

The Unsaid

Leading with empathy when there's no support:
a manager's dilemma



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Foreword

“ Being a leader is like being a parent, and the company is like a new family to join. One that will care for us like we are their own....in sickness and in health.

— Simon Sinek, author and inspirational speaker

We already know that empathy is a vital soft skill for leaders. Now more than ever, it's the ultimate antidote to the challenging times we live in. We also know that to lead their teams with empathy, managers need to be adequately upskilled.

But what happens when no one cares for our leaders? What happens when our managers aren't sufficiently trained to support their teams through challenging times?

It's not news to any of us that managers are stretched. On top of their already heavy workloads, there's frequent illness, absence and ongoing disruptions to contend with. Throw in managers operating in hybrid work environments and it's a lot to handle.

What's more, taboo issues that have traditionally been unspoken about in the workplace have now made their way into the everyday workplace vernacular. From burnout and menopause to family violence and fertility, these human issues are now openly discussed at work, and it's falling on managers to know what to say. The problem is, they aren't always equipped to navigate these tricky situations themselves.

This report shines a light on the manager experience right now and helps to understand the enormous challenges they face.

What we've unearthed is pretty shocking. Managers are really struggling. They are overwhelmed, out of their depth and simply aren't capable of showing true empathetic leadership. And it's not because they don't care; it's because they don't have the right tools or support from their workplaces.

The magnitude of what is being asked of managers is a stark reminder of the duty of care organizations have to create caring workplaces. They simply can't turn a blind eye to their obligations to ensure all their employees — including their managers — are supported.

When they don't, the entire organization suffers: managers are stressed and at risk of burnout, teams are unproductive, there's decreased employee engagement, and issues with staff retention. With the war on talent being so fierce, organizations have to get this right.

This is why Circle In is so committed to supporting managers. As the platform that helps build workplaces that care, we provide managers with their own resource hub filled with conversation guides, tips and strategies so they can feel truly supported and lead with empathy....in sickness and in health.

“ As managers, unless you have a psych or counseling degree, you aren't qualified going into these situations, but you need to have a toolkit on how to navigate them and what levers of support to pull.

Jodi Geddes and Kate Pollard
Co-founders at Circle In



Personal issues are workplace issues

The last couple of years have been challenging for everyone. And managers are no exception.

In many ways, we've been forced to be more transparent about our lives. The outdated work culture where it was the done thing to separate our personal and professional lives is evolving, and more and more organizations now recognize their employees are whole people - not robots.

At some point in their career, everyone will deal with a personal issue that will impact their work. It's simply part of the collective experience of being human.

▲ **COVID-19 pulled the curtain back on us and smashed together our work life and personal life. Work used to be place-based, but now there is no separation.**
— Laura Berland from the Center of Compassionate Leadership

Especially now, as we wade through this new landscape, many employees are navigating issues traditionally unspoken in the workplace - from mental ill-health to menopause and beyond. But what we know is that managers aren't equipped or supported to lean into these uncomfortable conversations.

So now it's up to organizations to prioritize cultures of compassion and manage these situations with care and empathy so that employees feel heard, and managers feel supported.

It's time they really step up and arm their people leaders with the tools they need to say the right things in the moments that matter.

When they do, it's a win-win: managers are equipped to do their best work, employees feel safe and supported to share their problems, and organizations reap the rewards.

▲ **Yes you're their manager, but you're also just one human being sitting down and listening to another human being.**

Greater performance and productivity

Increased loyalty and staff engagement

Overall **Better** health and wellbeing outcomes

Increased morale

Better staff retention

Improved reputation and public image

The big picture headlines

Unlike any other time in history, managers are not only leading their teams at a functional and operational level but taking on more and more responsibilities when it comes to supporting their employees through personal issues.

And one thing is clear: the pressure is impacting them - a lot.

▲▲ There is little support for the stress that you take home. As someone who cares deeply about their team and what they are going through, I find I take on a lot of it and it impacts my own wellbeing.

97%

have supported a team member to navigate **challenging life issues**

8 in 10

have **not received training** in navigating these challenging issues

>50%

say providing this support is a **major part of their role**

2 in 3

say this takes up a considerable percentage of their **workload**

>50%

say this impacts their **own stress levels**

2 in 3

worry they will say the **wrong thing**

>50%

have supported a team member with **mental ill-health**

1 in 4

has supported a team member experiencing **domestic or family violence**

75%

say the support they need to provide their teams has increased because of **COVID-19**

▲▲ It has never been more challenging to be a manager.

The most common issues

If nothing else, the last few years have shown us that vulnerability is simply part of being human. And being human means sometimes personal issues bleed into our work.

	% of managers who have supported a team member	% of managers who have had training
Mental Health	59%	48%
Grief / Loss	42%	23%
Redundancy	37%	29%
Burnout	36%	19%
Separation / Divorce	33%	16%
Family Violence	28%	19%
Fertility, Family Planning and Abortion	26%	14%
Illness	25%	14%
Menopause	24%	21%
Disability	19%	13%

And there's more...
Managers also told us they have supported team members through:

- Ageism
- Alcoholism
- COVID-19
- Female health
- Homelessness
- Mental health in children
- Returning from parental leave
- Sickness in children
- Stress
- Surgery
- Workplace bullying/ violence/ harassment

“The only way I have handled these situations is coming across these types of issues in my personal life.”

The Unsaid

Mental health

Mental health is the most common issue and the issue most managers have been trained in. Yet 1/3 are still not confident navigating it with their team members.

Mental ill-health is all around us, and it's on the rise. Every year, 1 in 5 Australians will experience a common mental illness³. This means every day, millions of people face up to work while living with mental ill-health. It also means productivity, performance and wellbeing are significantly impacted.

Given how much of our lives we spend working, workplaces are the perfect environment for supporting someone to get back on track. What this looks like differs from organization to organization, but it's about cultivating a culture of connection where people can openly talk about their mental health struggles. And, ensuring our leaders know what to say in response.

▲ I really feel for new managers that are faced with more concerns in and around the mental health space and have no life experience to support or show empathy.

What managers told us

1/2

Over ½ have supported a team member with mental ill-health.

The confidence factor

20%

Less than 20% are very confident in supporting a team member experiencing mental ill-health.

In training

50%

Less than 50% have received training.



³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health> (2020-21)

Grief | Loss

Grief is the second most common issue navigated at work but only 1/5 of managers have been trained to handle it.

In 2020, Australia recorded 161,300 deaths, 943 of which were infants⁴. What's more, studies show that up to 1 in 5 women will have a miscarriage⁵.

Whatever the type of loss and however grief manifests, it's happening in every workplace, in every country all around the world. Managing grief is a time fraught with many conflicting emotions, and often productivity is impacted at work, but the onus is falling on managers to support their people through the grief process, even when they aren't sure what to say.

What managers told us

42%

42% have supported a team member experiencing grief or loss.

The confidence factor

22%

Only 22% are very confident in supporting a team member experiencing grief or loss.

In training

23%

Only 23% have received training.

▲ I've had somebody who suffered multiple miscarriages and someone who was married to a lady who wasn't going to get a visa, so I actually had him on suicide watch.



⁴ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/deaths-australia/2020>

⁵ <https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/pregnancy-problems/early-pregnancy-problems/miscarriage>

Redundancy | Workplace change

Of all the issues, managers are most confident talking about redundancy, an issue that takes place in the workplace itself.

The pandemic wreaked havoc on the labour market, with many businesses closing or operating at reduced capacity, which meant many people lost their jobs. Between 2021 and 2022, 2.1 million people left or lost a job (up by 300,000 from the previous year). One in 10 of these (or 199,000 people) was retrenched. The year before nearly 400,000 were made redundant⁶.

For managers, there's an enormous pressure to reduce the stress and uncertainty that comes with redundancy. But often they are in the dark about exactly the right things to say.

What managers told us

37%

37% have supported a team member through redundancy or workplace change.

The confidence factor

28%

Only 28% are very confident in supporting a team member through redundancy or a workplace change.

In training

1/3

Less than $\frac{1}{3}$ have received training.

▲ All of my training around workplace change has been self-directed and paid for by myself. Loads of diverse life experiences help too.



⁶ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/jobs/job-mobility/latest-release#retrenchments> (2022)

Burnout

Like redundancy, managers are most confident talking about burnout, another issue that comes from within the workplace.

The World Health Organization recognizes burnout as an official diagnosis, and it's on the rise across the globe.

According to a 2022 study, 25% of employees feel burnt out at work⁷. What we know about burnout is that it can be debilitating and overwhelming. The more severe it is, the harder it is to manage professional obligations, so it's important that workplaces not only recognise burnout in their employees but can properly manage it when it happens.

It's a worry that so many managers aren't equipped with the proper tools to spot the tell-tale signs or deal with it when it happens.

What managers told us

36%

36% have supported a team member through burnout.

The confidence factor

1/2

Just over $\frac{1}{2}$ are confident in supporting a team member experiencing burnout.

In training

1/5

Less than $\frac{1}{5}$ have received training.

▲ People leaders need so much more training and ongoing support in this area.



⁷ <https://www.workhuman.com/resources/reports-guides/unleashing-the-human-element-at-work-transforming-workplaces-through-recognition>

Separation | Divorce

Despite its growing prevalence, separation/divorce is one of the areas in which managers have been the least upskilled.

The pandemic sparked a huge spike in divorces in 2020-21, with over 50,000 couples filing for divorce (up by around 6,000 from the previous year)⁸. Yet, for some reason, there's still a stigma attached to talking about separation and divorce. The result? Absenteeism, loss of productivity and increased sick leave.

This makes it even more pertinent for workplaces to create a safe, open dialogue around separation and divorce.

The problem is unless managers have direct personal experience, they're often left scratching their heads about the right things to say.

▲ I've had a staff member who has gone through a divorce after being married for thirty years plus. So that was a bit of a learning curve.

What managers told us

1 in 3

1 in 3 has supported a team member through separation or divorce.

The confidence factor

15%

Only 15% are very confident in supporting a team member through separation or divorce.

In training

20%

Less than 20% have received training.



Family violence

There's a direct correlation between managers' low-level confidence and lack of training regarding family violence.

The statistics around domestic and family violence in Australia are frightening. One in 6 women has experienced violence by an intimate partner, and this figure is on the rise⁹.

In 2020, family and domestic violence-related sexual assault increased by 13% from the previous year and there were 145 victims of family and domestic violence-related homicide. At least 2 in 5 assaults recorded by police were related to family and domestic violence¹⁰.

Workplaces must play a positive role by providing a safe and supportive environment for victim-survivors.

It's a fine line for managers to walk; not many have been trained to walk it.

▲ I felt a bit helpless because that was my first time dealing with domestic violence.

What managers told us

1 in 4

1 in 4 has supported a team member experiencing family violence.

The confidence factor

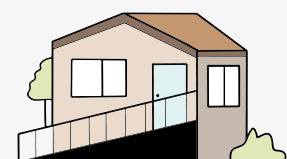
50%

50% are not confident in supporting a team member experiencing family violence.

In training

20%

Less than 20% have received training.



⁹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-data/contents/about>
¹⁰ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-data/contents/about>

Fertility | Family planning | Abortion

Fertility isn't a common issue spoken about between team members and managers. Outside of disability, it is also the issue that managers have the least training in. Does the lack of training influence people's decision to open up about it?

More couples are conceiving through IVF treatment in Australia than ever before. As far as prevalence goes, it's up there with cancer. 2020 data showed that 1 in 6 people struggle to conceive¹¹, and a growing number of single women and same-sex couples are using donor services, so chances are someone in your workplace is having treatment.

And while there's no national collection of abortion data in Australia, a 2017 study reported the total number of abortions was just under 90,000¹².

Navigating issues like this at work is complex, and managers are simply not resourced to deal with the challenge.

▲ I'm currently assisting a team member going through an IVF journey. I haven't been through this challenge but have found it's about showing empathy, giving space and time when needed, and researching support resources and networks who do know this area.

What managers told us

1/4

1/4 have supported a team member through fertility/family planning/abortion.

The confidence factor

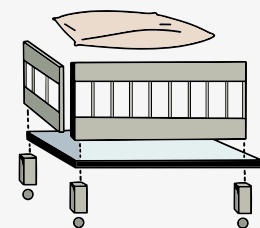
1/2

Only 1/2 are confident in supporting a team member through fertility/family planning/abortion.

In training

14%

Only 14% have received training.



¹¹ RACGP (October 2020)

¹² University of Melbourne cited in Women's Forum Australia (2017)

Illness

Its prevalence is high, nearly 150 respondents have navigated it with team members but less than $\frac{1}{5}$ have received training on dealing with illness.

Last year, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of Australians had at least one long-term health condition, and nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ had a chronic condition. Back problems and arthritis were the most common types of physical conditions¹³.

A silver lining of COVID-19 is that speaking about illness at work has become more normalized. While it may present new challenges for managers, it's a golden opportunity for workplaces to really consider how they support and accommodate their employees when they are unwell.

That's why it's so important to train managers so they know what to say in the moments that matter.

What managers told us

1/4

$\frac{1}{4}$ have supported a team member through an illness.

The confidence factor

19%

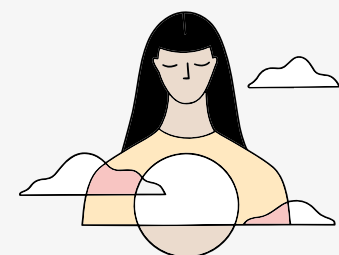
Only 19% are very confident in supporting a team member through illness.

In training

14%

Only 14% have received training.

▲ She wasn't eating, she was vomiting, she was chronically sick. And so we had to just talk about her taking leave and giving her enough time to get well.



¹³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/health-conditions-and-risks/health-conditions-prevalence/latest-release> (2022)

Menopause

Even though $\frac{1}{2}$ the population experience menopause, managers still aren't trained on how to navigate it with their teams.

This is what we know about menopause: all women go through it, 80% experience symptoms, 90% say it negatively impacts work and, right now, 21% of the current workforce are menopausal¹⁴.

Menopause can have a significant impact on attendance and performance at work, but rather than being seen as a performance management issue; workplaces need to understand the impact it can have on individual women. Workplace menopause awareness not only makes individuals feel supported but also fosters positive cultural and commercial outcomes.

Managers need to be educated to truly support a team member through this milestone.

▲ More specialized training would be a benefit to managers. General training around mental health is beneficial, but there are very specific issues which my team have had to deal with.

What managers told us

$\frac{1}{4}$

$\frac{1}{4}$ have supported a team member through menopause.

The confidence factor

$\frac{1}{2}$

Over $\frac{1}{2}$ aren't confident supporting a team member through menopause.

In training

20%

Only 20% have received training.



¹⁴ <https://www.menocollective.com/>

Disability

Disability is the area in which managers have the least confidence and the least training in navigating.

One in 6 (18%) people in Australia has a disability. That's around 4.4 million people. Of those, 1 in 3 has a severe or profound disability, and 1 in 4 has a mental or behavioral disability¹⁵.

By law, no one has to disclose their disability in the workplace, but if they do, their workplace has a legal obligation to support them. And this support should extend beyond tickbox adjustments. Workplaces should be safe spaces for employees to talk about their disability or that of someone in their care, in whatever way they are comfortable, without fearing repercussions.

Workplaces also need to upskill their leaders so they know how to handle the conversations.

▲▲ For example, this person who had a child diagnosed with autism....I did a bit of homework and research so that the person knew that I was supporting them.

What managers told us

18%

18% have supported a team member to navigate disability.

The confidence factor

50%

>50% aren't confident supporting a team member to navigate disability.

In training

13%

Only 13% have received training.



It's better to try and fail than never try at all

I've been in management for a while now, so I've had to support team members through lots of life's highs and lows. The highs are easy, but when it comes to challenging times, you really have to dig deep to support someone well.

Over the years, I've supported team members through separation and divorce, pretty significant mental health issues and one whose child had a disability that really impacted her day-to-day. I never shy away from supporting them, but I certainly don't always feel properly equipped to do a good job, especially if I don't have my own life experience to draw on.

I find I either rely on self-directed research to learn more about the particular issue or I go to HR. They are always supportive but they don't necessarily have all the right resources themselves. They'll know the company policies and benefits but often they are in the dark, like me, about what to actually say when people are going through something challenging.

It feels like there's such a small window of time to say the right thing and if you can't deal with the issue in the moment or the flow of conversation is impacted by simply not knowing what to say, then it can really affect that individual person (and team engagement at a broader level).

Regardless, my approach is that it's better to listen and try to help than to ignore the issue altogether. I want my team to know they can always come to me and we can figure it out together.

Does it take its toll? Absolutely. But I think as people leaders it's par for the course.

— Luke, Global Sales Transformation Leader, SaaS

A (challenging) learning opportunity

For me, empathy means being a true leader and showing up for my team in the good times and the bad. It means showing a genuine interest in people's lives both in and outside work.

Some people say we wear two hats: people leader and psychologist, but I almost feel like they can't be separated. Supporting people through personal life issues simply comes with the territory of being a people leader.

When a team member approaches me with a challenging life situation, I actively listen and empathize with the importance of their issue. I want them to know that I have their back and make it my goal to resolve it to the best of my abilities. This could mean pointing them to Circle In material, providing a relevant 1300 number to get in touch with a psychologist or working with our HR representative. The combination of these tools has helped me to manage most situations I've encountered.

There are times when I really feel the impact of being a compassionate manager, but for the most part, I find it empowering as it helps me grow as a leader.

— Luisa, ePMO Coordinator, Food manufacturing

What can your organization do?

Nothing about this current landscape is business as usual: workplaces are playing catch up when it comes to new ways of working and managers are scrambling to do justice to their increasingly dual role of people leader and psychologist.

From over 500 managers, we heard that:

8 in 10

have not received any training at all.

55%

have access to HR for support.

52%

have an Employee Assistance Program to refer to.

10%





have no support at all.

One thing we know is that organizations can truly thrive only when they exemplify a workplace culture of understanding and empathy.

How do you achieve this? Start by equipping your managers.

- > Provide manager training on key issues. For example, mental health first aid training.
- > Launch company-wide education programs on specific issues.
- > Establish mentor programs for new managers.
- > Introduce soft skills training for all leaders.
- > Develop manager-specific training plans.
- > Ensure you have an Employee Assistance Program.
- > Establish an HR 'drop in clinic'.
- > Sign up to Circle In and utilize our digital manager tools.

Here's a sneak peek of just a few of our manager resources:

<p>Guide</p>  <p>Supporting employees through IVF, fertility treatment, surrogacy o...</p> <p>Gemma Saunders 3 min</p>	<p>Guide</p>  <p>Menopause: a conversation guide for managers</p> <p>Circle In 1 min</p>	<p>Article</p>  <p>Dos and don'ts of managing an employee through separation or...</p> <p>Circle In 7 min</p>	<p>Guide</p>  <p>What conversations to have when things don't go as planned</p> <p>Gemma Saunders 4 min</p>
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About Circle In

Circle In is a digital-first employee benefits platform that allows your caregiving employees and their managers access to expert advice at every life stage. The advice is practical, data-backed and available on demand on all devices.

Our platform not only supports individual caregivers but also helps managers provide tailored support to the caregivers in their teams that engage and build stronger connections through empathy.

It helps build empathetic people leaders through:

- Support and conversation guides across key stages; and
- Timely nudges to coach your managers in the moments that matter.

We support over 70 leading companies globally to build a family-inclusive workplace and create a culture that supports caregivers every day and in the moments that matter. Externally, we champion and add credibility to their Employee Value Proposition helping demonstrate the deliberate culture they are creating.

For more information, visit: <https://circlein.com/>



Although I have not received formal training I believe that if my team member(s) were to go through any of the above situations I would seek help from my HR department as well as our Circle In subscription.

Research Methodology

Survey

The findings in this report are based on a survey conducted by Circle In between July and August 2022. The global survey was deployed online via Survey Monkey.

To complete the survey, respondents had to be a manager of any level in any organization size or type.

Sample size

Sample size: 518 respondents.

Case studies

A 10-part questionnaire was distributed to selected respondents in August 2022. The case studies are based on these responses.

43% work in organizations of 100-1,999 employees.

73% manage between 1-19 employees.

39% of respondents were senior managers.

▲▲ The more we are equipped with training, the better. You never know what someone's going through in their personal lives, so anything we can be armed with to identify issues and be able to point them to the right support, the better.

▲▲ Workplaces need to proactively provide support and guidance to managers throughout their careers.