



STRAINED, AND STRESSED, STEPPING AWAY

The Supervisor Crisis and What Employers Must Do Now

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STRAINED, **STRESSED,** AND STEPPING AWAY

The Supervisor Crisis and What Employers Must Do Now



“Supervisors are saying, ‘No more.’ Future leaders are saying, ‘No, thanks.’ The result? A vicious cycle that decreases effectiveness, breeds toxicity, and weakens the workplace. The companies that come to terms with the situation and start implementing solutions will be the ones that succeed in this reshaped economy.”

– Bob Funk, Jr., CEO, President, and Chairman of the Board
Express Employment International

Contents

Strained, Stressed, and Stepping Away	4
The Disconnect	7
The Consequences	9
Building Better Leaders	11
Detoxifying the Workplace	12
Conclusion: Closing the Gaps	16

Key Takeaways

Younger workers avoid management roles, threatening the leadership pipeline.

Companies think they are training leaders, but supervisors say critical support is missing.

Workplace toxicity is rising, linked to supervisor strain.

Supervisor burnout and churn are creating leadership vacuums.

Immediate investment in supervisors' success is crucial to future company stability.

STRAINED, STRESSED, AND STEPPING AWAY



Strained, Stressed, and Stepping Away

Companies from coast to coast are experiencing a quiet but consequential crisis: losing middle management. Retirement, burnout, or—in some cases—force reductions¹ or corporate “flattening”² is straining and pushing these critical and stressed supervisors to the door. Junior employees appear less-than-eager to climb the ranks or less-than-capable of filling these roles.

It’s the beginning of a dangerous cycle: strains on supervisors hurt workplace culture; a deteriorating workplace culture makes those jobs less attractive; and the result is a management vacuum that undermines company success.

The trend may not be new. McKinsey and Company warned of the “vanishing middle manager” in 2021³, but the effects are compounding. Recent survey data from Express Employment Professionals and The Harris Poll, combined with interviews from Express franchise owners from across the country, uncover the roots of a growing leadership gap at the supervisory level—including what younger generations really think of career advancement, the mismatch between expectations on supervisors and training provided, and the causes and effects of workplace toxicity.⁴



“People tend to leave people; employees often leave because of bad management. Good managers can retain staff and create an environment for optimal performance.”

— Hanif Hemani, Express franchise owner, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



“Having the responsibility of managing others is very stressful and comes with added responsibilities that many aren’t prepared to do, which can impede work-life balance, affect mental health, and increase the potential for burnout. The salary difference is often not substantially higher than what most employees assume or expect, which creates a double-negative, in turn making it more difficult for supervisors to stay motivated and committed.”

— Chris Vandenbosch, Express franchise owner, Ottawa, Ontario

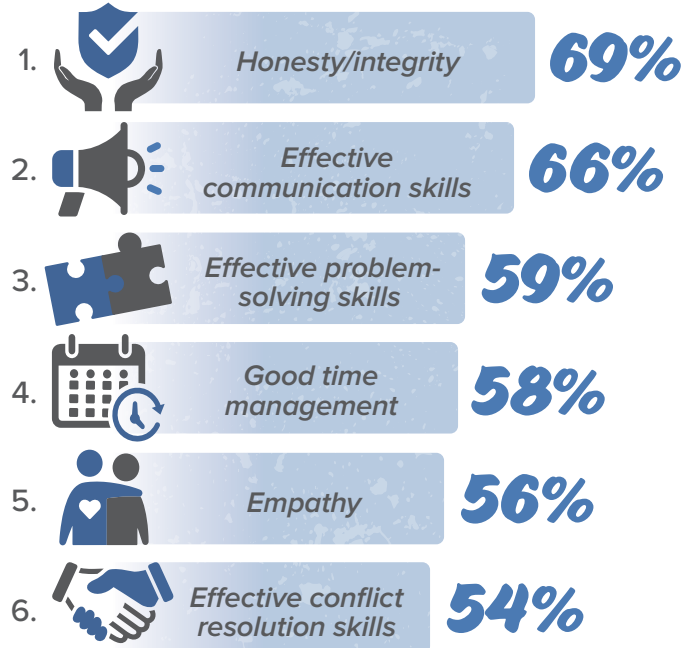


“There has been a shift where employers are increasingly becoming responsible for accommodating the needs of their employees, whether due to legislation, competitive pressures related to recruitment and retention, or evolving philosophical beliefs and workplace culture. Younger generations are looking for leadership that understands and accommodates human complexities.”

— Jessica Culo, Express and Specialized Recruiting Group franchise owner, Edmonton, Alberta

Top Six Supervisor Skills

According to Canadian Hiring Managers⁵

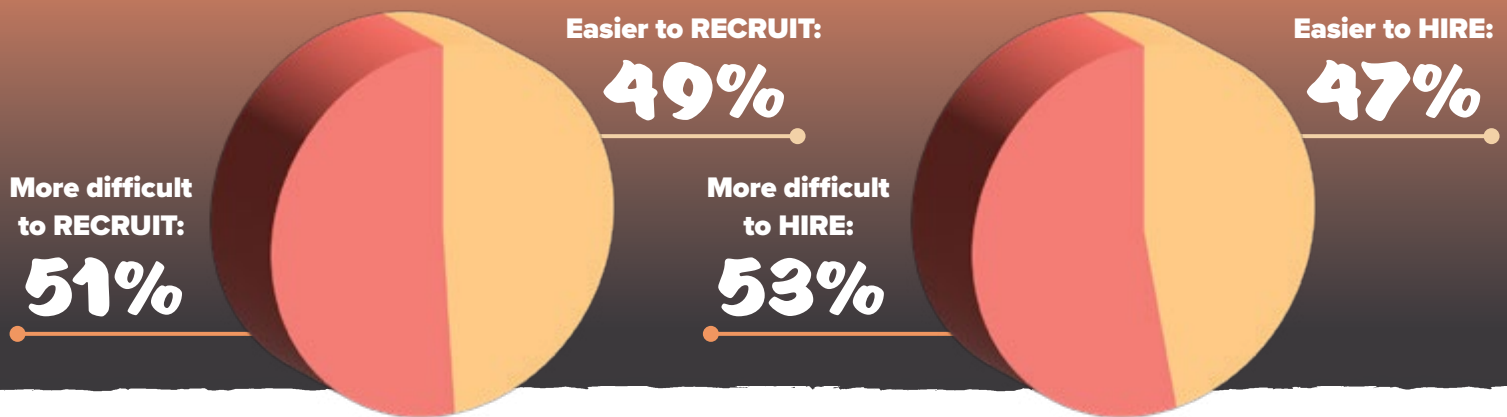


According to Canadian Job Seekers⁶



Hard to Hire? A Murky Outlook

Hiring managers were asked: Is it easier or more difficult to recruit and hire candidates for supervisor roles than it has been over the past few years?⁷



This paper digs deeper into the trends and aims to offer solutions that senior leaders should take seriously now before it's too late.



About the Surveys from Express and The Harris Poll

Survey of Hiring Decision-Makers

The research was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals among 505 Canadian hiring decision-makers (defined as adults ages 18+ in Canada who are employed full-time or self-employed, work at companies with more than one employee, and have full/significant involvement in hiring decisions at their company). The survey was conducted Nov. 11–26, 2024. Data are weighted where necessary by company size to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.⁸

Survey of Job Seekers

The research was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 21 to Dec. 6, 2024, among 505 adults ages 18 and older who are employed but looking for a new job, or not employed and looking for work (“Job seekers”). Data are weighted where necessary by gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, and official language to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.⁹



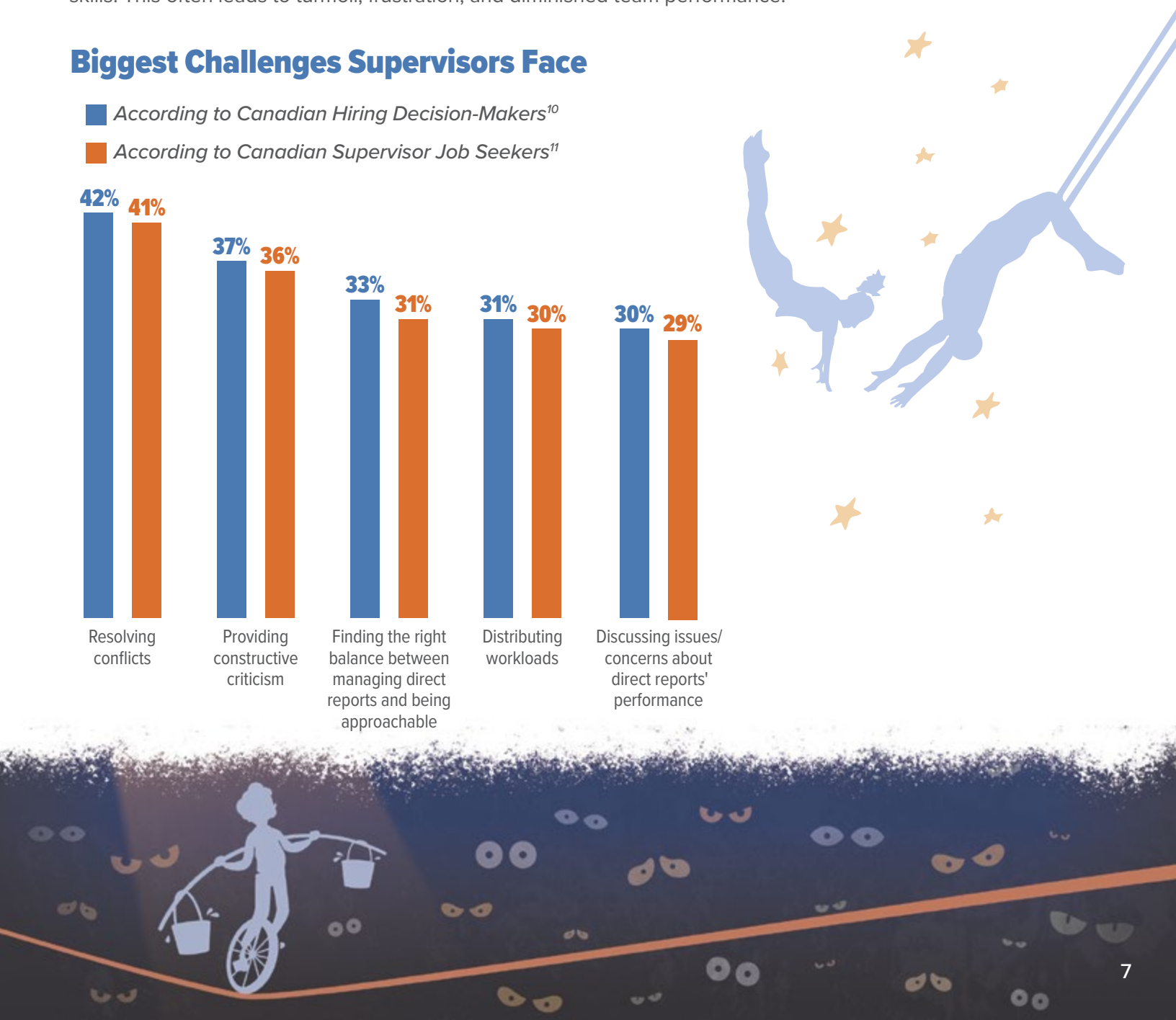
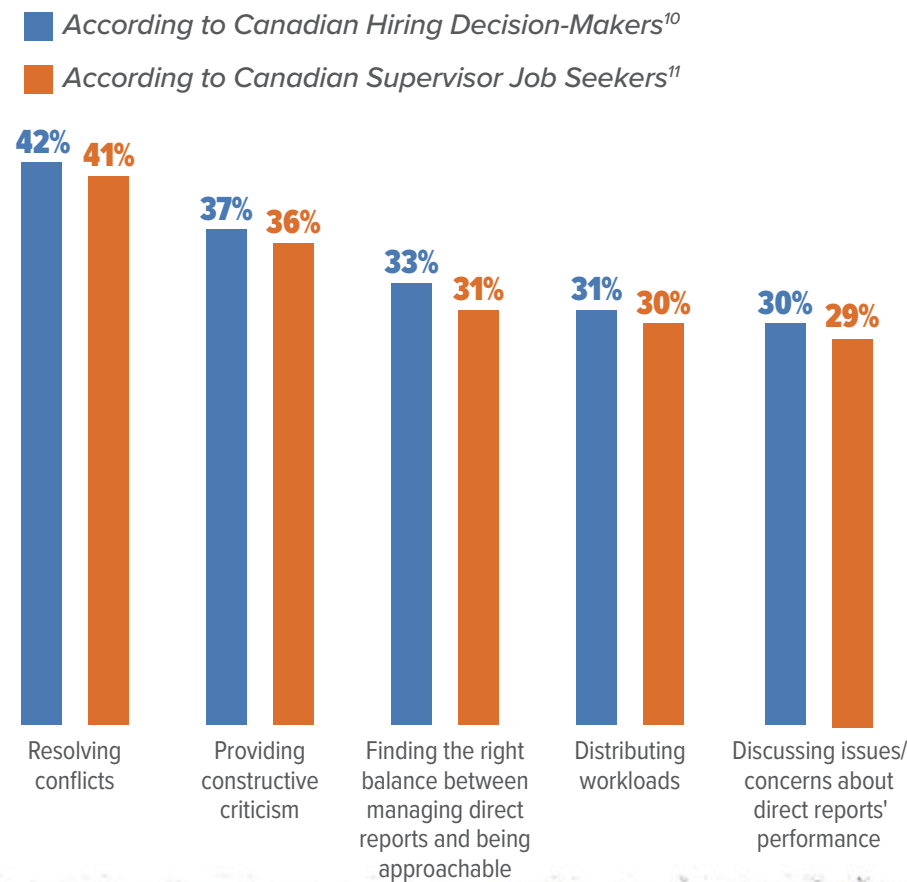
The Disconnect

Companies often try to promote from within when it comes time to fill an open supervisor role. After all, institutional knowledge can be an asset for a leader. In doing so, companies naturally look to their hardest workers or best producers. But a common mistake is assuming what makes these employees strong performers in their current roles will translate to strong performance in a supervisory role.

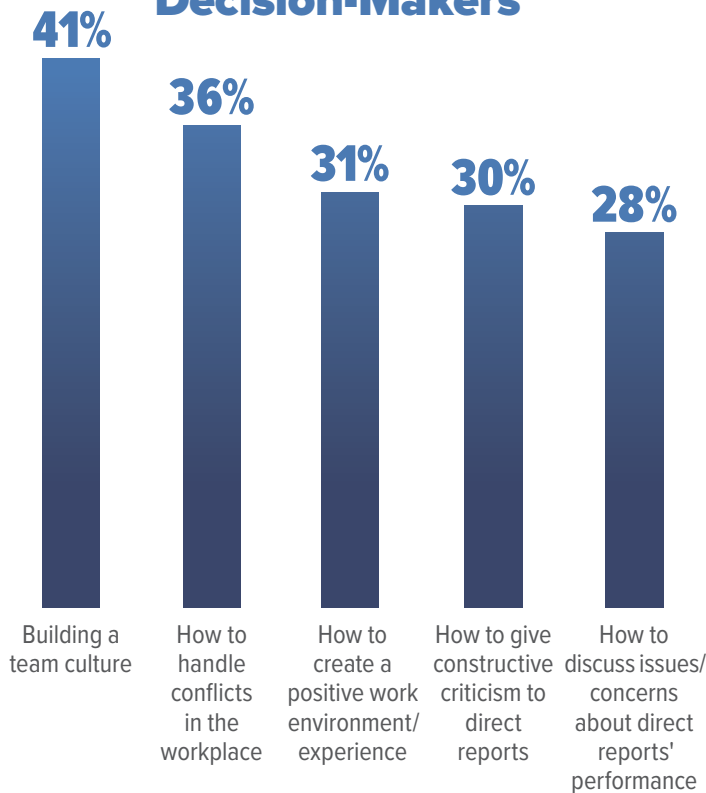
That's not always the case.

Being a successful supervisor means confronting new challenges that entry- or lower-level employees do not face, most notably resolving interpersonal conflict. Too often, companies fail to train newly promoted supervisors, leaving them ill-equipped for the job. On top of that, the new supervisor may be leading a leaner team because of the vacancy created by their promotion, leaving more work for a team now led by someone less experienced and still gaining leadership skills. This often leads to turmoil, frustration, and diminished team performance.

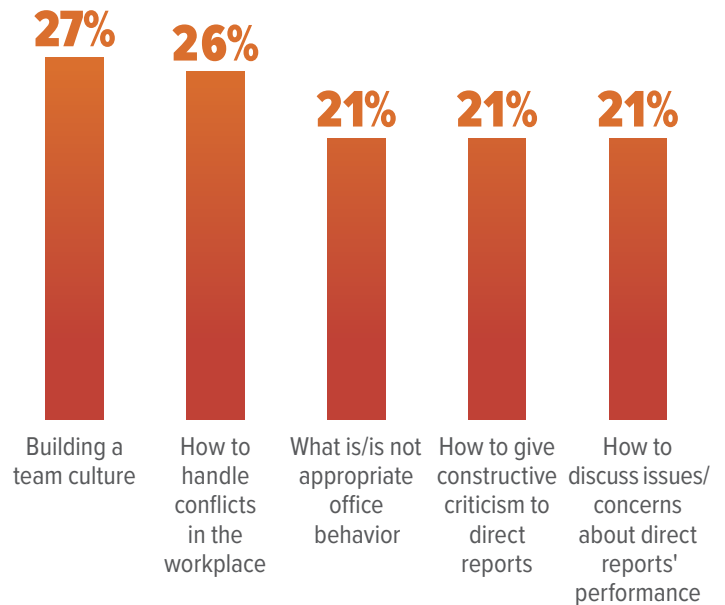
Biggest Challenges Supervisors Face



Issues on Which Companies Provide Training, According to Canadian Hiring Decision-Makers¹²



Issues on Which Supervisor Job Seekers Say They Have Received Training¹³



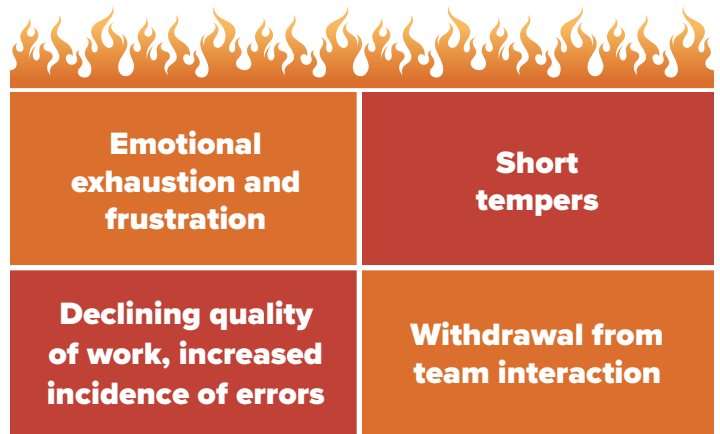
Many hiring decision-makers in Canada are completely unaware of a disconnect that exists in the way companies train—or fail to train—new supervisors. According to the survey from Express and The Harris Poll, a strong majority of hiring managers (79%) feel supervisors at their company have the tools they need to help their direct reports succeed.

But only one-third or less of companies offer training related to the issues and skills that hiring managers say are relevant to supervisors: how to give constructive criticism (30%), how to discuss issues/concerns about direct reports' performance (28%), and how to set professional boundaries with direct reports (24%). Perhaps paradoxically, 7 in 10 (70%) concede their companies should be doing more to support and help supervisors succeed.¹⁴

Meanwhile, most job seekers who have been supervisors report receiving some form of training (69%), but regarding top issues, only 26% have received training on workplace conflicts and just 21% on providing constructive criticism.¹⁵ A staggering 1 in 3 (31%) said they received no training on any of the issues surveyed.

Signs of Supervisor Burnout

Express franchise owners identify common signs of supervisor burnout.¹⁶



Lacking the necessary training or skills to succeed in a job can quickly lead to burnout, exacerbating existing workplace challenges. Suppose supervisors—particularly new supervisors who were star performers in previous roles—exhibit the trademark signs of burnout. In that case, it may indicate that the company did a poor job of preparing them for success in their new roles.

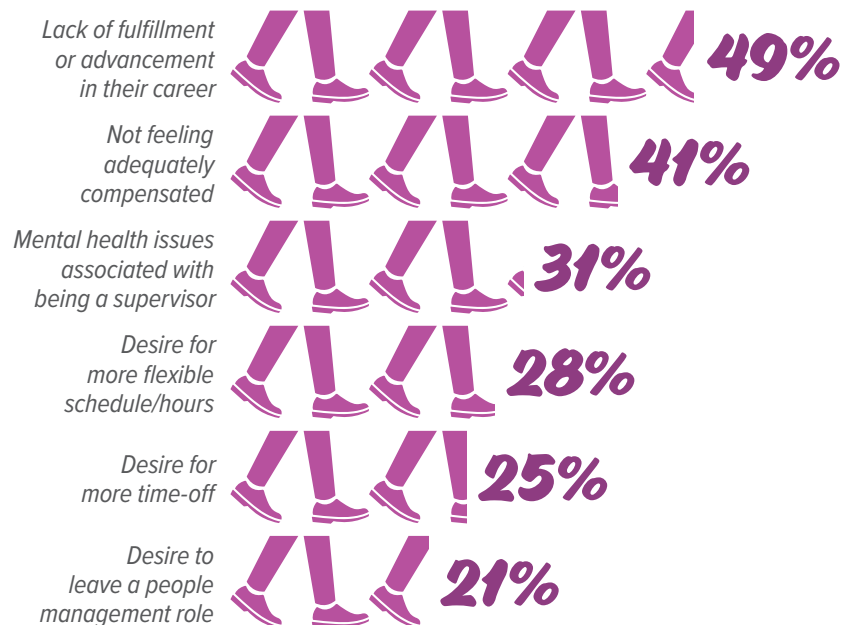
The Consequences

The disconnect in priorities and training makes it hard to retain or attract good talent. In other words, companies are losing current leaders and scaring away future ones.

“When middle managers are cut or neglected, companies risk losing not only leadership capacity but also the informal networks and trust that drive performance,” report Bryan Hancock and Bill Schaninger for McKinsey.¹⁷

It is not just supervisors who suffer the consequences. When supervisors are not equipped to handle their jobs, the employees who report to them do not get the attention and support they deserve, creating a stressful situation. A report from LinkedIn Learning finds that the “percentage of employees who say their manager provided forms of learning and career support” has declined over the past year.¹⁸

Why Supervisors Left or Planned to Leave Their Jobs²²



Younger generations are watching this dynamic and deciding that management is not for them. Nearly three-quarters of Gen Z professionals would rather develop “individual expertise” to advance their careers than take on a job that requires them to manage people.¹⁹ They cite high stress and growing workloads post-pandemic as reasons that middle management is just not worth the cost.²⁰ The result is that companies lose their talent pipeline for future management roles.



“Young employees see their leaders as more stressed out and working more than the rest of the team. Combined with a lack of training offered by upper management, they see all the negatives without any of the positives. There is also a lack of mentorships within companies to help promote internal development and growth toward leadership positions.”

– James Norris, Express and Specialized Recruiting Group franchise owner, London, Ontario



“Younger generations seek personalized coaching, mentorship, and opportunities for growth and learning on the job. They value supervisors who exhibit empathy, transparency, flexibility, support their mental health, offer resources, and respect work-life balance.”

– Daisy Kaur, Express franchise owner, Pickering, Ontario

A majority (59%) of job seekers who are or were supervisors have quit or plan(ned) to quit a supervisory position. The reasons for leaving or planning to leave are a lack of fulfillment or advancement in their career (49%), not feeling adequately compensated (41%), mental health issues associated with being a supervisor (31%), desire for more flexible schedule/hours (28%), desire for more time-off (25%), or desire to leave a people management role (21%).²¹

Reasons Gen Z Are Saying “No” to Middle Management

High stress, low reward:

As supervisors are given more responsibilities in the name of “efficiency,” the extra pay may not seem worth it.

Autonomy and flexibility:

When searching for work-life balance, jobs with strict schedules hold less appeal.

“Conscious unbossing” and alternative paths²⁴:

By seeking work that aligns with their values, the trend of saying no to having bosses or being the boss may hold more appeal.

The cost of turnover is significant, as it creates a “domino effect.” If a popular supervisor quits, lower-level employees, feeling increased strain, are likely to follow or to become less productive. Operations elsewhere in the company could start to feel the consequences—until or unless vacant positions are refilled and the teams get back up to speed.

While the monetary cost of turnover can vary greatly by position, estimates commonly put the cost at 50%–200% of the position’s annual salary. This comes in the form of recruitment costs, onboarding costs, training costs, and decreased productivity.²⁴ Close to one in five Canadian hiring decision-makers say turnover costs their company \$100,000 or more per year.²⁵

The \$100,000/Year Problem: The High Cost of Employee Turnover by Company Size²⁶

100+ Employees (34%)

10-99 Employees (6%)

2-9 Employees (4%)



“Strong supervisors improve productivity, lower turnover, and improve revenue and profitability. More importantly though, they bridge the gap in the workplace. They can understand, disseminate, and articulate the goals, vision, mission, and needs of the business from leadership, while also working directly with employees and the frontline team to deliver on those results.”

– Brent Pollington, Express franchise owner, Vancouver, British Columbia



The bottom line?

It is usually worth the investment to keep a good supervisor, as the cost of losing one could be greater.

Building Better Leaders

“Is there still value in the role of managers?”

That is a question posed in Deloitte’s 2025 “Human Capital Trends” report.²⁷

Express thinks so.

Supervisors are the connective tissue that binds organizations together. Some companies may aim for “flatter” structures, but this often leads to more impersonal chains of hierarchy, a push for efficiency that can create morale issues, ultimately leading to inefficiency.

That’s not to say that management roles will not evolve over time. The expanded use of AI will relieve many supervisors and support staff of more repetitive or tedious tasks, while also speeding up others. However, as the Deloitte report observes in answering its starting question, “For most organizations, eliminating managers altogether isn’t the solution. But neither is simply retaining or elevating the role of the manager as it has existed for over a century. Instead, organizations should seek a third path: reinvention of the role entirely.”

That reinvention includes shifting the focus of the supervisor role from task manager to leading change and providing sound judgment, as well as “connecting groups” and “enabling human performance.”²⁸ This adds to the urgency of supporting supervisors in the areas where training is lacking, and likely adding more training on something previous generations of supervisors barely contemplated: AI.

“Today, the people being managed need support more than ever due to the shrinking half-life of skills, the impact of AI, and the increasing pace of change.”

— Deloitte’s 2025 “Human Capital Trends” report



“Supervisors should be promoted based on their leadership ability instead of their technical skills. Emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and coaching skills need to be prioritized when promoting to management roles. If new managers feel overwhelmed, unsupported, and are not equipped to lead, then they could burn out quickly or quit without a clear growth path.”

— Daisy Kaur, Express franchise owner, Pickering, Ontario



“The role of supervisor is something that’s constantly evolving, and it’s getting harder every day because of the rapid pace of technological change. Supervisors today aren’t just advocates for the business or change leaders; they also have to be performance managers, coaches, mentors, trainers, and onboarders. Additionally, they must stay ahead of ongoing technological shifts in the market and within the business itself. These roles ask a lot, and often, I think businesses don’t fully recognize the level of responsibility involved, or the true impact these roles carry.”

— Brent Pollington, Express franchise owner, Vancouver, British Columbia

Detoxifying the Workplace

Supervisors help shape the workplace culture, but they are also shaped by it. Deteriorating workplace cultures are as much a symptom of strained supervisors as they are a contributing factor. Notably, the top two challenges reported by current or former supervisor job seekers are resolving conflicts (39%) and providing constructive criticism (36%).²⁹



"Several recent shifts in the workplace, especially the rise of remote work, have made the role of supervisors more complex and altered how performance is measured. In addition, supervisors are navigating evolving expectations around accommodations and heightened awareness of workplace culture and sensitivity, all of which add new layers to their responsibilities."

– Hanif Hemani, Express franchise owner, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Almost half of Canadian hiring decision-makers (45%) say there are now instances of bad employee behavior being reported than there were three years ago, making it all the more important for supervisors to receive the desired practical training for real-world situations.

Nearly three-quarters have witnessed toxic traits occur regularly among employees over the past year: The most common is gossiping (40%), followed by unprofessional communication (26%), avoiding working/ collaborating with others (24%), micromanaging of direct reports (21%), and taking credit for another person's work (21%).³⁰

The effect of these actions adds up. One Canadian study found that the annual cost of toxic workplaces totals \$51 billion.³¹



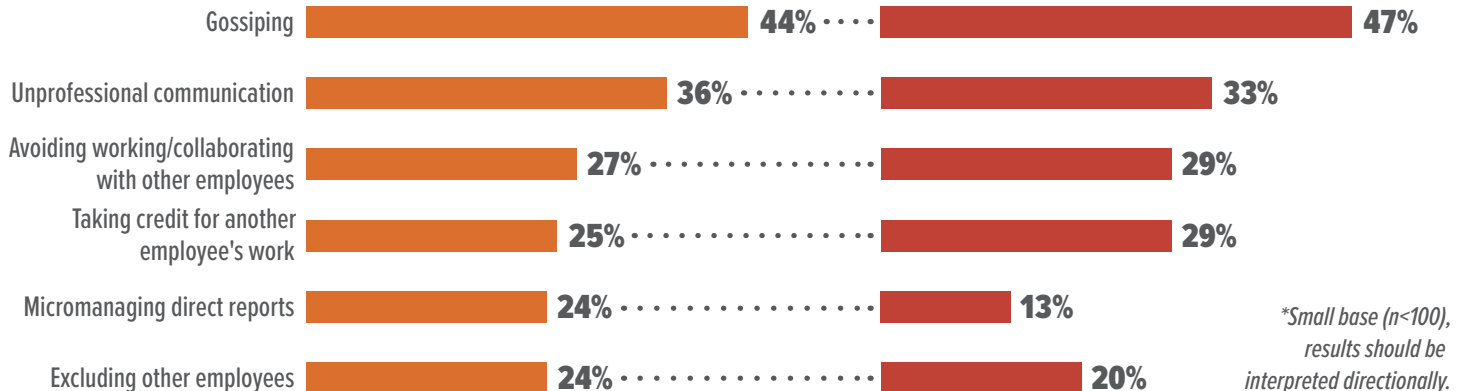


Toxic Traits in the Workplace, As Reported by Job Seekers³³



Toxic Traits That Regularly Occurred in Past Year *Employed Canada Job Seekers*

Toxic Traits That Regularly Occurred at Most Recent Job *Unemployed Canada Job Seekers**



Warning! The Effect of Recession Fears

Headlines of a looming recession³⁴ only add to the pressures supervisors face. On top of the normal day-to-day stresses, they now must contend with fears of facing layoffs in an economic downturn, which could mean losing their jobs or having to lose valuable employees who report to them.

At the same time, they are expected to manage and reassure their teams, helping employees navigate anxieties about job security during times of uncertainty. Yet most supervisors are not trained to handle the emotional weight of others' fears, adding a layer of complexity to an already strained supervisory system.

Being alert to workplace culture—and recognizing the signs of a toxic workplace—is an absolute must for senior management. These signs cannot be causally dismissed as a side effect of a difficult or transitioning job market or outside forces. They should be addressed head-on before the damage worsens, reinforcing the importance of proper supervisor training and support.

Supervisors are the key players in detoxifying a workplace. But if a toxic culture drives them to step away, there's no one left to clean up the mess. A positive culture is not a “nice to have” but a “must-have.”



54% of hiring managers feel companies need to have signage to remind people to be nice to one another.³⁵



Employee behavior are prompting some companies to take action, as 53% of hiring managers report increased discussions at their company about employee conduct. More than half (56%) state their company encourages employees to communicate with their supervisor regarding potential conflicts and provides resources on how to navigate or avoid conflicts at work to help manage such interactions.

Employers are also focused on cultivating workplace friendships. Nearly all hiring decision-makers (94%) feel there are benefits to employees forming friendships in the workplace. Most commonly, they say it improves employee and company productivity (65%).

Half or more report increasing employee morale (54%), improving employee productivity (51%), improving employee mental health (50%), and strengthening company culture (47%) are also positive byproducts of work friendships, followed by reducing turnover (41%) and reducing interpersonal conflicts (40%).

Friendships may even help retain current employees, as nearly 9 in 10 hiring decision-makers (86%) say employees are more likely to stay with a company if they have friendships in the workplace; 35% strongly agree with this statement. Employees agree: three-quarters of Canadian job seekers (78%) would be more likely to stay with a company if they have friendships in the workplace.

Top 5 Benefits of Employees Forming Friendships in the Workplace

Canadian Hiring Decision-Makers



54%

Increasing
employee morale



51%

Improving
employee
productivity



50%

Improving
employee
mental health



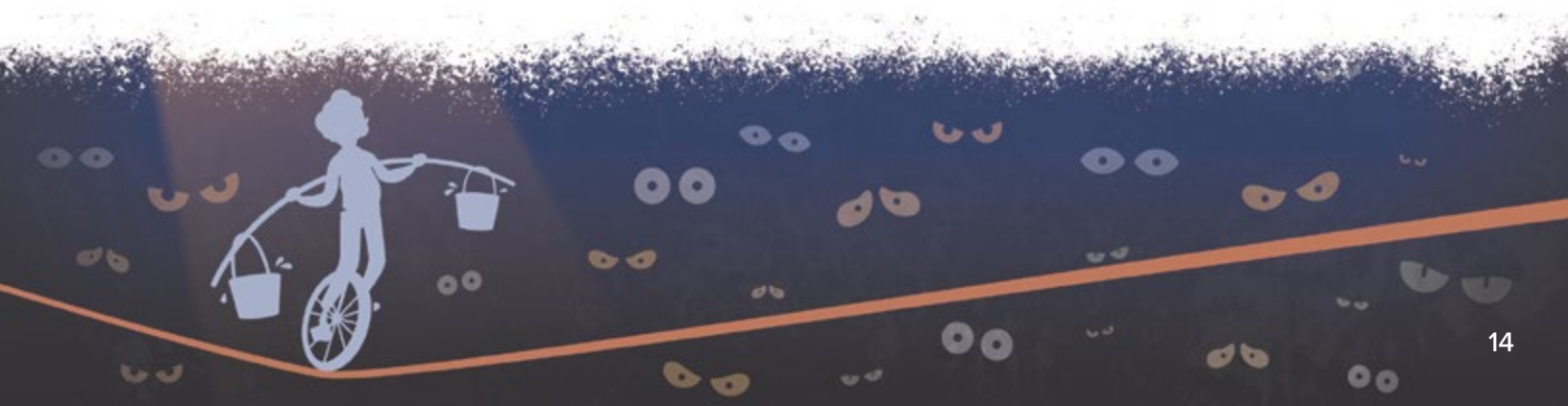
47%

Improving
company
productivity

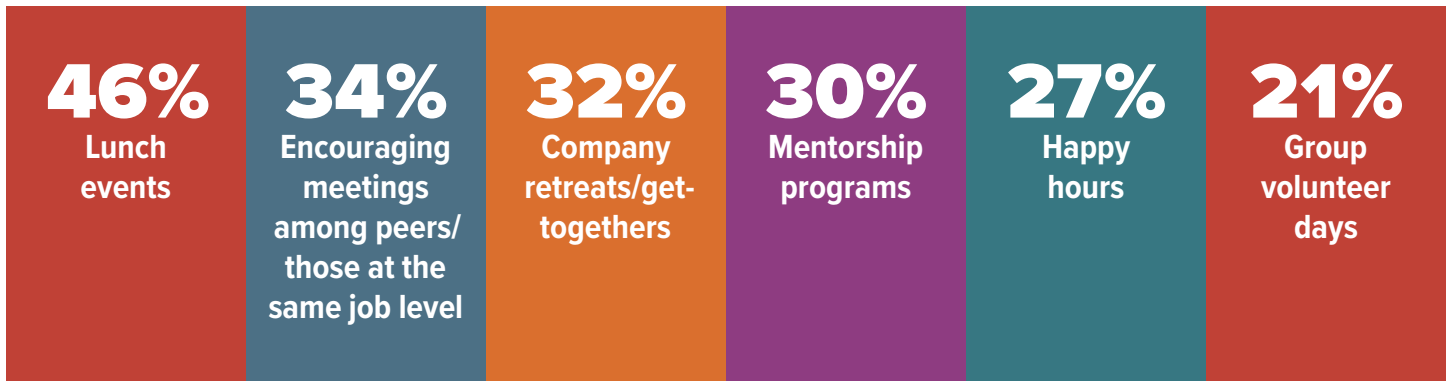


47%

Strengthening
company culture

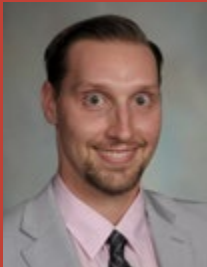


More than 8 in 10 companies (82%) say they use methods to encourage or help employees form friendships:³⁶



While these all appear to be steps in the right direction, it is also clear that employers are not doing enough, and their failure to support and cultivate their supervisors may be their biggest oversight.

There is a temptation to think that some of the workplace toxicity is a “hangover” from the confusion of post-pandemic return-to-office policies. However, even if that has been a contributing factor, it overlooks the reality that new challenges are on the horizon. Economic pressures, from economic pressures to new technologies, requiring supervisors who support a positive culture, and vice versa.



“Companies need to invest in their people and be very specific about how they want their leaders to operate. Ongoing training for leaders needs to be at the core of a company looking to ensure they have people with the right skills and experience to effectively manage and lead their teams.”

– James Norris, Express and Specialized Recruiting Group franchise owner, London, Ontario



“To help their leaders, companies can provide peer networks and mentorship opportunities to help them connect with others in similar positions, both internal and external, and tools, training, and data resources, including technology and AI, to help them effectively communicate with, develop, and understand their people. They can also help by providing them with flexibility in whatever capacity is possible. That is a highly sought-after component of any role, but especially in middle management.”

– Jessica Culo, Express and Specialized Recruiting Group franchise owner, Edmonton, Alberta

Conclusion: Closing the Gaps

Today's companies can't afford to overlook the crucial role of supervisors. Burnout is rising, interest in leadership roles is declining, and gaps in training are leaving supervisors, and their teams, vulnerable.

Middle managers need clear expectations, practical skills, meaningful support, through both effective training and a right-sized workforce, and leadership that recognizes the realities they face every day.

Closing these gaps will not only improve supervisor retention; it will strengthen team performance, reduce turnover, and help stabilize workplace culture at a time when many companies struggle to keep employees engaged.

The choice is simple: Invest in supervisors now or continue losing talent and momentum.

Companies that act now will be better positioned to build stronger teams, weather change, and compete for top talent in the years ahead.

Preventing Supervisor Burnout: A Company Checklist

Express franchise owners identify top solutions to prevent supervisor burnout.³⁷

- ✓ **Set Clear, Reasonable Expectations**
Define realistic goals and workloads for supervisors.
- ✓ **Enforce Time Off**
Actively encourage supervisors to use paid time off and take real breaks.
- ✓ **Utilize Contract Workers for Short-Term Staff Adjustments**
Employ contract workers during periods of transition or high demand to balance higher workloads.
- ✓ **Train for Real-World Leadership**
Prioritize conflict resolution, feedback skills, and emotional intelligence.
- ✓ **Build Peer and Mentorship Networks**
Create spaces where supervisors can learn from and lean on each other.
- ✓ **Recognize Effort, Not Just Outcomes**
Celebrate leadership behaviors, not just numbers.
- ✓ **Give Supervisors More Autonomy**
Let them make decisions without constant approvals or micromanagement.
- ✓ **Use Technology Smartly**
Automate low-value tasks and streamline communication.
- ✓ **Invest in Mental Health Resources**
Provide access to counseling, resilience training, and stress management tools.
- ✓ **Cross-Train Teams**
Share knowledge across staff so supervisors do not shoulder every critical task alone.
- ✓ **Simplify Reporting and Admin Work**
Cut back or outsource busy work that distracts supervisors from leading their teams.

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9. Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within ± 4.0 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest. All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.
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At Express Employment Professionals, we're in the business of people. From job seekers to client companies, Express helps people thrive and businesses grow. Our international network of franchises offers localized staffing solutions to the communities they serve across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, employing 427,000 people globally in 2024 and 11 million since its inception. For more information, visit ExpressPros.com.

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The Express franchise brand is an industry-leading, international staffing company with locations across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Headquartered in Oklahoma City, Express Employment International oversees a global network of sales and support teams.



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