



Building Trust, Connection, and Confidence: Core Skills for Managers

By Corey Pinkham, CEO, The Jacobson Group

Today's insurance leaders are faced with a number of complex challenges, evolving employee and client expectations, and ongoing change. Yet, even as the business landscape shifts, the core skills that contribute to strong management are constant. These transferable soft skills are essential for building connections among team members and guiding teams with confidence and transparency.

Not surprisingly, the [Shin Research Program](#) recently found management employees consider interpersonal skills critical for their roles – both today and looking toward the future. Compared to non-management individuals, these leaders place greater importance on investing in capabilities such as communication and empathy. At the non-management level, those surveyed considered interpersonal skills important but less worthy of long-term investment; however, creating these habits and mindsets even before reaching the management ranks is essential.

Whether you're a leader looking to enhance your own skills or aiming to build these capabilities within your team, there are a few key interpersonal skills and broader soft skills that set the best managers apart. By putting the effort into growth and development within these areas, you'll be well-positioned to remain successful as the industry evolves.

Building a Foundation of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence serves as the cornerstone of strong interpersonal skills. It involves understanding your own emotions, as well as the emotions of others, and then using this awareness to manage your behaviors and relationships. High emotional intelligence contributes to an individual's ability to work with others, navigate difficult conversations

and build high-functioning teams. Unlike IQ, emotional intelligence can be developed and strengthened over time.

There are four distinct components of emotional intelligence:

- *Self-Awareness*: Understanding your own emotions and triggers is the first step. Those who have mastered self-awareness know their strengths, as well as where they can improve when it comes to managing their emotions. This acknowledgement helps them better recognize situations that may trigger a heightened emotional response.
- *Self-Management*: Building on self-awareness is the ability to manage one's emotions and elicit a more neutral response to situations, rather than one that is emotionally charged. Effective strategies may include talking with a neutral third party, removing oneself from the situation or concentrating on the ideal outcome rather than feelings in the moment.

The first two components of emotional intelligence focus on personal awareness and regulation. Once these are mastered, individuals are better positioned to understand and manage the emotions of others, ultimately building stronger relationships.

- *Social Awareness*: This involves paying close attention to others' emotions and social cues, including body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. Those who are socially aware remain present in conversations and pay attention to what is being said both verbally and nonverbally, rather than focusing only on their own talking points.
- *Relationship Management*: This is where emotionally intelligent leaders shine. By focusing on relationship management, individuals are able to approach challenging conversations proactively. By genuinely seeking to understand where others are coming from, validating their feelings and redirecting unproductive discussions, individuals who have mastered this area are primed to navigate escalations and uncomfortable conversations.

Committing to Consistent Communication

Intertwined with emotional intelligence and at the heart of successful management is the ability to effectively communicate. Whether addressing large groups or engaging in one-on-one conversations, communicating with clarity, confidence and empathy sets the best managers apart. Those who are skilled in this area leverage emotional intelligence to tailor their messaging for different audiences and viewpoints, leading to more positive outcomes.

Clear communication is key in setting expectations, defining goals and ensuring individuals understand how success will be measured. However, communication is inherently two-sided, making active listening equally important – especially in an environment plagued by burnout and ongoing change. This skill requires an individual's full attention – not just to the words being said, but also to how they are delivered

(exercising the social awareness quadrant of emotional intelligence). Ask clarifying questions and ensure you're interpreting what the individual is truly saying, without inserting your own opinions or ideas. For those who feel the need to have an answer or response in all situations, this may be more challenging and require ongoing practice and intentional effort.

Cultivating and Maintaining Relationships

Strong relationships with employees, colleagues and clients are often the result of a culmination of multiple soft skills. Managers who cultivate meaningful relationships within their teams are likely to see greater productivity, more open communication and higher employee satisfaction. Additionally, investing in relationships across the broader organization enhances your overall visibility and influence as a leader. This contributes to your personal brand and is often essential for continuing to move up through the leadership pipeline. A few traits and attributes are essential for building these relationships:

Integrity

Leaders who consistently act with integrity build trust and inspire confidence among their employees. This means embracing a clear set of values and demonstrating those values through all interactions, regardless of the situation or circumstance. Integrity is reflected not only in public actions, but also in private decisions, accountability, and the willingness to acknowledge mistakes.

Transparency

As much as possible, sharing what individuals can expect – even if you don't have all the answers – helps maintain trust and strong relationships. Many employees are feeling anxious about their jobs and transparent communication and regular updates can help ease these concerns, minimize surprises, and create a more stable foundation for organizational change.

Courage

Leadership is seldom easy and often requires difficult decisions and uncomfortable conversations. Whether communicating organizational restructuring, announcing large initiatives like AI implementations or new technologies, or managing budget constraints, respected leaders demonstrate the courage to make and communicate difficult decisions while remaining committed and steady. The ability to be direct and share information – even if it's hard for someone to hear – is a valued management and relationship-building skill at all levels.

Navigating Change

Today's managers and leadership teams are not only experiencing ongoing change themselves, but are also often serving as employees' primary connection to the organization. How managers relay information heavily influences their employees' overall experience, especially in hybrid and remote environments. Change that isn't well-

communicated or managed often results in resistance and disgruntled individuals, leading to lower productivity and increased turnover.

Empathy and communication are particularly critical during periods of transition. Being proactive in understanding how a change will be received by employees, communicating how it will impact them, and remaining transparent throughout the process is paramount. The exact same situation can result in dramatically different outcomes, depending on leaders' interpersonal skills. For example, consider a company that decides to add new AI capabilities to its claims function, changing how adjusters interact with clients.

Path A: In one instance, the company makes this decision in a vacuum, rolling it out to its claims teams with communication focused primarily on new expectations and procedures. Employees are likely to be resistant, concerned about what it means for their jobs, and frustrated by a process change they do not fully understand. Without opportunities for two-way communication, they'll feel less empowered to ask questions and are likely to feel unsupported. Management is in a position to be blind-sided by unengaged individuals, while experiencing lower productivity and increased turnover.

Path B: In an alternate instance, the company introduces the initiative early, clearly communicating how the change will benefit employees, the company and its customers. Leadership welcomes questions and managers openly discuss how current employees' roles may evolve, as well as how they will be trained and supported. Employees understand what to expect and feel included in the process. They also have an open line of communication to raise concerns. As a result, leaders gain valuable insight into employee needs while fostering stronger engagement and smoother adoption.

Developing Soft Skills within Your Team

While these skills are perceived as more important for managers, building them early within your [leadership pipeline](#) is essential. Individual contributors benefit from practicing and enhancing their soft skills before they formally step into management roles. Start by identifying the employees who demonstrate natural leadership capabilities and innate interpersonal skills. As with any skill set, soft skills will come more naturally to some professionals than they do others. Focus on how an individual can further maximize their strengths, while also recognizing the skills that will require more intentional effort to master. For some, these challenges may also include sacrificing their own production levels to ensure their teams are successful or learning to balance their workloads while supporting their employees' achievements.

For those who are on the management track, provide opportunities to practice and strengthen these skills. Ensure your current leadership team is committed to their own personal growth and is serving as an example that permeates from the top down. Within your corporate and team culture, be open about calling out and commending soft skills when they are used in real-world situations. Even if there is room for growth, discussing what went well and how they could be further improved upon in the future provides an excellent opportunity for learning. You may also consider pairing individuals with coaches

and mentors to help build their confidence and provide additional support on their management journey.

In today's evolving business environment, strong managers and effective leaders require much more than technical knowledge alone. By investing in emotional intelligence, communication, relationship-building and other soft skills, your teams will remain adaptable and equipped to successfully lead through ongoing change.