

TALENT
REWIRE



REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

Manager Mindsets

Best Practices for Engaging Frontline Managers

By: Talia Alongi and Ajai Scott



ABOUT TALENT REWIRE

Talent Rewire, an initiative of FSG, envisions a future where every individual in the U.S. can realize their full potential through a humanity- and economy-boosting job that provides equitable economic opportunity, stability, and mobility. Simply put, we envision a world in which the hopes and dreams of frontline employees are seen and achieved—where they feel empowered and listened to, and where their work is fulfilling and purposeful.

We seek to increase the economic mobility of frontline employees—particularly people of color and women—through 1) innovating new research, programs, and tools to drive employer systems transformation; 2) scaling our learnings to build the capacity of the broader workforce field; and 3) modeling equity and frontline-centered systems change. Learn more at www.talentrewire.org.

ABOUT FSG

FSG is a global nonprofit consulting firm that partners with foundations and corporations to create equitable systems change. Through customized consulting services, innovative thought leadership, and learning communities, we're working to create a world where everyone can live up to their full potential. Learn more at www.fsg.org.

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Introduction

As more and more companies make commitments to inclusive talent practices, or **Opportunity Employment**, we've found that these efforts often overlook the critical role of frontline supervisors and hiring managers and underestimate the role of mental models, assumptions, and organizational culture in supporting this shift. By effectively engaging frontline supervisors and hiring managers in practice and culture change, companies can build buy-in for Opportunity Employment and reap the benefits for frontline employees and businesses alike.

People don't leave jobs; they leave their managers. Managers set the tone for an employee's day-to-day experience and play a big role in how happy you are at work."

KELLY GRAHAM, GRADS OF LIFE

Every company, every employee, understands the importance of having a good manager. Companies can easily make public commitments, diversity statements, and other top-down signals of inclusivity. How those commitments are put into action and tangibly impact frontline employees—usually the most diverse segment of a business—is the true indicator of success. At the same time, we know that frontline supervisors and hiring managers (often one in the same) who are responsible for enacting these commitments on a day-to-day level face immense pressure, have limited capacity, and are often overburdened.

Opportunity Employment

Opportunity Employment is a set of principles and associated talent practices that prioritize equity, inclusion, opportunity, and mobility within your company while generating business value.

In our work with employers, we've consistently heard the need for deep, systemic change within an organization. There is a solid evidence base for which practices and policies can support diverse, inclusive workplaces, but where companies often run into challenges is in **addressing the relationships, power dynamics, and mental models that affect day-to-day interpersonal interactions**. These things together make up workplace culture.

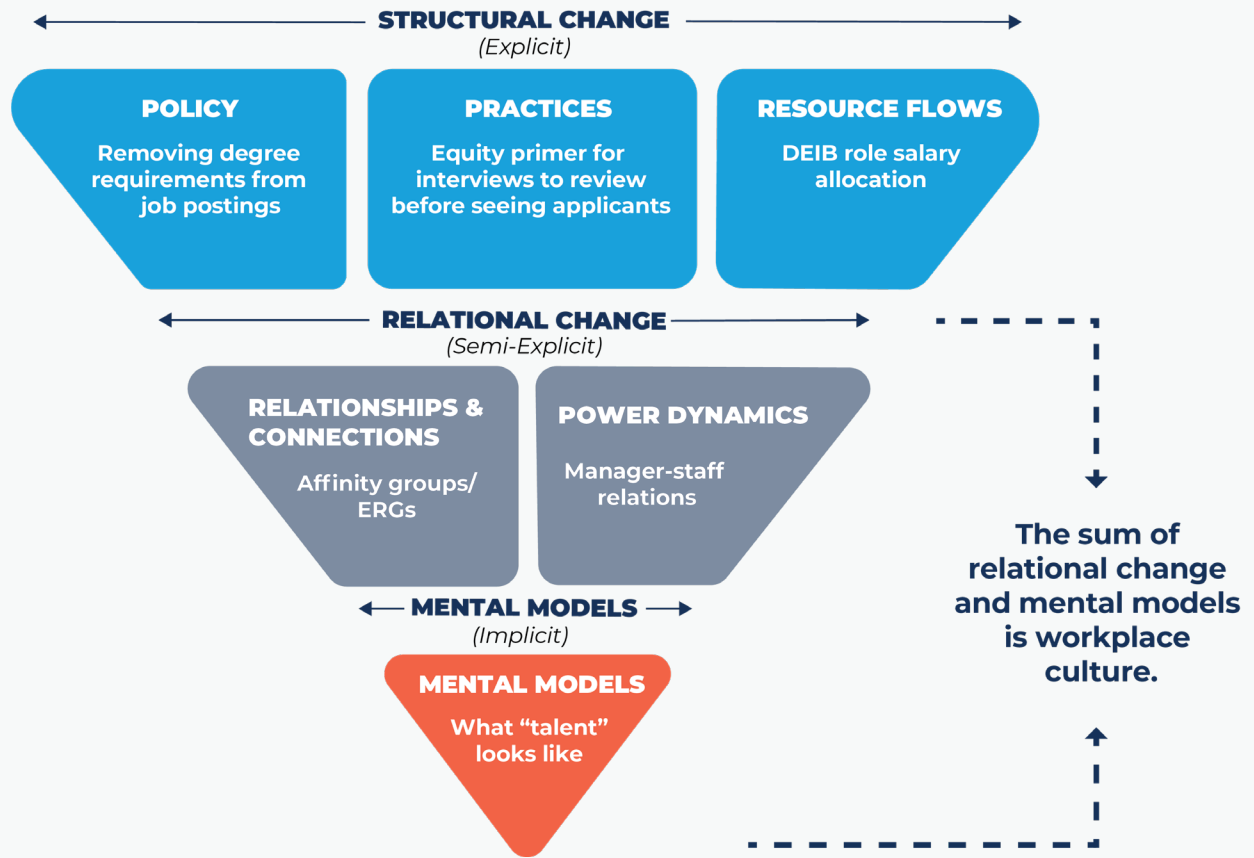
"Frontline supervisors are the first line of defense for everything from culture to discipline to performance evaluation to training."

GENEVIEVE MARTIN, THE LAST MILE

In this report, **we share best practices for engaging and supporting frontline supervisors** (also referred to as managers throughout the report) in systems change for inclusive talent. These insights were gathered from companies and workforce organizations who have experienced these challenges and lessons firsthand. **In order to truly adopt Opportunity Employment, companies need to engage in structural, relational, and individual change management to address all levels of the system, and frontline managers are critical to that effort.**

FIGURE ONE: BARRIERS TO ENGAGING FRONTLINE MANAGERS IN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Source: Based on “The Water of Systems Change” by John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge



Barriers for Managers

As we consider how to engage managers in inclusive talent efforts, it’s important to acknowledge the barriers and constraints that often get in the way. Change management doesn’t happen in a vacuum, and it is often placed on top of already overwhelming workloads for managers. These barriers are not mutually exclusive and are usually compounding or mutually reinforcing.

Talent Rewire uses this **systems change framework to demonstrate the multiple types of change needed to truly shift a system**—in this case, an individual company. At the most visible level, policies, practices, and resources affect how the organization is run and how

work is organized. At the relational level, relationships and power dynamics impact how people interact with each other in the workplace.

Companies with large frontline workforces report that up to 40% of their frontline managers are in their first year of a leadership role.¹

And underpinning all of it is mental models, or the assumptions, biases, and worldviews we all hold. Here, we organize the barriers to the systems change framework to demonstrate the many ways blockages show up within a company system.

Structural / Explicit: Policies, Practices, and Resource Flows

Limited time and overburdened:

63% of frontline managers are considering leaving their jobs for reasons that include workplace flexibility, career development, and health and well-being.²

Across every single interview, the most common challenge we heard about implementing Opportunity Employment was managers' limited time. Frontline managers are tasked with so much—from running a production line or a store to meeting quotas or sales metrics to dealing with customers or clients to managing the multitude of needs across their direct reports. **Fifty-three percent of managers report feeling burned out at work,³** and when managers are overwhelmed by juggling multiple responsibilities, treating their employees fairly gets deprioritized.⁴

In many cases, businesses are setting up their frontline managers for failure, which results in the same outcome for frontline employees.

Lack of training and capacity building:

Despite their critical role in supporting the business and frontline employees, frontline managers are consistently underinvested in through training. Most manager trainings are one-offs offered at the beginning of the role, and there are little or no opportunities for ongoing training. Moreover, training content is often focused on legal boundaries and company expectations and systems rather

than supporting, developing, and leading people. This is insufficient, particularly when you consider that managers were often very recently in frontline roles themselves, and the skills it takes to succeed in a frontline role and those it takes to be a good manager are often quite different.

“Managers are charged with translating what’s coming down the pike from leadership, as well as problem solving, troubleshooting, serving as the fixer and scheduler. It’s a huge job, and it’s not clear how the incentives line up to keep the prioritization of frontline workers’ needs high.”

HALEY GLOVER, UPSKILL AMERICA

Lack of top-down modeling, resourcing, and communication:

Top-down commitment without substantial leadership modeling, resourcing, and effective communication creates pressure to change without providing the necessary supports. Frontline managers are tasked with inclusive hiring or retention work, but they don't see their bosses or their bosses' bosses being held to the same standards. To the earlier point about being overburdened, unless frontline managers and HR are resourced to change their practices, systems, and ways of being, the impact for frontline employees will not be realized.

Ineffective change management:

Top-down change management efforts frequently leave frontline managers out of a process that requires their participation to be successful. It's not just that people don't like being told what to do without having a say in it; it's that **change efforts**

that don't seek the input of those affected by the change are likely to exclude important considerations. As a key agent of change, managers must be included in the process. When managers aren't effectively engaged, their frontline teams are also often left out, and the company has lost out on the insight of the largest segment of their workforce. Change management efforts often lack clear and consistent communications about why Opportunity Employment is important to the business and how frontline managers support this work.

“There's too much faith in trickle-down change management, which we know doesn't work.”

HALEY GLOVER, UPSKILL AMERICA

Companies also shared that **implementing too many changes too quickly** can be a big barrier. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, companies with a large frontline workforce have been dealing with immense changes in their market, workforce, customer base, and more, prompting lots of adjustments internally and creating “change fatigue.” Too much change at once, inadequate resourcing for change management, or poorly communicated rationale all fuel change fatigue.

Relational: Relationships and Power Dynamics

Lack of empathy and trust:

Because of the time and capacity constraints managers experience, they have less energy to put toward relationship building with their direct reports, which can result in a transactional, hierarchical dynamic.

This scarcity mindset inhibits trust and empathy building, which negatively impacts both the frontline employee and their supervisor.

73% of frontline employees cited a manager who supports their career progression as key to their career advancement.⁵

Lack of empowerment, agency, and voice:

Both frontline managers themselves and their direct reports experience a lack of power in the workplace, as evidenced by limited opportunities to share their opinion and inform business operations. **Frontline managers have visibility into business operations and proximity to frontline employees that is invaluable yet often overlooked.**

“Supervisors are holding other angles that may be unknown to HR or leadership and need to be in the decision-making room to elevate that insight.”

**GENEVIEVE MARTIN,
THE LAST MILE**

Lacking voice and agency decreases productivity and engagement, resulting in higher turnover and poorer performance. In a recent study from Catalyst, managers expressed that not having influence over company-level decisions and processes, such as scheduling and advancement, negatively affects both managers and frontline employees.⁶

Implicit: Mental Models

Misaligned priorities:

The prioritization of productivity and financial metrics without consideration for people, in everything from performance

evaluation systems to communications, cultivates a mental model that employees don't matter. Given the aforementioned time and capacity constraints of frontline managers, this often means that frontline employee voice, needs, and ideas are ignored by both managers and the business at large.

“Managers are the middle man between frontline and leadership. There is only so much they can do; they don't have a lot of power. Then they get burnt out, frustrated, and leave.”

**RANEIGH AGUILERA,
TALENT REWIRE FRONTLINE
EMPLOYEE COUNCIL**

Risk aversion:

To shift employer systems in service of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) requires letting go of the status quo and trying something new, which inherently comes with risk. In the quarterly reporting cycles of traditional business, especially industries with tight margins and large frontline workforces like retail, **top-down commands to change without the requisite space, time, and risk tolerance to do so are set up to fail.**

“So much racism and classism shows up in how frontline employees are treated, and the bigger issue is that employers don't see it as their problem to solve.”

KELLY GRAHAM, GRADS OF LIFE

Stereotypes and biases:

Every single employee enters the workforce with years of personal experiences, socialized biases, and assumptions that affect how they engage with each other. In order to shift

these dynamics, **organizations must acknowledge the systemic barriers to opportunity and mobility that influence who is seen as a qualified candidate or high-performing employee**, and how that reinforces stereotypes and biases. It is not the responsibility of a business to wholly shift employees' core values, but it does have a say over how people treat each other in the workplace.

“Sometimes turnover is assumed as a normal cost of doing business. If companies think frontline workers are going to leave, they're not going to invest in them and their careers.”

LIANA BRAN, CARA COLLECTIVE

Limiting mental models:

There are many assumptions made about frontline talent that negatively impact their employment journey, and affect how others at the organization treat them or are resourced to support them. Most commonly, we see an **assumption that high turnover in frontline and entry-level roles is acceptable or normal.** Another common mental model that inhibits inclusion is that frontline jobs require minimal skills, which then translates to those employees being seen as low skill or low value. **These mental models result in a lack of investment in and a devaluation of frontline talent, including how frontline managers are resourced to support their teams.** However, when companies adopt the mentality of investing in the frontline and managers to reduce that turnover cost for the business, they see greater retention and commitment.

Ultimately, most of the limiting mental models about frontline talent are captured in the framing of a “fixed” mindset as opposed to a “growth” mindset.⁷ Fixed mindsets are inflexible and limiting, and they often cultivate fear and reinforce barriers to advancement for frontline employees. Growth mindsets, however, center development and learning and cultivate resilience and empowerment for employees.

Best Practices for Engaging Hiring Managers and Frontline Supervisors in Opportunity Employment

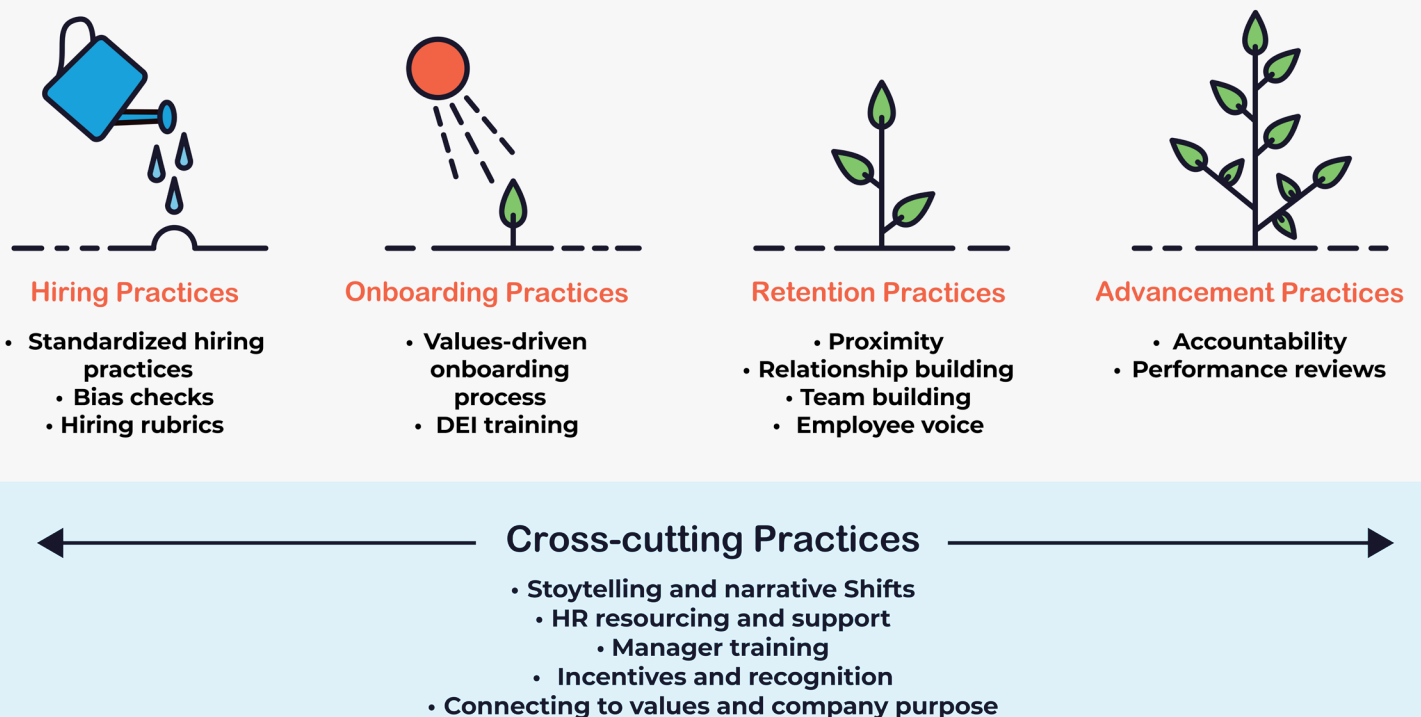
Recognizing these barriers, we believe there are opportunities to shift how frontline managers are supported, incentivized, and celebrated for their critical role in Opportunity Employment.

Through secondary research and interviews with companies, workforce organizations, and frontline employees themselves, we’ve identified **effective strategies for equipping frontline managers as change agents in your Opportunity Employment efforts.**

These best practices are organized along the employee life cycle, illustrating critical intervention points for frontline managers to best support their frontline team. We’ve also captured “cross-cutting” best practices that are relevant across the entire employee life cycle. Many companies are already implementing these practices, and others may be new to you. We encourage you to use the worksheet in [Appendix A](#) to reflect on what your organization is already doing and where to go next with your colleagues.

FIGURE TWO: EMPLOYEE LIFE CYCLE

Best practices for engaging frontline managers across the employee life cycle



Hiring Best Practices

Standardized hiring resources:

As companies introduce more inclusive hiring practices, it is critically important to provide hiring managers—who are also often frontline supervisors for the talent that gets hired—with resources that **reinforce inclusive thinking and decision making**. Like all people, hiring managers carry biases based on their experiences and identity that impact their thought processes and decision making. By providing the following resources, companies can create checks and pause points to keep those biases in check:

Skills-based job descriptions:

Before the job opening is posted, companies should engage frontline employees and their managers to articulate the skills required to succeed in that job. Historically, companies have used previous experience and education as a proxy for skills, but the **current skills-based movement takes a broader**

approach to include all the ways in which people acquire skills.

Having a clear articulation of specific skills needed for the role aids hiring managers in making less biased decisions.

Bias checkpoints:

Bias checks can be used to create a pause point and reflection before a hiring manager goes into an interview with a frontline candidate. Creating awareness of biases is the first step in mitigating their negative impacts, and **bias checks offer reflection questions and embed intentionality into the hiring process.**

This can be a stand-alone document used before interviews or a process such as Vistra's hiring conferences.

Standardized interview questions:

Maintaining consistency in the interview process helps to minimize the influence of hiring-manager bias on hiring outcomes. By providing a set of questions that cover the most important aspects of what it takes to be successful in the role,

Vistra: Hiring Conferences



As Vistra was working to engage all employees in their DEIB strategy, they adopted the practice of hiring conferences to support hiring managers' understanding of and engagement with DEIB. The hiring manager, a recruiter, an HR support person, and an employee relations manager meet at least once during the hiring process to reflect on the pipeline and how decisions are made and to understand how it connects to the company's DEIB strategy.

These conversations are approached with curiosity and lots of questions, and they are nonpunitive. Hiring conferences support accountability in the hiring process, culture change in service of DEIB goals, and capacity building for the hiring manager.⁷

companies can ensure a similar experience for all candidates regardless of their identity.

Assessment rubrics

Providing clear assessment rubrics for hiring managers and others who participate in the hiring process helps to standardize what candidates are being assessed on and also provides a real-time record of why decisions were made. This supports not only consistency across hiring managers and other interviewers, but it also **provides evidence for accountability in the hiring process.**

Monitor DEIB data in hiring pipeline:

HR and talent acquisition teams can use candidate demographic data to break down different facets of diversity at each stage of the hiring process and **understand how their sourcing and hiring practices may need to shift to improve outcomes.** For example, if racial and/or gender diversity was low in the overall applicant pool, that indicates a need for more diverse sourcing and talent

development partnerships versus changes in the hiring process itself. Alternatively, if diversity is high in the applicant pool but low in the finalist pool, that signals a need to address bias in the interview and selection process.

Onboarding Best Practices

Values-driven onboarding:

The first 90 days of a new hire experience is important because that's when employees align their values with the company's values and when the foundation of good working habits are formed. The first 90 days set the stage for the employee experience moving forward, and managers play a pivotal role in this process as the most proximate leader to the frontline.

There are a variety of ways for frontline managers to onboard new hires, such as setting up time to meet leadership either in person or through a recorded welcome video highlighting the mission, values, and

Inclusive Hiring Effort



One fashion retailer wanted to engage hiring managers in their inclusive hiring efforts. Their distribution center is located in a community with a large Spanish-speaking population, and they wanted to shift their hiring practices so their workforce better reflected the local community. The HR team framed the work as a pilot effort with hiring managers, creating room for flexibility and adaptation as well as building trust in the process. Communications focused on how participating in the hiring process benefits managers and how inclusive hiring helps the business. They showcased internal promotions and existing employees with various backgrounds who have been successful. They also shifted their systems so that Spanish speakers could navigate the hiring process, onboarding, and the role itself with their native language.

through of the company's handbook to allow space for processing and questions. Other companies include job shadowing in their onboarding, often with an employee that has demonstrated success in that role. The practice of an "onboarding buddy," in which a new hire is paired with an existing frontline employee, is another way of building relationships and conveying hard-won knowledge about how to do the job well, and it provides the existing employee with a development opportunity.

When **HR provides frontline managers with a standardized, well-supported, and values-aligned onboarding process with new hires**, it sets up both managers and frontline employees for success.

"Our onboarding is two days with a variety of training on the company, the job, and safety. It also includes 30 minutes with the founder and CEO. This helps people understand and get on board with our culture and values, and understand the resources available to them."

ROONEY CASTLE, RHINO FOODS

Role clarity:

As new employees join an organization, their managers play a critical role in clarifying roles and responsibilities for the new hire and for their own roles as managers. Frontline employees deserve clear expectations from their managers that build on the job description they signed up for, focus on the skills required to succeed in the job, and put them on track for career mobility over time.

It is also important for managers to communicate role expectations in a way that connects frontline roles to the success of the company overall. This

helps frontline employees feel connected to the company's purpose and valued for their contributions.

"People are set up for success when expectations are clear and lived into (e.g., this is what is expected of me in my role and how I'm supported to do that). Managers are unable to help people progress in their role if those expectations and boundaries are not clear."

EMILY HANNING

Retention Best Practices

Proximity and relationship building:

Centering employees' humanity and having empathy in each interaction as a frontline manager is key to welcoming and retaining employees. Carving out time for managers to build meaningful relationships with their direct reports and understand their needs, career objectives, and strengths supports a positive working environment, which helps retention. There are many times where **managers play a coaching role to support employees as they grow, and providing this support comes a lot easier when there is an existing foundation of trust.**

It's important for managers and even senior leadership (e.g. skip-level conversations) to be accessible to and present with people, to sense how employees are feeling, and to see how their work connects to the company's goals. Frontline managers often experience a shift in their perspective on their direct reports when they develop a 1:1 relationship that breaks down previous assumptions and builds rapport despite differences in identity and experience.

Team building:

For frontline employees, their direct manager and their immediate team are the people they interact with on a daily basis. The manager's role in cultivating relationship building, trust building, and empathy within the team cannot be understated. Frontline managers must be equipped with tools and resources to support team building and create a positive work culture that centers on belonging. This could include training on cultivating an inclusive culture, reinforcements such as checklists to keep team building as a priority, and resources to support team-building activities.

One retail company we interviewed provides their managers with a daily checklist to make sure they're meeting with their direct reports, asking how their day is, and connecting with them as individuals to develop strong relationships.

Feedback and employee voice:

We know that employee voice is critical to enhancing employee engagement,

and managers play an essential role as the most proximate listening ear for the frontline. Managers can hold listening sessions for employees to share ideas, questions, and concerns; funnel that information up to HR and leadership; and communicate responses back to the frontline.

“Mindset change happens at the individual level, which is why proximity and relationship building are so important.”

ANDREA RIEHL, BEST BUY

It's helpful to have **multiple channels for employees to share feedback**, some of which should be anonymous. Everyone has a different communication style, relationships with authority, and sense of security in their job, so anonymous channels allow everyone to share their input safely. Managers are responsible for letting the frontline know their options for sharing feedback and for listening to those who prefer to share feedback directly. This is a skill that must be intentionally cultivated, so manager training should

Supportive Onboarding



One retail company shared about their inclusive talent pipeline program. New hires who participate in the program receive ongoing support and coaching from community partners, their store manager, and a seasoned peer. Managers play an important role here in drawing the connection between how the store operates and the role of the store associates, e.g., why friendliness with customers and keeping inventory tidy has a direct impact on customer experience and store sales. The program aims to leverage entry-level store roles to create economic mobility opportunities, and having a clear and supportive onboarding process is an important first step in that process. Participants in this program have a retention rate double that of their peers.

include components of this. In order for managers to be successful in elevating feedback, they need direct lines of communication with HR, leadership, and/or operations functions to share what they've heard as well as a commitment to transparency in sharing back with the frontline.

Advancement Best Practices

One of the most overlooked aspects of Opportunity Employment is advancement. Supporting equitable economic mobility means providing clear pathways and opportunities for frontline employees to move up, and frontline managers play an essential role in that process.

“We start with an empathy interview, which includes 30 minutes with a new hire to ask open-ended questions about their life, experiences, and background. Let them define in their own words what they want to achieve, what skills they want to develop, and what they're motivated by. This helps build trust and understanding.”

KELLY GRAHAM, GRADS OF LIFE

Development opportunities:

Job growth or promotion is a higher priority for frontline employees than pay or benefits alone⁸, which means that investing in advancement can improve frontline employee retention as well as support their economic mobility—a true win-win. We also know that managers have an incredibly important role in people development: **Seventy-three percent of frontline employees cited a manager who supports their career progression as essential to career**

advancement.⁹ By supporting managers to act as a champion for the advancement of their frontline team, businesses can tap into a dedicated, diverse talent pool with a strong foundation of knowledge about the company.

There are multiple ways in which managers can support their team's development:

- Consistently providing honest, constructive feedback that supports employee development
- Standardizing opportunity across the team by making professional development conversations a regular practice
- Providing job-shadowing opportunities or “stretch assignments” for any employee to develop new skills and test out roles in which they're interested
- Across all of these practices consistency is key, both in timing (regular, repeated practice) and in treatment of employees (fair and equal). Mitigating bias requires a conscious effort and systemic reinforcement, and this will help to ensure equal access to opportunities.

Accountability for frontline advancement:

Frontline managers should be held accountable for their role in supporting the advancement of frontline employees. In addition to using frontline promotion rates as one proxy for success in this area, companies are also using mechanisms like reflection prompts, regular meetings

focused on frontline advancement, and data to reinforce positive behaviors. For example, ask frontline managers how often they're having career development conversations with their direct reports or creating professional development plans with them. These questions help to reinforce the behaviors that support advancement and communicate the company's priorities.

Since data plays a role in supporting accountability for managers, companies should also consider how data is used and who has access to it. Data on retention, turnover, and advancement is often only available to HR leaders, but **if frontline managers had access to that information (de-identified and anonymized for protection, and disaggregated by demographic groups), then they could be a more active participant in DEIB efforts.**


Cross-Cutting Best Practices

Manager training:

It is the employer's responsibility to train new managers, whether they are promoted internally from the frontline or an external hire, because many frontline managers may not have management experience. Frontline managers often get brief manager training upon assuming their position, but companies across industries and size have emphasized the importance of **comprehensive and continuous manager training**. High-quality manager training isn't just about when the training happens but also *what* it contains and *how* it's delivered.

Companies and workforce agencies highlighted components of their manager trainings that they believe support success on the frontline:

Career Pathways



A midsize fast casual restaurant chain with locations across the US underwent efforts to clarify performance standards and career pathways for frontline employees and managers. The main component of this effort was redesigning and clarifying store leadership roles. To create a pipeline toward the store manager role, they created a "store coach" position for those interested in becoming people leaders. They also created a time-bound "manager in training" program that is a minimum of 12 weeks and provides opportunities for store coaches to get additional training.

To supplement these efforts, the company offered bias training to help managers understand how bias operates in all of us, and provides e-learning modules on performance management for managers to revisit as needed. They also clarified their company values and linked both performance standards and interview guides to those values to create consistency and build understanding.

Companies and workforce agencies highlighted components of their manager trainings that they believe support success on the frontline:

- At the most basic level, trainings should cover technical aspects of the manager role, such as HR systems and policies, any legal boundaries to be aware of, and what resources are available internally for both the manager and their frontline team.

“Manager training can’t be a one-and-done process; it has to be ongoing for it to be successful.”

**MARIA “ALEX” ALEXANDER
FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE COUNCIL
TALENT REWIRE**

- Trainings should also cover inclusive hiring practices and interview skills for those participating in hiring processes.
- Learning people management skills is essential to the job, and many companies emphasized the importance

of trauma-informed management skills for companies focused on inclusive hiring.

- There should also be training on implicit or unconscious bias, cultural competency, and DEIB. The DEIB training should align managers on clear definitions, the company’s overall DEIB vision and strategy, and how managers and the frontline are expected to integrate DEIB into their roles.
- Trainings should focus on building managers’ skills in empathy and relationship building to support them getting to know their team, cultivating teamwork, managing interpersonal dynamics on the team, and building personal connections.
- Also important is effective communication, giving and receiving feedback, and navigating difficult conversations.

Tenets of a Good Leader



A recent study found that defining what great frontline managers do and supporting them to teach and mentor their peers is essential. The study noted four actions the best frontline managers tend to take, which 90 percent of frontline leaders do not do consistently¹⁰:

- 1. Stopped when something didn’t look right instead of hurrying to their initial destination**
- 2. Asked exploratory questions instead of correcting or scolding direct reports**
- 3. Created time for problem-solving discussions for employees to identify their own solutions**
- 4. Followed up and publicly recognized individuals who identified and applied solutions**

In addition to the training content, companies shared tips on what makes training delivery most effective:

- Role-playing exercises help managers practice skills in real-life scenarios rather than learning about concepts abstractly.
- Empathy interviews or storytelling exercises help managers build empathy for people with different backgrounds and experiences, and put themselves in someone else's shoes.

“When we find ourselves over indexing on the ‘what,’ we miss the ‘how’ of the leadership behaviors that get us there. If it’s all “how,” then we really start to see the differences. How those conversations are delivered is really critical to driving sustainable change.”

HR LEADER, LARGE RETAILER

DEIB training:

It's the manager's responsibility to build frontline employees' understanding of the company's DEIB vision and strategy and how it shows up in their day-to-day operations. While the actual training may be led by HR, **it's the daily reinforcement of the frontline manager that ensures those learnings are ingrained.** Everyone on the team should understand how DEIB shows up in their work, understand cultural competency (i.e., how to connect with people from different backgrounds), and recognize unconscious bias. Managers also play an important role in modeling DEIB practices and values in action, leading by example. Each person comes into work with different lived experiences, identities, and

adversities they have faced and are still facing. So having ongoing DEIB training opportunities, especially through a trauma-informed lens, can be beneficial.

Manager performance reviews:

In their own performance review process, frontline managers should be held accountable to people-focused measures that assess their ability to onboard, retain, and advance frontline employees. For most employers, retention of frontline employees (or the flip side of turnover rates) are the most accessible data point to be used in these manager conversations. You can also leverage other data about frontline employee retention and advancement, such as annual surveys in which frontline employees self-report on belonging and inclusion or frontline promotion rates.

Leaders share that **these conversations should include both outcomes (the “what”) and reflection on “how” these outcomes were achieved:**

Manager performance reviews should include data to identify the outcomes, as well as discussion and reflection on how those outcomes came to be.

HR resourcing and support:

We know frontline managers are often overburdened in their role, so it's important to have additional resources and support from HR specifically for this level of the organization. As more companies adopt Opportunity Employment, second-chance hiring, and other inclusive talent strategies, they have found that both resourcing HR and hiring different types of skills within HR are helpful. For example, some

These **wraparound, comprehensive services help address employee needs so they can succeed on the job, and the manager doesn't have to take on the role of social worker to support their team.**

“We have a wall of fame to highlight employees who live into our principles, and a lot of them are supervisors.”

TED CASTLE, RHINO FOODS

HR teams play a particularly important role when navigating sensitive employee information, and can either be a thought partner to the manager or an alternative, confidential partner working directly with the frontline employee. For example, for employees with system-impacted backgrounds and parole obligations, only certain HR roles should be aware of that to reduce the risk of both team and managerial bias.

HR teams also provide resources and consistency with their systems and processes, such as the above mentioned standardized interview guides, training offerings, and professional development processes. Getting leadership buy-in to support HR in playing this role is a critical success factor.

Incentives and recognition:

Frontline managers are often overburdened in their role, so finding the right levers to incentivize specific behaviors can be a helpful change management tactic. When managers are tasked with directing frontline employees, operating the business, and reporting up to and receiving directives from leadership, people management often gets deprioritized. Companies can **incentivize managers to focus on people management by celebrating those who do it well.** Whether this is through public

Rhino Foods: Resourcing HR



Rhino Foods is a food manufacturing company in Burlington, Vermont, that aims to advance equitable employer practices. As their team grew and diversified with more inclusive hiring efforts, they recognized that their employees had needs outside of work that were going unmet and affecting their attendance and performance. Rhino partnered with the United Way Working Bridges program to provide an on-site resource coordinator that helps employees access social services and financial services, and is also trained in mental health first aid.¹¹ Having this additional resource frees up frontline managers to focus on their core responsibilities of people management and operations.

interactions conveying gratitude and appreciation (e.g., team shoutouts, thank-yous), every act of recognition helps.

“It’s nice to point out something a manager has done or said that people don’t know about, to make the invisible visible. Share that personal story and recognize what the company values about this manager.”

**MARIA “ALEX” ALEXANDER,
TALENT REWIRE FRONTLINE
EMPLOYEE COUNCIL**

Though they are less common at the frontline manager level, incentives such as bonuses or prizes for DEIB-related outcomes can be another helpful practice. As performance systems and metrics grow to include indicators of retention, belonging, and advancement of frontline employees, their managers should be rewarded for demonstrated success in this arena. Though some employers do caution against financial incentives: “You can’t financially incentivize belonging. You need leaders enabled to make the right decisions, understanding why it’s important, and holding ourselves to account when the outcome isn’t what we intended to be.”

“People are generally tolerant of change when they know it’s change for the better; they’re intolerant when it seems arbitrary.”

HALEY GLOVER, UPSKILL AMERICA

Storytelling and narrative shift:

Implementing Opportunity Employment, and engaging frontline managers in that process, requires a balance of “head” and “heart” work. Managers need to logically understand the value of these shifts to

the company and their role (“head”) and also develop care and empathy for their frontline team (“heart”). **Storytelling helps managers understand why it’s important to embed DEIB practices, and also helps incentivize and elevate managers who are succeeding as inclusive people managers.**

Sharing stories about frontline employees or nontraditional talent who have moved up in the organization is a powerful way to shift narratives. Sharing these stories helps to disrupt the harmful stereotypes managers may have about frontline talent and highlight that valuable contributions come in many shapes, sizes, and backgrounds. This storytelling isn’t just directed toward managers, as this cultural shift needs to happen from leadership to the frontline—everyone benefits from hearing these stories.

“Connect it to the identity and purpose of the organization; frame it as core to what you do. It can’t just be public signaling—there is some social capital to speaking about it, but it’s clear when that doesn’t translate throughout the business.”

GENEVIEVE MARTIN, THE LAST MILE

Connecting to company values and purpose:

In order for frontline managers to make the time and space to prioritize Opportunity Employment, they need to understand why it’s important and believe in its positive impact on the business at large. For many companies, this means connecting inclusive talent strategies to the company’s values and purpose. This best practice is all about communication. There needs to be

ongoing and proactive transparency about the current state of talent practices, the business' vision for the future, and how it will impact managers, their teams, and customers (where relevant to your industry). Operations leaders, including HR, must be intentional in their communications about connecting Opportunity Employment efforts back to company values and core business to reinforce their importance.

These **communications should include both “head” and “heart” arguments**, or they should be clear about the business benefit and the social imperative in doing this work. For example, when sharing internally about their inclusive talent-sourcing program, one company conveys the business impact through retention metrics while also sharing emotional, personal stories of how the program positively impacts systemically marginalized populations.

Call to Action

Although frontline managers have a lot on their plates, it's important to “slow down in order to speed up” and for senior leadership to create the space for this to happen. True systems change requires commitment from the top, as well as time and resources invested in frontline managers to make these shifts. These investments are well worth it, given the impact on the business and frontline employees.

We encourage you to use the worksheet in [Appendix A](#) to identify areas of strengths and gaps for your business, and to use that to engage your team. From there, identify a suite of best practices to pilot and engage frontline managers and employees in the design and implementation of that pilot.

Thank you for being an Opportunity Employment champion!

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We thank all of the people who generously shared their expertise, input, and feedback with us.

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Appendix A: Putting Learning In Action

Our goal is for this research to catalyze action that engages frontline managers meaningfully in Opportunity Employment. To help you internalize these learnings and support you in your first action steps, we've developed this worksheet to prompt reflection, discussion, and action among you and your colleagues.

Reflect On Your Current State:

- How would we rate our support of frontline managers today? (Scale of 1 – 5, 1 meaning we do not support frontline managers at all, 5 meaning we do everything we possibly can to support frontline managers)
- Think about a time when we engaged frontline managers in a policy or practice change regarding frontline talent. What did we learn from that? How did it change the process or outcome?
- In what ways does our organization currently engage frontline managers as partners in our Opportunity Employment efforts? (e.g., gather feedback, build capacity, etc.)

Understand Your Barriers:

Select the top 2-3 **barriers** your organization faces today in engaging frontline managers in your Opportunity Employment efforts. Feel free to brainstorm other barriers that we didn't include here.

Structural/Explicit	Relational	Implicit
<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of training and capacity building	<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of empathy and trust	<input type="checkbox"/> Misaligned priorities
<input type="checkbox"/> Ineffective change management	<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of empowerment, agency, and voice	<input type="checkbox"/> Risk aversion
<input type="checkbox"/> Limited time and overburdened		<input type="checkbox"/> Stereotypes and biases
<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of top-down		<input type="checkbox"/> Limiting mental models

Plan for Future Actions

Prioritize practices to pilot:

Choose a combination of 2-3 best practices focused on frontline managers that you want to pilot that also engage multiple levels of systems change. These could be something new or something you already do but not with frontline managers. As you make your selections, think about how adopting this suite of practices together could impact systemic change within your organization.

Hiring
<input type="checkbox"/> Standardized hiring practices <input type="checkbox"/> Monitor DEIB data in hiring pipeline
Onboarding
<input type="checkbox"/> Values-driven onboarding <input type="checkbox"/> Role clarity
Retention
<input type="checkbox"/> Proximity and relationship building <input type="checkbox"/> Feedback and employee voice <input type="checkbox"/> Team building
Advancement Practices
<input type="checkbox"/> Development opportunities <input type="checkbox"/> Accountability for frontline advancement
Cross-Cutting Practices
<input type="checkbox"/> Manager training <input type="checkbox"/> Manager performance reviews <input type="checkbox"/> Incentives and recognition <input type="checkbox"/> Connecting to company values and purpose <input type="checkbox"/> DEIB training <input type="checkbox"/> HR resourcing and support <input type="checkbox"/> Storytelling and narrative shift

Discussion questions:

- What can frontline managers do that **hasn't been done before**?
- What can we do better?
- Which best practices have we implemented with more senior employees that might effective scale to frontline managers?
- Given the suite of best practices we chose above, what are the **first 2-3 steps** we can take this week or month to engage frontline managers as partners in these pilots?
- What can we consider taking off frontline managers' workloads to make more time for supporting their team?

Appendix B: Resources for Further Learning

The best practices highlighted in this report are covered at a high level. Here are some additional resources on specific practices or areas of practice change to support you in your implementation journey. Many of these may not focus on frontline managers, but we believe the guidance could be catered to focus on this population.

Hiring:

- [Skills-Based Sourcing and Hiring Playbook](#), Markle
- [Inclusive Hiring Resources Guide](#), Harvard Center for Workplace Development
- [Bias Interrupters for Hiring and Recruiting](#), Bias Interrupters
- [7 Practical Ways to Reduce Bias in Your Hiring Process](#), Rebecca Knight, Harvard Business Review
- [What Good Looks Like: Vistra](#), Talent Rewire (case study on hiring manager coaches)

Onboarding:

- [New Employee Onboarding Guide](#), Talent Acquisition, SHRM
- [A Guide to Onboarding New Hires \(For First Time Managers\)](#), Gleb Tsipursky, Harvard Business Review

Retention:

- [Engaging Frontline Employee Voice](#), Talent Rewire
- [Engaging Employees To Solve Retention Issues](#), U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation
- [Improving Employee Retention: A Guide to Upskilling Frontline Managers](#), Gallup
- [How to Make Employees Feel Heard and Valued in the Workplace](#), TINYpulse
- [How Change Happens](#), Talent Rewire
- [Belonging: A Weekly Practice](#), Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley

Advancement:

- [Skills-Based Internal Mobility Playbook](#), Business Roundtable
- [Promoting DEIB Through Equitable Advancement](#), Risk Management Magazine
- [Tools for Performance Evaluations](#), Bias Interrupters

General:

- [The Essential Guide to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#), Lever

Endnotes

- 1 Deborah Lovich, David Welch, Julia Dhar, and France Joris, "[Why U.S. Frontline Workers Are Quitting](#)," Harvard Business Review, March 14, 2022"
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- 3 Dawn Klinghoffer and Katie Kirkpatrick-Hus, "[More Than 50% of Managers Feel Burned Out](#)," Harvard Business Review, May 18, 2023
- 4 Elad N. Sherf, Ravi S. Gajendran, and Vijaya Venkataramani, "[Research: When Managers Are Overworked, They Treat Employees Less Fairly](#)," Harvard Business Review, June 4, 2018
- 5 Ibid
- 6 "[Women on the Front Line: Enabling Them to Thrive, Stay, and Perform \(Report\)](#)," Catalyst in partnership with Accenture, accessed January 30, 2024
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- 8 Swathi Bhaskaran, Andrew Davis, Christophe Desbrière, and Sara Wasserteil, "[Bridging the Advancement Gap: What Frontline Employees Want—and What Employers Think They Want](#)," McKinsey & Company, July 21, 2022
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- 11 "[Working Bridges. Innovation at Work: Relationships, Resources and Resilience](#)," United Way of Northwest Vermont, accessed January 30, 2024