

# 3 Ways Managers Can Build Resilient Teams

by Cian O'Morain



Managers play a critical role in building and supporting resilient teams through disruption. This article outlines three actions the best managers take during disruption to build resilient teams and showcases examples of how the best HR leaders are supporting them to do so.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the greatest overhaul of work practices in a generation. HR leaders, tasked with supporting their employees through this transition, have realized the central role of workforce resilience in navigating the disruption. They have celebrated their workforces’ agility in maintaining strong performance: 86% of employees and 90% of HR leaders report that productivity has stayed the same or increased since the onset of COVID-19.<sup>1,2</sup> However, they have also shared concerns that it may not be sustainable, and these concerns are well-founded.

Our research defines workforce resilience as the ability to sustain or grow performance through disruption without damaging workforce health (i.e., the health of individuals, relationships and





the work environment). And though performance has remained high, 55% of employees have suffered significant damage to workforce health in that same time.<sup>1</sup>

### Connector Managers Play a Critical Role in Protecting Workforce Health

Our research has identified four types of managers, with one clear winner: Connector managers. They outperform Always On, Teacher and Cheerleader managers when it comes to driving the key outcomes of employee performance management, skills preparedness, inclusion and intent to stay (see Figure 1). Despite

Figure 1. Maximum Impact of Employee Outcomes for Manager Types

▲ Positive Impact    ▼ Negative Impact    — No Impact

	 Teacher	 Always On	 Cheerleader	 Connector
Employee Performance	▼	—	▲	▲
Skills Preparedness	▼	—	▲	▲
Inclusion	—	▲	▲	▲
Intent to Stay	▲	—	—	▲

n = 4,787 employees  
Source: 2020 Gartner Manager of the Future Survey

this clear advantage, they make up only 26% of all managers.<sup>3</sup> Connector managers elevate their teams' performance and motivation by focusing on three key connections: the employee connection, the team connection and the organization connection.

Our new research on workforce resilience reveals that local employee and team connections are critically important during disruption, highlighting the need for Connector managers to focus on facilitating these two connections. Resilience becomes a team sport during disruption: Collaborative relationships within direct teams increase the likelihood of sustaining workforce health by up to 10%, while collaborative relationships with further-out networks have no significant impact.<sup>1</sup>

The data highlights three imperatives for managers to build resilience during disruption:

1. Help team members realign their personal purpose.
2. Make prioritizing the team's work a top priority.
3. Make cohesion an ongoing team pursuit.

## Help Team Members Realign Their Personal Purpose

Over the past year, many HR leaders have told us about the importance of keeping their employees inspired and invested heavily in clearly communicating an overarching organizational purpose. Inspiration is critical to sustaining workforce health. However, during disruption, the ingredients that feed that purpose are personal. In the past year, efforts to show that the organization shares a passion for causes employees care about have fallen flat (with no significant impact on workforce health). By contrast, employees who report their work is personally relevant to them were 26% more likely to sustain workforce health.<sup>1</sup>

When a disruption knocks an employee's personal "why of work" out of joint — by changing what an employee is working on or what work the organization says is now a priority — it is their managers who are best placed to help them realign it. Connector managers feed the connection with their employees by



### **Case in Point: Resource Composability**

Leaders and HR within the IT function at The Co-operators, a Canadian financial services firm, recognized the importance of continually aligning work with changing demands. To ensure managers are well-equipped to realign their team's goals and priorities along with changing needs, the leadership team publishes a practicewide "backlog" of the top priorities on a monthly basis. Clear prioritization criteria mean all managers (and employees) have a clear view into practice- and function-level priorities, especially as they change.

HR and leadership further enable their managers by tying these priorities to formal performance management targets referred to as objectives and key results (OKRs). Their team-first approach means managers and leaders are evaluated 50% on hitting achievable targets for collective OKRs (i.e., shared by a full team or multiple teams) and 50% on individual contribution. These incentives encourage managers to foster greater collaboration and take a team-first approach that fuels the team connection.



overinvesting in getting to know them and diagnosing potential misalignment.

HR plays a key role in enabling managers to do this effectively. For example, HR and leadership at the software organization Salesforce have long recognized the importance of helping their employees connect their personal purpose with changing business needs. Salesforce uses its vision, values, methods, obstacles and measures (V2MOM) tool, which gives employees a framework to translate changing organizational goals into their own unique contexts. Importantly, it guides employees on how and when to update their V2MOMs (for example, as they kick off new projects).

HR at Salesforce has also embedded the tool into its performance management process so managers can regularly discuss purpose with employees and ensure continual realignment. Furthermore, HR supports managers in discussing V2MOMs at a team level to help turn personal purpose into greater team cohesion.

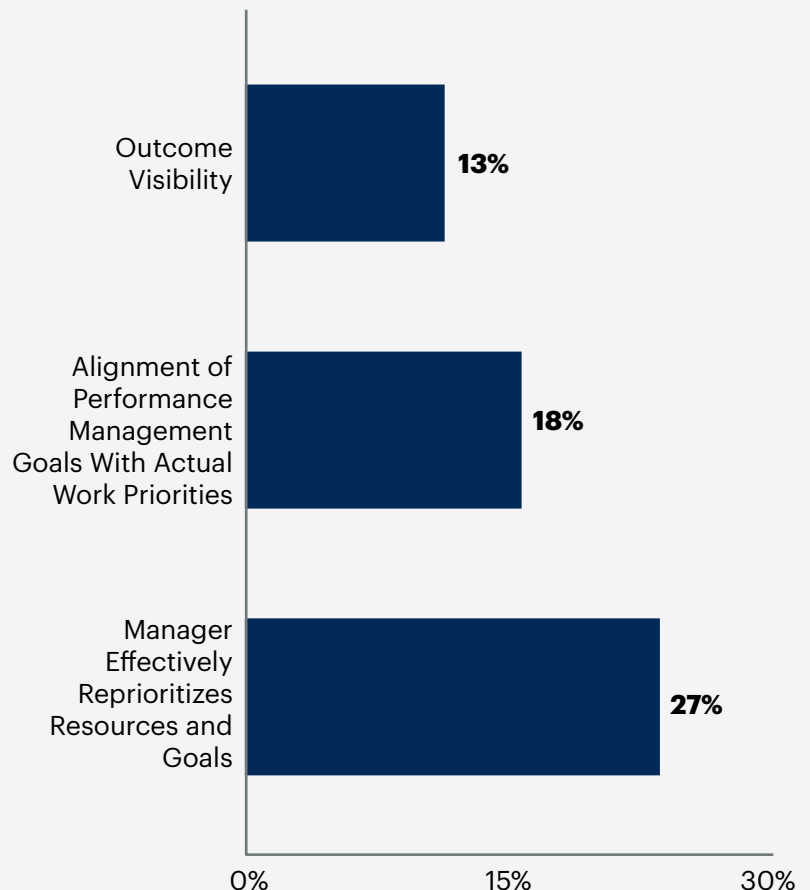
## Make Prioritizing the Team's Work a Top Priority

If there's one thing the pandemic has highlighted, it's the importance of managing with empathy. Eighty-nine percent of HR leaders say it is more important to lead with empathy in a hybrid environment.<sup>4</sup> But there is more to managing with empathy than simply acknowledging your team's pain. And when it comes to supporting a team's health and resilience, the most actionable empathy is work empathy.

Managers best feed employee and team connections by showing empathy to changing circumstances. Ways of practicing work empathy include making sure key outcomes are visible (even if they're changing), aligning team members' formal goals with actual work priorities and continually prioritizing a team's resources toward updated needs. These three actions combined can increase the likelihood of sustaining workforce health by up to 58% (see Figure 2).

### Figure 2. Impact of Adapting Priorities to New Circumstances

Percentage Change in Likelihood of Sustaining Workforce Health



n = 3,690

Source: 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Survey





### **Case in Point: Team Resilience Workshops**

Hilti, a global manufacturing organization headquartered in Liechtenstein, has developed ongoing team resilience workshops to help its teams realign and nurture immediate working relationships on an ongoing basis. Teams come together in dedicated workshops to collectively diagnose performance barriers at four levels: the individual, the team, the organization and outside the organization. Focusing on what teams have in their control, they commit to making changes at the team level (whether those changes relate to personal or team-level challenges). By doing this activity as a team, they can spot which barriers are shared across the team, which are personal and which are outside their control. This makes it easier for them to develop team-level solutions to the most important stressors.

Importantly, teams must then regularly meet to check in on progress. This ongoing practice assumes new disruptions will arise, requiring new solutions. What's more, Hilti ensures each team, from the executive leadership to the shop floor, conducts the exercise. This means each manager conducts the activity twice: once as a team member and once as a manager of a team. This multilevel approach enables its managers to learn as part of their own team so they can better lead the teams they're managing.

## **Make Cohesion an Ongoing Team Pursuit**

Resilience is a team sport. Highly cohesive teams are 37% more likely to sustain workforce health through disruption. The problem is that teams are not stable, especially during disruption. More than half (51%) of teams were significantly disrupted (i.e., a change in team manager or significant change to team composition) during the COVID-19 disruption.<sup>1</sup> The best Connector managers ensure the pursuit of cohesion is a full team activity, empowering teams to openly discuss challenges and opportunities to work better together. They also recognize that a team never stands still (especially during disruption) and conduct regular "training" for that cohesion as a team sport.

## **Conclusion**

Workforce resilience will be an enduring success metric for HR as it navigates a future of inevitable ongoing disruption. Managers will be the vessel through which teams' resilience can be nurtured and sustained long term. HR leaders have a key role to play in ensuring they hire, develop and promote Connector managers, and in providing them with the support they need to protect and foster employee and team connections through disruption.

<sup>1</sup> 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Employee Survey

<sup>2</sup> 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Member Survey

<sup>3</sup> 2020 Gartner Manager of the Future Survey

<sup>4</sup> 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work HR Leader Survey

# Get More.

Get actionable, objective insight to deliver on your most critical priorities. Our expert guidance and tools enable faster, smarter decisions and stronger performance. Contact us to become a client:

**U.S.:** 1 855 811 7593

**International:** +44 (0) 3330 607 044

[Become a Client](#)

**Learn more about Gartner for HR Leaders**

[gartner.com/en/human-resources](https://gartner.com/en/human-resources)

**Stay connected to the latest insights**

