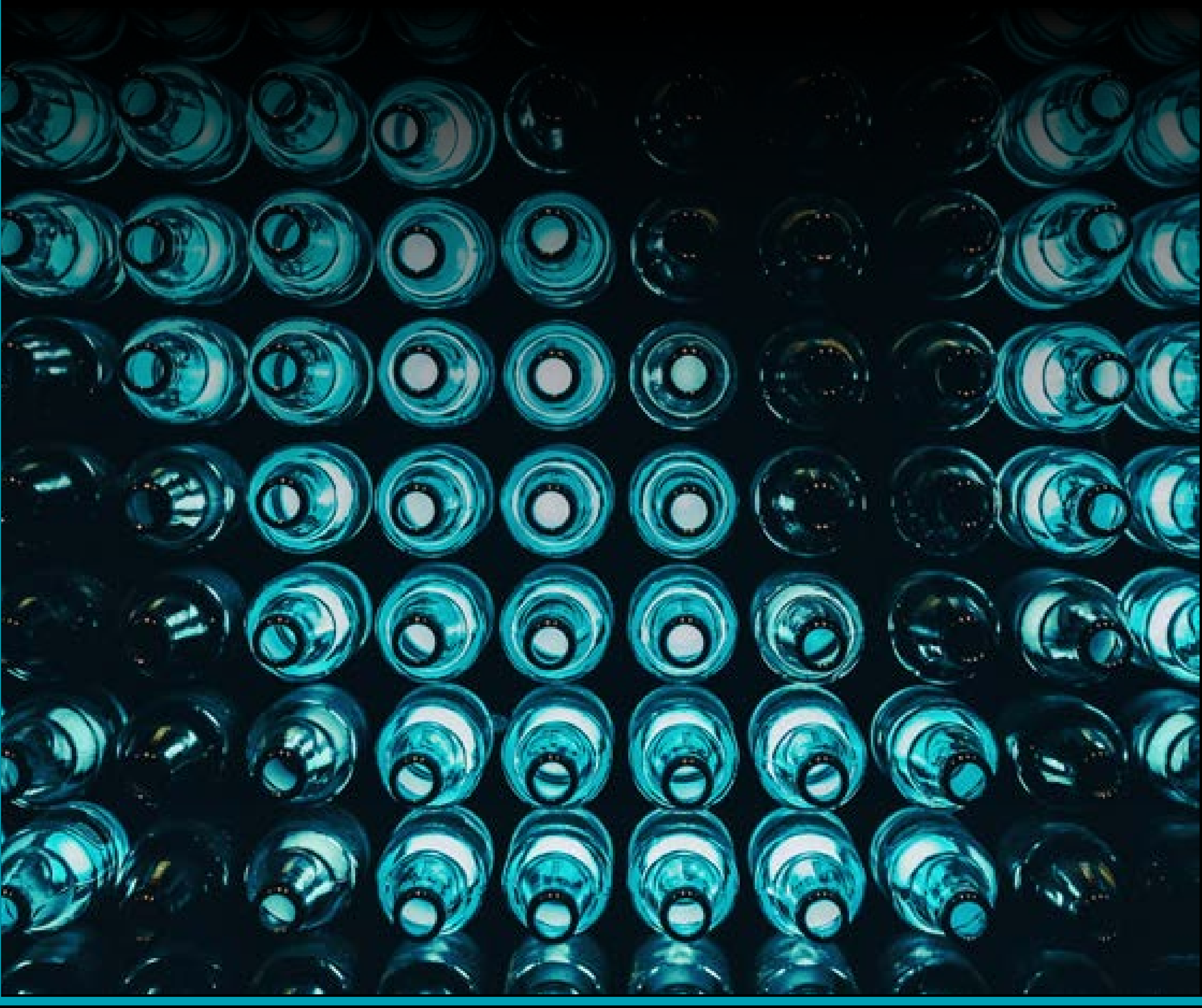
Great Managers

The Secret Sauce



“The best manager I ever had.”

It’s a phrase most of us have said or heard at some point, but what does it mean? What sets a great manager apart from an average one?

Good managers are the beating heart to any successful business. Great ‘people managers’ attract exceptional staff; they are the reason an organisation becomes a preferred employer, they help to increase market share, they add to profits and they reduce costs. Staff are engaged, committed, ‘go the extra mile’ and deliver great performance.

Great managers see their employees as people, not just workers or worse, a pound sign. As individuals they act with humility, they role model, know their team, set direction, build trust empower, develop, praise, inspire, they treat their people with care and respect, stretching them to become their best versions of themselves.

Sounds good, doesn’t it?

Being a manager is a human-focused role, so the journey toward betterment is one of personal discovery, understanding and becoming the best version of yourself. And what’s more, once people start to grow and develop their skills, their behaviours become contagious (in a good way). Great managers inadvertently awaken the inner leader in those around them. They inspire greatness in others. This chain reaction is pure magic to see in action – light the fuse and watch them fly.

Quality trumps quantity

Did you know? **50% of people left their last role to escape poor management.** Shocking but true. Interestingly, research also shows that a whopping **91% of employees feel motivated to do their best work when they have good leadership support**. Developing your managers' management skills has massive business benefits – in fact, business success depends on it.

The differentiating factor for all organisations is the quality of their management. Many senior leaders can be unwilling to invest in management development because they falsely consider it to be woolly and fluffy. Our hope is that through this article you conclude, like us, that developing your managers is a direct investment in the bottom line. More importantly it creates a healthy organisation where people thrive and give their discretionary effort.

Knowing where to start

There are thousands of articles listing the most important management characteristics and skills, but while some information is good, too much information can be counterproductive. Not to worry — we've taken care of that for you. We're self-confessed nerds and we've devoured the latest research, data and leading thinking out there, boiling it down to the 'secret sauce' of management and the most important behaviours to focus on.

In this article, we explore what great managers do and reveal the 10 essential characteristics of great managers. The good news? These 10 characteristics can be learnt and replicated.

> ***Great managers create a climate where people want to show up and do their best, deliver results and help grow the business.***

A culture climate change emergency

What employees and employers expect of managers has changed drastically in recent times. None of us are under any illusions that the environment for business today is fragile, complex, ambiguous and demanding; it is also a trend that doesn't seem to have an immediate let up. Add to this an explosion of technological innovation where we are seeing entire workforces replaced by robots: in the not too distant future, it will get to a point where there won't be human beings in call centres or serving you fast food, or even cooking it. Never before has humankind seen the amount of change that has happened in the last 20 years. Managers are faced with a tsunami of change and are expected to navigate this, whilst executing the company strategy.

What's more, there has been a fundamental breakdown in trust of leadership at a social and corporate level and a belief that corporations are, at their core, corrupted by their own agenda of creating profit - that those at the head of these organisations are untouchable and devoid of integrity. It is the cumulative effect of the last two decades' continual barrage of leadership failures within politics, business and society that is slowly eroding people's trust in people in positions of power. The message has moved from a murmur to a voice and that voice says, 'Leaders and managers are not to be trusted, business is not to be trusted and society is at risk'.

Trust in management is at an all-time low, exacerbated by a general societal mistrust in figures of influence. Office politics, personal agendas and game playing poison the well, making it harder for middle management to operate and deliver. Low trust inevitably leads to toxicity, which quickly takes root in a culture and spreads like wildfire.

Toxic shock

MIT Professor Edgar Schein defines company culture as “the unspoken rules that drive employee decisions” - and those unspoken rules can be deeply poisonous. We are coming across an increasing number of companies whose toxic behaviours are eating away at their culture, bit by bit. In these situations, it’s time to declare a culture climate change emergency.

Of course, the odd negative comment or knee-jerk assumption is inevitable. We’re only human, after all. But left to grow, any one of these small cultural germs can develop into a widespread infection.
The result? Apathetic meetings. Creeping rumours, gossip, buck-passing, finger-pointing and days that feel as long and exhausting as they are unproductive. Managers spend time covering their a**e rather than growing their people and the business.

According to a recent study by Randstad, ‘38% of workers want to leave their jobs due to a toxic work culture or one where they feel they don’t fit in’. An even larger group (58%) have left jobs, or are considering leaving, because of negative office politics. ‘75% of people voluntarily leaving jobs don’t quit their jobs; they quit their bosses’. If that’s the case – another worrying stat is that ‘leadership accounts for 70% of corporate culture and corporate culture accounts for 21% of company performance’.

Behavioural pollutants are a serious problem - and all the harder to fix because they’re so unquestioned and ingrained. Managers play a huge part in creating the culture and can either detoxify a climate or help spread the pollution and perpetuate the problems.

The signs of a toxic culture

FEAR: Fear is the ultimate culture killer. It stifles innovation, slows down processes and leads to potential-smothering stress. If there is an absence of frank and open dialogue in your organisation, new ideas are met with silence and fresh talent is rapidly jumping ship, you've probably got a climate infected with fear. Management through fear slowly suffocates life from the culture.

HYPOCRISY: Leaders and managers talking the talk but failing to walk the walk are all too common. This is a trait of many organisations that score 'superficial' on the trust barometer, where leadership is a title, not a behaviour. If you say the customer is important, then penalise people for spending too long on customer conversations for example, you're caught in this toxic trap. A worrying stat is that 74% of UK professionals admit to emulating the behaviours (both good and bad) of their managers (ILM, 2018)

BLAME: Throwing people under buses, not owning up to mistakes, not holding poor performance to account, inter-department warring… sound familiar? In a blame culture, our primeval flight or fight response is constantly engaged, crippling clear thinking and resulting in constant conflict.

FAULT FINDING: Relentless criticism slowly destroys a culture. There is nothing worse than a nit-picking manager, who endlessly finds fault and focuses on the negative and things that are not right. It is soul-destroying.

MICROMANAGEMENT: Google's Project Oxygen - launched to discover what makes a better manager - identified micromanagement as a major toxic behaviour. The resulting lack of trust and permission makes it very hard for people to use their initiative and do what's best for the customer in the moment, as they don't feel ownership over their work. In fact, micromanaging can erode worker initiative and damage employee motivation.

If you recognise any of these signs, you may want to take action now. Great managers detoxify cultures; they act like a filter to take the toxins out of the organisation's bloodstream. Average managers do the opposite – they either act in wilful blindness or they exacerbate the situation further.

Who wants to be a manager anyway?

Considering all these challenges, it is not easy being a manager, let alone a great manager. Truth told, being a manager is a little hard. In our work we frequently come across some or all of these three core problems:

ROCK AND HARD PLACE – managers are wedged between senior leaders and frontline staff. Trying to balance the demands of senior leaders to execute the strategy; the need to inspire, muster and motivate the troops; navigate the changing landscape of sales and service; keep pace with societal and organisational change; and be expected to do more with less – all whilst trying to deliver results and maintain harmony at a team level – is not easy.

AN EASY TARGET – if you ask senior executives, they will often blame middle managers for under-performance: 'They just don't get it, I have told them, and they still don't get it'. At Elev-8 we have a saying, 'You get the team you deserve'. The buck does not stop with middle managers.

FEELING UNLOVED - no surprise then middle managers are amongst the most disengaged (Gallup). Studies show that they are overwhelmed by work, they feel issues are not addressed by those above them, they feel undervalued, unsupported and they lack a sense of purpose. Yet the research says:

> ***"Great managers produce 48% higher profits"***
>
> (Gallup)

It is no secret that a good manager is one who can make all the difference in how happy your team is. Being a manager can be a demanding job with a lot of responsibility, and they are not always set up for success. If it is such a tough gig and we expect a twenty something to be a Gandhi or an Obama, are we expecting too much? Can we really blame them if they don't shine? Organisations need to set people up for success. Our experience suggests many don't.

The familiar five

So, what exactly is going wrong? Do any of these five issues sound familiar to you?

1

MAGIC WEEKEND – Many managers experience what we call the magic weekend: On a Friday they are content and passionate frontline employees, with great ambition to advance their careers. In recognition of their dedication, they get given a team to manage. On the following Monday they are expected to be competent, inspiring people managers who can lead a team. Not easy. If they are lucky enough to get training, it is often a sheep dip approach, with little workplace consolidation and limited connection to the real world they now face.

2

TECHNICAL VS. PEOPLE FOCUS – 82% of companies choose the wrong manager (Gallup). Often highly technical people are promoted or recruited into management roles, with little thought about their capability or aptitude to lead and manage people.

3

TEF (TIME, ENERGY AND FOCUS) – Managers often are managing large spans of control, and are overwhelmed by project work, reporting and so on. Their time is drained away from the thing that matters most, people.

4

MASTER COACH – There is an expectation that managers, who are mostly twenty-somethings, can become great life coaches who soothe the troubled waters of the frontline. The reality is they are not psychologists or counsellors, and they don't need to be.

5

NUMBER JUNKIES – In the vain effort to measure everything, companies end up shackling their managers to their desks, analysing and creating a whole mini industry of spreadsheets and reports. They are focused on the output, rather than the input which will shift performance by helping people perform better.

Many organisations will relate to these issues, but very few will act and do something different.

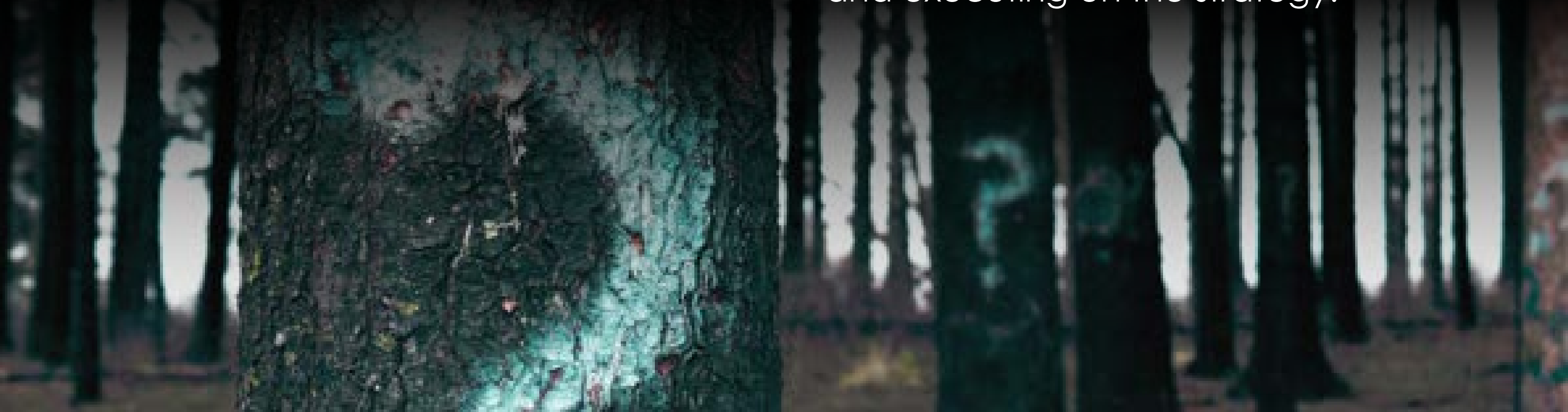
‘Manager vs. leader’
Just a bullsh*t argument?

Google ‘manager vs. leader’ and you will be inundated with blogs and articles, arguing the difference between what makes a great leader and a manager. At Elev-8 we have a strong view on this. Many of us have been taught and conditioned to believe that managers and leaders are two separate entities, which is quite a harmful assumption. As a result, we have managers who cannot lead and leaders who cannot manage. A leader who cannot manage has a vision of where they want to go but no idea of how to get there. A manager who cannot lead is not able to build trust and create engagement within an organisation to get to where they need to go. None of these scenarios are practical or effective.

Back in the day, the role of a manager was to make sure that employees clocked in on time, did their jobs, didn’t cause any problems, and showed up the next day to repeat the process. There was little emphasis on creativity, innovation, engagement, empowerment, or the like; nor was there a need for any of these things.

However, today we live and work in a very different world where all these things are essential. The stereotypical manager focuses on control, delegation, productivity, the numbers, process, and efficiency. The leader focuses on vision, engagement, big ideas, empowerment, innovation, and transformation. One without the other is meaningless. Leaders are not just CEOs or C-suite execs, that’s just hierarchy. We believe any manager, regardless of how junior or senior, needs to be able to come up with big ideas, inspire employees, take on a certain degree of risk or engage team members. This needs to be happening whilst maintaining the balance of productivity and long-term business growth.

In conclusion, this means that managers must be leaders and vice versa. The best managers combine excellent management and leadership skills – they manage and lead. Great managers are also great leaders. They make meaning, role-modelling behaviour, giving energy to the stories that motivate, bring curiosity and challenge to conversations and encouraging people to be their best version of themselves whilst organising and executing on the strategy.



From the savannah to the office

Humans emerged on the savannah plains some 200,000 years ago, yet according to evolutionary psychology, people today still seek those characteristics that made survival possible then: an instinct to fight furiously when threatened, for instance, and a drive to trade information and gossip. Human beings are, in other words, hardwired. You can take the person out of the Stone Age, evolutionary psychologists contend, but you can't take the Stone Age out of the person.

The success of Homosapiens was no fluke. The enlarged brain of the humans made survival in the unpredictable environment of the savannah possible. Let's look at one example; In an uncertain world, those who survived always had their emotional radar—call it instinct, if you will—turned on. And Stone Age people, at the mercy of wild predators, came to trust their instincts above all else. That reliance on instinct undoubtedly saved human lives, allowing those who possessed keen instincts to reproduce. So for human beings, no less than for any other animal, emotions are the first screen to all information received. Today leaders and mangers are often trained to dispense with emotions in favour of rational analysis and urged to make choices using logic. But evolutionary psychology suggests that emotions can never fully be suppressed. That is why, for instance, even the most sensible employees cannot seem to receive feedback in the constructive vein in which it is often given. Because of the primacy of emotions, people hear bad news first and loudest.

"We might be sophisticated animals in a primate hierarchy, but we, like every other animal we share this planet with, have taken a long, grinding evolutionary path to get here, and our minds are littered with psychological souvenirs of the journey."
(Vugt and Ahuja)

Great managers are aware that certain hardwiring can impact their behaviour and how they lead others. They implement strategies to overcome their evolutionary tripwires and default settings. They are cognizant of the need to create a climate in the workplace that makes people feel psychologically safe, build trust, display empathy for their people and connect teams together. They detoxify and address negative behaviours like gossip, and role model the desired behaviours.

Source:HBR

Give me the secret sauce

Great managers believe 'Always be the person you would want to work for'.

So, we have established change is a constant, that being a good manager isn't easy, and to some extent we are hardwired to behave in a certain way. 'So what?' I hear you cry!

While a manager's actions may be scrutinised when things are going bad, it is their management and leadership characteristics that shine through the worst of times. It is these same qualities that employees look up to, respect, and work very hard for. This is why it is so important for every manager to work hard to gain the qualities of great management and leadership.

We often have those people in our life that we remember. They influenced us, they encouraged us, they made us better, and they made a huge difference in our life. Why? Probably because they had the qualities of a great manager. But what makes a good manager? The kind that inspires a team, fosters growth and productivity, and frequently asks for feedback on their management style? Simply managing a team doesn't make a good manager. It's the amount of effort and leadership they put into making their team successful.

There are a lot of misconceptions about management and leadership floating around in the business world. Think great leaders love the spotlight? They are charismatic? Or that they have all the answers? Or they got to where they are by taking a lot of credit for big wins?

These myths are all too common. In fact, great managers don't seek attention; they find pride in helping others succeed. They aren't all-knowing; they use their resources to turn ideas into executable plans. And they don't take all the credit; the best leaders are humble, self-aware, and shoulder a little more share of the blame and a little less share of the credit.

After conducting over 400 diagnostics in FTSE 250 we have identified the top performing management behaviours that create successful and thriving cultures. Having tested and re-tested these high performing behaviours in our award-winning programmes we are excited to share the insight.

The great news is that it is not rocket science. Our thought-leadership and research concludes that leadership and management are intertwined, and that there are a set of top-performer behaviours that can be learnt and replicated across any business.

Make meaning – Create purpose and a compelling narrative that changes the conversations shaping everyday thinking and actions.

Create psychological safety – Make it safe for people to bring their best selves to work.

Build trust – Act with integrity and the right intent, build trust through their daily actions.

Develop others – Genuinely care and support their people with regular feedback and coaching to enable them to perform at their best.

Give permission – Develop autonomy and accountable freedom, unleashing the shackles.

10 things great ~~managers~~ do leaders

Own performance – Inspire, motivate and encourage people to perform and fulfil their potential.

Positively disrupt – Show humility, vulnerability and bravery; are willing to challenge the status quo.

Engage in dialogue – Hold authentic and adult conversations that result in strong relationships and collaboration.

Tame change – Thrive in high challenge situations, equip their people to overcome complexity and bounce back from the bumps along the way.

Role model – Walking the talk and demonstrating commitment to the desired behaviours and values.

From ordinary to **extra**ordinary

Individually, these characteristics are not new. But by using them systematically, consistently, and in combination, organisations will increase the impact of their management development initiatives and enable more managers to create great workplaces and sustain personal change. These characteristics make a profound difference to how people lead and manage teams. They are the hallmarks of those who create extraordinary lives and become extraordinary leaders and managers. They are game changers that make a difference to people at work, at home and to their personal wellbeing.

Being an effective manager requires constant focus and perseverance to build a team that is accountable and designed to get results. Many of us in leadership or management positions know what we need to do to be better at the art of the craft, we just sometimes fail to act. It requires constant personal and professional development, regular transparent feedback from the team, self-reflection and acting on feedback received.

There are so many ways to be an effective, inspiring people manager in the modern workplace. But perhaps the most important mindset that managers can have is to think of their people, not as subordinates or followers, but as talented members of the same team. Managers are there to support, care and develop them, and they're there to support your vision. A great manager recognises this and a great team admires them for it.

NERD CORNER

At Google, an internal team of researchers launched Project Oxygen – to determine what makes a manager 'great'. From this research, they identified eight behaviours that are common among highest performing managers. The Elev-8 10 things great leaders do are aligned to these high performing behaviours and draw on research from other experts in this space, such as S Sinek, B Chapman, J Collins, B George.

Mind the tangibility bias

147% higher earnings per share than the competition when companies increase their numbers of 'talented' managers (Harvard Business Review).

Intuitively we know great leaders and managers make a difference. Yet something called the 'tangibility bias' is at play. Senior leaders can be unwilling to invest in leadership and management development because they falsely consider it to be woolly and fluffy. Leaders put a priority on the tangible – what they can see, touch and measure – such as technology investments.

Putting an exact value on people is more difficult, even though people directly influence the value of technology, innovation, products, sales and service. Investing in leadership and management development can be perceived as intangible and hard to determine an ROI.

We disagree, the investment is tangible.

Let's not forget that according to Gallup, 'great managers produce 48% higher profits' and with the finding that 'only 10% of managers today feel their organisation's current training sets them up for success and to truly lead their teams' (Bartram). The business case is laid bare. You can develop the right management behaviours and more importantly replicate them across the business. Management training embraces more than the individual.

It's an investment in the whole team because your managers' learn how to coach and develop their people. When managers become skilled leaders, results improve, attrition reduces, and everyone feels more valued. And happy staff means happy customers.

'Leaders everywhere in the world have a tendency to name the wrong person manager and then train them on administrative things – not on how to maximise human potential'

Jim Clifton, CEO Gallup

To make the Secret Sauce work, you must have the right recipe. From our experience, supported by behavioural science, we know how to help you.

Get in touch

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Or visit our website
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