

Redefining People Development

Boosting **Retention** Through
Managerial Excellence



Produced by Corporate Learning Network



You cannot lead others if you can't lead yourself. You cannot hold others accountable if you can't hold yourself accountable.



Timothy Olaore
Founder, Mr. Meaningful Work

Bridging the gap between upper management and entry-level employees while implementing strategy and leading teams, middle managers are a crucial part of every organizational structure. However, they are faced with a monumental challenge: leading a team to success while skillfully bridging the gap between upper management and individual contributors. Additionally, with upper management focused on organizational visions and goals and employees at all levels trying to upskill and reskill while navigating demanding workloads, middle managers risk getting lost in the shuffle when it comes to L&D programs. This is an oversight that can have detrimental organizational consequences.

Managerial roles require a distinct and unique set of people skills, and excelling in a previous individual contributor role does not guarantee success as a leader. Timothy Olaore, Founder at Mr. Meaningful Work says: “If you’ve shown technical competency in a particular area, some folks feel like that automatically qualifies you for people and strategic management, which is oftentimes not the case. It’s a different skill set driving a process versus driving people who drive a process. If you don’t know how to manage personalities, you don’t have to know how to manage.”

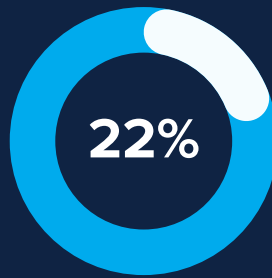
The importance of middle managers to organizational success and the knowledge gap that they can often face means focusing specific L&D programs on the development of middle managers is essential. Developing effective middle managers has a cascading effect, allowing individuals on their teams to learn and grow in their roles as well.



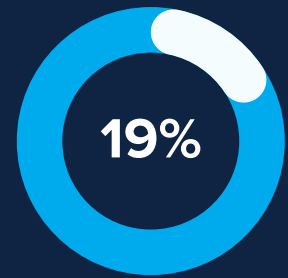
Many learning professionals are jumping on the bandwagon and upskilling middle managers. CLN's recent survey of L&D professionals found that a majority



(59%) have already implemented L&D programs specifically for middle managers.



22% have not implemented L&D programs for middle managers

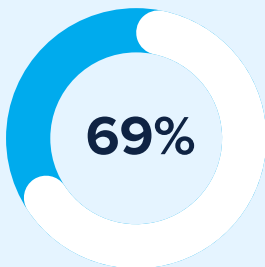


19% are in the process of doing so.

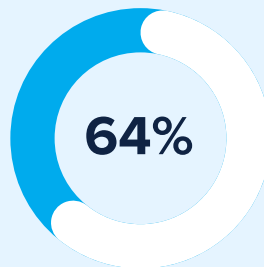
This report illustrates why all L&D professionals should be striving to build out specific learning programs to build managerial and leadership skills for middle management, focusing specifically on employee engagement and retention.

Middle managers have a significant impact on employee satisfaction and can directly impact individual decisions to stay with the company long-term. CLN research shows that when management builds and exemplifies a culture of learning, empathy, curiosity, and trust, it builds a psychologically safe environment that encourages employee engagement and retention. Andrew Mina, Senior Learning and Development Specialist at eloomi, shared the following insight: “First, the manager needs to bring curiosity to their own role. They also need to be in a place where they feel they have their own psychological safety so that they can actually be brave enough to realize that one of their employees might be smarter than them. Instead of being threatened by that, they can be excited that their team can grow and flourish.”

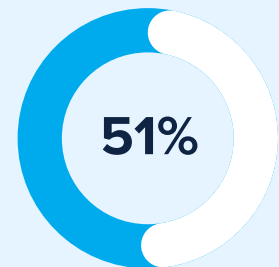
Employees are also looking for meaningful support from managers. Results from eloomi's 2024 people development survey show that the top guidance and support employees want from leaders are:



of employees want leaders to give them clear goals and objectives



of employees want leaders to give them constructive feedback



of employees want leaders to enable them to develop in existing roles

The Benefits of Middle Management Training



Further breaking down the positive impact of middle managerial training on the organization, CLN's survey found the following organizational benefits were most salient for L&D professionals:

Development of future leaders within the organization:

74%

Preparing middle managers to eventually advance to upper-level management is a win-win situation that lets managers excel in their individual careers and encourages them to invest their skills in the organization long-term, allowing the business to increase retention of top talent and knowledge.

Better decision-making and problem-solving skills:

72%

Investing in the development of critical thinking skills and business acumen for middle managers allows them to tackle challenges with increased confidence and make decisions that benefit the business. Many organizations focus on developing these skills for entry-level workers, but it's important not to overlook the unique advantages of ensuring managers are included in problem-solving skill development.

Enhanced communication and collaboration within teams:

69%

Managers who are skilled communicators are better able to create a collaborative and open environment for their teams.

Increased productivity and efficiency:

59%

Better leadership skills among middle managers allow teams to become more productive.

Enhanced ability to manage conflicts and resolve issues:

61%

Managers with advanced interpersonal skills will be better prepared to handle conflicts within their teams or with other managers and leaders.

Greater alignment with organizational goals and strategies:

59%

Managers with high critical thinking and business acumen skills are able to discern the skills their team needs to boost organizational success and encourage the learning programs that align with those skills.

Improved employee morale and motivation:

59%

Competent managers naturally create a supportive work environment that boosts morale and motivation.

Improved employee engagement and satisfaction:

59%

The increased morale that results from working in a psychologically safe environment generally results in higher job satisfaction and better engagement.



Managers need to understand what the organizational goals are. What is the organization trying to achieve? What is my team's contribution to those goals? If the manager doesn't understand the flow of these goals and objectives, they may approve a training on some area that doesn't take the business forward."



Andrew Mina

Senior Learning & Development Specialist, eloomi

The Cost of Insufficient Managerial Development



The dangers of falling behind on management training logically follow its benefits.

CLN's recent survey of L&D professionals found that the following issues, all related to managerial competence, were most likely to prevent high retention.

What are the potential costs of falling behind on management training?

What challenges have you found are most likely to prevent high retention? Select as many as apply



The Skills that Redefine Managerial Excellence and Improve Retention

The benefits of management development are clear, but what specific skills should L&D leaders promote among middle managers? It's all about the skills that allow them to support their teams. When asked how leadership and management training for middle managers can improve retention, L&D executives largely emphasized human skills such as leadership, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and communication:

“When middle managers are given the tools and training to better lead their teams and not just manage them, their people will stay more often”

CLN Survey Respondent

“By creating an environment where employees are enabled to be their highest functioning selves. This includes communication, psychological safety, and alignment with organizational goals in a way that is meaningful to employees, not just the organization”

CLN Survey Respondent

“Increased decision making, conflict resolution, and communication skills improve the relationships between managers and their team and managers and leadership, thus enabling a more positive, engaging, and productive environment”

CLN Survey Respondent

“Improving coaching and feedback skills leads to employee growth, which leads to better retention. Understanding what motivates employees helps managers create an environment where employees feel engaged”

CLN Survey Respondent



The pattern is clear: developing human skills for middle managers increases retention. Managers with human skills create an environment of psychological safety. In a psychologically safe environment, employees feel empowered to share ideas and make mistakes without fear of repercussions.

Empathy	_____	Leads to trust
Conflict resolution	_____	Builds team unity
Communication	_____	Allows for open dialogue
Coaching & mentoring	_____	Lets each employee feel heard and allows them to grow their own skills
Critical thinking	_____	Allows managers to lead the team in a successful direction aligned with business objectives, but also individual employee objectives



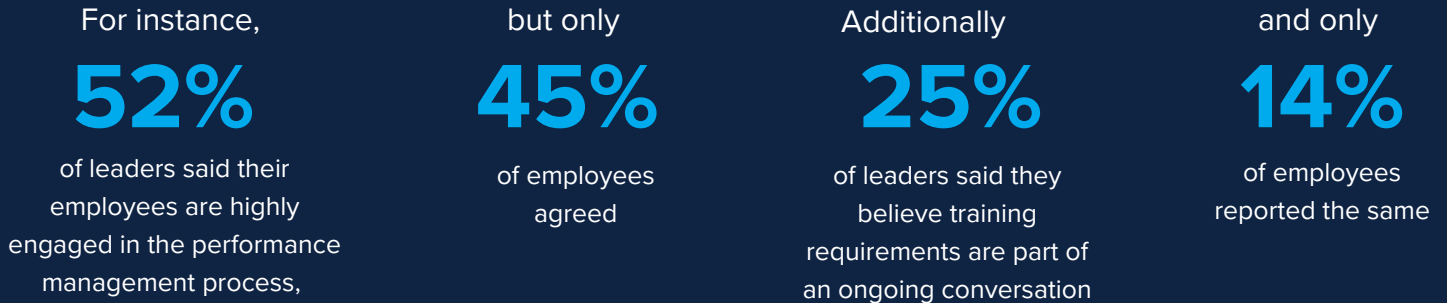
When everyone feels a degree of safety and trust in the organization, then they're open to learning new things, and then they're open to taking on new challenges to get from the comfort zone to the growth zone.



Andrew Mina

Senior Learning & Development Specialist, eloomi

Highlighting the negative effects of a lack of human skills among leaders, eloomi's 2024 people development survey found that leaders and employees have a discrepancy in how they perceive factors related to workplace engagement.



Improved communication and empathy among leaders could help alleviate these perception gaps and ensure that leaders and employees stay on the same page.

Cultivating Excellence in Middle Management

Middle managers can begin to build up these skills by realizing that each employee has an individual perspective, personality, and goals. Timothy Olaore noted that: "It's about understanding where folks want to go and developing them based on where they want to go. It's understanding what everybody's needs are and the responsibility of the leader to have their calendar reflect that. Are you having those one-on-one conversations? Are you protecting time to really understand your folks so that you can retain them?"

Managers should also be offered specific learning initiatives that focus on developing these human skills. Learning programs that work particularly well for "soft skill" development often include a coaching and mentoring component, role-playing exercises or simulations that allow learners to practice real-life scenarios, interactive exercises, and more.

When managers take time to learn, their teams benefit not only from their better management skills, but also from the paradigm being set. Managers taking time to better themselves through learning initiatives exemplifies a culture of learning. Feeling safe to take time for their own learning, employees will be more likely to pursue their own career development. Employees who are able to take time for their own growth are more likely to feel valued within the organization and remain with the business long-term.

Conclusion

Middle managers are a crucial part of the organizational hierarchy, but risk falling through the cracks when it comes to training. Without investing in L&D programs specifically for middle managers, businesses risk increased attrition among entry-level employees, frontline employees, and individual contributors. Building up human skills such as empathy and communication in order for managers to foster a psychologically safe work environment for their teams encourages employees to remain with the company long-term. People development isn't just about the individual – it's about fostering a team where growth and learning are not only plausible but encouraged.



Meet the Author



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Megan Kashtan is a Digital Writer and Analyst at the Corporate Learning Network. She is passionate about writing and enjoys creating content about established and developing trends in the corporate world. In previous jobs, she wrote and edited marketing and thought leadership content. Megan loves learning and expanding her knowledge through travel.

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