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Manager Burnout: Why Leaders Are Struggling and What Organizations Can Do



Christi Doporto | Aug 13, 2026 | 13 min



There is a strange irony at the center of most companies right now. The people responsible for protecting employees from burnout are themselves burning out, often faster than the teams they manage.

Ask most managers how they are doing and you will get a version of the same answer: “busy”, “fine”, “managing”. Look closer and a different picture appears. Stretched thin, isolated, and quietly exhausted, with no one checking on them the way they are expected to check on everyone else.

This is not a personal failing. It is a structural one. And in 2026, the data behind it is loud enough that no organization serious about retaining its leadership talent can afford to ignore it.

What Is Manager Burnout?

Manager burnout is a state of chronic exhaustion, detachment, and reduced effectiveness that develops when someone in a leadership role faces sustained pressure from multiple directions at once, without enough support, authority, or recovery time to manage it.

It shares the same underlying pattern as general workplace burnout, which the World Health Organization defines through three dimensions: energy depletion, increased mental distance from the job, and reduced professional effectiveness. What makes manager burnout distinct is where the pressure comes from. A manager absorbs demands from senior leadership above, expectations from the team below, and the emotional weight of being the person everyone turns to when something goes wrong. Few other roles in an organization sit at that intersection every single day.

The Squeeze: Why Manager Burnout Is Different From Employee Burnout

Most burnout content treats managers and employees as if they experience the same problem. They do not. **A manager is squeezed from two sides simultaneously**, and this is the core mechanism worth understanding before anything else.

Pressure from above

Senior leadership sets targets, timelines, and expectations, often without fully accounting for what it actually takes to deliver them through a team of people. The manager is the one who has to translate strategy into daily reality, frequently with the same resources they had two years ago and far more responsibility. Gartner data shows that the median manager-to-employee ratio widened from roughly 1:5 in 2017 to 1:15 by 2023, a near tripling of span of control in under a decade with no corresponding tripling of support.

Pressure from below

At the same time, the team looks to the manager for direction, recognition, conflict resolution, coaching, and emotional steadiness, especially during difficult periods. A manager is expected to notice when someone on their team is struggling and respond with empathy, even on days when they themselves are struggling more.

The expectation to fix what they are experiencing

Here is the part almost no one writes about. Managers are explicitly trained and expected to watch for burnout in their employees, yet there is rarely anyone formally watching for it in them. One workplace mental health study found that only 42% of burned-out workers ever tell their manager about it, and even when they do, 42% say their manager takes no action. Flip that question around and ask who the

manager tells. In most organizations, the honest answer is no one. There is no formal layer above the manager whose job is to notice their exhaustion the way they are expected to notice it in others.

Managers are trained to prevent burnout in others while having no equivalent system protecting them from the same thing. That asymmetry is the real engine behind rising manager burnout, and it is rarely named directly.

The Data: How Bad Is Manager Burnout in 2026?

The numbers from this year paint a consistent and serious picture.

[Gallup's 2026 State of the Global Workplace report](#) found that global employee engagement fell to 20% in 2025, the lowest level since the pandemic lockdowns of 2020, with the economic cost of disengagement now estimated above \$10 trillion. The same report shows manager engagement declining sharply, down nine points globally since 2022.

71%
of U.S. middle managers report being burned out

A recent workforce survey found that 71% of middle managers in the United States reported being burned out, more than any other group of employees measured, including individual contributors and senior executives. See the full breakdown from [High5Test](#).

Managers are also 36% more likely than other employees to report alarming stress levels, according to recent burnout research, which directly contradicts the assumption that seniority comes with more control and therefore less strain.

Training gaps make this worse. Gallup research cited in recent workplace data shows that only 44% of managers globally have ever received any formal management training, meaning more than half of the people responsible for guiding teams through chronic stress have never been equipped with the skills to do it, for their teams or for themselves.

There is also a new variable in 2026 that almost no leadership content has connected to this issue directly: AI. A UC Berkeley study referenced in recent burnout research found that **AI does not necessarily free up workers' time, but instead leads them to take on more responsibilities and work longer hours, with heavy AI users reporting more burnout, not less.** Managers are frequently the ones rolling out AI tools to their teams while simultaneously being expected to absorb the productivity gains as additional capacity.

What Actually Causes Manager Burnout

Strip away the generic advice found across most burnout content and the real causes of manager burnout come down to a small number of structural conditions, not personality traits or poor time management.

Promotion without preparation

Most managers are promoted because they were excellent individual contributors, not because they were trained to lead people. Research on leader wellbeing highlights inadequate training as one of the central drivers of manager burnout, since technical excellence and people leadership require almost entirely different skill sets.

Isolation

Management can be a lonely position. Managers are no longer part of the peer group they used to belong to, but they are often not fully embedded in senior leadership conversations either. They sit in a layer of the organization with fewer natural support relationships than the roles above or below them.

The always-on expectation

Many managers feel they cannot fully disconnect, since their team may need them for a decision, a conflict, or an emergency at any time. This constant availability prevents the kind of recovery that actually resets stress levels.

Span of control without span of support

As organizations flatten and reduce middle management layers, the managers who remain inherit more direct reports and more responsibility, but rarely receive proportionally more authority, budget, or administrative support to handle the increase.

Being the shock absorber

When organizational change happens, whether it is a reorg, a policy shift, a tool

rollout, or a tough business decision, managers are usually the ones who have to explain it, defend it, and manage the team's reaction to it, regardless of whether they agreed with the decision or had any input into it.

Why This Is an Organizational Problem, Not a Personal One

Most burnout advice tells the individual to set better boundaries, take real lunch breaks, or use their vacation days. None of that is wrong, but it treats a structural problem as if it were a willpower problem, and that framing quietly shifts responsibility away from the organization that created the conditions in the first place.

The financial case for treating this as an organizational priority is direct. Burned-out managers create a multiplier effect on their teams, with those teams showing 33% higher likelihood of disengagement and 22% greater turnover intentions. **A burned out manager does not just struggle individually. They quietly lower the performance ceiling of everyone who reports to them.**

On the other side of the ledger, the return on fixing this is just as clear. Companies that prioritize employee well-being see a 67% boost in performance and are 21% more productive, and organizations that adopt coaching-style leadership report a 70% improvement in individual performance, a 50% increase in team performance, and a 48% increase in organizational performance, according to International Coaching Federation research.

Even smaller, more targeted interventions show measurable returns. Gartner research found that when managers were trained in coaching techniques, their team's productivity rose by 18%, and coaching-trained managers see a 20 to 28 percent improvement in overall team performance. Manager development, it seems, is one of the highest-leverage investments an organization can make.

BUILD THE SKILL

Give your managers a better way to have the hard conversations Collaborative Coaching Conversations teaches managers how to coach instead of carry, so support becomes a repeatable habit rather than one more thing on their plate.

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Early Warning Signs Organizations Tend to Miss

Manager burnout rarely announces itself. It builds quietly, and by the time it becomes visible to senior leadership, it has often already affected the team.

- A manager who used to bring ideas to meetings and now mostly just executes what they are told.
- Increasing irritability or short responses in situations that would not have triggered that reaction six months ago.
- A noticeable drop in 1:1 quality, with meetings becoming transactional status updates rather than real conversations.

- Delayed decision-making on issues the manager would normally have resolved quickly.
- Visible exhaustion paired with reluctance to take time off, often out of fear that stepping away will create more problems to come back to.
- Rising turnover or disengagement on their team, which is frequently misread as a team problem rather than traced back to the manager's own depleted capacity.

None of these signs are dramatic on their own. That is exactly why they get missed. Organizations tend to watch for crisis-level signals and overlook the slow erosion that precedes one.

What Organizations Can Actually Do About It

Fixing manager burnout requires structural changes, not wellness perks layered on top of an unsustainable role. The organizations making real progress on this are focusing on four areas.

Build a layer of support above managers

Someone needs to be responsible for checking in on managers the same way managers are expected to check in on their teams. This can be a senior leader, a peer coaching structure, or a formal mentoring relationship, but it needs to be a defined responsibility, not an assumption that it will happen informally.

Give managers real training

Promoting someone into management without developing their leadership skills sets

them up to manage by instinct under pressure, which is exhausting and inconsistent. Training in communication, conflict resolution, delegation, and [emotional intelligence](#) gives managers a repeatable framework instead of forcing them to improvise every difficult moment.

Match span of control to actual support

If a manager's direct report count has grown significantly, their support structure, administrative capacity, and decision-making authority need to grow with it. Adding headcount under a manager without adding the resources to lead them effectively is one of the most common and most overlooked causes of burnout.

Normalize the conversation

Many managers will not say they are struggling, partly because they believe leaders are not supposed to admit it. Organizations that create real, low-stakes ways for managers to flag when they are overloaded, without it being treated as a performance concern, catch problems months earlier than organizations that wait for a resignation letter. This is what it means to create a [psychologically safe work environment](#).

Shift from boss to coach

Leaders who operate as the sole decision-maker for every issue carry an unsustainable cognitive load. A coaching-based leadership style distributes decision-making further into the team, which reduces the manager's burden while simultaneously developing the next layer of leaders underneath them.

Where Emotional Intelligence Fits Into the Solution

Of all the skills that help managers withstand the structural pressure described in this article, emotional intelligence has the most consistent evidence behind it. Self-awareness allows a manager to notice their own depletion before it becomes a crisis. Emotional regulation allows them to stay steady during high-pressure moments instead of reacting in ways they later regret. And the ability to read and respond to a team's emotional state, without absorbing it as their own personal burden, is what separates managers who burn out from managers who lead through pressure sustainably.

[Leadership Edge Live's Emotional Intelligence training](#) is built specifically around these competencies, giving managers the practical skills to protect their own resilience while still showing up fully for their teams.

[Explore Emotional Intelligence training >](#)

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Frequently Asked Questions About Manager Burnout

What is manager burnout?

Manager burnout is chronic exhaustion, detachment, and reduced effectiveness that develops in leadership roles due to sustained pressure from senior leadership, direct reports, and the emotional demands of being the primary point of support for a team, often without adequate training or backup support.

Why are managers burning out more than other employees right now?

Recent data shows middle managers reporting the highest burnout rates of any employee group, with 71% of U.S. middle managers reporting burnout. This stems from a structural squeeze: rising spans of control, limited formal training, constant availability expectations, and the unique pressure of being expected to manage burnout in others while having no equivalent support for their own.

Is manager burnout the same as employee burnout?

They share the same core symptoms of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced effectiveness, but the causes differ. Manager burnout is shaped specifically by the dual pressure of reporting to senior leadership while being responsible for a team, a position few other roles occupy.

What can organizations do to reduce manager burnout?

The most effective interventions are structural: providing real leadership training, matching span of control with adequate support, building a layer of accountability that checks in on managers directly, and shifting toward coaching-based leadership that distributes decision-making rather than concentrating it entirely with the manager.

Does manager burnout affect team performance?

Yes, directly. **Burned-out managers have been shown to create a 33% higher likelihood of disengagement and 22% greater turnover intentions on their teams,** meaning the effects of manager burnout extend well beyond the individual leader.

How can emotional intelligence help prevent manager burnout?

Emotional intelligence builds self-awareness and emotional regulation skills that help managers notice their own stress earlier, respond to pressure without becoming reactive, and support their teams without absorbing every emotional demand as personal responsibility. [Structured emotional intelligence training](#) gives managers practical tools for this rather than leaving it to instinct.

The Bottom Line

Manager burnout is not a sign of weak individuals in a strong system. It is a predictable outcome of a system that asks managers to absorb pressure from every direction while rarely building in anyone whose job it is to support them in return.

The organizations that get ahead of this will not do it through wellness webinars or a single off-site retreat. They will do it by treating manager development as core infrastructure, the same way they treat any other critical system the business depends on. The data is consistent across every major research source available right now: investment in manager training and support pays for itself many times over, in retention, performance, and the long-term health of the organization.

If your organization is ready to give its managers the practical skills to lead under pressure without burning out, explore Leadership Edge Live's Emotional Intelligence training program and start building that support into your leadership pipeline.

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