by Dominic Ashley-Timms & Laura Ashley-Timms

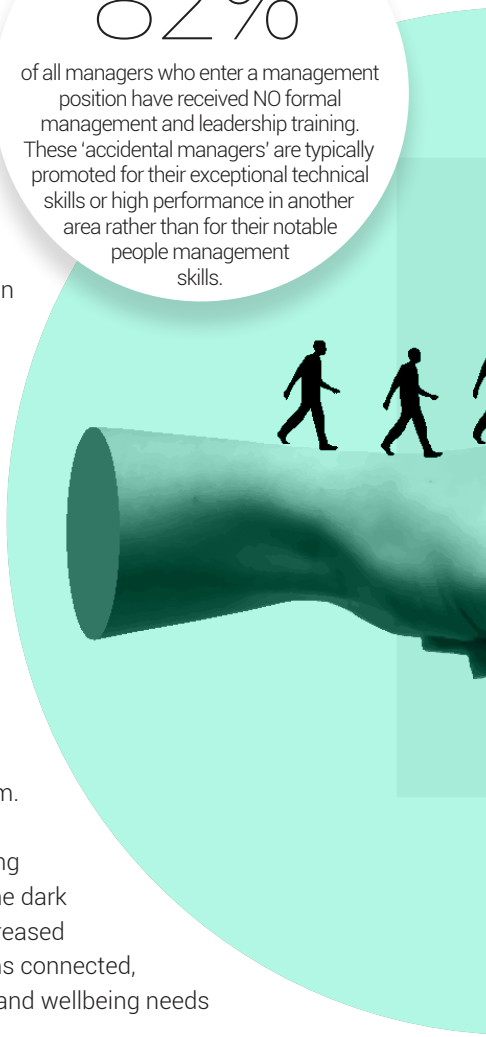
Redefining the Purpose of Management for the 21st Century

What does it mean to be a manager in the modern workplace? Since the start of the 21st century, the world of work has changed dramatically and with it the expectations and responsibilities of management. But the crucial question is: have managers been able to keep up with the pace of change?

If we look at the data, the answer is, sadly, no. According to **Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2025 report**, global employee engagement has fallen to a pitifully low 23%. Half of global employees also intend to leave their jobs with 'poor management' cited in the top three reasons. Those who work in companies with bad management practices are nearly 60% more likely to be stressed than those working in environments with good management practices. Managers themselves feel the strain, with only 30% engaged in their work and **50%** feeling burnt out.

82%

of all managers who enter a management position have received NO formal management and leadership training. These 'accidental managers' are typically promoted for their exceptional technical skills or high performance in another area rather than for their notable people management skills.



Why is a drastic change in management practice needed?

Whilst it's clear that workforces are struggling and change is needed, dogged reliance on outmoded 20th-century models of management and training endure. Now is the time to reinvent the purpose and practice of management, and business schools will play a pivotal role in driving this transformation to shape the workplace of tomorrow.

To understand how to redefine the purpose of management, we must first take a closer look at the unique challenges that modern managers face.

The workplace has never been more diverse than today, with up to five generations, from Traditionals to Baby Boomers, Millennials to Gen Zs. While a Baby Boomer might value a job for life, their Gen Z colleague might prefer frequent role changes to build a varied résumé. Today's modern managers need to manage the expectations of these different generations.

Post-COVID-19, people have also fundamentally re-evaluated what work means to them. They want more flexibility, more purpose, and a better work/life balance. If their current employer isn't offering that, they will most likely move to organisations that will. Adopting remote and hybrid working models has been a popular solution for organisations, yet the dark side of working from home - less human interaction, isolation from colleagues, and increased distractions - is a new working situation for managers to navigate. Keeping digital teams connected, engaged and motivated while meeting each employee's mental health, neuro-diversity and wellbeing needs is another overlay on already overwhelmed managers.

These contemporary workplace issues are exacerbated by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) findings that **82% of all managers** who enter a management position have received NO formal management and leadership training. These 'accidental managers' are typically promoted for their exceptional technical skills or high performance in another area rather than for their notable people management skills. Suddenly tasked with managing a team, they haven't honed the necessary skills to handle the 'people' side of leadership and aren't able to cultivate the environment in which their new team can thrive.

Hasn't coaching helped?

An increasingly popular approach for bringing about a change in the people capabilities of managers is the idea of coaching. Believing that helping others achieve their goals will transform how we work together is an attractive idea that has led many organisations to invest heavily in training their managers and leaders to conduct coaching sessions to help develop their employees.

The most popular coaching models taught in Manager-as-Coach programmes are executive coaching models like GROW or its various derivatives, i.e., managers are being taught *to be coaches* and to hold sit-down, pre-planned, one-to-one executive coaching sessions. This approach, though, doesn't align with the realities of a busy workplace, and leaders struggle to find the time to hold these structured, sit-down coaching sessions. Those who do quickly discover a conflict when trying to perform as a coach serving their direct report's agenda, when they have a vested interest in the team member's performance and an agenda of their own. Despite billions of dollars invested into coaching skills training over the past 20 years, employee engagement and productivity levels remain critically low, and few, if any, organisations can attest to the measurable organisational impact of coaching skills training for their managers and leaders.

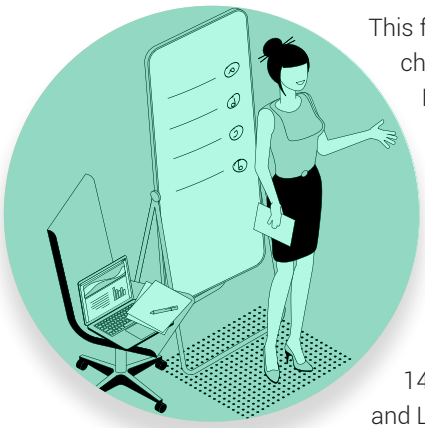
So why hasn't coaching worked? Well, the ideas were right, it's just that rebadging training originally designed for Executive Coaches wasn't ever going to be fit for purpose for a busy and overwhelmed management audience.

Embedding coaching behaviours into management practice - the rise of Operational Coaching®

To be transformational and to rehumanise management, all managers need to use coaching-related *behaviours* every day, in the moment, as a part of their everyday management style ... and that's a very different proposition to the executive coaching approaches still being taught. How can business schools achieve this?

One surefire way is by teaching the managers of tomorrow to practice an *enquiry-led approach*, whereby they develop the skill of asking more insightful questions of employees during their day-to-day conversations as a tool to unlock their full talents. By helping managers learn when and how to ask their team members questions in situations that offer the potential for a better outcome, you create a culture where each team member's contribution is invited and acknowledged, leading to higher levels of employee engagement, productivity, and performance.

Using an enquiry-led approach helps managers break old habits by learning to STOP, and preventing themselves from stepping in to fix every problem. Developing their situational awareness to THINK about the person they're engaging with and what they need from their manager at that moment, helps them determine whether it's a coachable moment. If it is, it's an opportunity to engage their team member by learning how to ASK them powerful questions intentionally designed to stimulate their thinking and then actively listening to them. Asking questions to help them determine an action they can take to move the situation forward and then gaining commitment from them to see that action through, perhaps agreeing on a follow-up, leads to a RESULT and a future opportunity to provide appreciative and constructive feedback.



This four-step management model—STAR®—helps managers change the focus of their management intent and embeds a *coaching mindset*. Known as *Operational Coaching®*, this new approach to managing others has been proven to positively impact organisations and their leadership.

The UK Government recently sponsored a large-scale, randomised-control trial conducted by the London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE) to measure the impact that managers using an Operational Coaching® style generated versus a control group. In the most extensive study, managers from 62 organisations across 14 sectors learned to apply the STAR® model, and LSE collected data for 49 separate measures to assess the impact that managers were now having. The results proved (statistically significantly) that managers spent 70% more time coaching team members *in the flow of work* than before undertaking an experiential development programme—STAR® Manager. They also improved their capabilities across all nine competencies measured and LSE also noted a positive trend indicating a six-fold improvement in employee retention over control group organisations. The published results from the research open the way for many more managers to learn how to adapt their management style.

Conclusion

The enduring mental model of management is just that— it's about *managing* people, i.e. providing direction, managing work, firefighting, decision making, administering disciplinaries and ensuring that the work gets done. But true people management is about 'enabling' others, helping them to flourish, and bringing out the best in teams. Transactional and episodic training methods that continue to focus on the 'what' of management rather than the 'how' of learning to engage the talents of others in a respectful and inclusive way, point to the need not only to address the underlying philosophy of management, but also the style that managers should adopt if they're to encourage the highest level of contribution from their team.

About the authors

Dominic Ashley-Timms and **Laura Ashley-Timms** are the CEO and COO of performance consultancy Notion. They are the co-creators of the multi-award-winning STAR® Manager online development programme which is being adopted by managers in 40 countries. They have also co-authored the management bestseller *The Answer is a Question*.