

# Deliberate Leadership Survey

Bulgaria, 2023-2024



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# Introduction

In 2023, the Act2Manage team, in collaboration with the American Chamber of Commerce in Bulgaria, set out to answer the following questions:

- To what extent do Bulgarian leaders apply the widely accepted management practices?
- What factors contribute to the application of leadership knowledge?

When we embarked on this work, we had to confront the fact that there is no universally accepted, standardized description of what constitutes a "good" leader or the necessary skills for leadership, either in practice or in international literature. While some authors identify three main behaviors as essential, others list more than fifty skills that a successful leader should possess. Nevertheless, there are certain leadership practices and behaviors that are deemed desirable and recommendable by both leadership science and international organizations.

But are Bulgarian managers doing them? How successful have the leadership development efforts of the previous decades been?

We would like to thank our colleagues, Daniela Kissova, Dr. Róbert Dobay, László Filep, Tamás Cservedyák, and Levente Dobay, for their contributions to the survey administration, interpretation of the results, and preparation of the research report.

We are also grateful to all the leaders who contributed to the realization of the research project by completing the questionnaire.

# Executive Summary

Our survey primarily provides an overview of leaders working in medium and large international companies in Bulgaria.

The most common leadership practices among our respondents include

- sharing available information,
- representing company values, and
- setting specific goals for themselves.

Unfortunately, our respondents are considerably less engaged in activities related to their team members:

- weekly one-on-one meetings,
- individual goal setting,
- giving and requesting feedback,
- systematic development,
- understanding motivators, and
- conflict resolution.

Neither the years of managerial experience nor holding a senior executive position makes the use of the practices examined in the survey more likely.

Gender or age don't affect the application of these nineteen practices.

Leaders who speak a foreign language fluently exceed other leaders in four practices.

# Executive Summary

Interestingly, one of the biggest differentiating factors was the location of work. Those working in a hybrid format apply these leadership practices significantly more often than those who always work in the office or who are primarily remote workers.

Another significant difference was observed with those who fully agreed with the statement: "I feel valued at work." This group was much more likely to apply as many as 50% of the nineteen practices.

Leaders in international companies surpassed those in locally-owned companies in four practices out of the nineteen. They tend to engage somewhat more with their team members.

In nearly a third of the leadership practices, it was observed that the larger the organization, the more likely it is that the managers apply them.

Surprisingly, there is a low correlation between the leadership behavior of our respondents and their direct superiors.

We reached the same conclusion in previous similar surveys, even though intuitively one would assume that leading by example is important.

# Research Concept

In his book *Managers Not MBAs* (2004), Henry Mintzberg categorizes managerial competencies into four main areas: personal, interpersonal, action, informational.

Our research focused on competencies related to leading people, which corresponds to the first three categories. Using these three categories as a framework, we collected a total of 17 leadership behaviours, actions or practices that are widely agreed upon in both international corporate management practices and leadership literature. We also synced the selected behaviours to Gallup's Q12 engagement survey items. Thus, a deliberate leader:

## In the area of personal competencies:

- Develops self-awareness
- Is aware of personal values, roles, and goals
- Manages time effectively and efficiently
- Learns and grows

## In the area of interpersonal competencies:

- Builds culture, represents values, and sets an example
- Creates a climate of trust
- Provides a motivating work environment
- Stimulates creativity and innovation
- Sets goals (or helps others set goals) and clarifies expectations
- Provides supportive and developmental feedback
- Develops subordinates
- Resolves conflicts
- Builds teams
- Establishes relationships

## In the area of action competencies:

- Creates a vision for the organization/area
- Implements and achieves results

# Research Concept

Additionally, inspired by Gallup's findings on workplace productivity, we sought to understand whether our respondents and their direct supervisors focus more on weaknesses or strengths during employee development.

In our survey, we were interested in whether leaders practice these activities and behaviours themselves, and whether they have perceived these behaviours in the management practices of their direct supervisors recently.

Naturally, we also collected data on several individual demographic and corporate characteristics to determine if any correlate with deliberate leadership practices.

- Does age, gender, foreign language proficiency, years of managerial experience, work location, sense of appreciation, or whether the respondent is a leader of other managers influence the likelihood of applying leadership best practices?
- Does the ownership background of the organization (foreign or Bulgarian) or company size affect the likelihood of demonstrating these leadership behaviours?

# Methods Used in the Survey

We collected our data through an online questionnaire from the fall of 2023 until the spring of 2024.

Our potential respondents were drawn partly from the network of Bulgarian leaders associated and dissociated with Act2Manage and partly from the membership of the American Chamber of Commerce in Bulgaria.

We approached the leaders via e-mail, providing them with the internet link to the questionnaire.

We also utilized our own personal network through social media platforms using a "snowball" method — informing our leadership contacts about the survey and asking them to share the questionnaire link with their own network.

Due to the sampling method, we do not know the number of individuals who received the invitation, and therefore, the exact response rate is also unknown.

However, based on technical data, it is known that 284 respondents completed the questionnaire in full.



# Main Characteristics of Managers

Given that the managers and the companies they represent were selected on a convenience basis rather than by probability sampling, it is worth reviewing the demographic characteristics of the survey participants in more detail.

- 35% of the respondents are women and 65% are men.
- They are mostly experienced managers.
- Their average age is 40 years,
- they have 11 years of managerial experience, have worked at their current workplace for 7 years, and
- have been in their current position for 5 years.
- 66% of the participants are senior executives, meaning that their direct reports are also in managerial positions.

## In terms of the number of subordinates:

- 37% of the leaders in the sample manage 1-10 employees,
- 36% supervise 11-50 staff members,
- while every fourth respondent, that is 27%, is responsible for more than 50 people. (Figure 1)

## In terms of the functional area:

- The largest proportion of respondents, 18-18%, work as General Managers and in IT,
- 16% in HR management,
- 9% in finance,
- 6% in production,
- while 5% work in administration.
- The remaining respondents come from various fields: marketing, sales, research and development, technical roles, legal, and consulting. (Figure 2)

# Main Characteristics of Managers

Figure 1: Distribution by the number of subordinates:

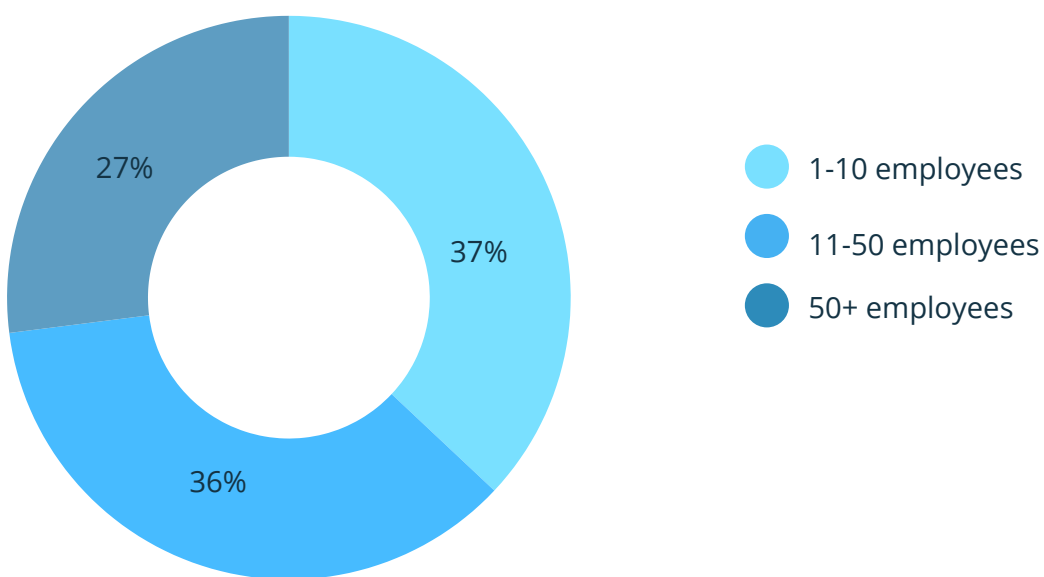
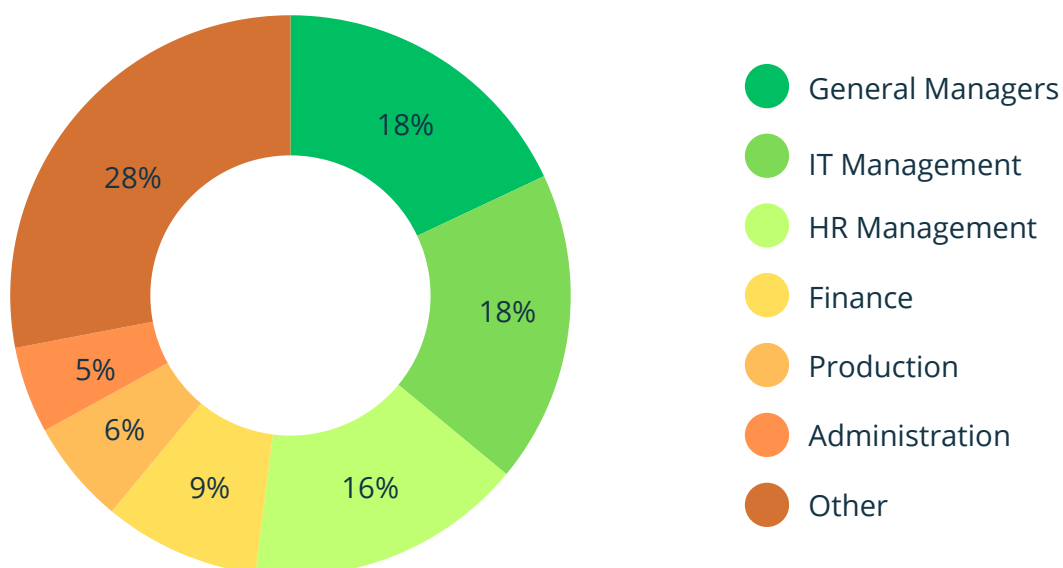


Figure 2: Distribution by functional area:



# Main Characteristics of Managers

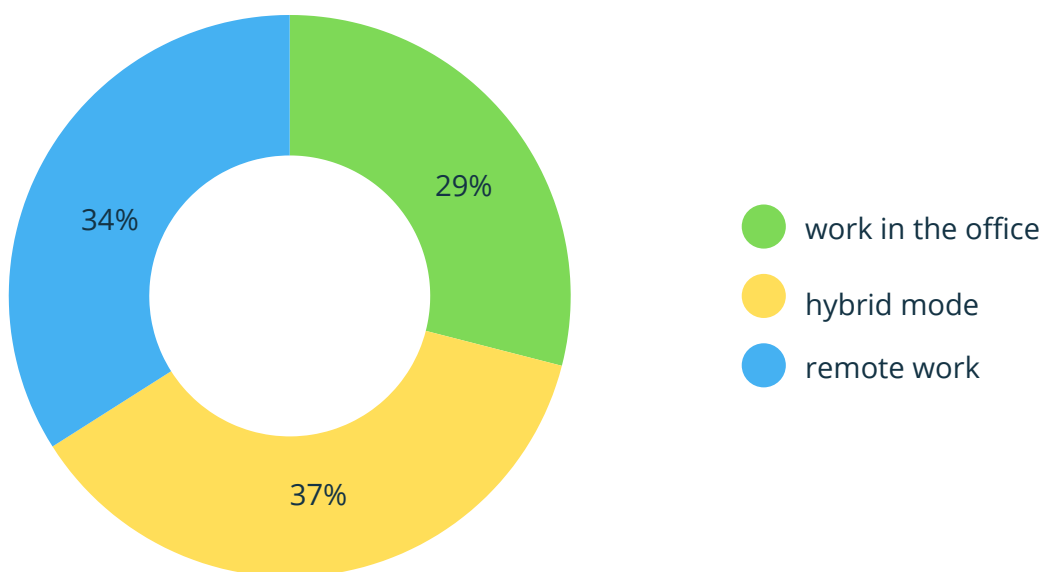
The respondents are characterized by a high level of language proficiency:

- 77% of them reported that they speak at least one foreign language fluently, and
- less than 1% indicated that they do not speak any foreign languages.

29% of the respondents primarily work in the office, the largest proportion, 37%, work in a hybrid mode, spending 2-3 days in the office, and 34% are practically remote workers. (Figure 3)

42% of the managers participating in the survey strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel I am valued in my company." However, 28% could not agree with this.

Figure 3: Distribution by office-hybrid-remote work:



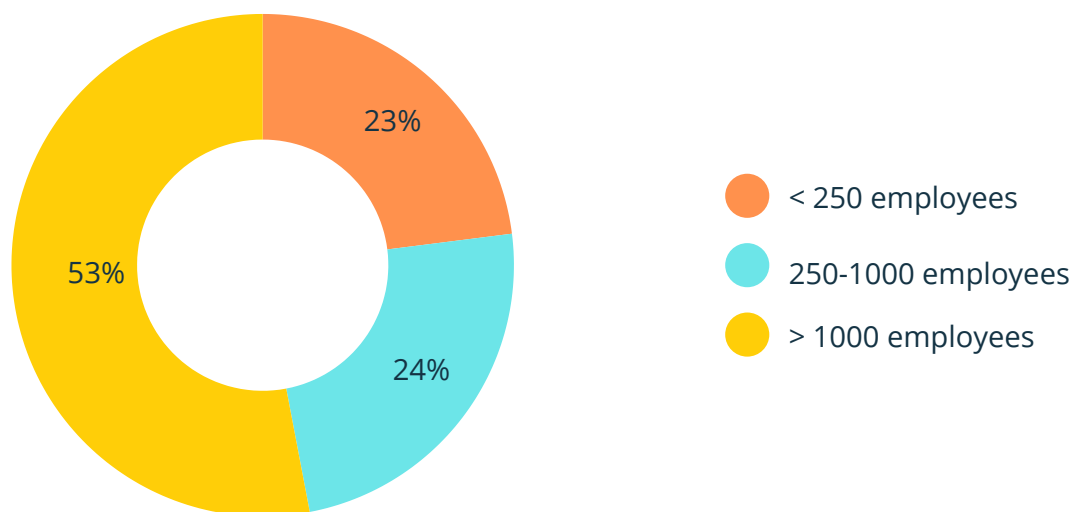
# Characteristics of Companies

Our leaders are employed by companies or organizations that are 80% foreign-owned and 20% has Bulgarian ownership.

Nearly a quarter of the employers, 23%, belong to the small business category with fewer than 250 employees, 24% are medium-sized companies with 250-1000 employees, and more than half, 53%, fall into the large enterprise category with over 1000 employees. (Figure 4)

37% of our respondents are from the IT sector, 11% from financial services, while the remaining half of leaders come from fifteen other industries.

Figure 4: Distribution by company size.



Therefore, our sample is not representative to the managers operating across the entire Bulgarian economy. Our 2023-2024 survey primarily provides insights into the behaviour of leaders working in the Bulgarian business sector, especially in foreign-owned medium and large enterprises.

# Deliberate Leadership: Application of Widely Accepted Management Practices

In our questionnaire, we formulated 19 statements. Of these, 17 are related to the 16 activities and behaviours we selected for deliberate leaders (as described in more details in the research concept), and two statements pertain to a focus on strengths versus weaknesses. Naturally, a single statement does not provide a comprehensive picture of a given activity but only captures one aspect of it.

Based on research literature, we aimed to investigate several factors that drives employee engagement the most, and derived managerial behaviours from them.

Gallup finds: "Managers - more than any other factor - influence team engagement and performance. That's not an exaggeration: 70% of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager."

Since there is a strong correlation between the team leader's behaviour and the engagement level and productivity of the team members, it was important for us to consider how strongly the manager agreed with the statements.

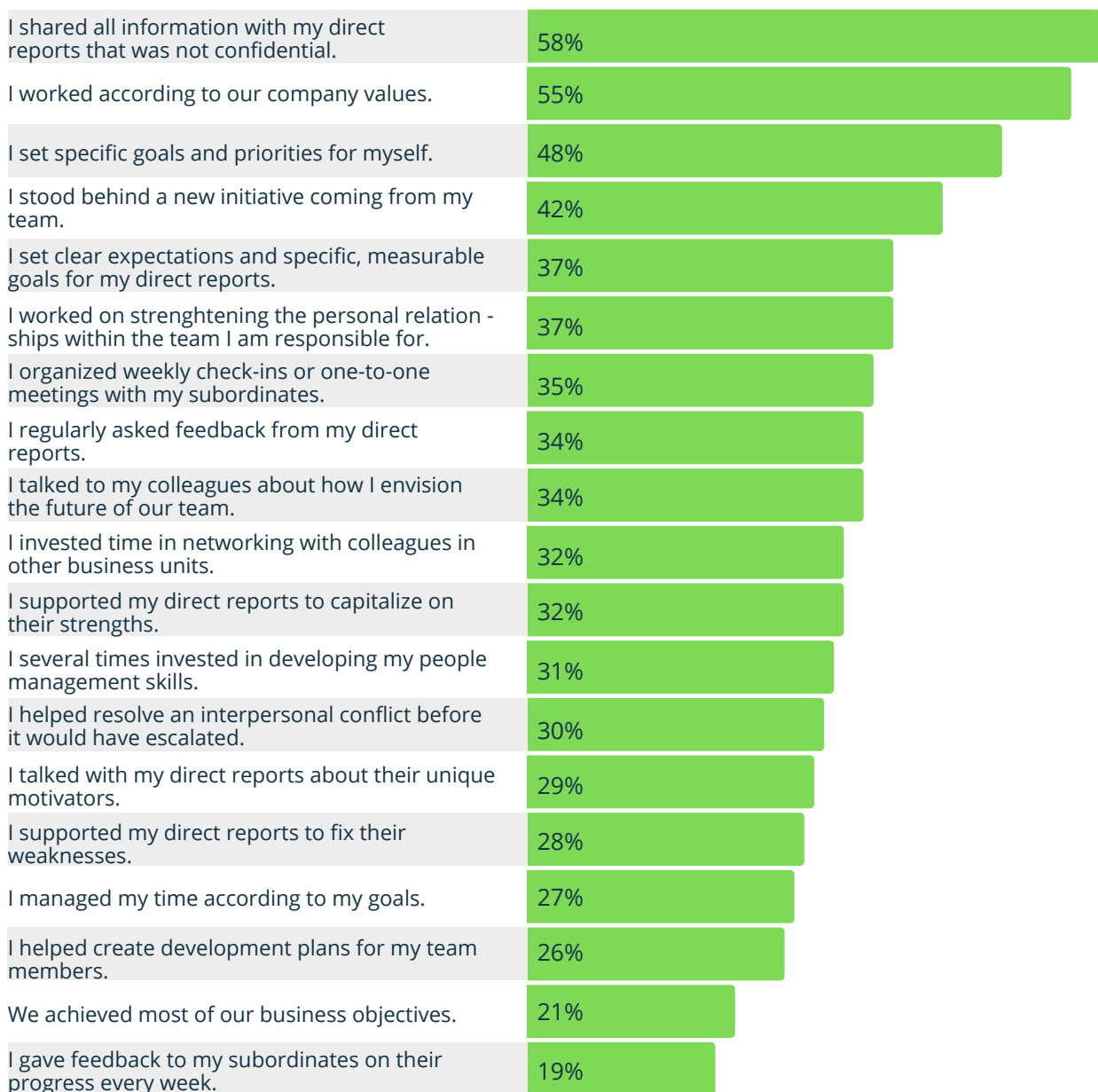
We focused on the extreme positives for each question, giving more weight to those with the strongest relationship to better predict positive and productive outcomes.

We also took into consideration that it is easier to recall our memories when we set the timeframe relatively short, so we used the framing for the statements: "In the last 6 months..."

We used a five point scale and crosschecked how the responses were spread around and we found that the ratings deviated roughly equally, which confirms that the wording of our statements set the range well and also validated to apply extreme positives.

# Deliberate Leadership: Application of Widely Accepted Management Practices

The following figure (5) shows the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed with the statements regarding various leadership behaviours and practices.



# Deliberate Leadership: Application of Widely Accepted Management Practices

The proportions show that the leaders participating in the survey most commonly exhibit behaviours such as sharing information, representing the company's values, and setting goals for themselves.

However, when it comes to engaging with their team members, such as holding regular one-on-one meetings, setting individual goals, giving and requesting feedback, conducting systematic employee development, understanding motivators, or resolving conflicts, only a third, a quarter, or a fifth of the leaders could strongly agree with the corresponding statements.

It's also telling that while

- 48% of our respondents set their own goals and priorities, only
- 27% manage their time accordingly, and only
- 21% clearly state that they have achieved the majority of their business goals.

It is not very favorable that only about a third of the leaders strongly agreed with the statement that they supported their subordinates in building on their strengths (32%) or correcting their weaknesses (28%).

In addition to not prioritizing one of their key leadership responsibilities, which is the development of team members, the remaining two thirds of leaders likely contributed to higher employee turnover.

A Gallup survey conducted in 2005 examined the relationship between various leadership attitudes and a lack of employee engagement. Among leaders who focused on developing their employees' strengths, only 1% of their team members were "actively disengaged" (looking for new jobs). For leaders who focused on correcting weaknesses, this rate was already 22%, while the shocking 40% rate was observed in teams where leaders did not focus on developing either strengths or weaknesses.

# Management Practices Applied by Direct Supervisors

In our survey, we were also interested in how managers perceive their current or former boss in terms of applying these best practices.

Our primary motivation was the concern that the self-report nature of the questionnaire might lead respondents to unintentionally present a more favorable image of themselves. We thought that by examining their perceptions of their direct superiors, we would at least have a control sample to see how much the data might be skewed positively due to self-assessment.

What we found was that, with only one exception, respondents perceived all practices as less characteristic of their superiors compared to themselves. The difference can be as much as 10-20 percentage points, meaning that, in some cases, they perceive the behaviour of their boss to be only half as prevalent as they reported it for themselves.

This could be due to the fact that their superiors indeed practice these behaviours less frequently, or it could be because respondents see themselves in a more positive light. This is likely not intentional and could easily be the result of a cognitive bias known as the "self-serving bias." (Figure 6)

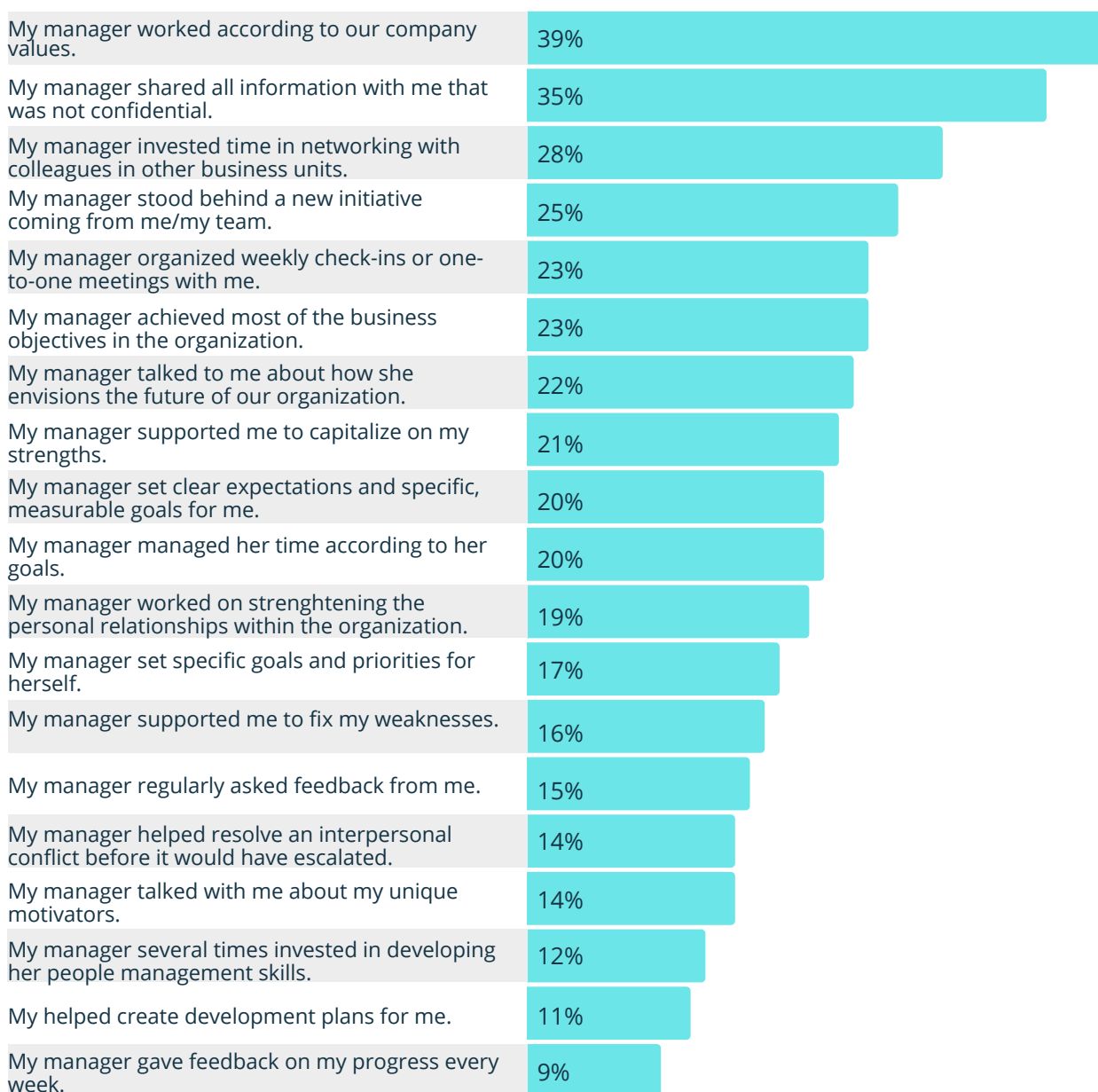
The realistic picture is probably somewhere in the middle — slightly lower than the responses from the self-reported questionnaire, but somewhat higher than the assessments of their superiors.

What is interesting, however, is that at the top end, the most widespread behaviours for both the managers and their superiors include sharing information, representing corporate values, and supporting initiatives from their teams. In the bottom ranks, both groups similarly report a lack of frequent feedback, planned development, and discussions about employee motivators. All of these latter behaviours would require deliberate leadership effort.



# Management Practices Applied by Direct Supervisors

Figure 6: the percentage distributions of those who strongly agreed with the statements:



# Examination of Potential Influencing Factors and Correlations

During our research, we examined whether various individual and corporate demographic factors, as well as the leadership practices applied by direct supervisors, have an influence.

## Female and Male Leaders

Our statistical analysis did not show significant differences between female and male leaders in most of the leadership practices.

Therefore, the notion that female or male leaders are inherently better or worse is mere speculation, not supported by data.

There were only three practices in which women were more engaged than men. Women were more likely to operate according to corporate values and share available information than men (66% vs. 49%, and 72% vs. 55%, respectively).

Additionally, women were more active in building relationships with colleagues from other departments (40% vs. 26%).

## Generation X Leaders and Younger Leaders (Generations Y and Z)

Although much has been written about the differences between the younger Generations Y and Z vs. Generation X, there were no significant differences in their leadership practices.

We found an over 10 percentage point difference in just two statements, both in favor of Generation X. They were more likely to operate according to corporate values (+18%) and set specific, measurable goals for their subordinates (+22%). Therefore, neither greater experience nor youthful energy caused significant differences in 90% of the leadership practices examined.

It appears that age is not a distinguishing factor in leadership consciousness.

# Examination of Potential Influencing Factors and Correlations

## Language Skills

Our research revealed that respondents with fluent foreign language skills outperformed others in four areas:

- building relationships with colleagues from other departments (+20%),
- creating development plans for team members (+11%),
- discussing vision (+12%) and
- developing weaknesses (+11%).

Those without high level foreign language skills were more likely to set goals for themselves (+15%) and request feedback from their subordinates (+11%).

## New and Experienced Managers

Respondents who have been in people management roles for at least 5 years were more likely to manage their time according to their goals (+12%).

Unfortunately, the amount of experience did not cause significant differences in any other practices.

Newly appointed leaders were more likely to

- operate according to corporate values (+19%),
- share available information (+13%),
- build on strengths (+27%), and
- work on correcting weaknesses (+15%).

These last two practices show that newly appointed managers tend to invest more effort in developing their team members.

# Examination of Potential Influencing Factors and Correlations

## Leaders of Leaders

It appears that leaders in higher positions, managing managers, differ significantly from other respondents in only two areas.

They are 15 percentage points more likely to set specific goals for themselves but, surprisingly, 15 percentage points less likely to build relationships with colleagues from other areas.

## Hybrid Work

In almost all leadership behaviours, those working in a hybrid model (2-3 days in the office) applied the practices at the highest rate.

The leadership behaviours we examined were 10-29% more prevalent among hybrid workers in

- setting specific goals for themselves and managing their time accordingly,
- setting clear, measurable goals for their colleagues,
- holding weekly one-on-one meetings,
- focusing on planned development for team members by building on strengths and addressing weaknesses,
- sharing available information and
- building relationships with colleagues in other areas of the organization.

It seems that hybrid-working leaders take the leadership activities included in our survey more seriously than those who work entirely in the office or remotely.

# Examination of Potential Influencing Factors and Correlations

## The Impact of Feeling Valued

Respondents who fully agreed with the statement "I feel valued at work" stood out in several areas of leadership practices compared to others.

- They were more likely to support initiatives from their team (+24%),
- work on strengthening relationships within the team (+23%),
- regularly request feedback (+17%),
- invest time in their own leadership development (+17%),
- set specific goals for themselves (+16%) and
- manage their time accordingly (+16%),
- discover what motivates their colleagues (+15%),
- build relationships with other departments (+15%),
- work on developing their colleagues' weaknesses (+14%),
- and operate according to corporate values (+14%).

## Bulgarian and International Companies

In our research, we found that four leadership practices were more prevalent in foreign-owned companies, while two practices were more common in Bulgarian-owned firms.

In international companies, weekly one-on-one meetings (+19%), sharing information with colleagues (+16%), operating according to corporate values (+13%), and creating development plans for employees (+12%) were more frequent.

Among respondents working in Bulgarian-owned companies, supporting new initiatives from the team (+16%) and building relationships with other areas (+12%) were more widespread.

# Examination of Potential Influencing Factors and Correlations

## Small, Medium, and Large Companies

In nearly a third of the leadership practices we examined, the larger the organization, the more common the practice. These include regularly requesting feedback, sharing information, and systematically developing employees: weekly one-on-one meetings, building on strengths, and addressing weaknesses.

It can be assumed that larger companies allocate more resources to leadership development, so these practices are better integrated into daily leadership activities.

There were no practices that were more typical of small companies.

## The Impact of Leadership Practices Applied by Direct Supervisors

When designing our research, we thought that the leadership practices applied by direct supervisors would significantly influence the respondents' own leadership behaviours. Following norms and learning from good and bad examples seemed important.

However, statistical analysis showed a low correlation between the practices observed from supervisors and the respondents' own practices (0.17-0.38).

In previous, similar surveys, we reached the same conclusion: the leadership practices of superiors do not significantly influence the application of the practices we examined.

While imitation and following examples are important ways of learning during childhood, it seems that our adult leadership behaviour is shaped by other factors. It is also possible that modeling occurs in other behavioural characteristics, not in the leadership practices we examined.

As we have seen before, the size and ownership of the company, which are decisive in terms of organizational culture, are much stronger influencing factors than the leadership behaviour of superiors.

# Conclusions

Although we can't consider our survey representative to the Bulgarian leadership population, it provides an insight into people management practices and behaviours that correlate the most with employee engagement, like our finding that [Bulgarian managers put primary focus on their personal productivity and are less engaged in activities related to their team members.](#)

Considering the 19 practices we have investigated, neither the years of managerial experience nor holding a senior executive position or gender or generational demographics affect their application.

Interestingly, those [working in a hybrid way apply leadership practices significantly more often](#), however it requires more research to better understand the reasons behind. [Caring of and listening to our managers seem to be a clear benefit as those who strongly felt being valued at work are more likely to apply half of the nineteen practices.](#)

Our research puts a challenge on the popular belief of leading by example: we constantly find low correlation between the manager's and the supervisor's leadership behaviour.

We do not tend to easily copycat positive, impactful and beneficial behaviours, contrary to the negative, less productive ones.

[Behavioural science can explain our finding: "hard to do" behaviours require more motivation and cognitive effort while we tend to mimic and follow more the "easy to do" ones.](#)

# Conclusions

Comparing the results of the same research we conducted in Hungary, we can conclude that there are no significant differences between the application of people management practices between the countries, although it seems that Bulgarian managers tend to build their development strategies a bit more on the strengths of the team members rather than on their weaknesses.

On one hand, it is welcomed that managers put more focus on strengths instead of weaknesses, on the other hand, there's still a long way to go as Gallup reports that using our strengths in 50% of our working time still leaves us in the disengaged zone.

The overall results paint a very sad picture about mainstream leadership development solutions: despite dinosaurs of trainings, a large proportion of managers are not able to turn knowledge into action.

The current efforts seem to revolve around a false assumption: if people understand it, they will do it. We can all witness, every single day, that it is simply not true.

We oversimplify our teaching approaches and methodologies, and fail to find the missing link to bridge the knowing-doing gap: to support changing behaviour.



# How Can the Act2Manage Team Help You?

Our development programmes are designed to address the most pressing challenges faced by leaders and organizations.

We make change and transformation sustainable by applying insights from behavioral science, neuroscience, adult learning methodologies, and positive psychology.

Our approach helps uncover specific organizational challenges and provides targeted, actionable solutions to drive meaningful improvements in performance and engagement. Not only are our solutions more efficient and effective than traditional methods, but we also measure behavioral change in real-time through our on-the-job app, delivering a far better ROI.

Ultimately, the true winners are the employees, who benefit from capable and confident managers that enhance their productivity and engagement.

We believe that leadership development is key to unlocking the potential of both individuals and organizations. Our mission is to empower leaders with the practical skills and knowledge they need to create thriving workplaces.



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