

WHO WANTS TO LEAD, WHO DOESN'T, AND WHAT EMPLOYEES REALLY THINK OF THEIR LEADERS

Research Report

Reinventing Leadership

The past two years has radically altered the way we work, behave as consumers, and interact as a society.

Disruptions that were bubbling up pre-pandemic, like digital transformation, accelerated, and trends that were already in motion, like focusing on personal wellness, gained momentum. Leaders have had to pivot to find new ways to connect with their people and get the job done.

The great unintentional work-from-home experiment revealed that people can get it done remotely. Productivity has remained constant or improved during the pandemic. Individuals did their work well and made decisions with less leader oversight. Self-accountability was the name of the game. Employees found ways to connect and collaborate with customers and each other. Leaders and employees demonstrated the importance of empathy.

What this time has revealed is not that we don't need leaders, but that we need them to interact with employees differently. It's time for leaders to up their game and evolve from using basic skills to more "advanced maneuvers." It's time to ask ourselves if we've been operating from an expired playbook with respect to what employees and future leaders value. Are we using a spiral-bound notebook to lead a podcast generation?

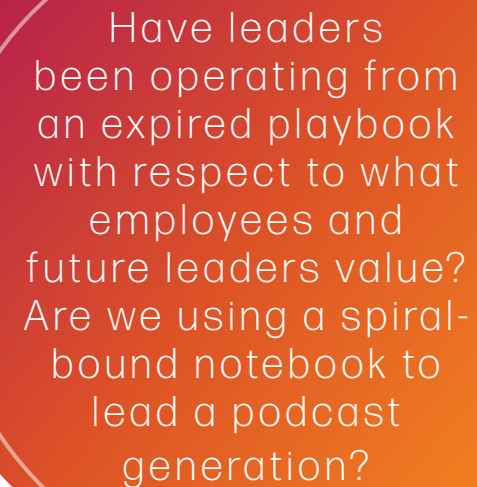


The world has changed, and leaders need to change with it. But how?

The truth is, leaders and their organizations had better figure out the answers fast. With quit rates¹ (1Bureau of Labor Statistics) at staggeringly high numbers, it is an employee's market. Employees are leaving their organizations, and in some cases their careers, in record numbers, looking for their own reinvention.

Reinvention is taking place all around us, and leaders must reinvent as well. It's an exciting time for people leaders, if they can take the meaningful lessons they've learned and use them to refashion their role. They can **move from ego to emotional intelligence, from tell to talk, and from a focus on corporate values alone to a viewpoint that includes personal values.**

Leadership is at an inflection point. The steady, known trajectory of typical in-office days and predictable patterns is gone. The new world of work requires a different type of leader.



Have leaders been operating from an expired playbook with respect to what employees and future leaders value? Are we using a spiral-bound notebook to lead a podcast generation?

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Against this backdrop, GP Strategies® asked 1,000 individual contributors what they want from the work they do, their expectations for moving into a leadership role, and whether their current managers have the ability to develop them as leaders. We wanted to know **how** people leaders should pursue reinvention. The results may surprise you.

REINVENTION: From Ego Emotional Intelligence

Where should leadership reinvention start? The employees we surveyed have some thoughts. We asked employees to think broadly about leaders they've followed and share when they've seen leaders succeed, and where they've seen them stumble.

Leader **SUCCESS** is a balance of factors, including **communication, trustworthiness, and competence/industry knowledge**. More than half of our respondents identified **poor communication** as the most significant leader **STUMBLE**, followed by **arrogance**, then **poor decision making**.

Success indicators reinforce what we know are the biggest factors in leadership—**competence and connection**. Employees want to be led by competent leaders who have the requisite knowledge to help them be successful in reaching their goals. At the same time, our historical research shows that it is leaders who forge connection through communication and trust who truly engage and inspire employees. While a single issue, such as poor communication, can sink a leader, it takes a careful blend of factors to make a leader successful.

SUCCESSSES

38% | Good Communication

26% | Trust

24% | Competence/Industry Knowledge

STUMBLES

52% | Poor Communication

30% | Arrogance


23% | Poor Decision Making

STUMBLES

Poor Communication:

At all levels of organizations, and in so many different ways, communication remains the single biggest factor in determining leader success—and for good reason. Communication is the best tool in a leader’s toolbox. Before a leader can delegate, coach, or hold others accountable, they need to be fluent communicators. Good communication is also how leaders convey competence, demonstrate their knowledge, articulate organizational goals, and provide direction to their team. It is how they forge connection, express empathy, show up authentically, and help people feel cared for.

Communication provides the clearest evidence of what a leader stands for and the best barometer of authenticity. Team members assess consistency between a leader’s words and actions. Good leadership communication is about more than what a leader says. It’s also about listening mindfully to the people they lead—not simply for the message, but for the mood as well as *what’s not said*. Particularly in a hybrid and digital environment, **intentionality** in communication is pivotal. This includes finding the right balance in terms of frequency, choosing the right modality for the message, and above all, keeping lines of communication moving in both directions. Communication is nuanced—when even one element is done poorly (e.g., tone or word choice) the larger message and objective can be undermined.



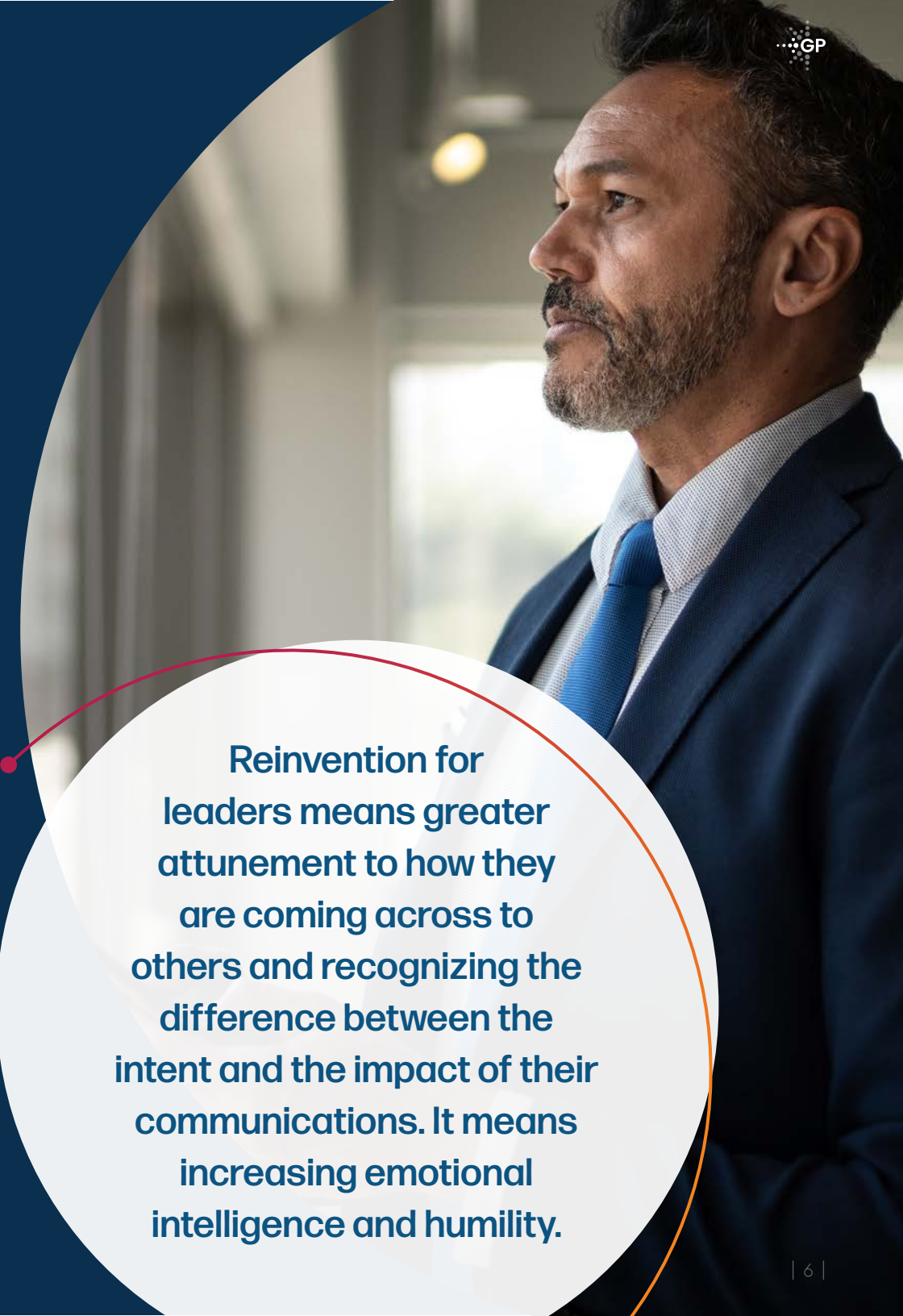
Reinventing communication for leaders means a heightened awareness to listening to distinguish the signal of the message from the noise, paying attention to the mood and tone of communication, and increased sensitivity in choosing the right modality or technology for the message.

STUMBLES

Perceived Arrogance:

There is also work for leaders to do when it comes to expressing humility. Much like communication and trust, perceived arrogance, left unaddressed, can have a pervasive effect on how a leader is viewed, and survey respondents cited perceived arrogance as a significant leadership challenge. A strong leader demonstrates competence and confidence, but over-applying these tools, combined with poor communication, can lead to the appearance of arrogance. Arrogance may mask a greater insecurity unknown to those who watch these leaders from afar. Some leaders may create distance from their employees as a way to shield them from challenges or bad news. Regardless of the root cause, the impact is a negative perception on the part of employees and raises the question, “What can leaders do to be more mindful of how they come across to the people they lead?”

The truth is, good leaders surround themselves with people who have knowledge or skills that they lack. They are able to acknowledge when they don't have all the answers and need help. However, a willingness to ask for help from others contradicts the traditional expectation that leaders need to be the most knowledgeable, have the most powerful voice in the room, and be the final decision maker. Far more appealing is the story of leader as showman—an individual with presence and gravitas. It's time to break the mold of the “all-knowing leader” and encourage vulnerability, transparency, and authenticity.




Reinvention for leaders means greater attunement to how they are coming across to others and recognizing the difference between the intent and the impact of their communications. It means increasing emotional intelligence and humility.

STUMBLES

Decision Making:

Decision making was another significant leadership stumble. Whether it is poor choices leading to negative outcomes, poorly communicated decisions, or decisions made without input from the team, decision making was cited by respondents as an area of concern. Taken alone, poor decision making is problematic, but this stumble, combined with arrogance and poor communication, suggests the need for leaders to redouble their efforts to communicate clearly, dial up their self-awareness, and take a more inclusive approach to decision making. As teams continue to work in remote and hybrid arrangements, distributed decision making will continue to take hold and grow. Likewise, transparent decision making will continue to be crucial in a hybrid environment. Leaders will need to become increasingly adept at proactively sharing decisions and their context. Leaders need to embrace the implications of a workforce that may no longer rely on them to solve every challenge or choose every answer.



Reinventing decision making means taking a more inclusive approach—one in which all employees feel they can contribute and their contribution is valued. It is about increasing distributed decision making, where the person closest to the situation, not necessarily the leader, has the strongest vote in the choice.

REINVENTION: From Tell Talk

As employees increasingly work independently, in virtual or hybrid scenarios, they've proven they can be productive. They've also demonstrated that they can hold themselves and their teammates accountable. Their ability to make decisions independently has increased. This doesn't make the leader obsolete. This makes them more useful in a different way. With that in mind, what is the opportunity for the leader to contribute? Where can they add to the lives and the livelihood of an increasingly self-directed employee population?

If where a leader spends their time is a measure of what they value, our research revealed the following in terms of what employees perceive leaders to prioritize:



60% said their managers are usually or always **delegating**.



57% said their managers are usually or always working **independently**.



54% said their managers are usually or always **supporting team collaboration**.

More telling is where leaders are not spending their time. Of those we surveyed:



35% of individual contributors said their managers never or seldom engage in **career development conversations**.



28% said leaders never or seldom spend their time **coaching**.

In a time plagued by
“The Great
Resignation”
it is troubling that
35% of employees
say their leaders
seldom or never
spend time in career
conversations.

Reinventing leadership means increasing the amount of time spent on higher value-add activities such as career development conversations and coaching. It's about elevating the interaction between leaders and each team member.

The fine line to walk as a leader is one that balances the certainty of individual contributions with the need to motivate others to contribute and engage. There will be many times where leaders will need to work independently, and there will be times where delegating and collaborating are what's required to get the job done. While skills like delegation and team collaboration are necessary, they are insufficient if people leaders want to elevate their role. What got them here won't get them there. The challenge is pivoting to more value-add activities.

Reinventing the role of people leader means more intentionality around coaching and career.

Of most significance in the data we reviewed is the lack of time investment employees perceive leaders spend on two highly valued activities—coaching and career development. It's no wonder the turnover tsunami continues in light of the fact that 35% of employees we surveyed say their leaders never or seldom spend time in career development conversations. If employees don't feel like leaders care about their career, how much will they invest in building their career at their organization? Respondents commented, "My manager is more concerned with covering her own career than developing someone else," and "There is no communication with me regarding my progression. I never feel important or needed." If we want individuals to be invested in the future of the organization, it is critical that people leaders show they are invested in employee development. We know that employees want to talk about their career informally and frequently and that when they are given the opportunity to do so, they are more likely to stick around.

What's more, reshaping the leader's role from tell to talk, can be freeing for people leaders and empowering for the people they lead. The best way to get there is through coaching. The increase in self-directed working environments gives employees the opportunity to make more choices for themselves. When leaders coach, they create a supportive dialogue with employees that helps them explore different options, creatively solve problems, and overcome obstacles. Freed up from the role of "productivity police," leaders can spend more time in the higher value-add activities of coaching and career development. First, they must gain the confidence and competence to do so.

REINVENTION:

Organizational Values and Personal Values Separated



Organizational Values and Personal Values Coexisting

The third reinvention is an enhanced understanding of employee motivators. The pandemic brought personal values acutely into focus. Instead of leading with corporate values, meetings, and one-on-ones across the globe, the period began with personal check-ins and conversations about health and family. This is perhaps one of the biggest lessons learned that leaders can carry forward as they reshape who they are and how they show up for their people.

Because the truth is, understanding these things not only makes for a better human being, it makes for a better leader, and it directly affects discussions around engagement and career. These discussions aren't successful if leaders don't know what individuals want. While leaders need to have one-on-one discussions to know what's important to each individual, some themes emerged when we posed this question to our respondents.

Understanding what employees and future leaders want from the work they do not only provides insight into what's most important to them today, but also what needs to remain a priority to keep them engaged. When employees are engaged, they contribute to the organization and they are satisfied by the work they do. They are more likely to stick around and be there when you need to them to assume critical leadership roles.

So what do they want? What might satisfy them enough to stem the turnover tide? While compensation is important to those we surveyed, issues of wellbeing and work-life balance ranked at the top of the list of priorities. As the only workforce in modern history to live through a pandemic, the prioritization of work-life balance and wellbeing is no surprise. While productivity remained high [during the pandemic](#), fatigue and exhaustion have brought issues of wellbeing and balance to the forefront. Still others have gotten a glimpse into a virtual work scenario that allows greater flexibility or have had an awakening in terms of what matters to them most and are prioritizing living healthy, fulfilling, and balanced lives. For others, these qualities were part of their value system before.



What Employees Want

84%
Work-life balance

83%
Wellbeing

80%
Compensation

76%
Work with colleagues I respect

74%
Show up as my true self

74%
Do work that gives me a sense of purpose

There is also a focus on work that works for them right now. Employees want to work with colleagues they respect. Working somewhere they can be themselves is important to them. They look for an environment that is less dictated by corporate values in favor of an environment that allows them to satisfy their own personal values. If they don't have that in their current workplace, they will look for a place with stated values that mirror their own.

Reinvention for leaders includes greater intentionality around engaging employees in the areas that matter most to them.

The early pandemic days created a cadre of leaders focused on employee wellbeing. It's important that leaders continue to talk about what's important to employees, their values, and how their work can satisfy those values. It's critical that leaders are invested in the wellbeing and work-life balance of their teams, particularly where there is widespread fatigue and burnout. Above all, leaders need to spend the time with their people and understand what's important to each individual. Satisfaction of values is an individualized equation—what works for one person might not work for all.



Reinventing leadership means leading with personal values. It means greater transparency on your employee's lived reality while being respectful of their boundaries in terms of sharing that reality.


REINVENTION: From Lost Leaders Rising Ranks

The turnover tsunami is not only taking individual contributors; future people leaders are also getting swept up in the tide. Unwanted attrition is not desirable at any level of the organization, but it can be particularly painful to lose up-and-coming leaders in light of the fact that organizations often make an investment in this population and depend on them for the future.

As current people leaders refashion their role, we wanted to understand how up-and-comers viewed that role today. We segmented our original population by those who indicated they wanted to lead and looked at those 500 respondents to understand why some individual contributors move into people leadership roles while others don't. What is driving the aspiration to lead? Are future people leaders motivated by career advancement or the desire to develop others? The answer is mixed.

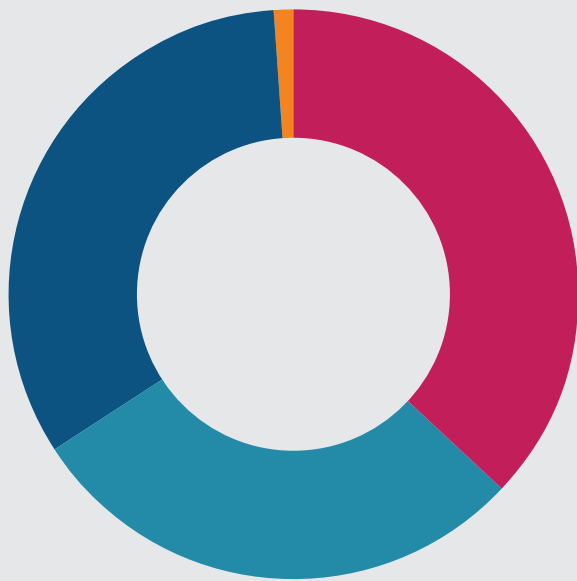
Respondents were divided on whether they **want** to take on the role of people leader formally. Those who indicated they do not want to lead said they were satisfied in their career already or didn't want the responsibility of leading people. A smaller percentage indicated they lack the skills.

Those who want to lead others want to do so because of a desire to advance their career, help others, or both.



Future
People Leaders—
What Motivates Them
and What Do They
Need to Be
Ready to Lead?

Why do you want to be a People Leader?



37%
Advance Career

29%
Develop People

33%
Advance Career AND
Develop People

1%
Other

Sixty-two percent of those we surveyed are motivated (29%) or partially motivated (33%) by the desire to develop others as they seek a role as a future people leader. And while not all express an initial desire to help others, we can hope that, motivated by a desire to be successful or support their team, people leaders will lean in to the development aspect of their role.

Future people leaders, like many of those we surveyed, prioritized work-life balance and wellbeing. But for this population, the importance of personally growth and development emerged as the third most important priority. While this may not be surprising given the upward mobility of this population, it does elevate the need to ensure future leaders feel they will have the chance to grow and develop.

To grow into leaders, they will need support from others, including their own leaders.

This may present a challenge, considering that future people leaders perceive an even wider importance-to-capability gap than the broader population we surveyed:

“My direct leader has the **SKILLS to develop me”** Rated 8 points lower than importance

“My direct leader has the **ATTITUDE or **MINDSET** to develop me”** Rated 8 points lower than importance

“My direct leader **CARES about my career”** Rated 7 points lower than importance

“My direct leader is a **ROLE MODEL for me”** Rated 8 points lower than importance

This confidence gap is particularly problematic for a population that values their development. If they continue to feel their current manager is not someone they can look up to or learn from, the wave of exiting top talent is likely to continue. Direct managers of future people leaders will need to step up their game in terms of spending valuable time in coaching and career conversations, since 28% of future people leaders said their direct managers seldom or rarely have career conversations with them. In addition, 22% of aspiring people leaders said the same when it comes to coaching conversations. To move from losing leaders to rising ranks means reinvention for current people leaders so they have both the confidence and competence to not only lead others, but develop the next generation—on whose shoulders the organization’s future rests.

75% of future leaders want to learn from their manager, which means equipping those managers with the right skills has never been more important! Future people leaders need their leaders, and they want to learn from them.

How to Help Them Succeed

We asked future people leaders to choose between technical skills, attitudinal/mindset skills, soft skills, and analytical skills as they considered where they needed to develop as a people leader and which of these were the greatest predictors of success as a people leader.

Those we surveyed recognize that in order to lead others, they need to develop across several areas. Technical aptitude, attitudinal skills or mindsets, and soft skills were identified as areas where improvement was most needed. And while these up-and-coming leaders recognize they need to develop across all areas, when it comes to leadership success, it was attitudinal and soft skills that they felt were most critical.

Future People Leaders:



What they value:

work-life balance, wellness, and personal development



What they want:

to develop others and advance their career



Where they want to develop:

skillsets and mindsets



What they need:

career development and coaching



How they want it:

through on-the-job coaching from their leaders

Reinventing leadership means a stronger focus on development conversations with future people leaders, including more frequent and transparent conversations about what they want, who can help them, and the best way to go about it.

Leaders are often promoted based on their technical and business skills and their individual contributions.

Technical and business skills are what gets leaders a seat at the table of leadership. But as our respondents indicated, these skills are not the best predictor of leadership success. While soft skills are often dismissed as not hard-hitting enough, they are precisely what our respondents say they need to become successful people leaders.

Reinventing leadership development for future people leaders starts where all good development conversations start: by knowing what's important to that individual. Do the individuals tagged for leadership positions want to lead people? What skills or support might they need to move into a people leader role? Development conversations start with understanding personal motivators and values and helping employees do work that aligns to those motivations and values. It extends to assessing whether aspiring leaders are, in fact, a good fit for people leadership and providing a safety valve if new leaders realize people management isn't for them. It might mean evaluating the messages that are sent about career success. Is "up" the only way? And, it means providing transitional support as employees make the turn from individual contributor to people leader.



Conclusion

Virtual work, digital disruption, greater calls for equity in the workplace, and many other factors have challenged the leadership paradigm in good and necessary ways. In light of the fact that many employees have demonstrated a greater self-sufficiency, what are the implications for where leaders are still needed? Employees are asking for leaders to keep the embers of empathy, authenticity, and empowerment still burning while rising to help them fulfill their personal values and contribute to the organization. The leadership landscape has forever been changed and employees need the support of a decidedly different type of leader—one who focuses on self-awareness, transparent communication, and inclusivity, and takes the time to understand the unique needs of their employees.



Reinventing Leadership

Ego to **Emotional Intelligence**

Better communication, increased transparency, inclusive decision making, increased self-awareness, humility

Tell to **Talk**

Time spent on empowering and higher value-add activities like career development and coaching

Organizational Values and Personal Values Separated to Organizational Values and Personal Values **Coexisting**

Holistic approach to employee engagement with a focus first on what's personally important to the people you lead, including wellness and work/life balance

Lost Leaders to **Rising Ranks**

Concentrated effort on supporting future people leaders with a focus on their development needs

Are you stumbling or succeeding?

ASK YOURSELF:

1. Do I share information transparently?
2. Are my people aware of what I'm working on?
3. Do I involve others in the decision-making process where I can?
4. Am I communicating for competence as well as connection?
5. Am I aware of how I'm coming across to others?

Are you a teller or a talker?

ASK YOURSELF:

1. Who shares first in my team meetings? My one-on-ones?
2. Do I spend time to tune in to what's happening with my employees?
3. Do I know their "lived reality" particularly in a hybrid world?
4. Do I ask thoughtful questions?
5. Do I know what the best work moments of the week are for my employees? The worst?

Are you tuned in to the values of your employees?

ASK YOURSELF:

1. Do I know what motivates my people about the work they do?
2. Have I shared what drives me?
3. Am I talking open about digital fatigue, wellbeing, and work-life balance?
4. Do I create an environment of psychological safety?
5. Am I having career conversations with my people on a regular and informal basis?

Are you helping your people ranks rise or losing leaders?

ASK YOURSELF:

1. Do I know who the future people leaders on my team are? Who on my team wants to be a people leader?
2. Do they have development plans in place?
3. Am I asking them how I can better support their development?
4. Am I taking the time to role model key skills?
5. Am I having regular career conversations with them?



ABOUT

The Author

Leah Clark, Senior Director of Leadership, leads research and product development for GP Strategies' leadership division. She researches, writes, and speaks on the topic of leadership. Her work informs the organization's product development and learner experience efforts. Leah authored the 2019 research report, *Leadership Mindsets* and the 2018 research report, *Tomorrow's Leaders, Today—What Leaders Need Right Now, and in the Future, to Be Successful*. She has written several articles and blogs on steady communication during unsteady times, executive presence, psychological safety, introversion, and mindfulness in innovation, and how to keep human connection alive in a digital learning environment. Leah has over 24 years of experience in marketing, strategy, and product development. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Organizational Psychology from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Sociology from Boston College.

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ABOUT

GP Strategies

GP Strategies is a leading workforce transformation partner—one of the few truly dedicated global providers in the marketplace providing custom solutions. We believe our transformation focus, when paired with deep listening, a customer-centric approach, and innovative expertise, enables our clients to routinely achieve superior business and operational results from our evidence-driven and technology-agnostic recommendations.

Whether your business success requires a change in employee performance and mindsets, learning technologies, or critical processes, GP Strategies is the transformation partner you can trust.

GP Strategies conducted the research applying an online data collection methodology between July 1 and August 17, 2021. Overall, 1,371 responses were received from individual contributors, with the majority coming from North America. Of the 1,371 responses:

Half represent the life sciences, education, healthcare, and manufacturing industries, 55% are female, 44% are male, and 51% are between the ages of 45 and 64.

This combination of experience brings a wealth of understanding in terms of what is important to individual performers and how their workplace can support their development as a potential people leader.



For more information on our research or insights on Reinventing Leadership, contact us: info@gpstrategies.com or 1.888.843.4784



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