What are New Expectations for First-Line Leaders?

A Post-COVID look at how to strategically build and develop front-line leaders

RBL research shows four key **human capability** areas drive business performance

RBL has comprehensive research in each of the four areas of human capability as well as ground-breaking findings connecting human capability investments to business performance.

In this article, we share our latest findings in leadership, with a specific focus on first-line leaders in the post-COVID era.

TALENT
- Talent accelerator research in 450+ global companies
- 100s of interventions on talent upgrade and impact
- Best-selling books on talent

LEADERSHIP
- Top companies for leadership: 500 companies
- Leadership Code (30,000 sample) and Leadership Brand (100 orgs)
- 10+ books defining leadership impact

ORGANIZATION CAPABILITIES
- 1,200 global organizations: deep inventions in 100+ companies
- 10+ books redefining organizational logic

HUMAN RESOURCES
- 30 years/8 rounds of HR Competency Study with >120,000 respondents
- HR's impact on stakeholder value
- 10+ books defining HR effectiveness and impact

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How have expectations of first-line leaders shifted because of COVID and the subsequent social, technological, economic, political, environmental, and demographic changes?

First-line leaders are being asked to do the impossible

> ***Do more****:* 64% "employees were given additional job responsibilities"

> ***With new people****:* 51% "restructuring of teams"

> ***And less money****:* 42% "budget cuts"

and they are stressed

> nearly **6 in 10** employees have "quietly quit."

> **44%** of employees said they experienced a lot of stress the previous day. This is the second year in a row worker stress reached record levels.

As Managers' Engagement and Satisfaction Decline, Their Intent to Leave Rises

Manager experiences based on Gallup's employee engagement, overall satisfaction and intent to leave survey items

— % Engaged   — % Extremely satisfied
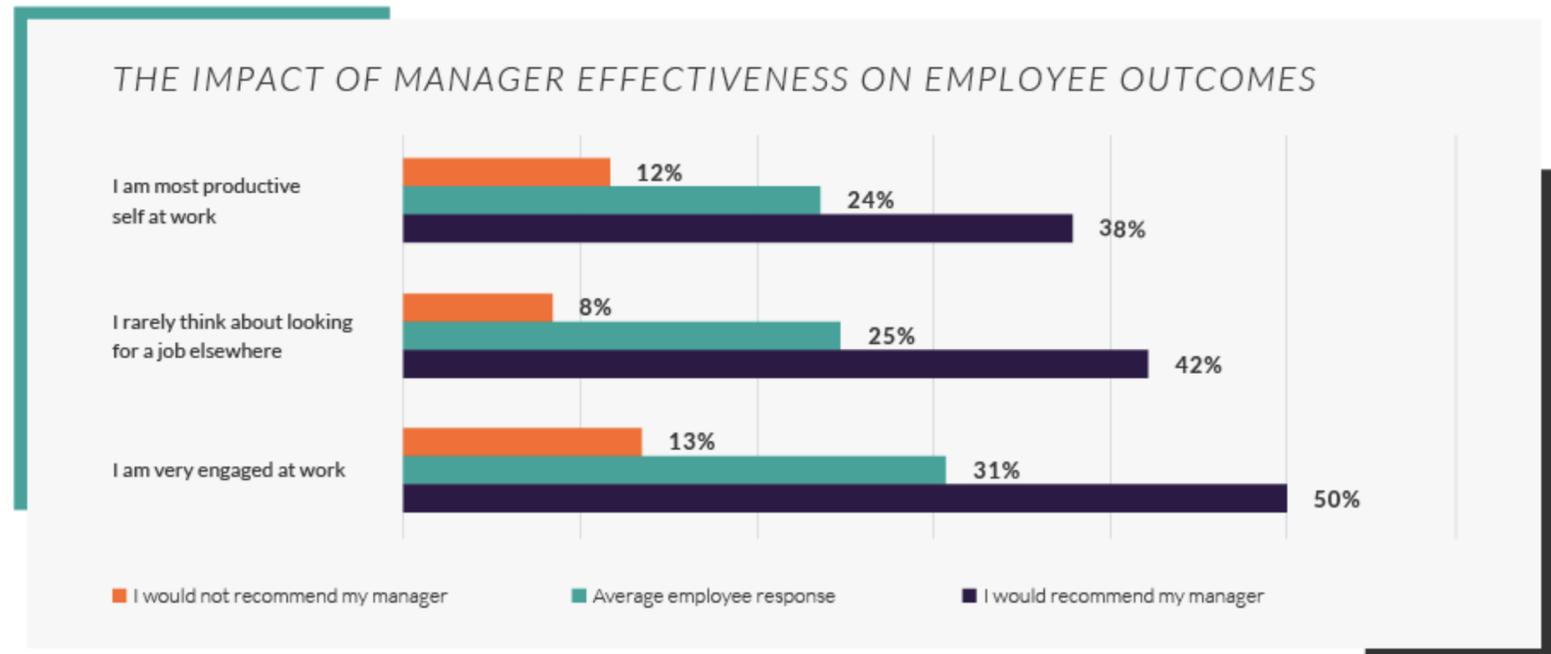-- % Watching for or actively seeking new job
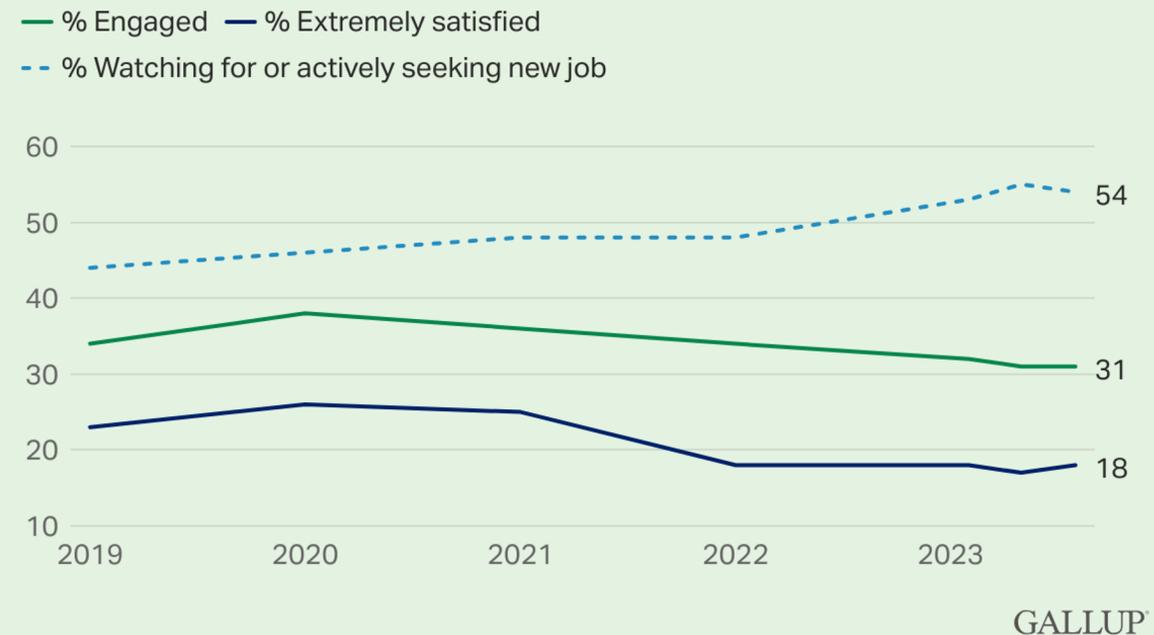
GALLUP

The failure of organizations to support first-line leaders impacts engagement and productivity

Employees who would recommend their manager are:

64% more engaged
71% more committed
61% more productive

THE IMPACT OF MANAGER EFFECTIVENESS ON EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES

I am most productive self at work
- 12%
- 24%
- 38%

I rarely think about looking for a job elsewhere
- 8%
- 25%
- 42%

I am very engaged at work
- 13%
- 31%
- 50%

■ I would not recommend my manager   ■ Average employee response   ■ I would recommend my manager

Source: Achievers Workforce Institute, August 2023

For more than 20 years, RBL has been collecting data about leadership fundamentals at every level
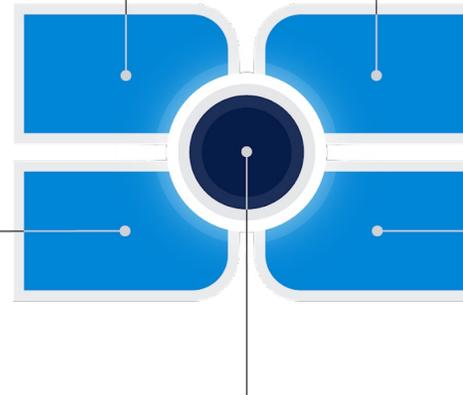
RBL Leadership Code®

Human Capital Developer

- Map the workforce
- Link firm and employee brand
- Help people manage their careers
- Find and develop next generation talent
- Encourage networks and relationships

Talent Manager

- Communicate
- Create aligned direction
- Strengthen competency
- Resource to cope with demands
- Create a positive work environmen

Strategist

- Have point-of-view about the future
- Create a customer-centric view of strategy
- Engage organization in developing strategy
- Create strategic traction in the organization

Executor

- Make change happen
- Follow a decision protocol
- Ensure accountability
- Build teams
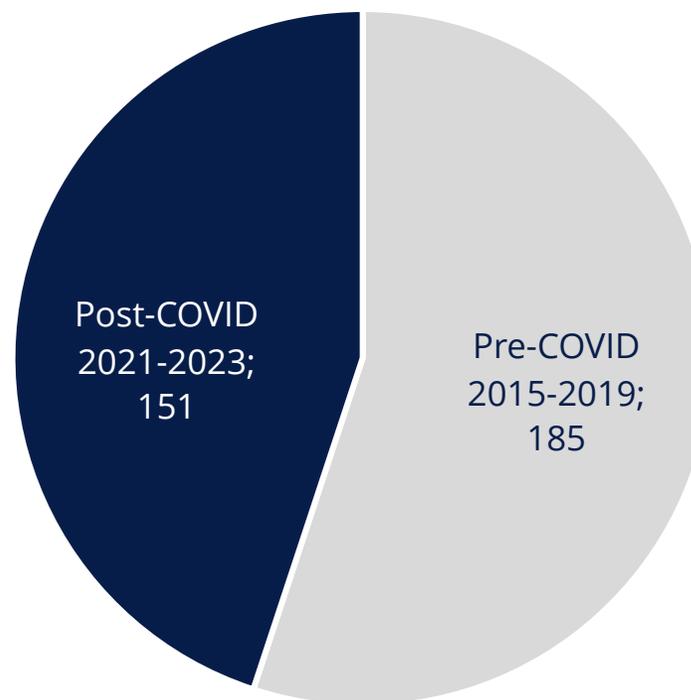- Ensure technical proficiency

Personal Proficiency

- Deliver results
- Practice clear thinking
- Know yourself
- Tolerate stress
- Demonstrate learning agility
- Tend to character and integrity
- Take care of yourself
- Have personal energy and passion

As we heard clients talk about how leadership expectations were changing, we went to this data for evidence-based answers

RBL Leadership Code® 360 Assessment Database

2009-2014; 11267

Pre-COVID 2015-2019; 9373

Post Covid 2021-2023; 10081

2020; 1572
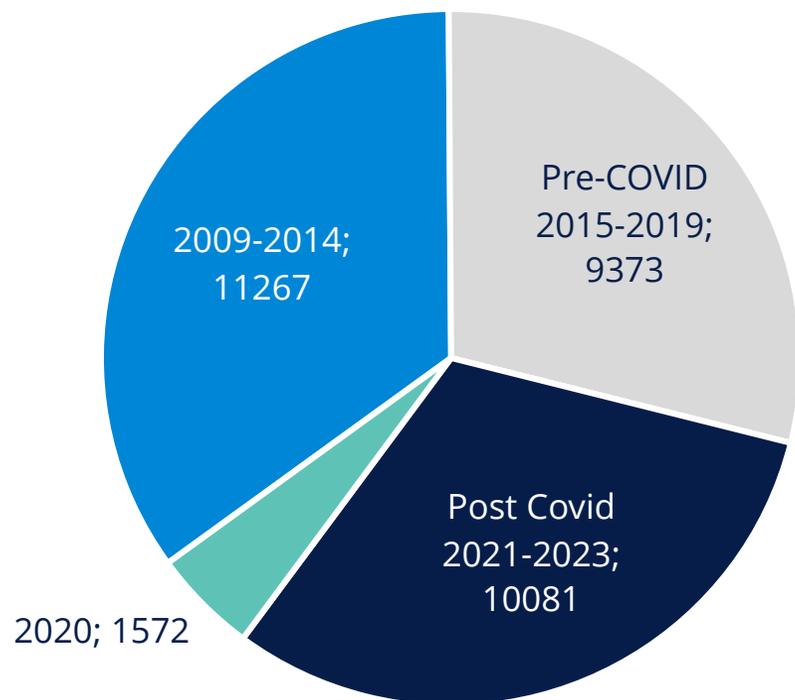
Total raters = 32293

Pre- to Post-COVID study of 343 First-Line Leaders

Post-COVID 2021-2023; 151

Pre-COVID 2015-2019; 185

Total raters = 3471

Analysis method

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationship between 67 RBL Leadership Code® behaviors and an organizational outcome criterion (average of four human-capability outcome measures) for first-line managers; all items were significant at $p = <0.001$ level (two-tailed)

Here's what we found:

Figure 1. Key Shifts in Top First-Line Leader Behaviors that Drive Organizational Value
Pre-COVID (2015-2019) vs. Post-COVID (2021-2023)

M=significant shift in Manager ratings
DR=significant shift in Direct Report ratings

Correlation strength of behavioral item (as driver of overall organizational outcome) noted in parenthesis.

	Less Important Now	Stayed Same	More Important Now
Strategist	▪ Incorporates expectations of outside stakeholders, including customers, into our future goals. (M .51) ▪ Involves others in the organization in developing strategy in order to build commitment to our future direction. (DR .79)	▪ Excels at generating commitment to future directions. (M .68) ▪ Excels at describing strategic goals in ways that appeal to employee values and hopes for the future. (DR .84)	▪ Translates our strategy into a compelling and achievable story. (DR .83)
Executor	▪ Is committed to building the technical proficiency of his/her team. (DR .74)	▪ Is consistently good at getting the right things done. (DR .83) ▪ Make sure his/her team excels at delivering the required results. (M .71) ▪ Ensures his/her team has a clear purpose and clear roles. (M .71)	▪ Makes needed changes happen. (M .71)
Talent Manager	▪ Is proactive in helping people develop the competencies they need for successful performance. (M .60) ▪ Ensures that rewards and growth opportunities reflect individual integrity, motivation, and work performance. (M .56) ▪ Clearly identifies the competencies required for success in his/her organization. (DR .80)	▪ Helps the people on his/her team understand their role in achieving the goals of the organization. (M .76; DR .86) ▪ Finds ways to attract and retain people with the competencies required for success. (M .68) ▪ Helps people align their individual goals with the work and goals of the organization. (M .67; DR .83) ▪ Ensures people get the information they need to be productive and engaged. (DR .83)	▪ Finds ways attract and retain people with the competencies required for success. (DR .88)
Human Capital Developer	▪ Maintains updated picture of what our future talent needs will be. (M .62) ▪ Invests time in helping key employees develop and advance. (DR .77)	▪ Creates an employee brand that identifies expectations and rewards that appeal to the most talented current and potential employees. (DR .84)	▪ Helps employees understand what is required at each stage in their development. (M .67; DR .83) ▪ Helps people understand the long-term benefits of working for this organization. (M .67)
Personal Proficiency			▪ Appears to balance resources and demands to fulfill personal interests and job requirements. (M .74) ▪ Cuts very quickly to the heart of complex issues. (DR .84)

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The data shows that much of what mattered 5-10 years ago still matters today

1

Get things done

Consistently ensure your team has a clear purpose and excels at delivering the right results.

2

Attract and retain the right talent

Find ways to attract and retain people that can do the work, and ensure they stay productive and engaged.

3

Create commitment to future direction

Inspire commitment to the future and connect your employees' values and hopes to strategic goals.

It also identified two key shifts first-line leaders need to make to drive value in today's world

1. Build your team for the future

> ❯ *Personalize work*: Seek to understand your team members' career goals and help your team members find opportunities to develop the skills they need for the future.

> ❯ *Create meaning and hope:* **Positively communicate** how the work the people on your team do contributes to goals that are both compelling and achievable.

> ❯ *Look ahead:* Anticipate what your team needs to do to be prepared for tomorrow and build and develop them to keep winning in the market.

2. Manage competing demands

> ❯ *Learn to navigate paradox*: Develop your skills in proactively juggling ever-increasing tensions in an uncertain environment.

> ❯ *Build skills of critical, clear thinking*: Invest in building your reflective judgment and strategic-thinking capabilities to progressively learn and improve your decision making.

> ❯ *Prioritize what matters most*: Learn to prioritize competing demands in order to focus your team an the most important objectives.

How well are you doing?
A scorecard for today's first-line leaders

RBL Leadership Code® Domain	How well do I:	Score 1=Need to improve 2=Doing ok 3=Doing great			What could I do to improve?
Strategist	▪ Translate the organization's strategy into a compelling story for my team?	①	②	③	
	▪ Inspire my team for commitment to future direction and growth?	①	②	③	
Executor	▪ Consistently make the right and needed changes happen?	①	②	③	
	▪ Provide my team with the right information, clear purpose, clear roles, and accountabilities to achieve our strategic goals?	①	②	③	
Talent Manager	▪ Find ways to attract and retain the talent needed to succeed?	①	②	③	
	▪ Help my team stay engaged and aligned?	①	②	③	
Human Capital Developer	▪ Hold career conversations with my team members to understand their career and leadership goals and development needs and align those with our organization brand?	①	②	③	
	▪ Help provide support at each stage of their development?	①	②	③	
Personal Proficiency	▪ Model well-being (able to balance resources to fulfill personal interests and job responsibilities)?	①	②	③	
	▪ Make good decisions, even in stressful, complex circumstances?	①	②	③	

If you lead or support first-line leaders:

Invest in helping your first-line leaders build the leadership skills they need to help you deliver on customer and investor expectations through:

1. **Regular coaching:** Provide your leaders with the feedback, consistency, and support they need to learn and develop sustainable change.

2. **Access to development:** Prioritize investments that will give your first-line leaders the tools, resources, and education they need to build the critical skills they need to lead in a post-COVID environment.

3. **Clear messaging:** Communicate clear priorities, directions, and strategic vision about how the organization sees the work of your first-line leaders' teams contributing to the goals and direction of the organization.

building human capability that delivers business results.

RBL conducts ground-breaking research and co-creates high impact solutions that link human capability interventions with business results.

We believe organizations inspire confidence as they build distinctive capabilities that delight customers and enhance key relationships. When organizations make and keep the right promises, customer experience improves, investor confidence increases, employees are invigorated, and society benefits.

We partner with business and HR leaders to build human capability that accelerates results for these stakeholders and enables them to succeed in their marketplace and ecosystems with digital and face-to-face solutions in *talent, leadership, organization capabilities*, and *HR*.

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