AVION CONSULTING

EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE

The Middle Manager Breaking Point

Middle managers now report the highest burnout of any organizational level. The cause is not resilience. It is workload design.

12.1

Average number of direct reports per manager in 2025, up 50 percent since 2013

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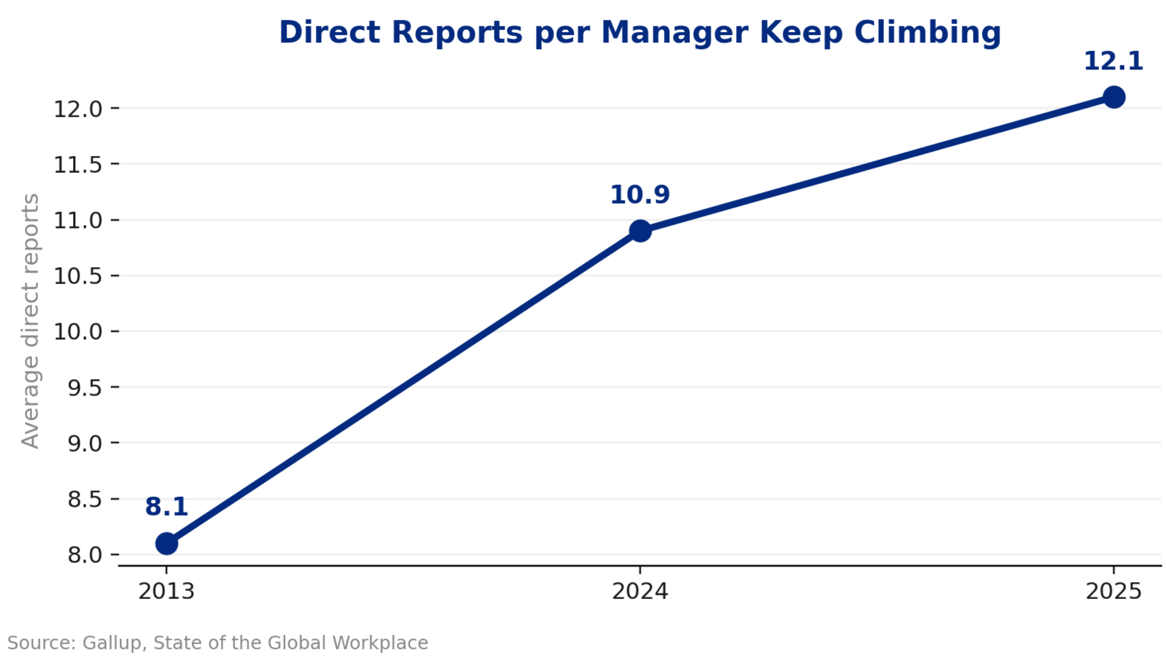
This Is a Design Problem, Not a Resilience Problem

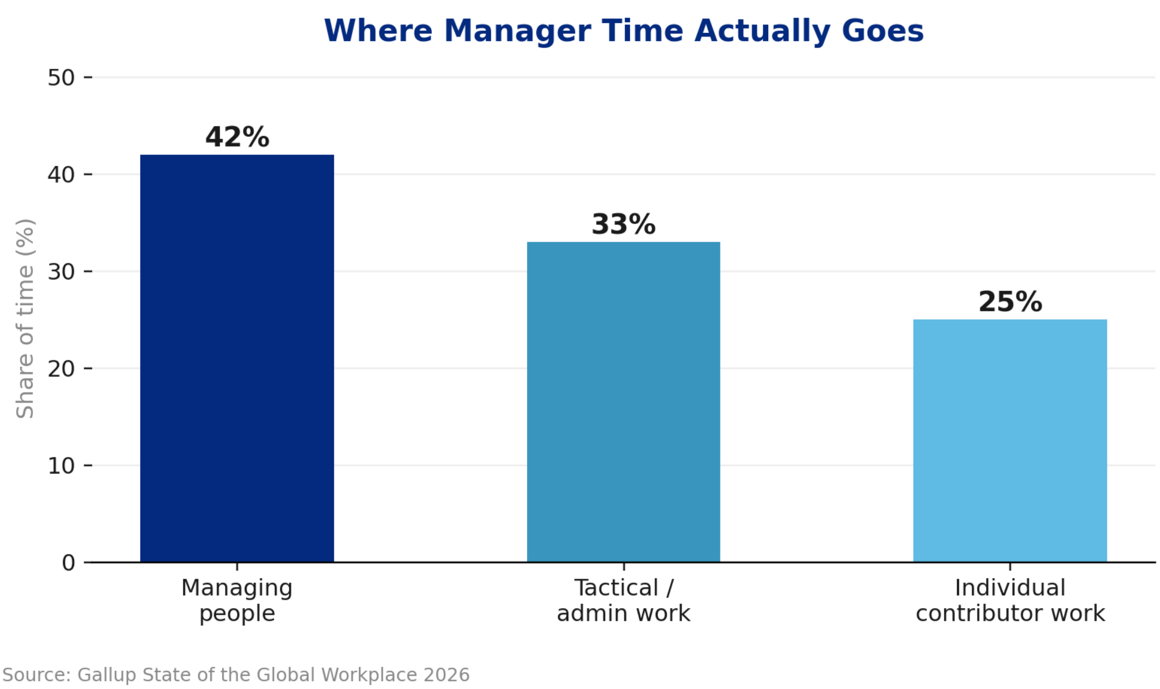
The instinct when middle managers report record burnout is to reach for resilience training, wellness stipends, or time management workshops. Those responses treat the symptom. The actual driver is structural: the average manager now carries 12.1 direct reports, a 50 percent increase since Gallup began tracking the figure in 2013. That is not a workload a person manages better with more discipline. It is a workload that mathematically limits how much attention any one report can receive.



Average direct reports per manager has climbed steadily for over a decade.

Where the Time Actually Goes

Widening spans of control have not been matched by a redesign of what managers are expected to do. Managers report spending less than half their time on the people-management work the role exists for, with the remainder absorbed by tactical oversight and individual contributor tasks that piled up when the layer above them was removed. A manager with twelve direct reports conducting even brief biweekly check-ins spends the equivalent of a full working day each month on one-on-ones alone, before accounting for team meetings, escalations, and their own deliverables.



Manager time is increasingly consumed by tactical work rather than people leadership.

The Numbers at a Glance

Metric	Figure	Source
Average direct reports per manager, 2025	12.1, up from 8.1 in 2013	Gallup, State of the Global Workplace
Increase in span of control since 2013	~50%	Gallup, State of the Global Workplace
Managers overseeing 25+ people	13% and growing	Workforce structure research, 2026
Companies that reduced management layers	41%	Korn Ferry, Workforce 2025
Middle management's share of total layoffs, 2023	32%, up from 20% in 2019	Middle management layoff research, 2026

Why This Keeps Getting Missed

Flattening the org chart looks like a cost saving on the slide that proposes it. What the slide rarely shows is where the eliminated layer's responsibilities actually went. In most cases they did not disappear. They landed on the managers who remained, without a corresponding change to their scorecards, their compensation, or the expectations placed on them. The savings are real on the org chart and illusory in practice, because the work still has to get done by someone.

The Retention Cost Hiding Behind the Burnout

The organizations paying closest attention to this are finding that overloaded middle managers do not just underperform, they leave, and they take institutional knowledge and team stability with them. Replacing a manager costs far more than the salary line suggests once you count the team disruption during the vacancy and the ramp time for whoever steps in. Treating span of control purely as an efficiency metric misses the retention cost sitting on the other side of the ledger.

Two Different Jobs to Do

For the CEO

Before approving the next round of delayering, ask where the eliminated layer's work is actually going to land, and whether the managers absorbing it have the bandwidth, the tools, or the mandate to take it on. A flatter org chart that quietly overloads the managers who remain is not a cost saving. It is a deferred cost with interest.

For the CHRO

Span of control needs to be a workforce planning metric with the same visibility as headcount and attrition, not an afterthought discovered during an engagement survey debrief. If the average span in a function has crossed 12 without a corresponding investment in manager enablement, that function is carrying risk the dashboard is not currently showing.

What Actually Changes This

The fix is rarely more training for the managers already stretched thin. It is redesigning what the role is actually accountable for once the span widens, removing lower value tactical work deliberately rather than letting it accumulate by default, and treating span of control as a design decision made on purpose rather than a byproduct of the last cost cutting exercise.

References

1. Gallup, "State of the Global Workplace 2026," citing Bureau of Labor Statistics data on span of control.
2. Korn Ferry, "Workforce 2025 Power Shifts Report."
3. Metaintro, "Why Companies Are Cutting Middle Managers, and What It Means for Your Career," June 1, 2026.
4. Speakwise, "Middle Management Statistics 2026," June 7, 2026.