

# HELPING FIRST TIME MANAGERS SUCCEED

*Findings from a 2022 Navgati survey of FTMs and Stakeholders*



# Background

Transitioning into a first-time manager has always been a tough act, both exhilarating and frustrating at the same time. Realising that you would never again be "one of the gang", learning to give difficult feedback to someone who was also a friend; struggling with balancing the often-conflicting expectations that stakeholders have of you...it's no surprise that Professor Ram Charan described this first transition (from being an individual contributor to manager) as being the most difficult one to work through.

We have been in the business of helping first-time managers navigate this transition for a long time now. Given that a lot has changed in the work environment in the last three years, we decided to get inputs on how the challenges and needs of FTMs have been impacted.

We had 90 individuals (both FTMs and their stakeholders) respond to the survey from a wide range of industries. Roughly half were from the technology space (E-Commerce, EdTech, Fintech, Hardware, Software, Analytics, Enterprise Software) and half from other industries such as FMCG, Retail, Automotive, Banking & Financial Services, Consulting, Healthcare and Manufacturing.

This document consolidates the responses of these 90 participants. We hope that you find it as insightful as we did!

## The areas we were interested in

- The subjective experience of becoming a manager for the first time
- The motivations for becoming a manager
- Their challenges, including the impact of hybrid working
- The learning inputs that proved to be most effective in helping them navigate the transition
- The gaps: what organizations and stakeholders can do more of and what FTMs should be doing more of



# Overall recommendations based on the survey

*While the details follow, here are our overall recommendations for what organisations could be doing to help people navigate this crucial turn in their careers.*

- **Spend time helping people understand what becoming a manager means** (before they decide) so they can make a more informed decision about whether this is the right decision for them – the more intentional the choice, the easier it is to navigate this difficult transition
- **Provide spaces for FTMs to talk about their challenges**, with their peers or their managers. Many respondents spoke about how this could be a very lonely time for them. They're used to being successful as individuals so making the transition and realising how much more they need to learn can be overwhelming.
- **Give them time and freedom to develop their own styles:** Several FTMs spoke about how while they have the designation, they do not have the autonomy to experiment with their own style of people management
- **Create learner safety:** This is an important stage of psychological safety where people feel safe to learn and to act. Managers of FTMs can provide this by taking a developmental approach to the first few months – focusing on coaching, inviting FTMs to articulate what they are learning etc.
- **Clarify expectations:** especially in terms of the mindsets they need to be demonstrating. Young people managers often tend to continue demonstrating the behaviours that made them successful as individual contributors and it is important for managers/stakeholders to keep explicitly calling out what changes they need to make in their new roles.
- **Provide feedback explicitly on people management skills:** in our experience, FTMs get more feedback on their ability to drive results rather than on how they are doing so.
- **Start your investment in building people management skills higher in the organisation:** most managers are learning how to manage people by observing. If their leaders are not role modelling the kind of people management you want, all your investment in training FTMs may not yield returns

**If you have questions about this document or about the leadership development interventions Navgati offers, please write to [deepa@navgati.in](mailto:deepa@navgati.in)**



## **RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY**

The responses received from the survey are categorized into three sections given below. The following pages report the inputs we received on each of these sections. We hope that you find it as insightful as we did !

**Section 1 - The experience of becoming a manager for the first time**

**Section 2 - The challenges of being a first time manager**

**Section 3 - Making the transition successfully**

## Section 1 - The experience of becoming a manager for the first time

When asked to pick words that described this experience, their choices indicate that becoming a manager for the first time is both an exhilarating and a daunting experience.

empowered humbling  
 fulfilling responsible recognized  
 empathy **trust** rewarding positive  
 exciting proud leading **patience** listening  
 execute **valued** efficiency **patience** learning  
 focussed delegated tasks  
 introspective **valued** respect responsibilities  
 accountability time management  
 overall view being the best  
 knowledge based educating others  
 appreciation from team

powerless stressed  
 confusing overworked challenging  
 vague nervous time consuming  
 stressful lack of clarity tiring  
 exhausting

## Why did you become a manager?

The majority of individuals were asked to take on the role (66%) as opposed to those who expressed the desire to become a manager (33%). This is one of the areas where there is a difference between technology and non-tech respondents; only 20% of FTMs in tech companies said they expressed the desire to be a manager.

Regardless of the original prompt to become a manager, most of them have been fairly intentional about this move. When asked why they chose to become a manager, the majority described one of two reasons

- That they were interested in progressing their careers (37%)
- That they were interested in people leadership (37%)

26% were not very intentional; either taking it up because it was the logical next move or because they were bored of doing something else. Companies that could reduce this last group through education about a manager's role would reap the benefits of a more motivated set of first-time managers.

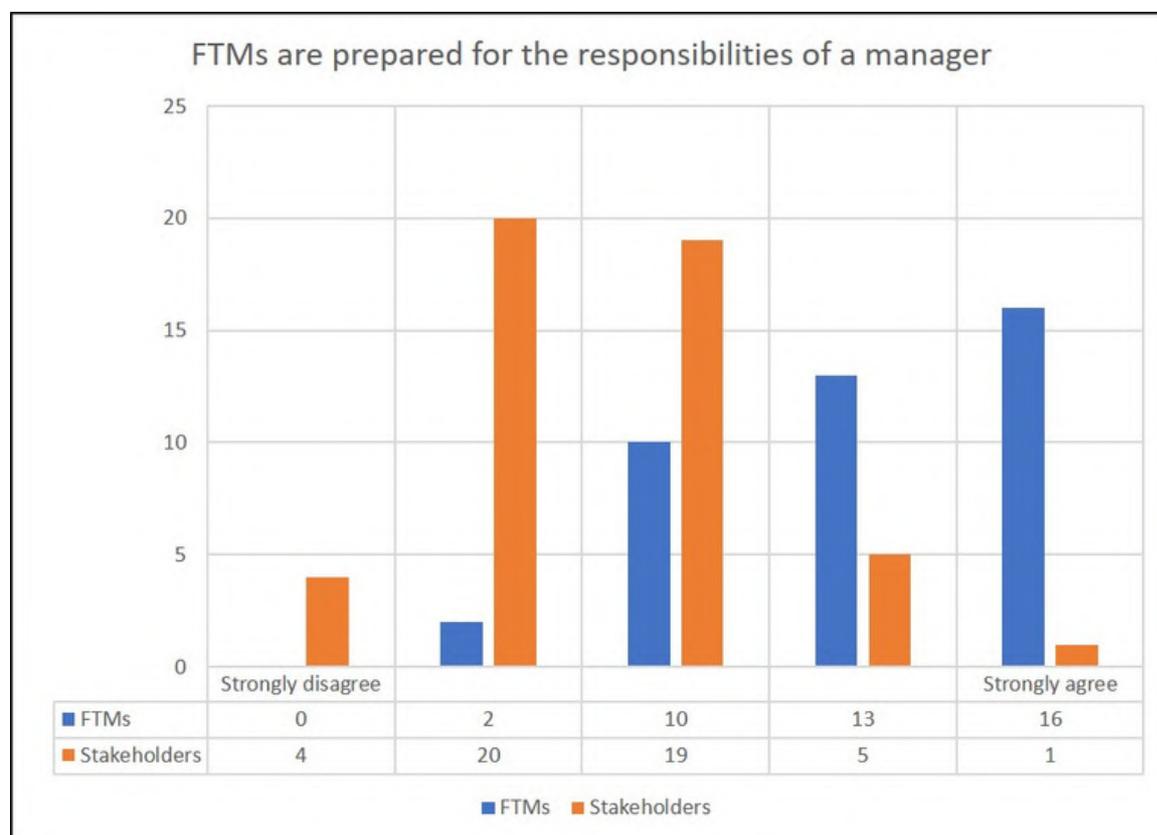
## What have you enjoyed the most about becoming a people manager?

Their responses fall into three buckets. Interestingly, the individuals who asked to become a people manager reported more benefits that fall in the second bucket as compared to those who were asked to become a manager.

The opportunity to contribute at a higher level	Getting to know more about leadership; contributing to initiatives that would eventually meet organization goals; focusing on the overall picture than just developing features; proximity to the organization's vision; freedom to drive activities; showcasing the achievements of the team
The satisfaction of helping their team members grow	Solving their challenges and gaining their trust; enabling their success through which I find my success; helping them move towards their career aspirations; having effective mentoring conversations with the team members; helping the team bond better and grow; seeing them holding their own in conversations with peers; helping them find solutions to non-technical problems
The personal growth and learning they experience	Appreciating the value of diversity; interacting with different types of people; listening to new perspectives; accepting new challenges; learning new management skills; implementing new things; managing multiple responsibilities; developing processes and modifying them to improve the status quo

## Did they feel prepared for the role before they took it up?

Surprisingly for us, the first-time managers who took this survey seemed to demonstrate a high degree of confidence in their preparedness for the role.

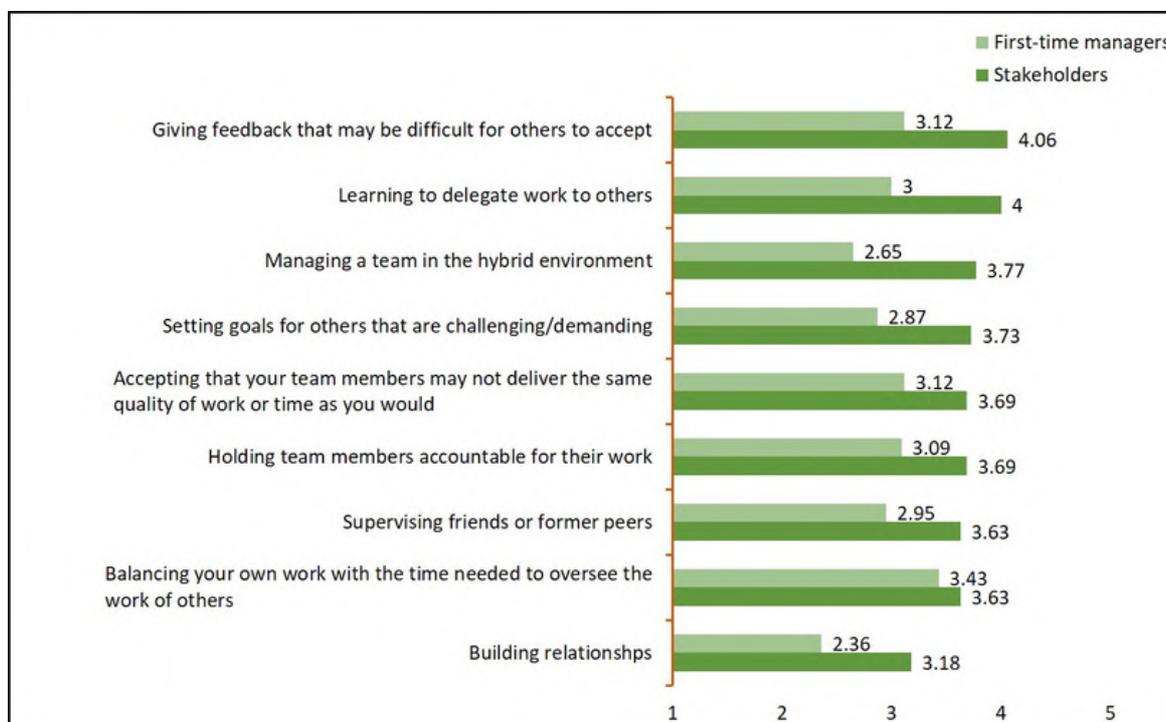


When we contrast this with the responses of stakeholders, first time managers certainly seem more confident about their own skills than their stakeholders. This could be a case of low self-awareness on the part of the FTMs (or perhaps just not knowing what they don't know); it could also be that experienced managers and stakeholders tend to have higher expectations.

## Section 2 - The challenges of becoming a manager for the first time

We put together a list of challenges based on all the work we have done with FTMs over the years and asked both the managers and stakeholders to rate how difficult each of these were.

Clearly stakeholders see FTMs as finding these tasks more challenging than the managers themselves do. Our sense (based on our past work) is that this is because the FTMs are not equipped enough to judge their capability. For example, an HR stakeholder may see that a manager needs to improve their skills when it comes to giving feedback but since the manager does not understand the nuances of the skill, they may not see it as challenging.



On a scale of 1-5 where 5 is "very challenging" and 1 is "not at all challenging"

### We asked the FTMs what other challenges they are experiencing

- Adding value to the team members and enabling their competency growth
- Need a sounding board or peer to vent out. Being a leader feels sometimes feels isolated
- Managing the relationship and collaboration between hierarchical and functional managers
- Balancing the aspirations of people against their capabilities/available opportunities
- Would like to have full ownership of the team
- Learning how to structure a team.
- Coaching employees dealing with personal issues that affect their work
- Taking fair decisions

**We also asked stakeholders about the other challenges they see first time managers facing and it was interesting that they shared areas that the FTMs did not mention (except for the last one).**

- *Changing work styles based on the existing culture of the new workplace (eg large company/brand employee transitioning to a startup)*
- *Executive presentation/communication*
- *Collaboration with peers in leadership,*
- *Networking for their own growth*
- *Balancing between work focus and relationship focus*
- *Seeing the bigger picture and helping their teams see that as well*
- *Understanding the role managers play in culture building, engagement and employee development*
- *Translating organization goals into tangible actions for their teams*
- *Balancing between advocating management strategy/plan of action and the team's needs*
- *Taking a long-term view of team members' careers, crafting jobs to develop people.*

**While FTMs don't see hybrid working as posing very significant challenges for them; this could be because a large percentage of them would have started work as a manager in the pandemic era. Stakeholders do see struggles but most of them also acknowledge that these are true for experienced managers as well.**

- *Forming relationships and personal connections with team members, bringing teams together in a fun and creative way*
- *Difficult to get work done effectively and hold teams accountable*
- *Finding ways to keep communication regular and transparent*
- *Learning by observing' is more difficult to do*
- *Difficult to building trust and credibility as less emotions get expressed in the virtual world*

## Section 3 - Making the transition successfully

### What do they/their stakeholders feel about the factors that contribute to success in an FTM transition?

In our experience, apart from having clarity about their motivation, these are the factors that are necessary for an individual contributor to be able to make the transition to being a manager.

- Having someone at work they can talk to about their struggles (since it can be a lonely place – they can't talk to their team, they may feel uncomfortable talking to their managers; they don't yet have peer connections)
- Having managers who are supportive and understanding
- Receiving training on the specific skills needed to be a manager

We asked both groups to rate to what extent these factors are present in their context.

### The things that stood out for us

1. There is a fair amount of agreement between how FTMs and stakeholders perceive the presence of these factors
2. Most FTMs are experiencing a reasonable amount of support and understanding from their managers
3. They could do with spaces to talk about their challenges (more from the tech respondents)
4. The stakeholders believe more training is required

	Total	Tech	Non tech
I have someone at work I can talk to about my struggles of being a manager (FTMs)	3.2	3.8	2.9
They have someone at work they can talk to about their struggles of being a manager (stakeholders)	3.1	3	3.4
I feel like my manager understands the challenges I face (FTMs)	3.7	3.8	3.7
They have managers who are supportive and understanding (stakeholders)	3.5	3.6	3.5
I wish I had received more training on the skills required to be a manager (FTMs)	3.1	2.8	3.3
They have received adequate training on the skills required to be a manager (stakeholders)	2.8	2.5	3.2

On a scale of 1-5 where 5 is strongly agree and 1 is strongly disagree

## What inputs have been most effective in helping FTMs transition?

Both the groups felt that learning from their manager and watching other managers work was the most useful. This underscores the importance of making sure that senior managers are being effective people managers because otherwise sub-optimal leadership practices will get passed down the organization.

It is interesting that both groups rated formal training as the least effective however also highlighted the need for more training (in the next question). It is possible therefore that they are rating training as least effective because there is not enough of it happening.

	Stakeholders	FTMs
Formal training	2.9	2.8
Learning from your manager	4	4
Watching other managers do their jobs	3.4	3.7
Mentoring from other senior people	3	3.6
Coaching	2.7	3.3

On a scale of 1-5 where 5 is strongly agree and 1 is strongly disagree

## What FTMs would like more of

- Formal training: in the skills they need that they do not possess (setting goals for others; giving feedback etc)
- Mentoring: could be from their managers or their HR partners
- Role clarity: Given that this is the first time they're managing people, these managers would like to know what's expected of them and regular feedback on how they're doing
- Psychological safety: a safe space to talk about their problems; time and space to fail and learn

## What stakeholders feel FTMs need more of

Interestingly, they also came up with exactly the same four factors. The only difference was that stakeholders felt that training was needed not just on the skills but on the mindsets (people vs task focus; building relationships; shifting from being a peer to a manager; paying attention to the developmental needs of their teams etc.)

## **What messages do stakeholders have for the FTMs**

- *Seek feedback and give feedback*
- *Ask for help; ask questions – don't be afraid that you'll look like you don't know*
- *Don't lose sight of the bigger picture when problem solving*
- *Remember it is a journey – be prepared but take your time. Recognize that expectations of you are very different now*
- *Trust your team to do their job well; your role is not to micromanage but to facilitate the work of others*
- *Trust yourself and dive in; it will be worth it*
- *Take your time to listen, observe and learn before you start making any changes*
- *Be vulnerable with your team*
- *Build trust with your team; work with their strengths and involve them in decision making*
- *Find a mentor or coach and be open with them*
- *Trust yourself; don't over think*
- *Stay grounded*

## **What is one piece of advice FTMs have for companies on how they can better support first-time managers?**

- More patience and forgiveness as they learn
- Regular check-ins
- Give them more autonomy: Time and space to make mistakes and learn; to develop their own styles; no back seat driving
- Provide authority: Give some level of autonomy, often it's just a dummy face that is put in front, while actual decisions are being taken by the senior level people
- Prepare people before they become managers
- Assign mentors/coaches

To know more about us and our leadership development program interventions do visit [www.navgati.in](http://www.navgati.in)

