



From Managers to People Champions: Making Line Leaders the First HR Contact

Alex Galea
CEO, Mdina Partners

**What would you think of someone
who is given the title “Champion”?**

**What words come to mind
when you think of a “Mountaineer”?**

“It’s our holistic being, the person we are outside work that brings the best value to who we are at work.”

Purpose Over Pride

**It is not about winning.
It's about doing the right thing,
building trust and reaching potential.**

Joint Leadership

**Walking side by side,
supporting teams more effectively and building
stronger cultures together.**

Shared Ownership

**Building skills and sharing responsibility
for the employee experience.**

FROM MANAGERS TO
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A United Front:

Walking together, growing together, and
overcoming challenges as one.



Elevate
your people.

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Why does this matter?

When line leaders are the first HR contact, they take ownership of the human side of work and shape the everyday employee experience.

Earn Trust through Action

As a united front, managers need to build credibility by walking with their teams, showing consistency, and sharing the journey.

Make Culture Real

When managers own culture and HR, it becomes authentic and meaningful.

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The Reality: Aspiration vs Preparation.



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Many aspire to a united leadership front in HR, but few invest in the foundation to make it work.

What is the cost of keeping HR at the centre?

Weakened Leadership Accountability

Risk

Managers step back
from responsibility
like team culture, performance
or people development.

Impact

Employees feel
disconnected from their
direct leaders, leading to
lower engagement and trust.

Slower Responsiveness to Issues

Risk

Delayed support.

**Managers push everything
the HR way, and HR becomes
the bottleneck.**

Impact

Frustration.

**By the time HR steps in, the
issue is a bigger problem
than it needed to be.**

HR Becomes the 'Bad Cop'

Risk

HR is seen only as the enforcer of rules or bearer of bad news, rather than a partner.

Impact

Managers avoiding tough conversations and losing authority with their teams.

Culture Becomes a Slogan, Not a Practice

Risk

Culture lives only in HR not in
Leaders' daily actions and
behaviour.

Impact

Credibility collapses.
Inconsistency between
stated values and
behaviours.

Why managers hesitate to take ownership of people issues:

66% believe it should be handled by HR.

49% fear saying the wrong thing.

48% lack knowledge or confidence.

Where managers struggle most when taking ownership:

46% struggle to understand shared responsibilities with HR.

43% struggle to create engagement through communication.

39% struggle to balance empathy with business outcomes.

Figures presented are drawn from HR Ignite research conducted with FHRD and PwC.

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What Needs to Happen:

Practical steps for frontline leadership.



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your people.

**“What tasks are often pushed to
HR that line leaders could
handle, or at least share?”**

**The flip today is:
Line leaders become the first
responders; HR is the guide.**

Five essentials that make it work:

Preparation

Pacing

Guidance

Readiness

Unity



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**The journey for Managers to championing
HR is not too different.**

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The Power of Preparation: Building Confidence Before the Trek

Equip managers early with
the tools and confidence to
lead effectively.

Leadership First 90-day Starter Pack

Ready-to-use tools for managers to lead first.

30-Minute 1:1 Agenda

First Conversation / Feedback Script

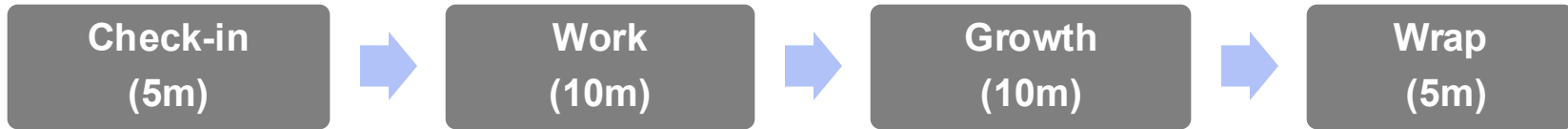
Check-in Prompts

Conflict Mini-Playbook

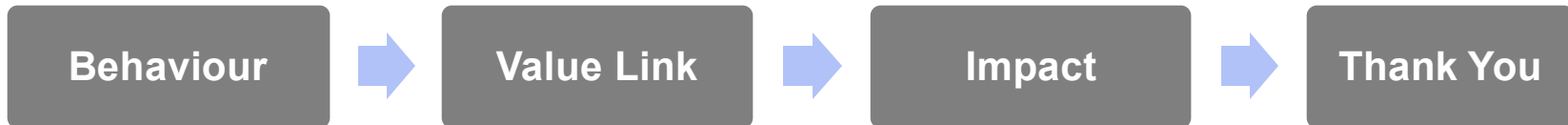
Team Charter Kit

Agenda + Recognition Formula

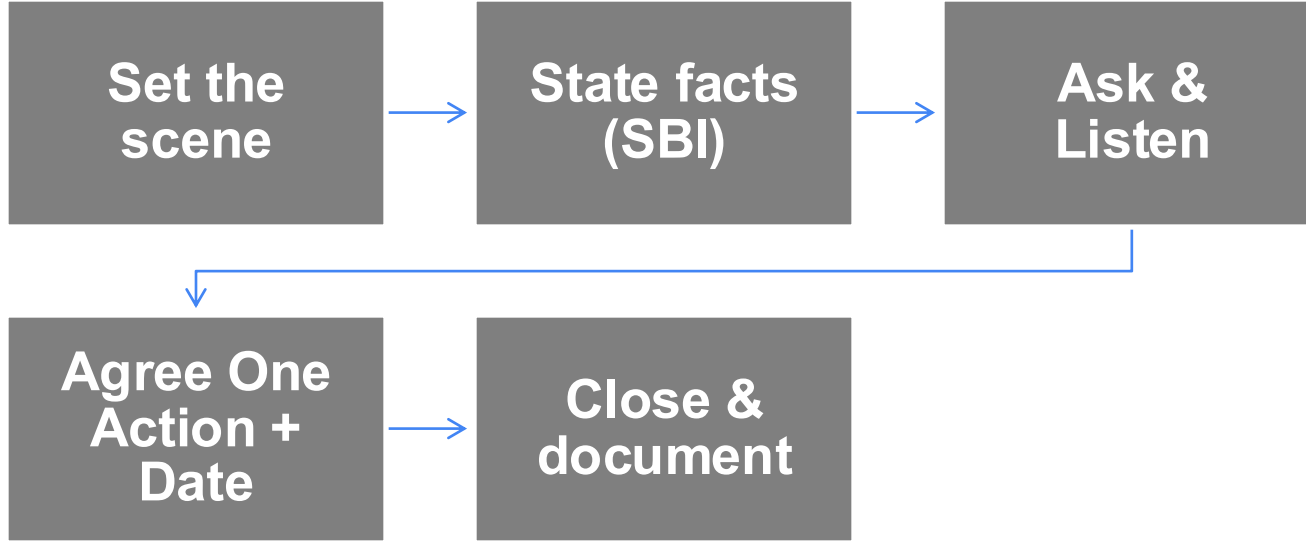
Run weekly 30 min 1:1s with a fixed four:



For recognition, use one sentence:



First Conversation Script (5 steps)



Short & Practical Micro-Learning Sessions

10–15 minute drills to build the skills to run the Starter Pack effectively

Giving feedback

1:1 Coaching reps

Conflict mini-mediation

Handling difficult conversations

Recognition that lands

Self-awareness

Deliver during team meetings or stand-ups. Rotate modules weekly.

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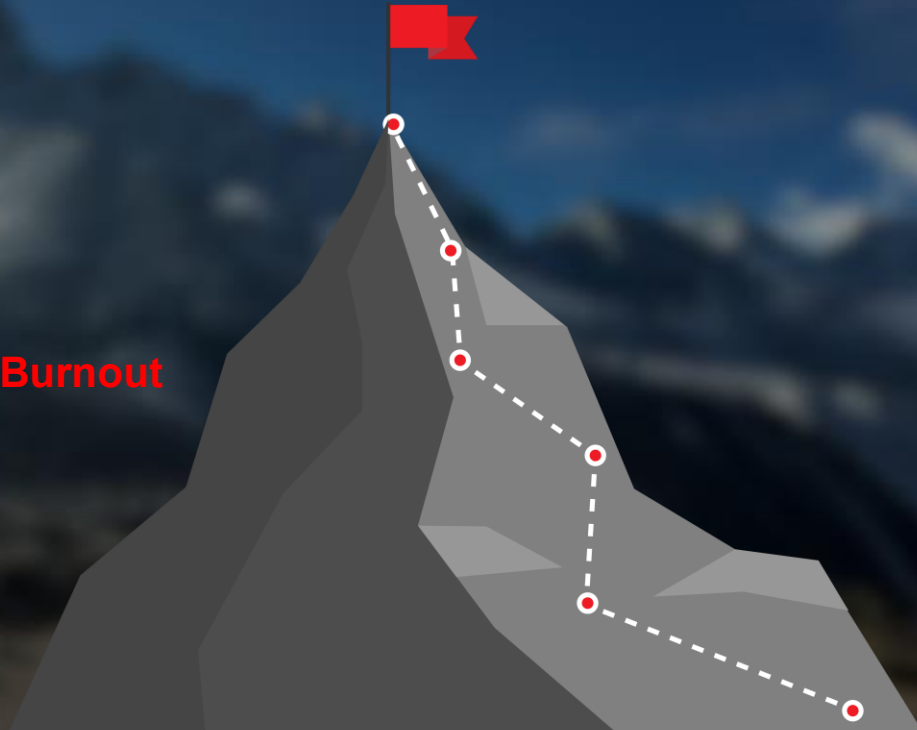
Altitude is Earned: The Role of Progressive Growth

Guide managers through **staged development**, not one giant leap.

Build capability in stages and let habits set before adding altitude.

Push to fast -> Burnout

**Altitude is gained
step-by-step**



Staged leadership development programmes + blend with coaching

Leading **Self**

Leading **Others**

Leading **Teams**

Leadership “base camps”

Safe spaces for managers to grow and learn.

Peer Learning

Learn from those who've already walked the path: **exchange labs, job shadowing, or rotations.**

Reflective Spaces

Pause to reflect and recalibrate: **project debriefs and individual reflection tools.**

The Role of the Guide: Coaching and Direction

Act as guide - not the controller,
but the trusted advisor that helps
leaders navigate, adapt, and
stay true to values.

Ownership Map - Who Does What?

Define the boundary: manager owns first cycles; HR guides not rescues.

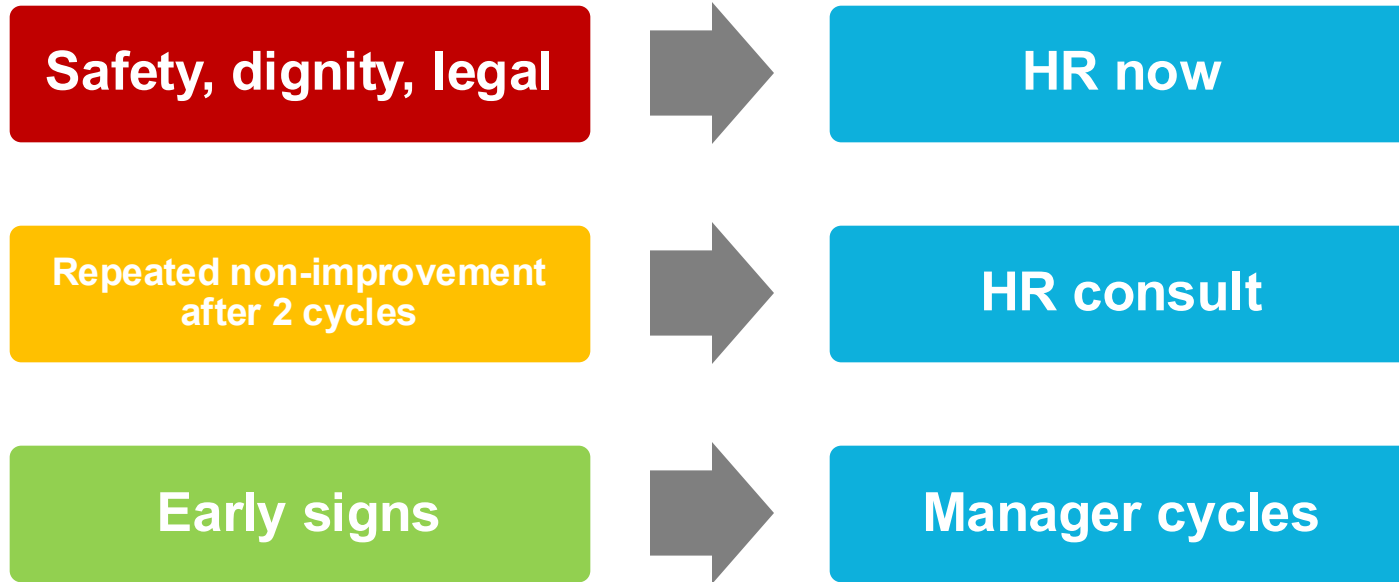
Area	Manager (Owns)	HR (Guides) / Escalate when...
Performance & behaviour	Set expectations; observe; give feedback; agree 1–2 actions; document; review in 7–14 days.	HR coaches & calibrates. Escalate if repeated non-improvement after 2 cycles or policy breach.
Team conflict	1:1 with each; facilitate a joint rule; timebox 2-week trial; follow up.	HR advises; can sit-in silently. Escalate for grievance, dignity/safety risk.
Hiring & onboarding	Define outcomes; structured interviews; 30-60-90 plan; weekly 1:1s first month.	HR ensures process/compliance. Escalate for exceptions/approvals.

Escalation Ladder

Show the path and keep manager ownership intact.



Escalation Thresholds



When the Weather Turns: Moments that Define Leadership

Prepare managers for storms -
**equipping them to lead through
tough moments with confidence.**

Provide pre-meeting briefing and post-meeting debrief support from HR.

Tie every step with the Escalation Ladder (keep the first steps with managers).

Equip managers with EI skills for tough moments before formal HR steps.

Trekking as a Team: Culture is Formed during the Journey

Support leaders to embed values
on the trail: **in how they lead,
recognise, and resolve.**

Favour rituals over slogans and build daily habits that create trust.

**Make values
behaviour-specific**

**Build values into
leadership rituals**

**Link feedback
to values**

Manager Rituals that Build Culture

Translate values into habits.



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Team-Charter sessions

Provide managers with templates to set norms and decision rights (purpose, roles & interfaces, norms).

RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consult, Inform)

Provide managers with tools to bring clarity of roles and responsibilities in their teams.

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Evidence it works:

Case studies of companies elevating leaders as HR frontliners to drive engagement, culture, and results.



Elevate
your people.

Google PROJECT OXYGEN

What they did?

Defined core manager behaviours.

Trained managers on them.

Used upward feedback to improve coaching.

Results

Improved managerial effectiveness.

Higher median favourability.

Boosted retention & satisfaction.

Takeaways

Define 6–8 key behaviours.

Use feedback surveys or 360 for development.

Target weakest areas with coaching, training and peer learning.

The Adobe logo, a red stylized 'A' shape.

Adobe CHECK-IN

What they did?

Replaced annual reviews with manager-led regular 'check-ins'.

Focused on expectations, feedback and growth.

Results

Voluntary turnover cut by 30%+.

69% said feedback was useful for personal development.

Takeaways

Replace ratings with conversations.

Provide simple check-in guides.

Keep focus on growth & feedback.

FedEx LEAD 1

What they did?

**5-day EQ training + 6 months
1:1 coaching.**

**Focused on 'People-first
Leadership'.**

**Assessed progress pre/post
program.**

Results

Large EQ gains (+8–11%).

**44% managers with very large
jumps.**

Fewer escalations to HR.

Takeaways

Blend training with coaching.

Certify HR/L&D as coaches.

**Focus on frontline leaders
early.**

jetBlue LIFT

What they did?

Launched peer-to-peer recognition.

Linked to 5 company Values.

Leaders supported spot rewards.

Results

+88% jump in recognition & satisfaction in 4 months.

Higher engagement & retention.

Takeaways

Tie recognition to values explicitly.

Leaders spotlight everyday actions.

Publish highlights to story-tell culture.

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The United Front: HR and managers walking the path together to build trust, culture, and resilience.



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your people.

Mindset Shifts

From



To

HR will fix

Managers lead first

Ad-hoc

Ritual

Opinions

Evidence

Escalation reflex

Consult & contain

Comfort

Courage

Strategies

Leadership First 90-day Starter Pack

Staged leadership development programmes + coaching

Exchange labs, mentoring circles and safe spaces for managers to grow and learn

Escalation ladder and thresholds

Manager-led regular 'check-ins' instead of annual reviews

Manager rituals to build culture

Tools

Templates (e.g. 1:1 agendas)

Pocket Scripts (e.g. first conversations)

Micro-learning drills

Check-in formats

Team-charter kit

RACI

**Write down 3 changes YOU
can implement or start by
year-end.**

Your role is not to carry the manager's backpack, but to help them pack wisely, show them the map, and walk the tough sections with them.



Connect with Us



**Thank you for your
time and attention.**

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