Promoting Technical Experts Into Management Is Breaking Teams and How HR Can Build the Next Generation of Leaders

The First Promotion Is Often the Biggest Leadership Risk

Canadian employers have a familiar promotion pattern. A strong individual contributor becomes the obvious choice for management because they know the work, meet targets, solve problems and have credibility with peers. They may be the best technician, salesperson, nurse, estimator, programmer, coordinator, operator, HR generalist or site lead on the team. The promotion feels like recognition, and in many cases it is.

Then the job changes almost overnight. The new manager is no longer judged only by their own output. They are now responsible for feedback, scheduling, delegation, workload, conflict, onboarding, discipline, accommodation, psychological safety, compliance, policy enforcement and the daily experience of other employees. Many have never been trained to do those things well, and some have never been told that the manager role is not simply a more senior version of the job they already had.

That’s where leadership development often fails. It invests heavily in executives, high-potential programs and annual leadership retreats, but underinvests in the first moment when an employee becomes responsible for other people. By the time HR sees the problem, the new manager may already be avoiding difficult conversations, overcorrecting with discipline, approving exceptions inconsistently, mishandling a disability disclosure or allowing resentment to grow inside the team.

The strongest leadership development strategy for the next generation of managers should start there. Not with inspirational leadership language, but with the first promotion into people management. That’s the point where culture, compliance and retention either become stronger or begin to break down.

The Engagement Data Points Back to Managers

The case for better manager development is not only intuitive. It is measurable. Gallup’s 2026 State of the Global Workplace country-level data reports that only 21% of Canadian employees are engaged at work, based on data collected in 2025. Gallup also reports that global manager engagement fell from 31% in 2022 to 22% in 2025, with the largest year-over-year drop occurring between 2024 and 2025. Those figures should concern HR because managers are the day-to-day delivery system for trust, communication, workload, recognition, conflict resolution and accountability.

Low engagement is not solved by telling employees that leaders care. It is improved through the daily behaviour of direct managers. Employees experience the organization through the person who assigns work, approves time off, gives feedback, responds to concerns, interprets policy and decides whether a problem is worth escalating. If that person is unsupported, untrained or overwhelmed, the employee experience deteriorates no matter what values appear on the wall.

This is why next-generation manager development should not be treated as a soft-skill benefit or optional training course. It should be treated as part of the organization's operating system. Managers are not only people leaders. They are risk sensors, policy interpreters, culture carriers and early intervention points. If HR develops them poorly, problems become more expensive later.

The Promotion Mistake HR Keeps Repeating

The most common promotion mistake is assuming that technical credibility predicts managerial readiness. It may help, but it is not enough. A person can be excellent at the work and still struggle to lead people who do the work differently, need different support, challenge authority, request accommodation, make mistakes, underperform or bring interpersonal conflict into the team.

This mistake is especially common in lean organizations. When a supervisor resigns or a department grows, the employer needs someone quickly. The high performer is available, respected and productive. HR may support the promotion because internal advancement is good for retention. The leader may approve it because the person is trusted. Nobody asks whether the candidate understands the people-management role or wants the kind of work the role requires.

Six months later, the signs appear. One employee says they never receive feedback until something goes wrong. Another says the new manager plays favourites. A third says workload is uneven. A fourth says they raised a concern and nothing happened. Performance documentation is vague. Accommodation requests sit too long. HR becomes involved only after the file is already messy.

The promotion was not the mistake. The mistake was promoting without a leadership transition system. HR should treat the first manager role as a career change, not a title change.

Manager Development Is Now a Compliance Issue

Leadership development has traditionally been framed around communication, coaching, delegation and emotional intelligence. Those capabilities matter, but they do not fully capture the risk. New managers are often the first people to hear about harassment, discrimination, disability, mental-health strain, workload pressure, safety hazards, payroll errors, bullying, family status conflicts, substance use concerns and performance problems.

If they respond poorly, the employer may inherit the risk. A manager who ignores a harassment concern may expose the organization to investigation and liability. A manager who comments carelessly on disability may create human rights risk. A manager who disciplines before asking accommodation questions may damage the file. A manager who promises flexibility outside policy may create consistency problems. A manager who lets team conflict continue may create turnover and psychological safety concerns.

The Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP highlighted the leadership training issue in its report on workplace harassment. The report noted that while supervisor and manager development programs contained modules on workplace conflict and harassment, those programs were not mandatory before people assumed supervisory or management positions. The Commission recommended stronger training for leaders involved in harassment complaint assessment and decision-making. That example is specific to the RCMP, but the lesson applies broadly. Organizations create risk when they put people into authority before they are trained to handle the human and legal parts of authority.

For Canadian HR professionals, this is the turning point. Manager development should not be sold internally only as a culture initiative. It should be positioned as compliance prevention, risk control and workforce stability.

The Cases Show What Poor Management Can Cost

Canadian employment cases show why manager capability matters. They are not just legal lessons for HR lawyers. They are cautionary stories about what happens when poor communication, poor judgment, poor documentation or poor conduct is allowed to become the employee experience.

In Boucher v. Wal-Mart Canada Corp., the Ontario Court of Appeal considered a case involving repeated bullying and humiliation by a manager and the employer's handling of the employee's complaints. The case is widely cited as a warning about the cost of allowing managerial misconduct to continue and failing to respond effectively when an employee raises concerns. For HR, the leadership lesson is direct. A manager who abuses authority is not simply a difficult personality. They are a workplace risk.

In Honda Canada Inc. v. Keays, the Supreme Court of Canada confirmed that damages for the manner of dismissal may be available where employer conduct during dismissal is unfair or in bad faith, including being untruthful, misleading or unduly insensitive. Although the Court set aside aggravated and punitive damages on the facts of that case, the principle remains important for HR. Managers and HR leaders need to understand that how decisions are communicated and implemented can matter legally, not just culturally.

In Render v. ThyssenKrupp Elevator Canada Limited, the Ontario Court of Appeal addressed workplace sexual harassment and just cause in a manager-related context. The case is another reminder that leadership conduct, workplace standards and statutory employment obligations must be understood together. A manager who crosses a serious line does not only harm the individual involved. They test the employer's policies, training, culture and decision-making consistency.

In McKinley v. BC Tel, the Supreme Court of Canada emphasized a contextual approach to dishonesty and just cause. That lesson is critical for new managers because many want simple discipline rules. They may believe dishonesty, insubordination, policy breach or poor performance automatically requires a set response. In reality, HR must assess context, seriousness, trust, role, history, safety, consistency and possible protected grounds. Managers need enough training to know when not to decide alone.

The Next Generation of Managers Needs a Different

Curriculum

Many manager training programs are too broad. They teach leadership values, communication styles or personality models, but they do not prepare managers for the difficult moments that create HR risk. The next generation of managers needs practical, scenario-based training that reflects the situations they will face in the first year of people leadership.

A modern manager curriculum should focus on the moments where managers either reduce risk or create it. HR should design training around real decisions, not abstract traits. New managers need to practise what to say when performance is slipping, how to document concerns, when to involve HR, how to respond when an employee mentions anxiety or addiction recovery, what to do if a harassment complaint is raised, and how to manage workload without burning out the strongest employees.

The core curriculum should include these capabilities:

- Difficult conversations that are direct, respectful and documented without becoming aggressive or vague.
- Performance management that separates coaching, expectation-setting, documentation, discipline and accommodation triggers.
- Harassment and violence response that tells managers what to do immediately, what not to investigate on their own and when HR must be involved.
- Accommodation awareness that helps managers recognize possible disability, family status, religious, pregnancy or medical issues without diagnosing employees.
- Workload and burnout detection that helps managers distinguish resilience from unsustainable capacity.
- Hybrid and remote management that avoids visibility bias, informal favouritism and inconsistent flexibility.
- Policy enforcement that’s consistent enough to be fair but flexible enough to account for context.
- Documentation habits that create useful records before a file becomes contested.

This curriculum is less glamorous than some leadership programming, but it is more useful. New managers do not fail because they lack slogans. They fail because nobody has taught them how to manage the moments where employees, risk and business pressure collide.

Psychological Safety Is Built by Managers in Ordinary Moments

Psychological safety is often discussed as a culture goal, but employees experience it through manager behaviour. CCOHS describes psychological safety as a workplace condition where employees feel able to ask questions, seek feedback, report mistakes and problems, or propose ideas without fearing negative consequences to themselves, their job or their career. That kind of safety is not created by a poster or a town hall. It is created in one-on-ones, shift huddles, team meetings, scheduling decisions, debriefs, investigations and feedback conversations.

A manager can build psychological safety by listening without retaliation, admitting uncertainty, following up on concerns, addressing disrespect early and making it safe to discuss mistakes. A manager can damage it by dismissing concerns, embarrassing employees, rewarding silence, punishing bad news, avoiding conflict or tolerating high performers who treat others poorly.

This matters for the next generation of managers because they are often leading teams under more pressure than their predecessors. They may be managing hybrid employees, intergenerational expectations, AI adoption, lean staffing, mental-health disclosures, higher employee skepticism and faster operational change. Psychological safety cannot be treated as a personality trait. It has to be trained as a management practice.

The 90-Day New Manager Ramp

The first 90 days of a manager role should be structured. Too many organizations promote someone, announce the change, give them a few HR links and expect them to learn through experience. Experience matters, but unmanaged experience can mean employees become the training ground for avoidable mistakes.

HR should build a 90-day ramp that gives new managers staged responsibility, coaching and review. The structure does not need to be complicated, but it needs to be consistent. The goal is to prevent the new manager from facing high-risk situations alone before they know how the organization expects them to respond.

1. Before promotion, assess whether the employee understands and wants the people-management role. Do not assume ambition for advancement equals readiness to manage conflict, discipline, accommodation and team dynamics.
2. During the first week, train the manager on role expectations, HR escalation triggers, documentation standards, scheduling authority, policy limits and confidentiality. This should be mandatory, not optional.
3. During the first 30 days, coach the manager on one-on-ones, feedback, delegation, workload planning and team norms. HR or the manager’s leader should review early decisions, especially where conflict is already present.
4. By day 60, review real situations the manager has handled. Look at performance notes, accommodation questions, scheduling exceptions, employee concerns and any early complaints or friction points.
5. By day 90, assess team health signals. Review turnover risk, absenteeism, engagement signals, training completion, workload concerns and feedback from direct reports or peers. Then decide what support the manager needs next.

The 90-day ramp sends a clear message. Management is not a reward that comes with unlimited discretion. It is a role with standards, support and accountability.

Manager Coaching Should Continue After Training

One-time training rarely changes manager behaviour by itself. New managers need coaching after they begin applying the learning. They need someone to review their first difficult conversation, first performance file, first accommodation issue and first serious team conflict. Without that support, they either avoid the issue or improvise based on the management behaviour they have seen in the past.

HR cannot coach every manager on every issue, but it can create a support model. New managers can be paired with experienced leaders, attend monthly manager clinics, receive scenario refreshers, or meet with HR at set milestones. The important point is to create a safe path for managers to ask for help before they make the file worse.

This is especially important for managers promoted from within the team. They may now supervise former peers, friends or informal rivals. They may struggle to reset boundaries. They may overcompensate by becoming too distant or too rigid. HR should address that transition explicitly rather than pretending the team will automatically adjust.

HR Should Measure Manager Effectiveness Through Outcomes

Organizations often know which managers are strong and which are struggling, but they do not always measure it. That makes manager development subjective and political. HR should use a manager effectiveness scorecard that combines people outcomes, compliance signals and employee experience indicators.

The goal is not to punish managers with a dashboard. The goal is to identify where support, coaching or intervention is needed. A manager with high turnover may have a workload problem, not a character problem. A manager with repeated complaints may need training, closer oversight or removal from people leadership. A manager whose team has strong engagement and low turnover under difficult conditions may offer lessons the rest of the organization should learn.

Useful manager effectiveness indicators include:

- Voluntary turnover and first-year turnover by team.
- Absenteeism patterns, overtime pressure and workload concerns.
- Engagement, trust and psychological safety scores by team where data is available.
- Completion and quality of performance reviews.
- Training completion for the manager and their direct reports.
- Employee relations escalations, complaints, grievances and investigation triggers.
- Accommodation response time and quality of manager participation.
- Internal transfers out of the team and exit interview themes.
- Safety incidents, near misses or reporting behaviour in operational environments.
- Evidence of coaching habits, one-on-ones and documented feedback.

These measures should never be read in isolation. A high-absence team may be working through legitimate medical issues. A team with many complaints may have gained trust in reporting. A team with low complaints may be silent because employees do not trust the manager. HR should use metrics as a prompt for inquiry, not a substitute for judgment.

The Bench Should Be Built Before the Vacancy Opens

Leadership development for the next generation of managers should begin before the manager role is vacant. If HR waits until a supervisor resigns or a department expands, the organization will often choose the best available person rather than the best prepared person.

A stronger approach is to build a manager bench. HR can identify employees who may be interested in people leadership, expose them to limited leadership responsibilities, train them on feedback and communication, let them lead projects, and observe how they handle conflict, accountability and collaboration. This gives the organization better information before promotion decisions are made.

The bench should also include an honest alternative career path. Not every technical expert should become a people manager. Some should be able to advance as senior specialists, trainers, mentors, project leads, technical advisors or client experts without being forced into formal supervision. When management is the only advancement path, employers push people into roles they may not want and may not perform well.

This is one of the most important retention lessons. A strong individual contributor should not have to choose between career growth and a job they are poorly suited to perform.

What HR Should Stop Doing

Revamping leadership development also means stopping practices that create weak managers. HR should be candid about the habits that make first-time management harder than it needs to be.

- Stop promoting people into management without explaining that people leadership is a different job, not a status upgrade.
- Stop treating manager training as optional when managers are expected to handle harassment, accommodation, performance and conflict.
- Stop relying on annual leadership workshops when new managers need applied coaching in the first 90 days.
- Stop measuring employee behaviour while avoiding manager impact.
- Stop assuming technical experts want to manage people just because they want career growth.
- Stop leaving new managers alone with high-risk decisions because they are uncomfortable asking for help.

These changes are not cosmetic. They shift leadership development from a program to a system. That’s what the next generation of managers needs.

The HR Takeaway

The next generation of managers will not become strong leaders because they were promoted. They will become strong leaders because HR built a system that teaches, coaches, measures and supports them before their mistakes become employee relations files.

Canadian employers need to stop treating the first manager promotion as an administrative move. It is one of the highest-risk transitions in the employment lifecycle. It changes the employee’s authority, the team’s experience and the organization’s exposure to conflict, turnover, accommodation mistakes, harassment failures, performance disputes and trust damage.

The solution is not another generic leadership course. The solution is a structured manager development system that begins before promotion, intensifies during the first 90 days, continues through coaching, and measures manager effectiveness through real workplace outcomes. It should teach managers how to make decisions, not just how to describe leadership values.

When HR gets this right, leadership development becomes more than succession planning. It becomes a risk-control strategy, a retention strategy and a culture strategy. The employer gets better managers. Employees get clearer support. HR gets fewer preventable files. The organization gets leaders who are ready for the role before the role exposes what they were never taught.