

# The top 4 challenges of being a manager — plus tips to handle them

Having a tough day? You are not alone. In a recent report, [The Manager Experience](#), Gallup identified the top challenges managers face, based on a study of more than 50,000 people leaders. (Gallup also uncovered significant perks, which we address in [this article](#).)



The good thing about challenges is they inspire growth, and you can learn to navigate them, even when they're not fully within your control. We've added tips to help you.

## 1. Unclear expectations.

Management is a complicated job. A “right” or “best” course of action often doesn't exist; instead, you have to make judgment calls in highly nuanced situations and with limited information. Plus, as managers in Gallup's study pointed out, there are obstacles that can further complicate matters, including competing priorities, wide-ranging responsibilities, and daily realities that don't always reflect your formal job description.

To handle this challenge:

- **Treat ambiguity as an invitation to take initiative.** You were given the opportunity to lead. Take it! While you may want to exercise caution if you work in a particularly hierarchical organization, most managers of managers are thrilled when their people err on the side of action — and, as one higher-up shared with us, not so thrilled when the managers who report to them “have no game plan.” Not sure how to start? Detail what you do and don’t know about your situation and develop a plan to investigate the unknowns — that’s better than having no plan at all. For more, see [8 ways to better manage ambiguity and uncertainty](#).
- **Set and monitor the expectations you *can* control.** There is one area of your job where you have plenty of chance to create clarity: how you manage your team (and yourself!). Have you collaborated with your team to [set goals and strategies for reaching them](#)? Do you ensure that expectations are clear, then [hold your direct reports accountable](#) for meeting them? And what about goals for yourself — have you [identified the behaviors that matter most to you as a leader](#) and ways to make them habitual?
- **Regularly seek and share strategic information with your manager and peers.** In a perfect world, your manager and peers would automatically feed you all of the information and strategic direction you need to see the big picture and make great decisions. But chances are they’re as busy (and maybe even as perplexed) as you are ... which means you need to be proactive. Ask about your manager’s priorities regularly in your 1-on-1s and check with peers about what they’re hearing and learning that might impact your work. For every interaction, ask yourself: *What information do I have that could enable my boss and peers to make better decisions?* For more, see [9 ways to build relationships up and across your organization](#).
- **Prioritize.** Instead of trying to accomplish everything for everyone all at once — and opening yourself to failure in the process — take a step back. Do the due diligence to assess your priorities and focus on what’s important. For more, see [Unsure of top priorities](#).

## 2. Heavy workload and distractions.

Gallup’s study verified what you already know: Managers are really busy and regularly interrupted. On top of working long hours and getting mercilessly pinged with problems and requests, you must constantly explain what’s going on to others. That means meetings — lots of meetings.

To handle this challenge:

- **Reclaim some control of your calendar.** Minor adjustments like setting office hours to field direct reports' questions, shortening your default meeting times by 5 or 10 minutes (e.g., from 60 to 50 minutes), and [rethinking how you handle email](#) can have a bigger impact than you might think. For more, see [5 scheduling tactics to bring some sanity to your calendar](#).
- **Make sure you delegate enough.** Many managers don't, relying instead on unsustainable individual "heroics." As one executive told us when describing a struggling team leader, "He holds onto a lot of the more difficult work, thinking it's too lengthy to teach. However, transitioning the work once will save a lot of time in the future." Plus, challenging your direct reports with new tasks you're currently doing can help drive their motivation and development. For more, see [Delegate something off your to-do list](#) and our [Delegation prep worksheet](#).
- **Rethink how you spend your time.** It's incredibly easy to get sucked into reacting to the whirlwind of mini daily crises that come your way. But when you get stuck in reactive mode, you risk letting your most important projects languish. Instead, try [spending 30 minutes each week and 10 minutes each day reviewing and scheduling your most important tasks](#) and [developing questions to help you determine the importance and urgency of tasks](#).

### 3. Job stress and frustrations.

From making decisions that affect other people's livelihoods to sharing bad news to scrambling to meet the competing needs of direct reports and higher-ups, managers' responsibilities can generate big doses of stress. That's a health risk you need to take seriously.

To handle this challenge:

- **Be vigilant about self-care.** You can't afford to fall into the common managerial pitfall of putting yourself last — not if you want to avoid burnout. This means [training yourself to handle the emotional stress](#) that comes with your job, setting smart work/life boundaries, and focusing on [getting good sleep](#) and other habits to give you stamina. For more, see [Self-assessment: How do your habits help \(or hurt\) your workplace well-being?](#)
- **Build a network of supportive peers and mentors.** Overseeing a team can feel isolating, adding to your stress level. Make an effort to connect with people who understand what you're experiencing and can be a sounding board, provide advice, or just share a laugh. For more, see [The happiness coach: Being a manager can feel isolating — here's what you can do about it](#).

- **Focus on interactions that you find energizing.** The Gallup study points out that managers may devote more emotional and intellectual energy to things like helping struggling employees, when in fact, less daunting tasks can be equally important and productive. Try devoting some time in this week's 1-on-1s to coaching high performers and [talking about their growth and improvement](#) or simply [noticing what you enjoy most at work](#) and sharing it with your team and others.
- **Develop tactics for effectively managing conflict and difficult conversations.** These situations may never become easy, but they can be less stressful when you go into them prepared with strategies. For more, see [7 tactics to help you improve how you react during stressful interactions](#) and [23 phrases to help you navigate emotionally charged conversations](#).

#### 4. Less opportunity to use your strengths.

The Gallup study points out that the strengths and skills that typically get managers promoted — closing sales deals, building new features, providing stellar customer service — aren't necessarily what they get to do anymore. That can be a bummer. But it's also an opportunity to develop yourself in exciting new ways.

To handle this challenge:

- **Expand your definition of success to include getting work done through others.** Helping a team meet a goal can be as satisfying as hitting an individual quota or deadline — and possibly more satisfying because you've multiplied your impact and can celebrate the success with others. For more, see [6 keys to developing a manager's mindset](#) and [Celebrate your team's progress this week](#).
- **Exercise your strengths by being a coach.** Research shows that helping someone else learn a skill is one of the best ways to improve the skill yourself. It also feels amazing to watch someone benefit from your hard-won experience. Great coaches guide their direct reports' thinking without telling them what to do so that they take an active role in learning. That means asking great questions. For more, see [90+ questions for better coaching conversations](#) and [Make a coaching plan to help your direct report build autonomy in a task](#).
- **Set learning goals to embrace the uncomfortable parts of your job.** A manager's job is so complex that it's impossible to be great at everything you have to do. Wise managers face weaknesses with courage and create a plan to improve. Future strengths are just around the corner if you start working on them now. For more, see [Identify a management task outside your comfort zone and make a plan to embrace it](#).

Managerial challenges are only half the story. For the managerial upside of Gallup's study, see [The top 4 advantages of being a manager — plus tips to leverage them.](#)