

Trapped in the middle?

A guide to breaking free from the Leadership Squeeze

Actions and resources for HR professionals to
manage this common modern workplace problem

Are your people leaders feeling trapped in the middle?

Are they stuck in the squeeze?

Let's start to loosen the grip.

Heard of the Leader Squeeze? Even if you haven't, if you work in HR, you might already be dealing with it.

So, what does it mean?

Team leaders and managers at your organization may feel trapped a lot of the time. They have demands and targets pushing down on them from above. And then there are different pressures bubbling up from their teams below.

This is the squeeze.

As a HR professional, you're likely to feel it yourself too – when you have to assist managers who feel caught in the middle at work and turn to you for help.

Either way, getting out of this vice might seem almost impossible at times. But with the right tools, guidance, and a change in mindset, you can help free your people leaders – and yourself – from this grip.

Taking the time to work on this will mean healthier boundaries, and a revitalized work environment where you, your leaders, and team members can all thrive.

3 things:

This guide will help you break things down into manageable actions that can make a real difference. Here are 3 things you should expect to take away...

- You will understand what the Leader Squeeze is, and how to recognize it when it's occurring at work – even when you feel it yourself.
- You will learn that the Leader Squeeze is widespread in most organizations, and feel equipped to make some positive changes.
- You will have the confidence to ask for leadership support, coaching or training, if you need it. And able to discuss with your own boss the benefits of improving your personal skillset to help others at your organization.

Statistics and findings.

The latest on the Leader Squeeze.

Over the past year, there have been several reports into this issue. Let's start by taking a look at the wider HR landscape, and how managers and leaders are feeling. It's highly likely the same issues you're dealing with at your organization are also shared by many others.

78%



of HR professionals
are concerned about
employee turnover*

It's not just about finding and recruiting those with the necessary skills, it's the retention of top talent that is a major issue.

44%

are feeling 'very'
or 'extremely'
stressed at work***

A shocking proportion of managers say they are having mental health struggles due to work-related stress.

66%

of HR
professionals
are concerned
about employee
mental health*

A concern for the mental health of people in their teams is a higher concern than other issues, such as labor shortages and the economic downturn.

70%

of employee engagement is
determined by managers**

The role of managers is the most significant factor in team engagement. They directly impact productivity, retention and wellbeing.

60%

of managers are struggling
with work-life integration*****

Most managers struggle to keep a healthy balance between their professional and personal lives, often feeling pulled in too many directions.

47%

of managers feel overwhelmed****

Almost half of managers report feeling 'too overwhelmed' with their routine responsibilities to perform their duties effectively.

58%



of managers have no
leadership training***

The same number of managers say they have been promoted without any formal leadership training. They feel underprepared for their roles, leading to frustration and overwhelm.

*SHRM State of the Workplace Study 2023-2024.

**Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey.

***The Predictive Index Middle Managers Report 2023.

****Lattice and YouGov 2024 survey

*****OnePoll survey for Groupon (Health)

It's clear the Leader Squeeze is having a huge impact on team health and performance.

Excerpts from the reports

"Labor shortages are forcing HR departments to think more strategically about workforce management for 2024. In particular, organizations are prioritizing support for their existing workforce ahead of bringing in new talent."*

"Changing business demands and hybrid work have complicated how we collaborate, leaving managers feeling more isolated and disconnected than in the past."**

"[When you] form the bridge between leadership and the rest of the organization, [you] are often caught between employees' and leaders' expectations. During times of change, that's a recipe for burnout."**

"Most managers say a lack of time is the main factor stopping them from taking advantage of training and development opportunities."***

"In short, most managers now have more work to do on a tighter budget with new teams."**

Take time to reflect. How many of these issues do you see at work?

*SHRM State of the Workplace Study 2023-2024.

**Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey.

***The Predictive Index Middle Managers Report 2023.

Are you feeling the squeeze?

Working in HR means you are often an intermediary between senior leadership and the operational teams.

And this can sometimes feel like being an orange in a juice press. There are increasing pressures from above and from below – squeezing out every ounce of your energy. Wringing you dry until you have nothing left.

But how do you know if you're caught in this squeeze? The signs are different for everyone, but here are some things that could mean your leaders are being juiced too hard.



Recognize the signs...

- ☐ Do you and your leaders feel overwhelmed most days, like a being in a pressure cooker?
- ☐ Are you and your leaders having difficulty focusing and prioritizing your day-to-day tasks?
- ☐ Does leadership feel a lack of motivation and spark, feeling flat and unenergized?
- ☐ Has productivity gone downhill for your leaders and teams, despite your best efforts?
- ☐ Are your leaders and managers struggling to maintain a healthy balance between work and their personal life?
- ☐ Are you noticing leaders and teams displaying feelings of cynicism and negativity that are hard to shake off?
- ☐ Are you and your leaders feeling dread about upcoming meetings, projects and deadlines?

But when you work in HR – you have to put on a brave face for everyone else. Which can be exhausting!

As the HR leader, your CEO expects you to recognize these signs and create a plan to improve them.

A recipe for disengagement

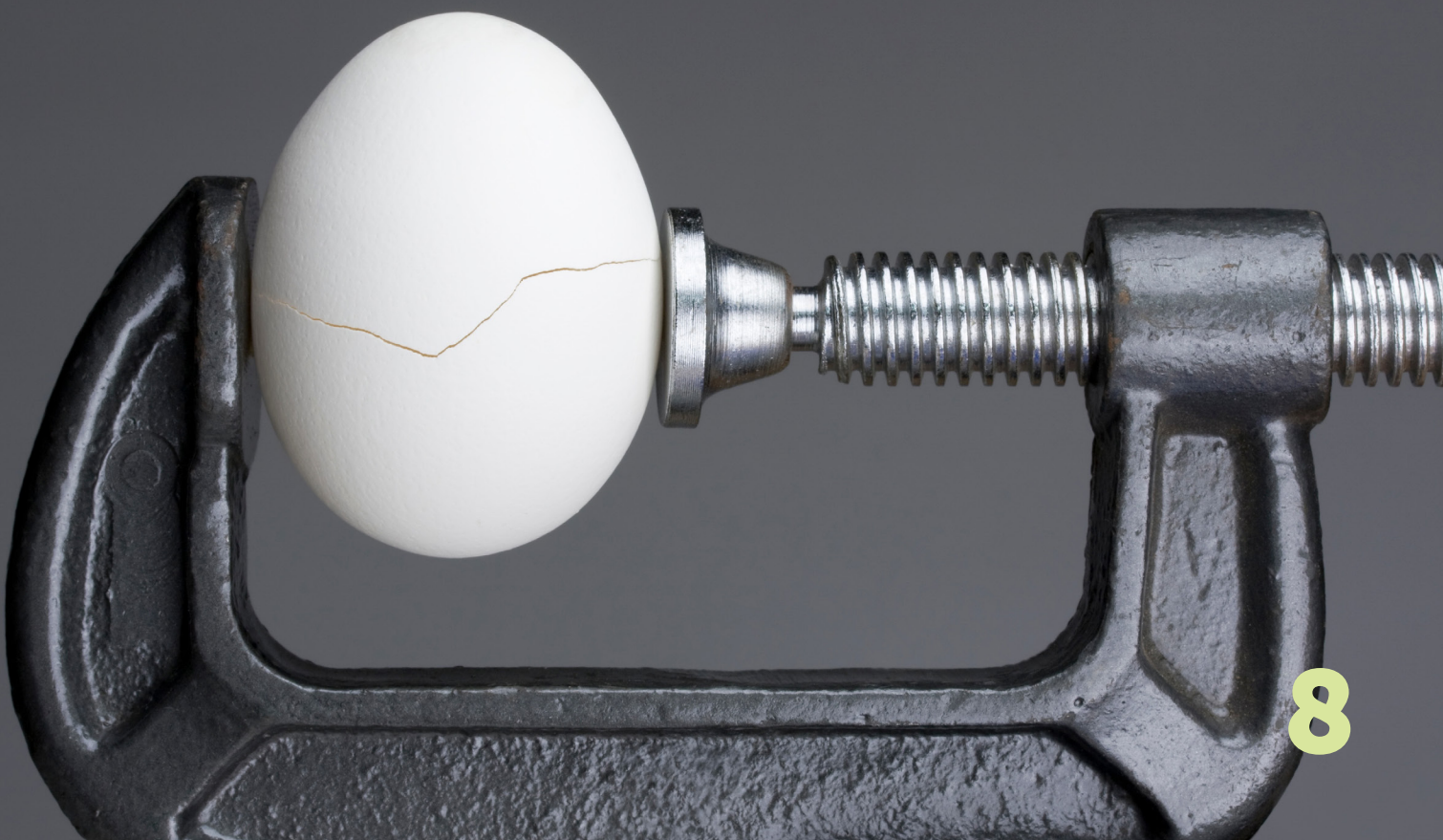
Perhaps you don't feel these pressures too much in your HR role, which is a great thing! However, you might see others displaying these behaviors at work.

Think of it like nutrient deficiency. Just as our bodies need essential vitamins to thrive, your work environment must have a blend of proper support, clear communication and balanced expectations to keep the teams healthy.

The reality is, many who are stuck in this middle zone feel the squeeze. This is because they carry the weight of expectations from both directions – supporting teams while managing senior expectations from above.

But this isn't a healthy juice or smoothie. Far from it. It can actually be a toxic cocktail that will slowly affect their mental wellbeing and even their physical health.

Ignoring it will lead to burnout, disengagement and have a negative impact – on you personally and on the people in your teams.



The Shift

From squeezing resources – to nurturing people.

In the past, many organizations have operated a model of extracting as much as possible from their employees. In fact, burnout was often seen as a badge of honor, a testament to dedication and hard work.

But the truth is, people are not machines, and they cannot run at full capacity all the time.

Just because we call it Human Resources doesn't mean the people should be seen as a 'resource'. They are not – they're individuals with the capacity for innovation, creativity and transformation.

Covid-19 was a turning point, bringing team health and wellbeing to the forefront of workplace conversations. And now, HR professionals are often the ones in charge of shifting the organizational culture. From one that squeezes people dry – to one that values sustainable, organic growth.

This shift is about moving away from the mindset that views employees as interchangeable assets – to one that recognizes them as unique, multifaceted individuals.

People vs Machines

Imagine driving a car every day without ever taking it to a garage for a checkup or oil change. The engine might keep running for a while, but eventually, it will break down. Many organizations treat their managers this way – pushing them to the limits but without offering regular opportunities for rest, recovery and reflection. Preventative care is essential, whether we're talking about machinery or people.

Just as machines require regular maintenance and repairs, people need support too. HR professionals in particular need support to successfully manage their own wellbeing – or they will inevitably feel the pressure and strain of the Leader Squeeze.

Suggestion...

Starting today, could you stop using the term 'resource' when referring to people? Your words shape perceptions, and changing your language to 'team members' or 'colleagues' helps to humanize the workplace.

How to help your leaders that are caught in the middle.

If your leaders are feeling caught in the middle, the first step is to help them acknowledge that it's happening and to take ownership of it. Only when one recognizes the issue, can they truly start to wriggle free by putting in place some healthier work practices.

Ask them to take a few moments to pause, breathe and reflect on their leadership experience so far. This isn't about what they 'should' be doing, or where others think they should be. It's about recognizing where they are, honoring their strengths and thinking honestly where they might be feeling a little more stretched.

By focusing on their own wellbeing and mental clarity, they will find greater ease and confidence in helping others.

You may want to print out this sheet and have them work through it at their own pace.

Step 1

Understanding your leadership path

How did you find yourself in this leadership role? What events or decisions brought you here?
Reflect and write below.

Do you think your promotion was based on your leadership potential, or your success in your previous role?
Acknowledge this without judgment – it's all part of your growth.

When you first started your career, did you ever see yourself as a leader? If so, how does it feel to be in this position now?
Think about the connection between your past self and present.

Step 2

Honest self-reflection and assessment

What are your Top 3 qualities or strengths that make you feel most confident in leading?

Celebrate these – they are the roots that support your growth.

Where do you feel the most tension or pressure in your current role?

These factors could be emotional, physical or mental.

Are there any skills or areas where you feel you could grow?

Think of this as your next opportunity for personal development, rather than a gap.

Step 3

Thinking about the road ahead

In three years' time, where do you imagine yourself? What does that look and feel like?

Visualize this not just in terms of your job, but in how you want to feel every day.

Would you like to take on a more senior leadership role? If so, how does that align with your wellbeing and personal life?

Consider the balance you desire in both your career and your personal life.

Aside from a bigger salary, how could advancing your career support your personal growth and wellbeing?

Think about what nourishes you and brings you joy beyond work.

Keep this worksheet close by.

This isn't a task to fill-in once and then set aside – think of it as a living document to revisit as you continue to grow.

Remember, growing as a leader is as much about nurturing yourself as it is about guiding others.

Your teams.

How does the Leader Squeeze impact team health?

Your leaders have now spent some time reflecting on how the Leader Squeeze affects them as individuals. But what about the teams that they guide in their departments?

Unfortunately, it's very likely they will also be feeling the pressures. And it can impact team health in a variety of ways.

Here are some ways this might be manifesting throughout your organization. As an HR leader, do you recognize any of these signs?

Stress transmission

Even if they try their best not to, a stressed and overwhelmed manager will inadvertently pass on stress to their team. This leads to a tense and anxious work environment, even if the individuals aren't sure why they're feeling that way. What is the current stress level in your teams?

Higher turnover

Without a doubt, poor team morale leads to higher turnover rates – as team members seek more supportive and positive work environments elsewhere. Have you noticed an increase of team attrition recently?

Communication breakdowns

Managers and leaders who are under pressure communicate less effectively, or seem too busy. This means their team often won't want to "bother" them. This can lead to misunderstandings and a lack of clear direction within the team – and a reduced quality of work.

Negative attitudes

Team members naturally pick up on their leader's cues and signals. Increased cynicism and negativity from their manager can demoralize the team, making them less enthusiastic and engaged in their work.

A lack of motivation

A disengaged manager might fail to inspire and motivate their team – resulting in decreased motivation and productivity overall. If they think you don't care all that much, they probably won't either.

Reduced support

Managers who are 'struggling' may be less available to offer support to their team and come across as aloof, or even unkind.

Closing the gap.

Strategies to start reducing the squeeze.

Working in HR means you wear many hats. You have to offer support to managers who are dealing with a variety of issues. But you also need to grow and maintain a positive working relationship with your senior leadership colleagues.

With this dual responsibility, how can you move forward and start to close the gap on either side?

Because they are two different groups, we recommend a two-pronged approach. One that addresses both the teams, and the senior leadership dynamic. Think of them as two separate pathways.



Path 1

Reengaging with the teams

How well you engage with people at work has a direct effect on team health and team performance. Remember, the latest Gallup research shows that the role of managers is the dominant factor in team engagement – it influences up to 70% of their performance.

By fostering healthier, more balanced and engaged teams, you can increase performance by 68% and decrease employee turnover by 51%.

What to do... now

There's no such thing as a quick win in this area. But there are immediate actions you and other senior managers can take to begin improving team health.

Commit to clearer communication

If you don't already have them set up, make sure you and other senior leaders have regular check-ins with your teams. These important touchpoints are key to building an atmosphere of open and transparent communication. Ask them what support they need, and listen actively to their concerns.

Prioritize wellbeing, always

Make wellbeing and mindfulness a part of your team's daily routine. Encourage breaks, set realistic expectations and create a culture where their work-life integration is valued. Always remember the real person behind the job role, including the activities and hobbies they enjoy outside of work.

Start to delegate more

You and other leaders don't have to carry everything yourselves. Trust your team to handle responsibilities. Clear delegation can lighten your load while empowering your team members to grow. Identify the strengths of each member of your team, delegate them work you know they can take on successfully.

What to do... longer term

There are other impactful measures you can implement over the longer term in order to continue supporting your teams.

Foster training and peer support

Helping your team develop the skills they need to succeed is a great longer-term strategy to try. Is there any budget for training courses, or perhaps an in-house workshop? Ongoing training of your team not only enhances their abilities – it means they feel progression and achievement – rather than stagnation in their current role. Additionally, you can set up a peer support, mentorship or 'buddy' arrangement. This allows the individuals to share their knowledge naturally and organically amongst themselves.

Cultivate comfort and safety

Try to focus more on understanding your team's emotional and psychological needs. Be a safe space where they are comfortable to speak up if things are happening outside of work that are affecting them. The more you connect on a human level, the more effectively you can lead and inspire them.

Create a feedback loop

In your team meetings, start to build-in moments where your team feels comfortable giving honest feedback, and where you regularly reflect on how you can improve as a leader. Be open to their suggestions. At the same time, you can celebrate their wins, giving positive feedback and praise.

Reengaging with upper management

While you're working on improvements in your own teams, you can also start to try some new techniques with the leader you report to.

What to do... now

By creating a new dialogue with your own leader, you can ensure you have the support, resources and the guidance you need. And you can start making some changes right now.

Have proactive conversations

If they're not on your calendar already, why not ask for regular one-on-ones with your boss? These are a great way to discuss their expectations – and ask for feedback. It's always best to do this sooner – and try your best to do something before things become overwhelming.

Clarify your priorities with your boss

If you're unsure of your top priorities when it comes to guiding the teams, ask for clarity. What are they expecting see, and what results? Clear expectations between you both can reduce stress and help you focus on what really matters.

Highlight your team's achievements

Keep upper management informed of your team's – and your own – successes. This helps you and your team gain recognition and reinforces the positive impact of your work. Don't assume your managers will know – take some time to inform them on the ongoing progress and good work being done.

What to do... longer term

There are also things you and your fellow leaders can plan for the coming months and into the next year to help ease the squeeze for you personally.

Ask for leadership development

If you've never had any official management training, why not advocate and champion for your own development? This isn't about 'admitting' to your own shortcomings or worries. It's just being honest and wanting to grow. Whether it's formal leadership training or a mentorship, continuous learning will help you become a better manager and ease the burden of the squeeze.

Be a problem solver, not a problem finder

When you or your fellow leaders have to speak to your boss about your departmental issues, always try to bring solutions, not just a list of problems. It's all too easy to flag up what's going wrong – but always better to come armed with a solution too! This not only builds trust between you both but positions you as a proactive leader who is focused on long-term success.

Seek feedback on your leadership

Just as you and other leaders have started getting honest feedback from your teams, you can ask your boss for insights on your leadership style as well. Don't be afraid to ask! Then take this feedback and make it actionable. This will help you align with management's expectations and improve your performance.

Prevention is better than cure.

How to keep yourself accountable.

The responsibility of dealing with the Leader Squeeze does not fall solely on HR. But by keeping yourself accountable, you can start to drive positive, long-term changes that will prevent the manager squeeze from happening when you see it.

Start the conversation

As a HR leader, you can proactively start a conversation with senior leadership about the impact of the Leader Squeeze. After all, this isn't just a people issue – it's a business issue. If you're taking on accountability, they will follow. Senior leaders are also accountable for the pressures they put on managers and starting this conversation will help them understand it's impact. This is not a one-time conversation. It should be an ongoing dialogue.

Set metrics for success

How well your organization is dealing with the Leader Squeeze can be measured through people-focused metrics. Use data to identify trends that signal the pressure points for managers. Metrics on topics such as burnout, turnover and engagement will provide valuable, real insights into where improvements are needed in your organization. Ensure these metrics are part of the larger business performance evaluation – to keep people-centric outcomes front and center.

Build relationships with key stakeholders

Establishing credibility and trust with senior leaders and key stakeholders is essential for driving change. By being accountable, you can position yourself as a trusted advisor who can influence decision-making, and advocate for policies that prevent the Leader Squeeze.

Be a Believer in Better

At Pavelka, we see HR professionals as key champions of workplace wellbeing – Believers in Better. These are the individuals who not only recognize the pressures of the Leader Squeeze. They also take action to dismantle any practices that create it. This means rejecting the outdated idea that managers and employees are mere resources to be squeezed for maximum output. Instead, Believers in Better foster cultures where team health is woven into the fabric of the workplace, not treated as an afterthought. The overall aim? A future where the Leader Squeeze is a relic of the past.

Communicate with care

HR often serves as the bridge between staff and leadership. Clear, empathetic communication is key to understanding the needs of managers and advocating for changes that enhance their wellbeing. When leaders communicate with care, they create an environment where people feel heard and valued.

Think about your future talent needs

HR leaders can focus on future-proofing their organizations by anticipating the upcoming talent needs – and ensuring the right people are in place to support business growth. This includes developing leadership training programmes and promotion pathways – to avoid overloading your existing managers with excessive pressure.

Actions to help keep you accountable.

A worksheet.

We hope you now have a firm understanding of this topic. As a HR professional, it's about knowing how your personal actions can make positive changes, and the impact you can have on others day-to-day to help alleviate the pressure.

As a final exercise, why not print this out and fill-in this worksheet to keep? Then you'll have a snapshot on the current state of your organization and can use it to identify any areas where you can start reducing the Leader Squeeze.

Where do you see the pinch points in your organization?

List any areas where you notice managers feeling the pressure between upper management and their teams.

How does the Leader Squeeze impact your company's managers?

Are there signs of burnout, disengagement, or turnover? Identify specific examples.

What conversations have you had with senior leadership about this issue, if any?
Have you addressed the impact of the Leader Squeeze with leadership? If not,
what would your approach be?

How frequently do you conduct check-ins with your managers?
Are there regular opportunities for managers to voice their challenges and
receive support?

What metrics are you using to measure success in preventing burnout?
Consider both quantitative (turnover, engagement) and qualitative (manager
feedback) metrics.

How does your organization foster a culture of continuous feedback?

Do managers feel comfortable sharing their concerns? How could this be improved?

Is senior leadership modeling the behavior you want to see?

Reflect on whether senior leaders are promoting balance, open communication and healthy expectations.

What steps can you personally take to drive sustainable change across the business?

Identify three actionable steps you can take to prevent the Leader Squeeze within your organization.

"At Pavelka, we believe that by up-skilling managers and providing them with the necessary resources and experiences, we can create a ripple effect. Taking the time to stop and reflect, then enhancing your leadership abilities will give you new energy and focus. In turn, this will better motivate your team, foster a more positive work environment, and drive organizational success in today's rapidly changing business landscape."

Jessie Pavelka, CEO and co-founder



**A Guide to
Overcoming
the Leader Squeeze**

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