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RESEARCH PAPER



Surviving or Thriving?

A Closer Look at Manager Effectiveness in Evolving Work Environments

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The Current Landscape

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Presently, there is no shortage of popular press and media coverage regarding the plight of managers within the workforce. We've long understood their critical role in shaping employee experiences. They're often faced with unique hardships and ever-increasing expectations from those they lead and their up-line. The recent proliferation of remote and/or hybrid work has also added another layer to the complexity of leading teams in support of organizational goals. As of recent widespread changes, it could be argued that managers and front-line leaders have never had a more difficult job when it comes to managing both the work and the people.

While we previously reported the finding that [engagement has reverted back to pre-pandemic levels](#), we also revealed a slight upward trend in the index we refer to as Manager Effectiveness. Given the unique challenges that workforces, particularly managers, have faced in the last few years, this trend intrigued our research team. We felt compelled to better understand nuances about the trend as well as the general experience of managers within workforces. With recent survey research showing that engagement and manager behaviors are related—yet currently moving in opposite directions—we sought to better understand why. Specifically, in this paper, we leveraged organizational, level-based, and manager self-report data to shed light on the following key questions:

- Is there a rise in manager effectiveness because employees are feeling greater connection to their manager while simultaneously experiencing a greater disconnect with higher levels of leadership or the company overall?
- What differences are we seeing in engagement and manager effectiveness scores based on levels of leadership within an organization? Have these trends changed over the course of the recent past?
- Are we seeing managers at greater risk for burnout due to elevated levels of work/life imbalance and enhanced workload?

Manager Effectiveness Index: Measurement Considerations

Through extensive study of workforces and the manager/leader behaviors that influence the psychological commitment of employees, WSAdata has developed an outcome-based index that broadly captures the conceptual key factors related to their work:

1. Providing inspirational leadership and direction,
2. Effectively managing the work, including the more tactical pieces of management associated with 'air traffic control,' and
3. Effectively managing people, including "softer" skills such as listening, supporting, and caring.

While some managers are particularly adept in one area as opposed to another, the best managers we have studied are ones that excel at all three critical components. These are the managers who can best harness the potential of their teams and consistently drive performance in a way that positively impacts the business¹. As such, the WSA best practice Manager Effectiveness Index consists of three evaluative items:

- My immediate supervisor/manager is an outstanding leader.
- My immediate supervisor/manager does a great job of managing the work.
- My immediate supervisor/manager does a great job of managing the people.

For the purpose of the current research, there are three methodological notes that are important to add for context. First, we focused on the last two items regarding managing the work and managing the people as the Manager Effectiveness Index. These two items have considerably greater utilization among the index items within the WSA massive 153 million survey responses normative database (*WSAdata*). This was a practical consideration, and doing so resulted in much greater project counts for analyses—enhancing the reliability and confidence of any potential findings. That being said, our recommendation is to still include the third index item (“outstanding leader”) within census surveys, when possible. It is a key item in helping to differentiate between good and great managers, and there is an important component of aspirational leadership not uniquely measured within the ‘managing the work’ and ‘managing the people’ items.

Second, the data reported in this paper is from the United States and Canada. These countries represent a majority of the *WSAdata* normative database and score relatively similarly. Therefore, being able to combine them for analysis purposes adds to the power of this research.

Lastly, as a large emphasis of the research in this paper is focused on data relative to management levels, we used the following definitions to categorize four common levels of management:

- Individual Contributors = Employees with no direct reports
- First-Line Managers = Front-line Managers and Supervisors
- Mid-Managers = Directors, Regional Managers, Vice Presidents (all with at least two levels down of direct reports)
- Senior Leaders = Executive Vice Presidents and above

Dissecting the Organizational & Leadership Trends

Along with high uncertainty and anxiety, the pandemic forced organizations to quickly pivot to operating in a way they had neither planned nor knew how to operate efficiently. While leaders scrambled to not only assure employees of safety and security but also create a new operating structure, employees were forced to adapt to new ways to get the work done with limited direction, training, and resources. As employees adjusted to this new way of working and connecting, first-line managers were caught in the middle between the directives of senior leaders and providing what employees needed to stay productive and engaged.

WSA research examines employee sentiment in terms of Pre-pandemic (surveys administered Jan 1, 2019—March 31, 2020), pandemic (April 1, 2020, through June 30, 2021), and Post-pandemic (July 1, 2021, through December 2022). During the COVID pandemic, engagement levels rose, as did the views of

senior leaders and managers. However, as we moved forward, engagement began declining back to 'normal levels,' falling from 75.4% during the pandemic to 72.1% post-pandemic. Yet, while engagement was going down, views on manager effectiveness continued on an upward trend.

Engagement and Manager Effectiveness Trends

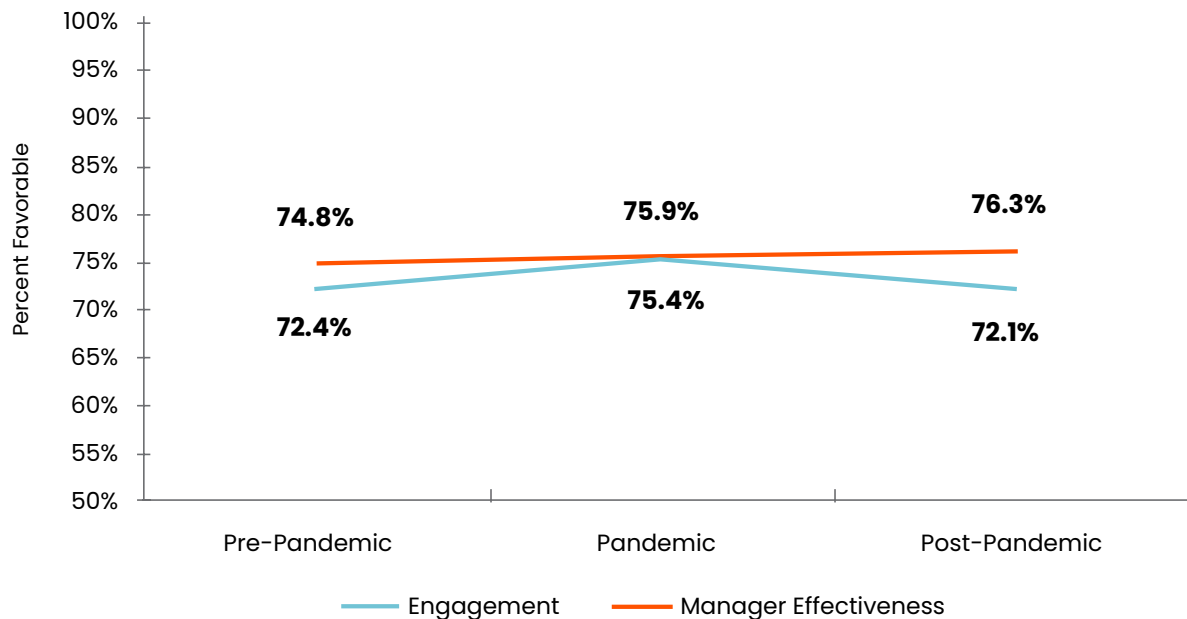


Figure 1. Engagement and manager effectiveness trends.

The shifting trends in both engagement and manager effectiveness during and post-pandemic may be simply explained by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and what employees required during and after the pandemic. During the pandemic, employees needed assurances and looked to leaders for basic personal safety and job security but

coming out of the pandemic, the priorities reverted back to the higher-order needs of the individual (e.g. recognition, balance, development). Reliance on senior leaders diminishes while stronger connections with managers are forged from a new way of working and a renewed focus on the employee as the economy shifts and the workforce becomes leaner.

In order to explore what this means for managers as well as why this may be occurring, we leveraged the *WSAdata* normative database for empirical insights to help discover what may truly be at play. Data revealed that behaviors influencing manager effectiveness have remained fairly consistent over the course of the last several years but have shifted in terms of importance based on employees' needs through and post-pandemic. Generally, managers who listen, build trust, and keep commitments, and those who provide feedback, develop their employees, and support work-life balance tend to be more effective than those managers who do not. Yet, during the pandemic, trust was paramount, and while it is still important, listening to employees and supporting their work-life balance became increasingly more important to perceptions of manager effectiveness in today's work environment. As manager effectiveness continues to rise, it is clear that managers' focus should be now centered on individual needs including listening, developing, and supporting. We can assume the way in which these behaviors are executed as well as how they are relevant to the work environment make them even more prevalent and influential than in years previously.

As manager effectiveness continues to rise, it is clear that managers' focus should be now centered on individual needs including listening, developing, and supporting.

One of the most notable findings stemming from the pandemic was the sharp increase in not just engagement but in the sentiment related to senior leaders and trust.

Employees saw the actions being taken by senior leaders in response to the crisis, which often came with increased communication and proactive measures to ensure employee well-being. This met some of the employees' most basic needs when considering the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This sentiment, along with high engagement levels, was short-lived and later decreased post-pandemic. Yet, sentiment related to an employee's immediate manager remains strong if not stronger than it was through the difficult times of the pandemic. Trust

rose for both managers and senior leaders throughout the pandemic but dropped dramatically for senior leaders while trust in managers continued to increase (See Figure 2). Relatedly, other themes related to manager effectiveness, such as Growth & Development and Communication, remained steady or increased when compared to senior leader-led initiatives (See Figures 3 & 4). This establishes how managers continue to play an even more vital role in supporting and shaping the daily experience of employees today.

Leadership Trust Trends

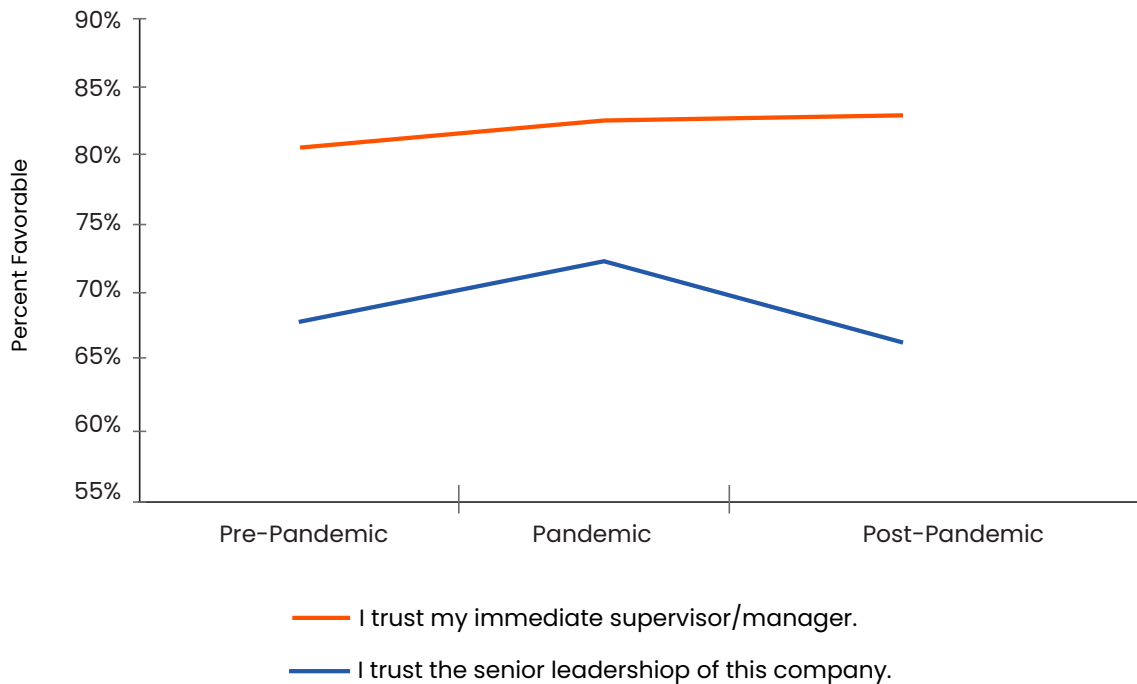


Figure 2. Leadership trust trends.

Growth and Development Trends

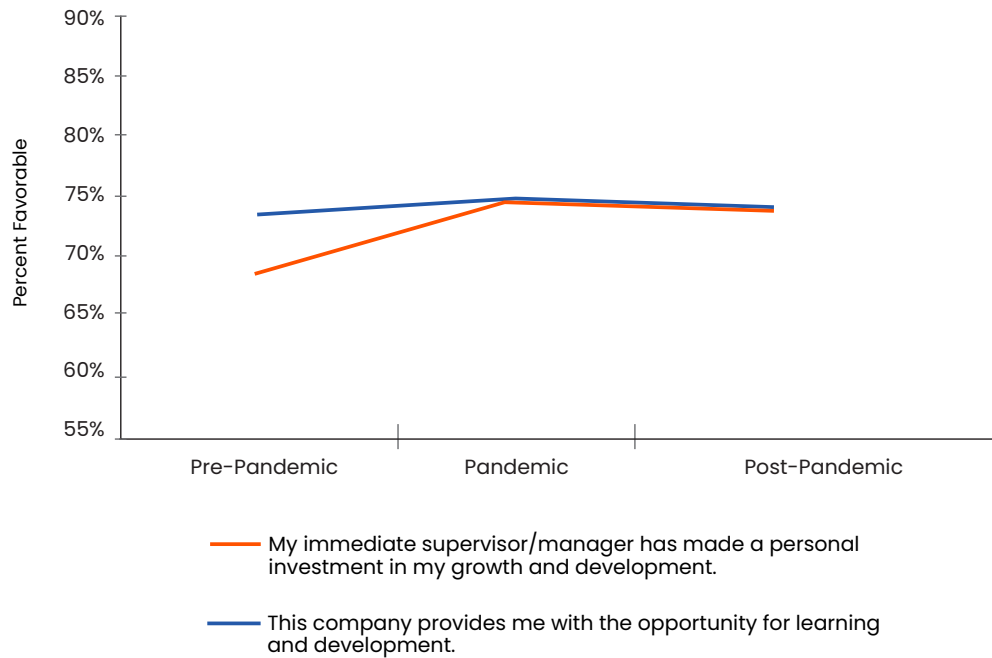


Figure 3. Growth and development trends.

Communication Trends

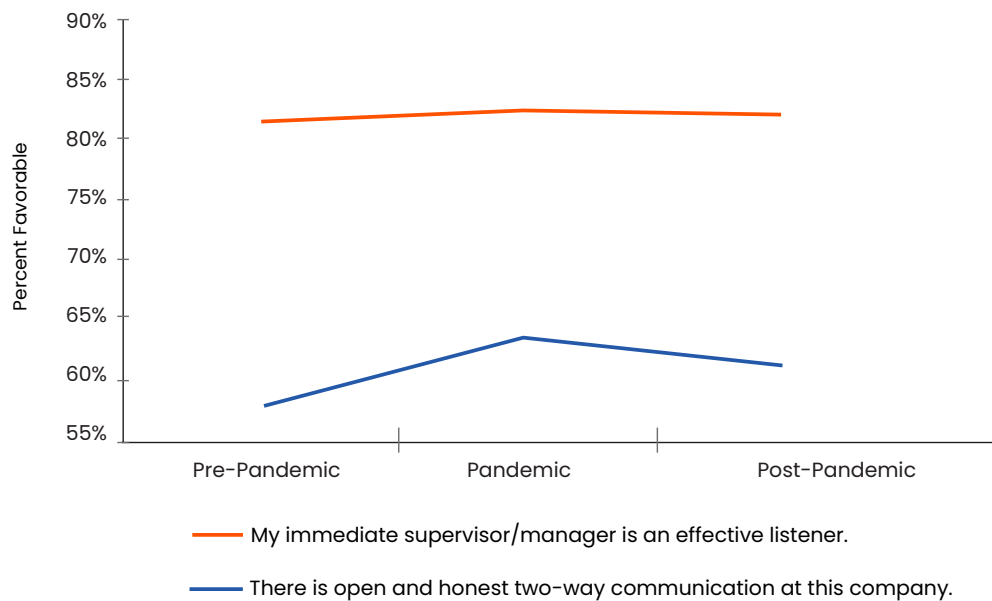


Figure 4. Communication trends.

Analyzing Management Trends by Level

As we consider the manager effectiveness trend, we were curious how much this might be impacted by how employees are rating their managers at particular levels within an organization. For instance, are individual contributors and first-line managers rating their managers in a significantly different way than perhaps mid-managers and senior leaders? How has this changed over time and how does this compare with trends seen in their levels of engagement?

As seen in figures 5 & 6 below, females at all levels had more favorable perceptions of their managers' effectiveness during the pandemic than they had prior. Today, female senior leaders rated their managers as even more effective, despite their declining level of engagement. This could be due to feeling supported directly by their leader (namely the President or CEO), but not feeling as positive in their perception of their experience within the company overall. This is an intriguing trend given that female senior leaders rated their managers' effectiveness well below other female leaders did in years prior. Male senior leaders rated their managers higher in the current times as well. This tells us that perhaps CEOs are stepping up to the plate and effectively managing/leading their teams, but this may not be the case for all senior leaders and lower managers who are supporting their own teams. For instance, female first-line managers rated their managers as 3.6 points less effective now than during the pandemic. Ultimately, perceptions about manager effectiveness will vary based on levels within an organization. It is typical that higher-level leaders receive more favorable manager effectiveness scores.

Manager Effectiveness Trends for Females

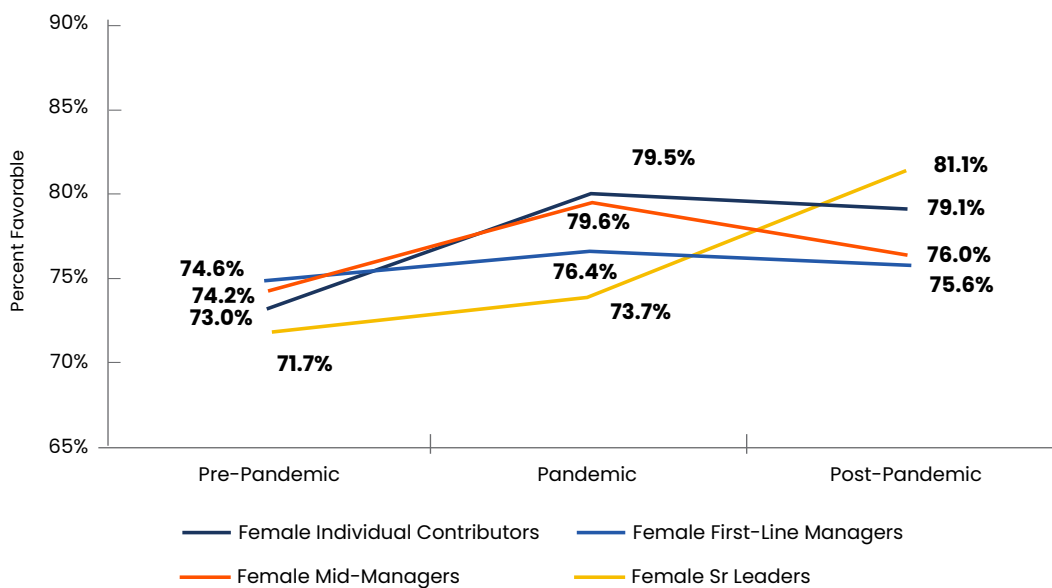


Figure 5. Manager effectiveness trends for females.

Manager Effectiveness Trends for Males

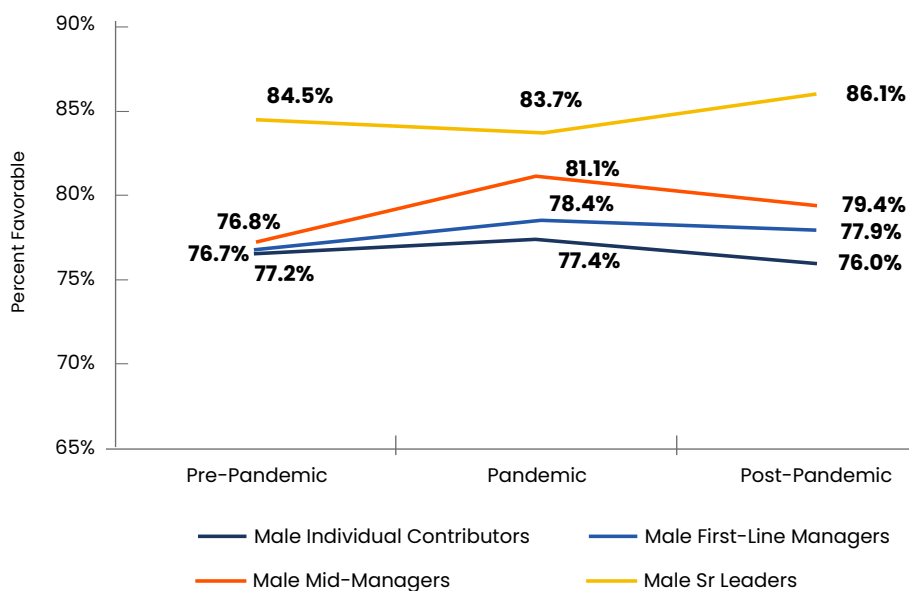


Figure 6. Manager effectiveness trends for males.

When analyzing engagement trends in a similar manner, we see in general that female scores have fluctuated more than male scores over the past several years. We expected to see elevated engagement scores during the crisis, as well as the subsequent decline. However, there are a few groups that saw a

sharper decline than others, including female senior leaders, female mid-managers, as well as male-mid managers. Most notable is the decline in engagement for female senior leaders, falling nearly 5 points below pre-pandemic levels.

Engagement Trends for Females

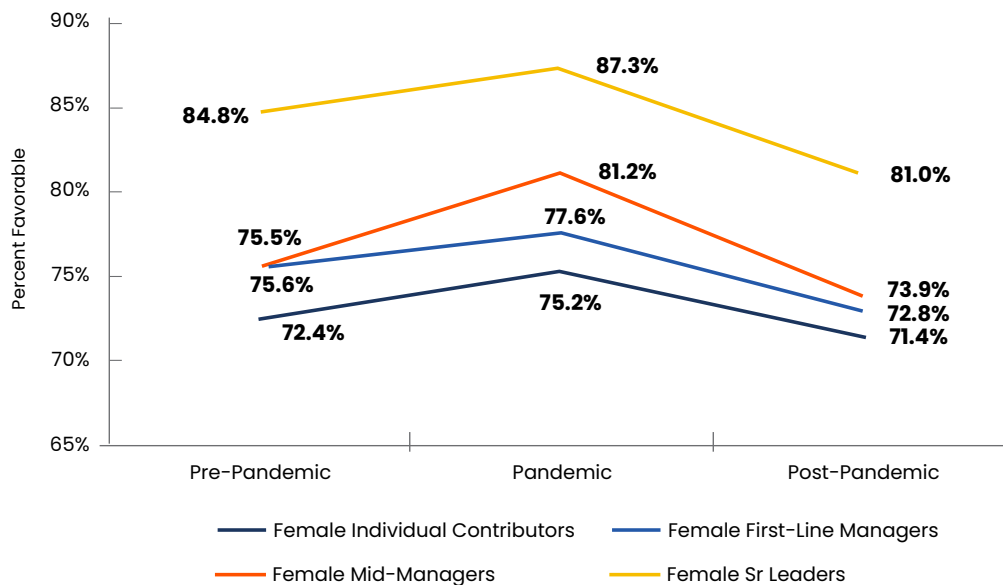


Figure 7. Engagement trends for females.

Engagement Trends for Males

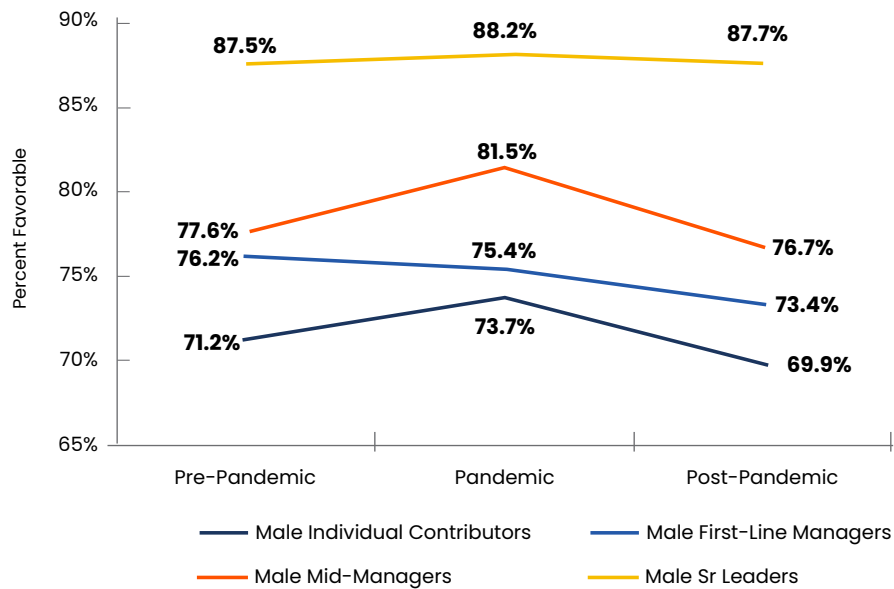


Figure 8. Engagement trends for males.

Seeing the above trends, we were keen to further examine perceptions of intent to stay across management level and gender, utilizing the retention item that is part of WSA Four Item Engagement Index: "I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company." With the exemption of male first-line managers, all groups peaked during the pandemic as would be expected from the broader engagement trend above, followed by a subsequent decline.

As can be seen in Figures 9 & 10, the most significant declines are female senior leaders (-11 points), female mid-managers (-7.6 points), male mid-managers (-5.9 points), and female first-line managers (-5.5 points). Also interesting is that female first-line and mid-level managers' intent to stay essentially mirrors that of female individual contributors, which is atypical as this generally increases with leadership levels.

Intent to Stay Trends for Females

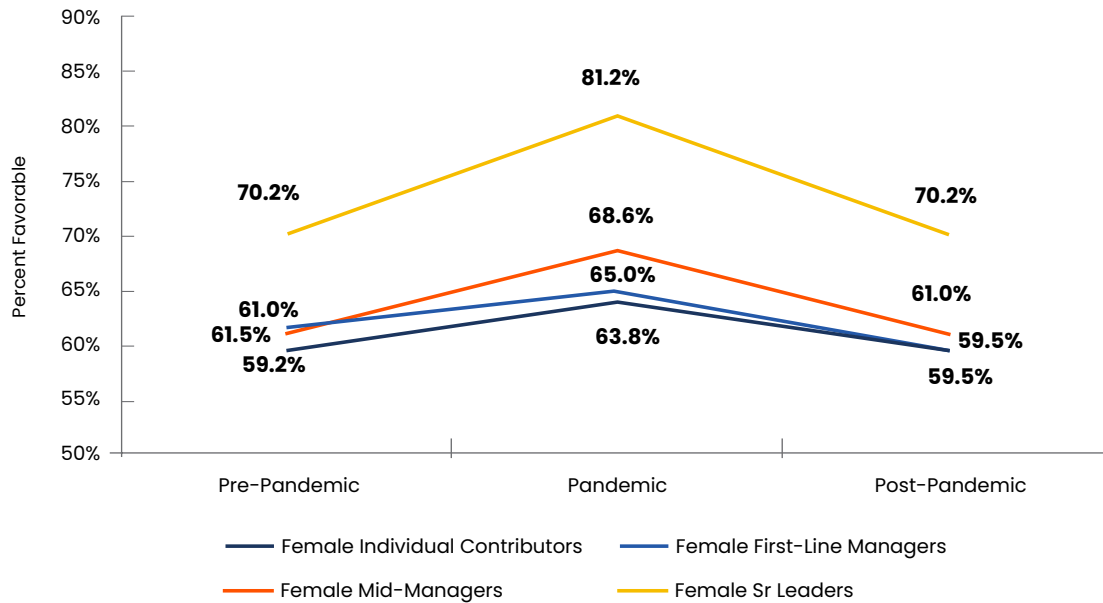


Figure 9. Intent to stay trends for females.

Intent to Stay Trends for Males

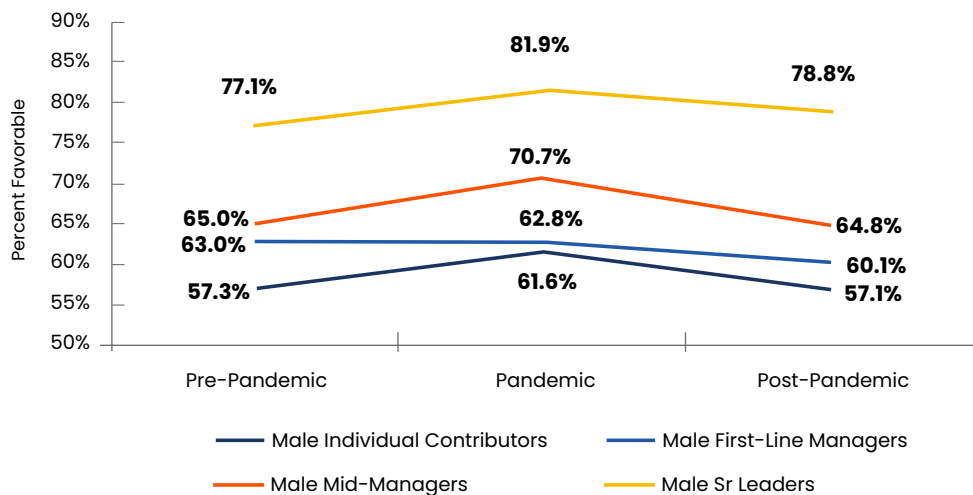


Figure 10. Intent to stay trends for males.

The Imbalance of Managers' Stress, Workload, and Pressure

Given the current times, it is important to check in on managers' perceptions of their stress level and workload. As many organizations are dealing with a workforce who feel the burden of higher workloads, we were particularly interested in how this varied by management level. Do managers, in particular, feel like they are taking on too much, and are they at an even greater risk for burnout? While the ability to maintain a balanced workload is not a typical driver of engagement, we know that the inability to do so can certainly cause frustration and have the potential to disengage employees over time. As mentioned earlier, the popular press has not been shy about discussing the pressures managers are currently facing. One of those pressures is related to retention, whether turnover is voluntary or involuntary due to a reduction in the workforce; many teams are under-resourced which places an additional layer of complexity on managers and those they lead. Therefore, we examined a few workload and work-life balance survey items by management level to evaluate the differences in perception regarding this pressing issue.

In examining the post-pandemic data for the item "my workload is reasonable.", first-line and mid-managers report the lowest scores, 67% favorable, whereas individual contributors have the highest score at 72% favorable. Senior leaders are at 70% favorable. A much more drastic difference emerges in evaluating the item, "The amount of stress in my job at this organization is manageable.", where the difference in score for first-line managers, 61% favorable, and senior leaders, 79% favorable, is 18 points. At 69% favorable, individual contributors score 8 points higher than first-line managers and 3 points higher than mid-level managers. Such a discrepancy highlights the crunch felt by managers as they are often reporting being tasked to do more, with less.

When layering in gender differences by management level for this particular 'stress' item, females score lower than their male

counterparts at every level, with the largest differences seen at the senior leader and mid-level manager levels. See Figure 11.

The amount of stress in my job at this organization is manageable.

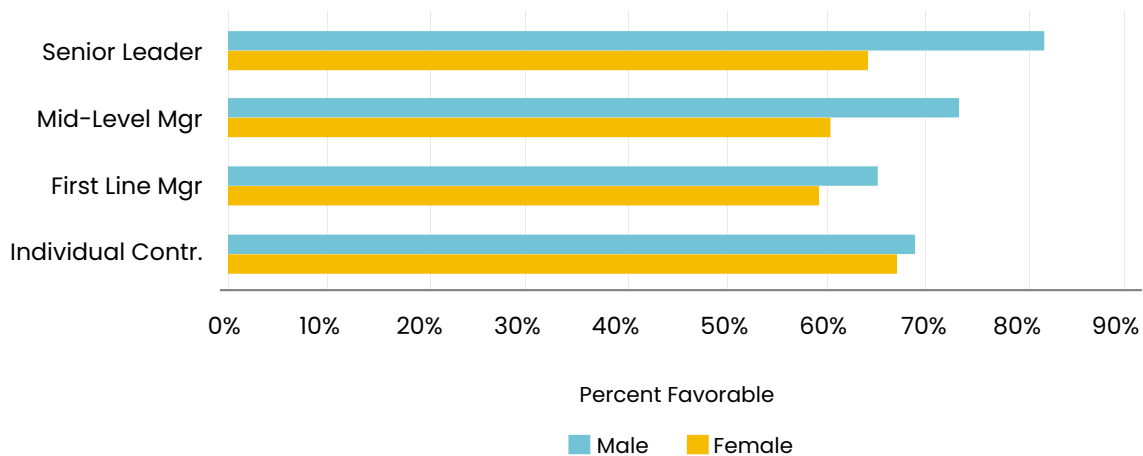


Figure 11. Job stress by gender and employment level.

A similar pattern emerges for the item, "My workload is reasonable." See Figure 12.

My workload is reasonable.

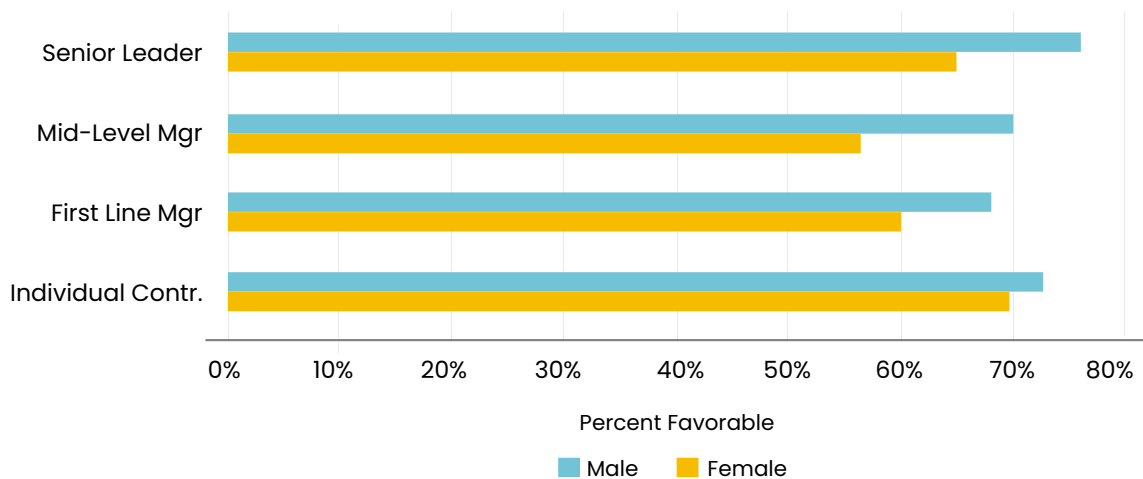


Figure 12. Workload by gender and employment level.

Ultimately, female leaders are less favorable about their workload and amount of stress within their organization, with a notable difference between male and female mid-level managers. While having a manageable workload and stress-free environment does not typically drive engagement, it can certainly disengage employees over time.

This discrepancy caused us to question whether or not this has always existed, or

if it has appeared to change over time. Unfortunately, these two particular items were utilized much less frequently in census surveys prior to 2021, so there is a lack of sufficient data to report trends over time. However, the below figures represent trend data for males and females at each management level when looking at a more traditionally utilized item specifically related to work-life balance.

I am able to manage my work responsibilities in a way that allows me to maintain a healthy balance between work and home.

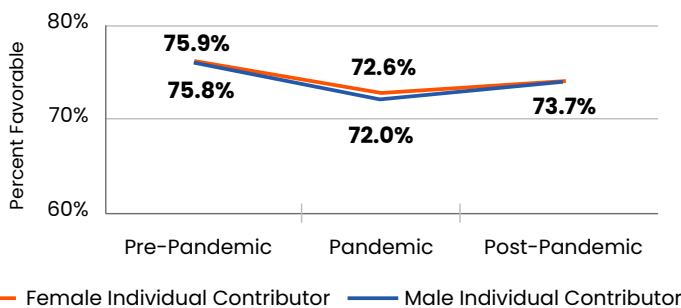


Figure 13

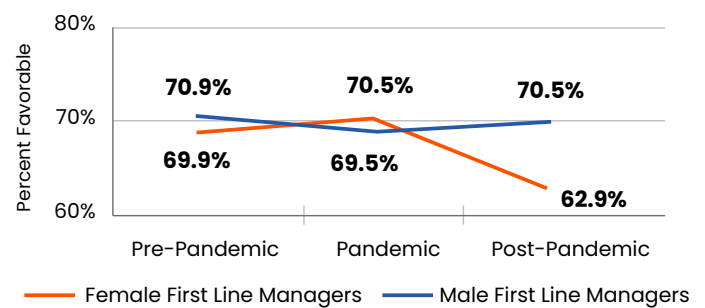


Figure 14

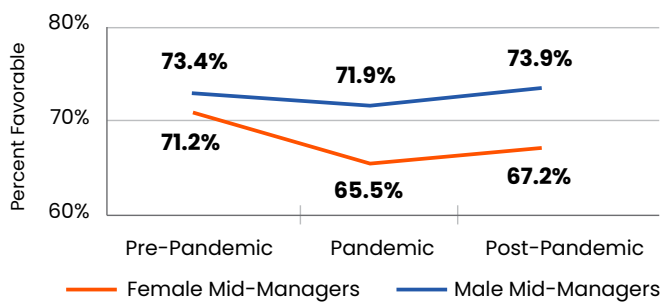


Figure 15

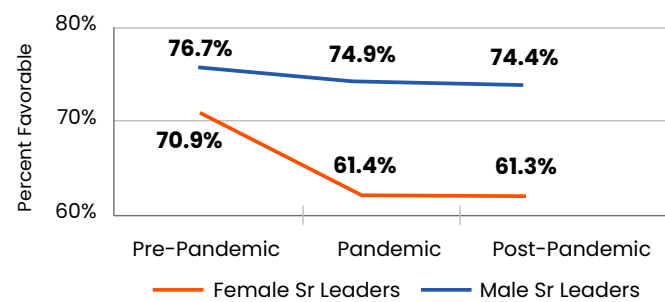


Figure 16

With the exception of individual contributors, female pre-pandemic scores on this item were lower than males at every leadership level. At the same time, scores for female mid-managers (-5.7 points) and senior leaders (-9.5 points) dropped during the pandemic and essentially have not recovered. Female managers and senior leaders are still feeling less favorable about their work/life balance than male managers/leaders as they did during the height of the pandemic. Noteworthy is that perceptions of work-life balance dropped 7.6 points for first-line managers post-pandemic, while remaining essentially flat for males at the same level during the same timeframe (0.5 point increase). This data shows that female managers and senior leaders in particular could be at an elevated risk for burnout, which can not only impact the ways in which they manage and lead their teams, but also in terms of their intent to stay with the organization.

Conclusion

To conclude, the data shows that there is a gap in how employees experience their managers versus their senior leaders and organizations at large, which could be expected. However, that gap is starting to widen—specifically related to trust. And while sentiment regarding manager effectiveness is increasing, there is a wide variance in how managers are perceived based on the level of employees. This is the same case for engagement across levels within an organization. While retention should be a priority up, down, and across an organization, intentions to stay are fluctuating most for female senior leaders and both female/male mid-level managers. In short, these groups are at the most significant risk of leaving.

There is also a general gap for all female leaders regarding the areas of stress, maintaining a reasonable workload, and having a healthy work/life balance when compared to their male counterparts. This makes it particularly important to understand the current experience of female leaders and the ways in which they can be provided with additional support based on the unique challenges they may be facing. This enhanced understanding is necessary to ensure that burnout does not become a primary (and preventable) factor of why they might be leaving organizations. At the same time, managers at all levels warrant time, resources, and support to help ease some of the pressures they are feeling at this current time. As these managers are often tasked with helping to elevate the experiences of employees, their own experiences cannot be overlooked. Their engagement certainly can have a cascading effect on those they lead, so it is more important than ever to stabilize and improve their commitment to drive workforces into the future.

Ultimately, understanding the nuances of manager effectiveness and engagement trends based on different organizational levels and genders is crucial for developing targeted strategies to enhance leadership practices and employee engagement. Further research and action should be taken to address the challenges faced by specific groups and to cultivate a workplace culture that promotes effective leadership and sustained employee engagement across all organizational tiers.

Authors



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Executive Consultant

Sheena Lyons, M.S., joined WSA as an executive consultant in 2021. Previously, she worked for Talent Plus for over eight years as a senior leadership consultant. In that role, she consulted with C-Suite and executive level client partners to guide their people selection strategies to achieve business outcomes. As an expert on behavioral leadership assessments, she analyzed assessment data to formulate insights that drove selection, development, and succession decisions. She served as a trusted resource to both internal and external clients in her role as a coach. Sheena is passionate about partnering with clients and providing insight into ways to elevate their organization's employee experience.

Sheena is also passionate about helping her community and served six years on the Board of Directors for Lincoln-Lancaster Child Advocacy Center. She continues to support community organizations that focus on helping youth thrive.

Education

M.S. in Marriage and Family Therapy/Counseling, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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LISA WAGER
Executive Consultant

Lisa Wager, M.S., joined WSA as an executive consultant in 2019. Previously, Lisa worked for IBM/Kenexa for over 18 years as a managing consultant, primarily assisting organizations to enhance and improve the employee experience through employee engagement, leadership assessment, and development programs. In her most recent role, Lisa served in IBM corporate leadership, learning and inclusion, where she was responsible for redesigning and implementing a global leadership assessment and development strategy, designing, and deploying programs to identify new and advancing leaders all the way to executive succession and development.

Lisa is an active member, contributor, and peer-reviewer of SIOP (Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology) and an active member of APA (American Psychological Association).

Education

M.S. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

B.A. in Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln



ROBERT WELDON
Director of WSAdata

Dr. Robert Weldon currently serves as director of WSAdata. In this role, he oversees the daily management, collection, analysis, and strategic output of all data and insights related to the employee experience.

Prior to WSA, Dr. Weldon worked at IBM Kenexa as senior managing consultant where he managed a team of programmers and research consultants who maintained and updated the employee engagement normative relational database.

Dr. Weldon worked to produce thousands of custom normative data reports for clients while conducting research on employee opinions and leadership competencies. Additionally, he worked with an international group of consultants to identify appropriate benchmarking comparisons for clients and use a variety of statistical techniques to produce normalized client survey scores that enabled clients more clearly identify areas of strengths and weaknesses within their business.

Education

Ph.D., Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center

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Cameron Klein, Ph.D., joined WSA as an executive consultant in 2019. Previously, Dr. Klein worked at PwC as a manager in the people analytics group, and prior to that he served as a senior managing consultant with IBM Kenexa. Throughout his career, he has partnered with organizational stakeholders across multiple industries to cultivate lasting business value via the delivery of thought leadership, products, and services spanning the areas of employee engagement, organizational culture, individual assessment, team performance, leadership assessment and development, individual and team training, and interpersonal skills. He has been a trusted business partner for clients that have included some of the largest retail organizations in the world, as well as global finance, technology, hospitality, healthcare, and manufacturing organizations. He has also partnered with several government and military institutions, including the Army Research Institute, NASA, and the Naval Air Warfare Center. Klein is an accomplished author and presenter, with numerous publications and professional presentations to his credit. Though consulting, service, and solutions, Cameron has leveraged available solutions to impact, streamline, and strengthen his clients' human resource and organizational development processes, with measurable impact on business outcomes.

Education

Doctor of Philosophy in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of Central Florida

Master of Science in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of Central Florida

Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a Minor in Business, Kansas State University



ANDREW MOSES
Data Analyst/Developer

Prior to joining WSA in June of 2022, Andrew Moses worked at IBM/Kenexa from 2010 to 2022, primarily in a data analytics role within the assessment psychometrics group. Among other things, Andrew specialized in disparate impact analysis, computer adaptive testing, and normative analysis.

In his current role at WSA, Moses works on the WSAdata team to clean and collate survey data, loading it into a normative relational database. He also develops web-based Python tools for data analysis and the automation of tasks.

Education

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Spanish with a Minor in Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

References

Workforce Science Associates LLC. (2023, January). Workforce Science Associates benchmarking database (WSAdata) reflecting employee sentiment from over 153 million survey responses from 586 projects across 151 countries (2019–2022), H12023. Lincoln; NE

¹ Ohio State Leadership studies serve as the underpinning foundation for the WSA leadership model, with ties to initiating structure and consideration as the premise for manage the work and the people, respectively.

About WSA

WSA, Workforce Science Associates, offers expertise to maximize the employee experience, enhance leadership effectiveness, and hire the very best talent. This expertise is rooted in ongoing research and behavioral science backed by 40 years of implemented experience. In short, WSA improves workforce performance.

WSA believes in the power of applying the right science that is proven to make people and organizations successful. This includes measuring what matters and equipping leaders with the right solutions to motivate their people to want to work harder, stay longer, and care more. WSA has workforce performance down to a science.

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