



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

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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



“Fewer people want to be supervisors. Why? Because they see it as more work with little reward. Pay bumps don’t always match the added stress, and the work-life balance trade-off isn’t appealing.”

– Mark Leupold, Express franchise owner, Oshkosh and Appleton, Wisconsin



“Supervisors directly influence a company’s bottom line by driving team productivity, reducing turnover, and fostering engagement, collectively boosting output and customer satisfaction while lowering recruitment and training costs. Neglecting their development and well-being can lead to burnout, poor decision-making, and disengaged teams, resulting in decreased efficiency, higher employee churn, and lost revenue, potentially costing companies millions annually in lost productivity and rehiring expenses.”

– Janis Petrini, Express and Specialized Recruiting Group franchise owner; Frontline Training Solutions co-owner and founder, Grand Rapids, Michigan⁵

Top Six Supervisor Skills

According to U.S. Hiring Managers⁶

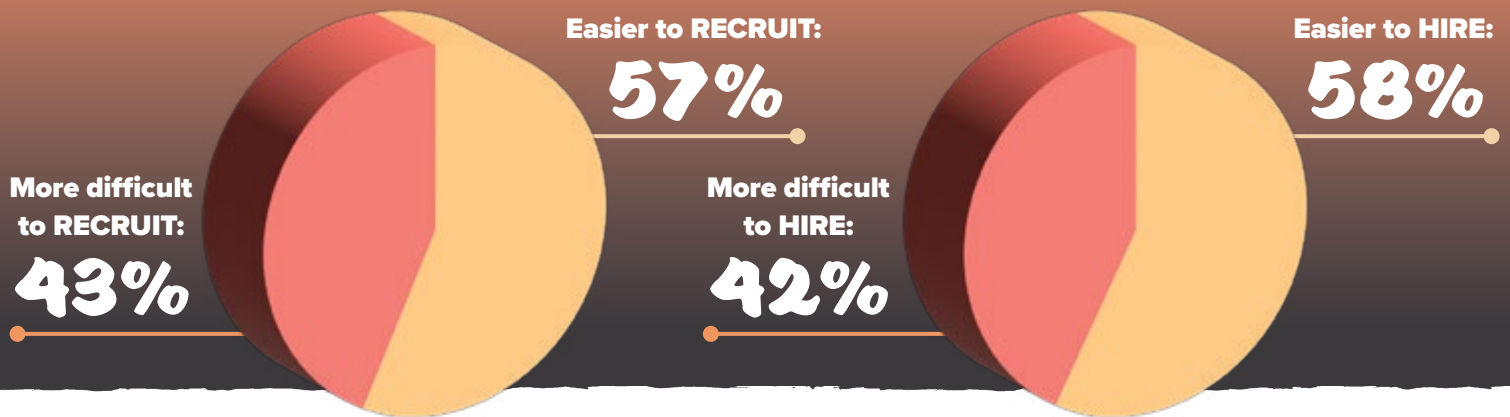


According to U.S. Job Seekers⁷



Hard to Hire? A Split View

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?⁸



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

Research was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals among 1,001 U.S. hiring decision-makers (defined as adults ages 18+ in the U.S. 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.⁹

Survey of Job Seekers

The research was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 21 to Dec. 10, 2024, among 1,039 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.¹⁰



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 made these employees strong performers in their current roles will translate to strong performance in a supervisory role.

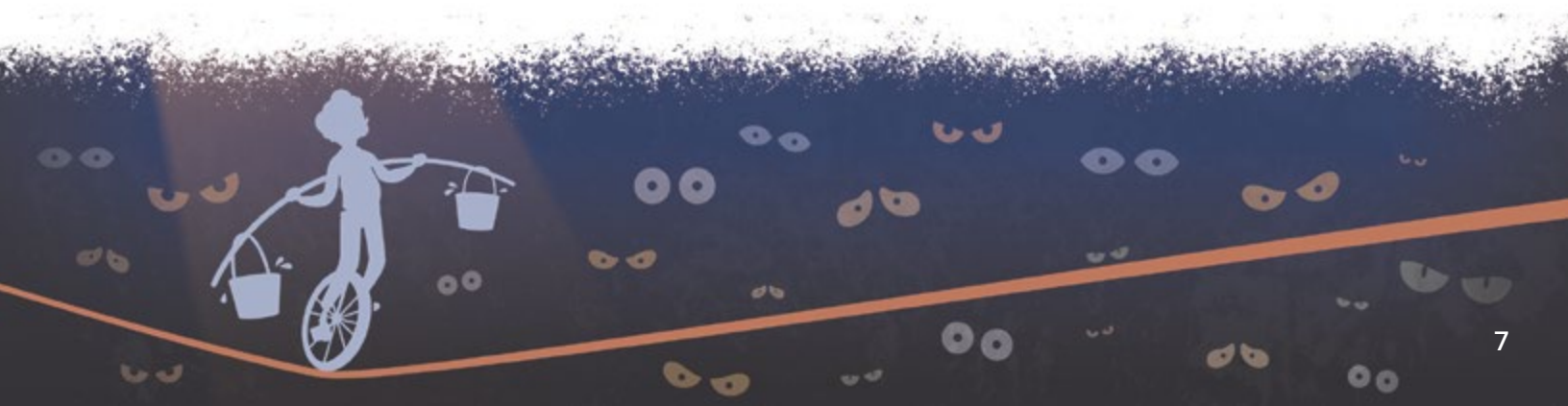
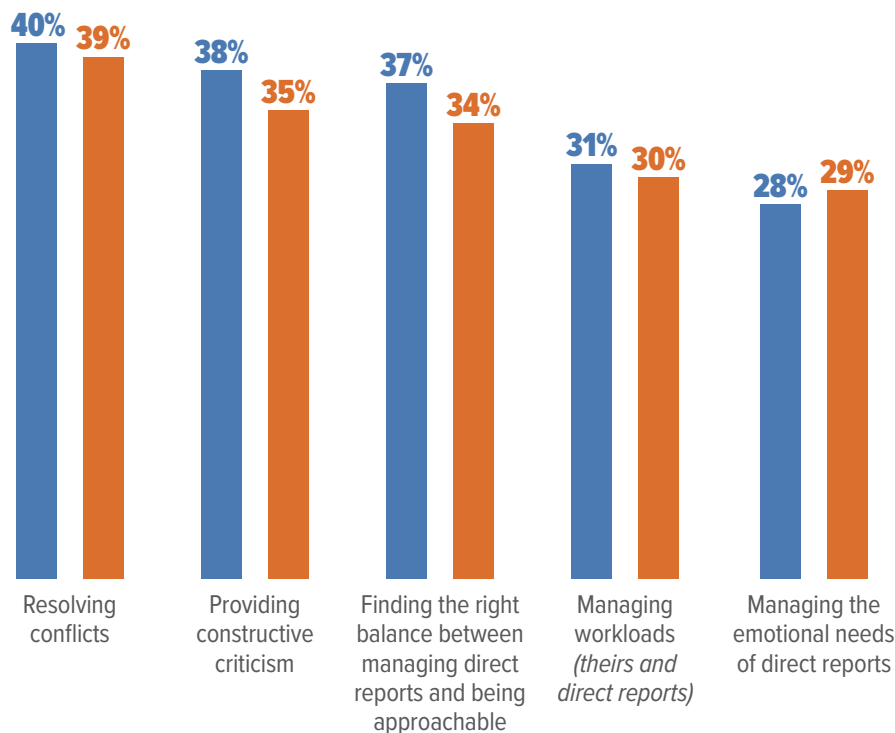
That's not always the case.

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.

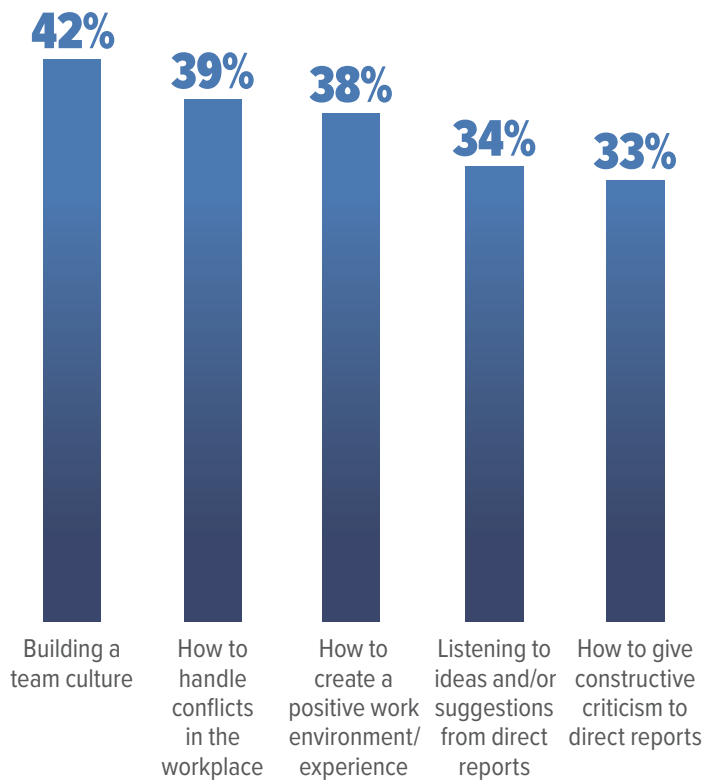
Biggest Challenges Supervisors Face¹¹

■ According to U.S. Hiring Decision-Makers

■ According to U.S. Supervisor Job Seekers¹²



Issues on Which Companies Provide Training, according to U.S. Hiring Decision-Makers¹³

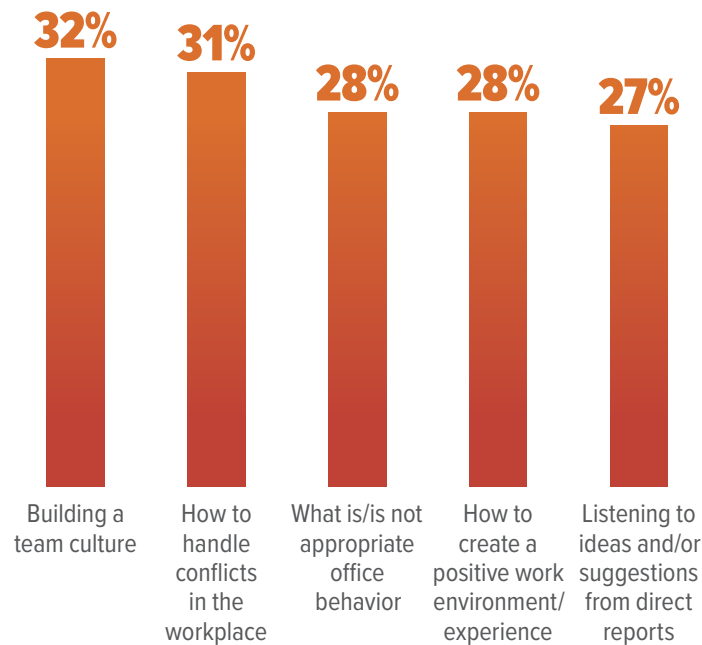


Many hiring decision-makers in the United States are entirely unaware of a disconnect in how companies train—or fail to train—new supervisors. According to the survey from Express and The Harris Poll, a substantial majority of hiring managers (86%) feel supervisors at their company have the tools they need to help their direct reports succeed.

But only one-third or less offer training related to the issues and skills that hiring managers say are relevant to supervisors: how to give constructive criticism (35%), how to discuss issues/concerns about direct reports’ performance (30%), and how to set professional boundaries with direct reports (27%). Perhaps paradoxically, more than 7 in 10 (72%) concede their companies should be doing more to support and help supervisors succeed.¹⁵

Meanwhile, most job seekers who have been supervisors report receiving some training (83%). Still, regarding top issues, only 31% have received training on workplace conflicts, and just 24% on providing constructive criticism. Seventeen percent said they received no training on any of the issues surveyed.

Issues on Which Supervisor Job Seekers Say They Have Received Training¹⁴



Signs of Supervisor Burnout

Express franchise owners identify common signs of supervisor burnout.¹⁷



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 retaining or attracting good talent difficult. 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.¹⁸



“Millennials and Gen Z are more willing to switch jobs frequently until they find one that truly aligns with their values, goals, and lifestyle.”

– Yvonne Rockwell, Express franchise owner, Palmdale and Santa Clarita, California

It is not just supervisors who suffer the consequences. When supervisors are not equipped to handle their roles effectively, the employees who report to them do not receive 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ They cite high stress and growing post-pandemic workloads as reasons why middle management is no longer worth the cost.²¹ The result is that companies lose their talent pipeline for future management roles.



More than half (55%) 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 lack of fulfillment or advancement in their career (55%), not feeling adequately compensated (40%), mental health issues associated with being a supervisor (33%), desire for more time-off (31%), desire for more flexible schedule/hours (29%), or desire to leave a people management role (26%).²²

Why Supervisors Left or Planned to Leave Their Jobs²³



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.²⁵ One in five U.S. hiring decision-makers say turnover costs their company as much as \$100,000 per year.²⁶



“Work-life balance has become even more important to the younger generations, and many are no longer interested in climbing the corporate ladder. I believe there are fewer people companies can develop.”

— John Roller, Express franchise owner,
Manchester, New Hampshire

The \$100,000/ Year Problem: The High Cost of Employee Turnover by Company Size²⁷

500 Employees (34%)

100-499 Employees (17%)

50-99 Employees (14%)

10-49 Employees (3%)

2-9 Employees (2%)

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’s a question posed in Deloitte’s 2025 “Human Capital Trends” report.²⁸

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.”²⁹ 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



“The rapid pace of technological change has increased the need for supervisors who can quickly learn and implement new tools, further narrowing the talent pool.”

— Janis Petrini, Express and Specialized Recruiting Group franchise owner; Frontline Training Solutions co-owner and founder, Grand Rapids, Michigan



“When people are considered, they feel valued. When people feel valued, they feel empowered and taken care of.”

— Yvonne Rockwell, Express franchise owner, Palmdale and Santa Clarita, California



“Younger generations value empathy and emotional intelligence in their supervisors, favoring collaborative leadership over authority and micromanagement. They also seek transparency, real feedback, and career development opportunities, preferring mentorship over traditional management styles. This contrasts with older generations, who may have valued more authoritative and hierarchical leadership approaches.”

— Lisa Daijo, Express franchise owner, Honolulu and Pearl City, Hawaii

Detoxifying the Workplace

Supervisors help shape 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 (35%).³⁰

Half of U.S. hiring decision-makers (50%) say there are actually more instances of bad employee behavior being reported now than there were three years ago, making it all the more important for supervisors to receive the desired practical training for real-world situations.



“The instability of employees staying in jobs has made it very difficult and stressful for supervisors to maintain the level of productivity and service.”

– Aracely Melendez, Express franchise owner, El Paso, Texas

Nearly three-quarters have witnessed toxic traits occur regularly among employees over the past year. The most common is gossiping (39%), followed by unprofessional communication (27%), avoiding working/collaborating with others (24%), micromanaging of direct reports (19%), and taking credit for another person’s work (19%).³¹

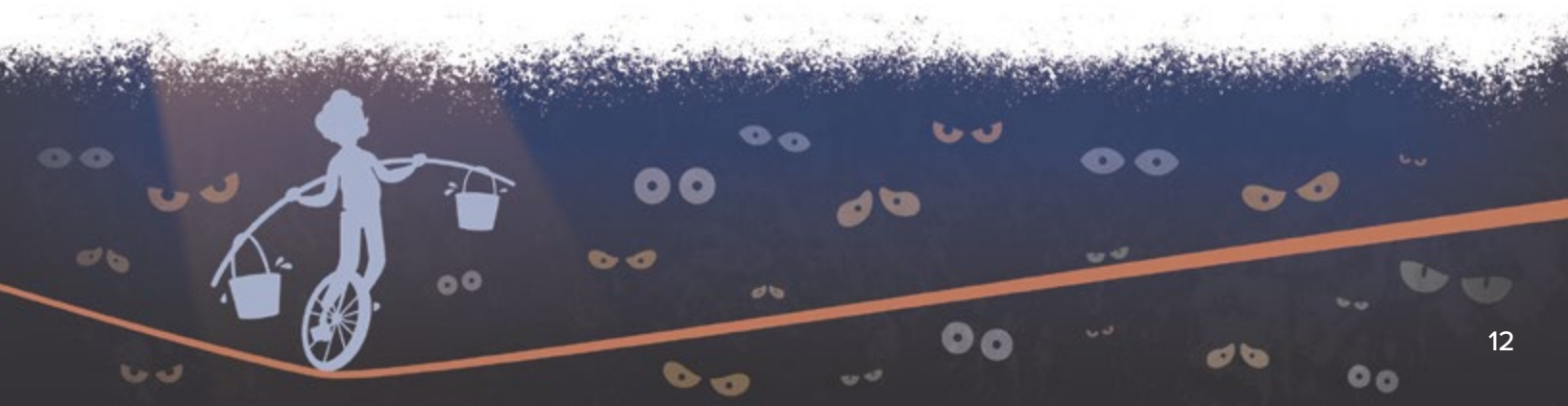
The effect of these actions adds up. One study found that the annual cost of toxic workplaces in the U.S. totals \$914.7 billion.³²



Top Toxic Traits In the Workplace, As Witnessed by Hiring Decision-Makers³³



Job seekers were more likely to report “regularly” seeing toxic traits in the workplace, with gossiping and unprofessional communication likewise topping their lists.



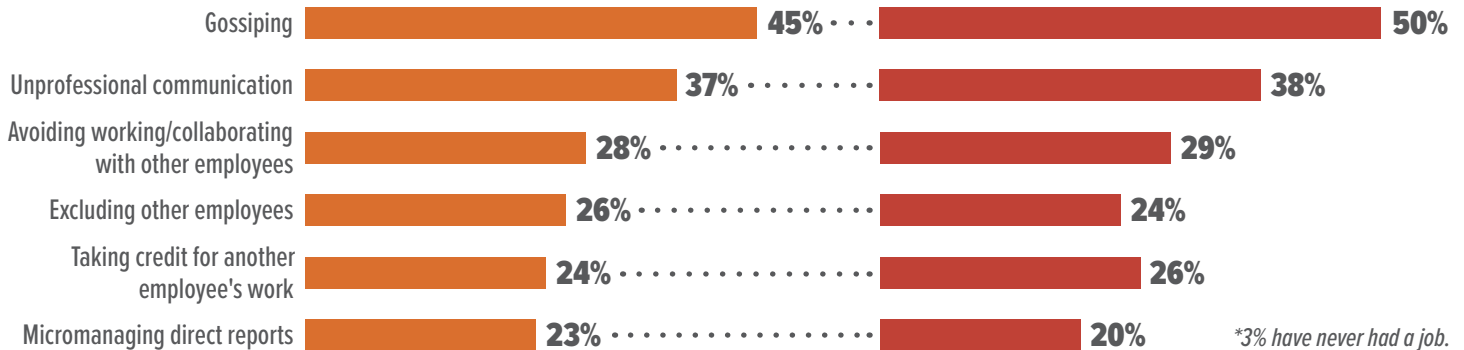


Toxic Traits in the Workplace, As Reported by Job Seekers³⁴



Employed U.S. Job Seekers

Unemployed U.S. Job Seekers



Warning! The Effect of Recession Fears

Headlines of a looming recession³⁵ only add to the pressures facing supervisors. On top of the “normal” day-to-day stresses, they now must contend with the fear of layoffs in an economic downturn, which could mean losing their jobs or valuable employees reporting to them.

At the same time, they are expected to manage and reassure their teams, helping employees navigate their 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.”



60% of hiring managers
feel companies need signage
to remind people to be nice
to one another.³⁶



Employee behaviors are prompting some companies to take action, as 58% of hiring managers report increased discussions at their company about employee conduct. Approximately 60% state their company encourages employees to communicate with their supervisor regarding potential conflicts and provides resources on navigating or avoiding conflicts at work to help manage such interactions.

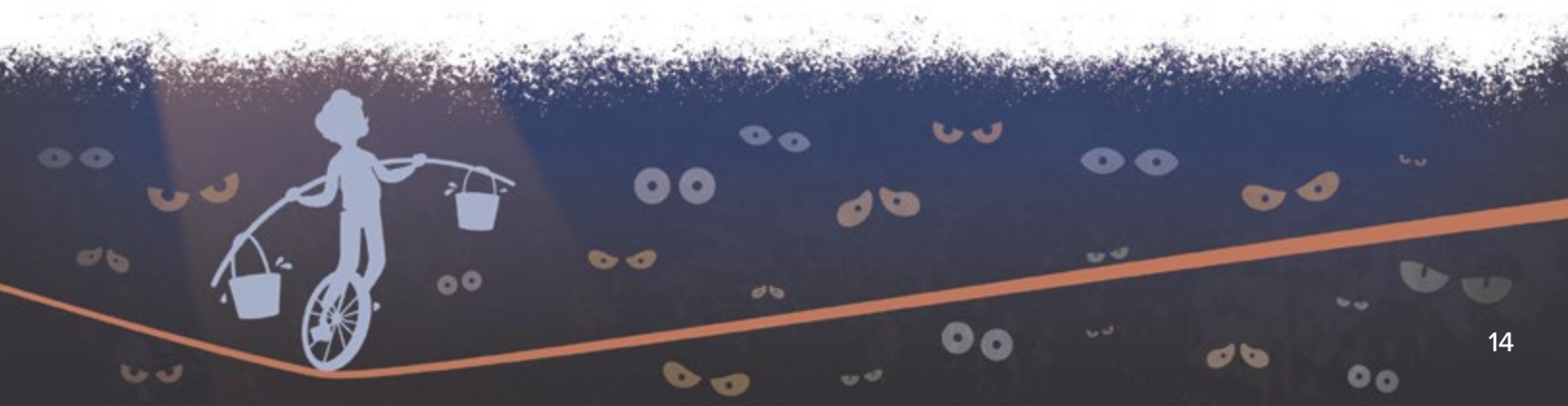
Employers are also focused on cultivating workplace friendships. Nearly all hiring decision-makers (97%) feel there are benefits to employees forming friendships in the workplace. They commonly say it improves employee and company productivity (67%).

Half or more report increasing employee morale (55%), strengthening company culture (51%), and improving employee mental health (50%) are also positive byproducts of work friendships, followed by reducing turnover (44%) and reducing employee burnout (40%).

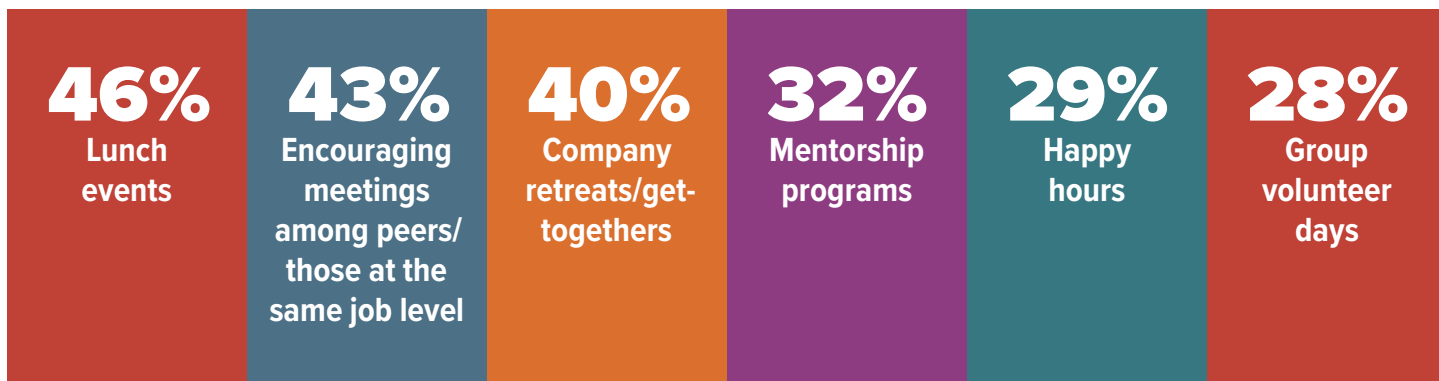
Friendships may even help retain current employees, as nearly 9 in 10 hiring decision-makers (89%) say employees are more likely to stay with a company if they have friendships in the workplace; 42% strongly agree with this statement. Employees agree, three-quarters of U.S. job seekers (76%) would be more likely to stay with a company if they have friendships in the workplace.

Top 5 Benefits of Employees Forming Friendships in the Workplace

U.S. Hiring Decision-Makers



Nine in 10 companies (87%) say they use methods to encourage or help employees form friendships³⁷



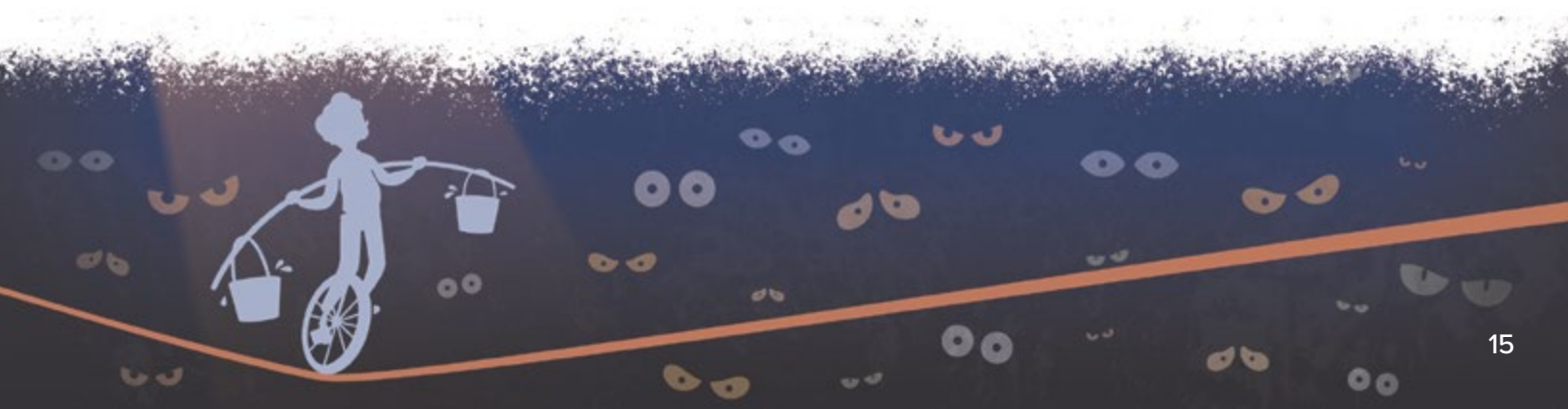
While these all appear to be steps in the right direction, it is also clear that employers are not doing enough, and their failure to support and cultivate their supervisors may be their biggest oversight.

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, emerging technologies, and shifting expectations all demand supervisors who can foster a positive culture and who, in turn, are supported by one.



“Leadership roles should be seen as rewarding versus unnecessarily stressful, and companies must invest in supervisor well-being in addition to their performance. Promoting someone into a management role isn’t where the process ends—successful companies continue to invest in leadership long after the title is given.”

– Lisa Daijo, Express franchise owner, Honolulu and Pearl City, Hawaii



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, a right-sized workforce, and leadership that recognizes the realities they face every day.

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

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

Companies that act 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.³⁸

- ✓ **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**
Utilize contract workers during periods of transition or high demand to balance increased 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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10. 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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About Express Employment Professionals

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.

About Express Employment International

Express Employment International supports the Express Employment Professionals franchise and affiliated brands, including Specialized Recruiting Group and Express Healthcare Staffing.

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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