Gallup’s 2026 workplace report: How do we fix the manager engagement collapse?

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the decline in manager engagement as revealed by Gallup's 2026 State of the Global Workplace report, which records global employee engagement at 20 per cent — its lowest since 2020 — and a nine-point drop in manager engagement since 2022. The author, drawing on 20 years of HR experience, argues that the crisis is structural rather than personal: the manager role has accumulated administrative, operational, and relational responsibilities that were never coherently designed into it, producing what the author terms a 'five-legged sheep' (mouton à cinq pattes). Key evidence includes Deloitte's 2025 finding that only six per cent of Gen Z identify leadership as a primary career goal, Robert Walters' report that 52 per cent of young professionals do not want to manage, and the observation that wellbeing programme participation rarely exceeds 25 per cent. The author contends that AI presents a structural opportunity to strip administrative tasks from the manager role and redesign it around uniquely human capabilities — coaching, judgment, and team development. The conclusion drawn is that organisations responding with role redesign rather than wellbeing interventions will produce more effective, sustainable management layers.

Key Insights

1. Global employee engagement has reached 20 per cent — its lowest since 2020 — with manager engagement specifically declining nine points since 2022, signalling a concentrated structural failure at the management layer.

2. The manager role was never coherently designed; it accumulated administrative, operational, and people responsibilities by default, creating an overloaded and poorly scoped position that the author characterises as a 'five-legged sheep'.

3. Gen Z's rejection of management roles — with only 6 per cent citing leadership as a primary goal and 52 per cent explicitly declining to manage — is framed not as a values shift but as a rational cost-benefit response to an outdated and overburdened job description.

Practical Takeaways

- Auditing what managers actually do via calendar analysis rather than job descriptions can reveal the gap between formal role design and operational reality — a precondition for meaningful role redesign.

- Reducing manager-to-team ratios toward research-supported spans of 1:8 to 1:12 is identified as a structural correction, with current ratios of approximately 1:4 attributed to compensation architecture failures rather than genuine organisational need.

Frameworks Mentioned

Scientific Management — Frederick Winslow Taylor's early 20th-century principles of work restructuring, referenced as a historical parallel to how AI is currently reshaping organisational roles and management functions.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article grounds its argument in named, recent external data sources (Gallup 2026, Deloitte 2025, Robert Walters) and avoids purely anecdotal reasoning. The structural critique — that the manager role is a product of organisational accumulation rather than intentional design — is analytically coherent and consistent with established organisational behaviour literature. The compensation architecture argument offers a less commonly discussed structural explanation for management bloat. Limitations: The article is an opinion piece authored by an HR practitioner, not a peer-reviewed study; no methodology is disclosed. The AI-as-solution claim is asserted through analogy (Taylor's scientific management) rather than empirical evidence — no data on AI-driven role redesign outcomes is presented. The anecdote of the audit director is vivid but cannot be treated as representative evidence. The claim that wellbeing programme participation 'rarely exceeds 25 per cent' is stated without citation. Biases: The author's 20-year HR background may orient the framing toward role redesign as a preferred intervention. The piece consistently positions wellbeing programmes as ineffective without engaging with evidence for their partial or contextual efficacy. The Gen Z framing, while supported by cited statistics, may overstate generational uniformity.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organisations that layer administrative, operational, and people-management responsibilities onto managers without deliberate role scoping; that maintain inflated management layers (reported ratios of 1:4) driven by compensation architecture rather than functional need; that deploy wellbeing programmes as a response to burnout without modifying the structural conditions generating it; and that have not yet systematically audited manager role content to distinguish AI-automatable tasks from human-critical ones.

Strategic Implications

The convergence of declining manager engagement, a shrinking Gen Z leadership pipeline, and AI's capacity to automate administrative management tasks suggests a potential inflection point in how organisations structure and recruit for the management layer. Organisations maintaining current role designs and compensation architectures may face compounding pipeline and retention pressure. The framing of AI as a role-redesign enabler — rather than a headcount reduction tool — points toward an emerging discourse in which PMS and talent architecture are redesigned around human-exclusive capabilities. The gap between research-supported manager spans (1:8 to 1:12) and reported operational norms (1:4) implies significant latent inefficiency in current management structures that role audits could surface.

Validation Status: passed