging indicators like retention & team performance take a bit longer to show up, but they're worth the wait.

## **Should we use external facilitators or build the program internally?**

External facilitators bring consistency & objectivity, especially during the diagnostic & facilitation stages. Building internally develops long-term capability you actually own. Most mid-market companies do best with a blend: outside expertise to design & launch, internal ownership to keep it alive long after.

## **What's the difference between leadership training & management training?**

Management training covers operational skills like goal setting, feedback, performance management, & one-on-ones. Leadership development tackles the behavioral & strategic stuff: coaching, trust, influence, strategic thinking. Most managers need both, & the order genuinely matters.

## **What is a personal leadership development plan?**

It's a short, specific plan that ties a manager's development gaps to a focused set of behaviors, a 90-day goal, & a clear accountability structure. The best ones get reviewed regularly with the manager's leader. No accountability, no follow-through, it's that simple.

## **How do I build a leadership development program without a dedicated L&D team?**

Focus on three things: a clear competency model, a cohort structure with peer accountability, & a simple measurement plan. Plenty of mid-market organizations pull this off without a full internal team by partnering on the design & facilitation, which is exactly what we built the Middle Manager Protocol to do.

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Ready to build a manager-to-leader program you can actually repeat?

Our Middle Manager Protocol is for organizations that want to develop their managers on purpose, not through one-off training events everyone forgets by Friday. You choose your modules, & we bring the competency model, assessments, personal development planning, & measurement that proves it worked.

[Explore Middle Manager Training](#)

Because the best leaders aren't the ones who got promoted the fastest. They're the ones someone took the time to develop.

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