First line managers are the most critical factor in employee engagement and team success. The 2017 State of the Global Workplace* report by research firm Gallup revealed that only 14% per cent of Australian employees are engaged, and by extension happy and productive. Gallup’s research and experience also show that a major reason for staff feeling disengaged, and for their subsequent resignation, is a poor relationship with a manager. Conversely, when looking at companies considered to be the best-managed in Gallup’s database, as many as 70% of employees are engaged.

So how can we ensure new line managers have the confidence and skills they need to fulfil such a vital role in their organisation? In this article, Caroline Taylor and Stephen Fortune from global management training consultancy, The Oxford Group offer their suggestions.

Organisations often promote people into management positions based on their outstanding performance in their area of expertise, and rightly so in highly technical fields. However, they may not come pre-equipped with the management skills they need to be successful in the role. Transitioning from individual contributor to manager can be challenging and often people struggle to let go of the ‘doing aspect’ of their previous role and slip into what is second nature – even when the role no longer requires it. Making the delicate shift from peer to manager within the same team does not come easily either.

Without an effective and robust support programme behind them, many managers flounder, and their team’s morale and productivity often fall as a result. Fortunately, there are a number of things leaders and HR professionals must do to set individuals up for success before, during and after this transition.

1. **Support aspiring managers by being open about what they need to do to reach their ideal role.** Providing regular, specific feedback to all employees, both on their technical expertise and their management and leadership behaviours, enables aspiring managers to seek out opportunities to develop their skills and breadth of experience. They will then be positioned as the ‘best’ candidate when the next role comes up.

2. **Define what skills and behaviours you need for that particular role so that you can plan relevant training and support.** Not all first line manager roles are created equal, and therefore should have training that is tailored to their needs. For example, creating new products requires a manager who is adept at encouraging innovative thinking from their team, whereas an operationally focussed team...
requires a manager who is skilled at organising and planning work and ensuring accountability.

That said, there is a range of generic management skills that all good managers need:

- **Good communication skills**, broken down into:
  - Three-level listening: internal listening to what it means to you, listening to the words and phrases being said, and listening to non-verbal cues
  - Being able to ask powerful questions to achieve clarity
  - Knowing the difference between accountability and responsibility. Responsibility (for objects, tasks or people) can be delegated but accountability can’t!
  - Providing high-quality feedback that can be used immediately
  - Managing performance effectively and in a timely way
  - Setting clear expectations regularly
  - Delegating effectively by utilising the strengths and talents of their team
  - Motivating others to achieve professional and organisational goals
  - Feeling confident in having difficult conversations
  - Coaching others to achieve their potential and overcome challenges

In addition to this list, today’s rapid pace of change in the political, cultural and technological environments means that managers also need to be able to lead virtual teams, leverage new technology, lead through change and ambiguity, and harness the diversity of thought and experience offered by employees from a greater variety of backgrounds, ages and countries.

To achieve this diverse skill-set you may need to create an individual learning plan that combines classroom (or virtual) practical skills-based learning, online-learning, coaching and mentoring.

Most importantly, these skills must be underpinned by an understanding of how and why to hold meaningful, effective conversations with their team members. This can be scary for new managers but is achievable by following specific programmes and models such as the 5 Conversations model (www.5conversations.co.uk), and with plenty of practice.

3. **Make a commitment to providing ongoing learning opportunities as their confidence and need for more complex skills grows.** Learning shouldn’t stop after initial first line manager training. As their experience and roles develop they will need to acquire new skills and knowledge to remain effective, and as such regular training, mentoring and coaching need to be prioritised. For example, they may need to learn how to create an environment that allows people to thrive by understanding their employee’s motivations and strengths; lead virtual teams; leverage technology; coach individuals; or lead through change and ambiguity. This ongoing learning must also sit alongside continual training on the technical elements of their role to keep their expertise current.

4. **Manage your managers.** Leaders themselves need to remember to be managers too and to role-model the behaviours they are asking others to display. Leaders need to prioritise having meaningful conversations with their managers to see how they are going; be interested in them; acknowledge and appreciate them. It’s important to note that establishing management training programmes isn’t enough to produce good managers if there isn’t the support available in the implementation phase or if the leaders themselves haven’t had the training to begin with.

5. **PDP and evaluation:** It’s also worth considering how you evaluate your manager’s performance to encourage and promote the behaviours you are seeking. Many Human Resources Directors are introducing non-numerical performance reviews which evaluate the quality of the conversations managers are having.

Managers play a vital role in motivating front-line employees and act as the conduit between ideas and action, ensuring those actions are carried out in the right way. Managers also have the closest relationship with employees and one that has the greatest impact on engagement. No engagement = no work. But, put the right support framework in place and you’ll have confident managers who are capable of balancing their technical and people skills leading teams of productive, engaged staff.