

WHITEPAPER



InspireOne
Performance, Inspired

The Invisible Passage

Why India's Most Overlooked Leadership Transition
Can Make or Break Your Organisation's Future

InspireOne Consultants Pvt. Ltd.

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Executive Summary

Every year, thousands of high-performing managers across Indian organisations are quietly set up to fail. They are promoted from leading a team of people to leading a team of managers - a move that looks like a routine step up but is, in reality, one of the most complex leadership transitions in any organisational hierarchy.

This white paper argues that the Manager-of-Managers (MoM) transition is not a promotion: it is a fundamental reinvention of professional identity, values, and craft. Drawing on three decades of global research - from Ram Charan's Leadership Pipeline, William Bridges' transitions framework, and Dr Michael

Watkins' first 90 days methodology - alongside field evidence from McKinsey, Harvard Business Review, DDI World, and InspireOne's own practice across Indian organisations, we make the case that without a structured transition program, the cost in human capital, business performance, and organisational resilience is enormous.

We present InspireOne's Transition to Transform: Managing Managers - a purpose-built, research-backed transition journey designed specifically for the Indian context - and explain why it represents the most important leadership investment organisations can make right now.

67%



of transitioning MoMs report a capability gap

Source: McKinsey Global Survey

23%



improvement in team performance

Source: McKinsey / HBR / Gallup

17%



reduction in employee turnover

Source: McKinsey / HBR / Gallup

The Indian Context: A Structural Blindspot

India is in the middle of an extraordinary leadership acceleration. With one of the world's youngest workforces and some of its fastest-growing organisations, the rate at which high-performers are promoted into managerial roles is unprecedented. According to McKinsey's Global Survey on Middle Management, almost half of managers' time is devoted to non-managerial work - a figure that is even more pronounced in Indian organisations where role clarity and structural empowerment remain perennial gaps.

Yet most Indian organisations invest heavily in two development moments: early-career programmes for high-potential individual contributors, and leadership programmes for senior and C-suite leaders. The critical transition layer - the move from Manager of People to Manager of Managers - falls into a structural blindspot. It is assumed that because someone has been a good manager, they will naturally become a good manager of managers. Research, and practice, tells a sharply different story.

“

Middle managers have had so much piled onto them. Their development, their well-being, has often been an afterthought. We have to make up for it, because when we think about creating resilient organisations, resiliency starts with having a really strong middle management team.

”

- McKinsey & Company, 2023

Understanding the Passage: What Global Research Tells Us

Three interconnected bodies of scholarly work converge to explain why the Manager-of-Managers transition is uniquely demanding - and uniquely neglected.

Ram Charan's Leadership Pipeline: The 'Passage Two' Problem

In their landmark work The Leadership Pipeline, Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel mapped six critical passages that every leader must navigate through

an organisation's hierarchy. Each passage requires not just new skills, but a transformation in how the leader applies their time and, most critically, what they value.

Passage Two - from Managing Others to Managing Managers - is the level at which the company's management foundation is built. The key requirements of this passage are profound:

- Managers must become pure management - individual contribution must no longer define their identity or value.
- They must learn to select, assess, and develop managers - not just individual contributors.
- They must coach first-line managers on how to manage, not just what to deliver.
- They must identify and address value-based resistance to managerial work within their teams.
- They must return people to individual-contributor roles if those people are not suited for management.

The trap is subtle but devastating. Most high-performing managers who reach this passage were promoted because of their individual brilliance. The very qualities that made them exceptional - deep technical knowledge, hands-on problem solving, personal accountability for outcomes - now become liabilities.

Passage Two in the Indian Context

In rapidly growing Indian organisations, Passage Two is further complicated by flat hierarchies, informal reporting cultures, and the social weight of seniority. A newly minted Manager of Managers often finds it personally uncomfortable to hold their former peers - now their direct reports - accountable for people development outcomes rather than task delivery. Without a structured transition framework, this discomfort becomes avoidance, and the pipeline quietly clogs.

William Bridges' Transitions: The Emotional Architecture of Change

In his foundational work *Managing Transitions*, Bridges drew a distinction that most organisations miss entirely: the difference between a change (an external event - a title, a new team, a new reporting structure) and a transition (the internal, psychological process of becoming someone new). Organisations plan for change. They rarely plan for transition.

Bridges identified three stages every individual must navigate:

- **Endings (Letting Go):** The new Manager of Managers must first grieve what they are leaving behind - their identity as a technical expert, their pride in personal execution, their psychological safety.
- **The Neutral Zone:** This disorienting in-between space is the most dangerous phase. Research shows that anxiety rises, motivation dips, and people regress to old behaviours - micromanaging, bypassing direct-report managers, reverting to individual contribution.
- **New Beginnings:** Only when individuals receive the right

support through the neutral zone do they cross into genuine new beginnings - adopting a new identity, new values, and new sources of professional satisfaction.

A transition programme for Managers of Managers cannot be purely cognitive (new skills, new frameworks). It must also be emotionally intelligent, creating structured space for leaders to acknowledge what they are leaving behind before they can fully embrace what is ahead.

Dr Michael Watkins: The First 90 Days and the Cost of Getting It Wrong

Dr Michael Watkins' research reveals that a quarter of all managers in major organisations enter new leadership roles each year - and that missteps made in the first three months are powerful predictors of ultimate derailment. His research demonstrates that the average tenure of vice-presidents has dropped from 3.2 years to 2.2 years, placing a dramatic premium on transition velocity.

For the Manager of Managers specifically, Watkins' framework

surfaces critical imperatives:

- **Accelerate your learning:**
Understand the team of teams you are now responsible for - their dynamics, their manager capabilities, their developmental readiness.
- **Promote yourself:** Mentally and behaviourally step out of your old role.
- **Secure early wins at the right level:**
Early wins must now be about team and manager performance, not personal output.

- **Build your team:** This means building a team of effective managers - which requires a completely different talent lens.
- **Create alliances:** The stakeholder map expands significantly; peer managers, cross-functional leaders, and senior sponsors all require new relational investment.

Watkins' framework anchors transition theory in practical, time-bound action, making it an ideal structural backbone for a Manager-of-Managers programme.

Three Lenses, One Transition

The power of InspireOne's approach lies in integrating these three scholarly traditions into a coherent, contextually relevant framework:

Scholar	Core Contribution	Focus Area	InspireOne Application
Ram Charan (Leadership Pipeline)	Six leadership passages; Passage 2 = Manager of Managers	Skills, values & time-use shifts at each level	Foundation for role re- definition in the MoM transition
William Bridges (Managing Transitions)	Endings → Neutral Zone → New Beginnings	Internal, psychological journey through change	Emotional & identity dimension of the MoM transition
Dr Michael Watkins (The First 90 Days)	10-step framework for leader transitions	Practical on-the-job strategies in new roles	90-day action execution built into the journey

The Scale of the Problem: What the Research Reveals

Performance and Productivity

McKinsey's Global Survey on Middle Management found that managers spend nearly one full day every week on administrative work, and devote less than a third of their time to talent and people management. Companies with high middle-management turnover experience a 20 per cent decline in organisational performance.

Skill Gaps and Derailment

A DDI World survey found that 67 per cent of middle managers believe they lack the skills to balance strategic and tactical responsibilities effectively. Research by Harvard Business Review found that 52 per cent of middle managers experience significant stress due to unclear roles and excessive workload. Only 30 per cent of middle managers in a Gallup survey reported receiving any formal leadership training at this level.

The Sandwich Paradox

Academic research has consistently described the Manager of Managers as occupying a 'sandwich' position - caught between strategic mandates from above and operational realities from below.

Scholars describe this condition as one of 'perpetual liminality' - always in-between, constantly negotiating identity. Without the tools to navigate this consciously, managers either over-delegate upward (becoming bottlenecks), under-delegate downward (becoming micromanagers), or disengage entirely.

The Hidden Cost Calculation

Consider a mid-sized Indian organisation with 50 Managers of Managers. If each spends even 20% of their time working below their level - doing the work their direct-report managers should be doing - the organisation is losing the equivalent of 10 full management salaries in misapplied capability every year. The talent pipeline beneath them also stagnates, as those managers never fully develop. The true cost is not a line item: it is systemic.

The Innovation Imperative

Harvard Business Review's research on the 'Middle Manager as Innovator' argues compellingly that it is precisely this layer of the hierarchy, with fingers on the pulse of both strategy and operations - that conceives, suggests, and sets in motion new ideas that top management may never have conceived. Organisations that leave their Managers of Managers undertransitioned are not just losing performance, they are losing innovation capacity.

The InspireOne Response: Transition to Transform

The power of InspireOne's approach lies in integrating these three scholarly traditions into a coherent, contextually relevant framework:

Key Themes of the Programme

Based on InspireOne's research, Managers of Managers need development on three key themes:

1. TRANSITION MANAGEMENT

- Accepting and owning the Manager of Managers role by redefining expectations, influence, and identity
- Building the self-awareness and empathy required to lead in complexity

2. BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL AGILITY

- Strengthening strategic thinking to respond effectively to a dynamic environment
- Leading and accelerating change through clarity, alignment, and disciplined follow-through
- Leading diverse teams while strengthening talent development, collaboration, and shared accountability

3. LEADING INNOVATION

- Empowering Managers of Managers to champion innovation within their spheres of influence
- Building a Generative AI mindset, enabling them to cascade and scale AI-driven innovation across their teams

Indicative Programme Architecture: The 14-Week Journey

The programme is structured across three interconnected phases, mirroring the Bridges transition model while embedding Charan's pipeline content and Watkins' 90-day action framework:

PHASE 1 MOVING FROM ENDING TO TRANSITION	
Week 1	Pre-Assessment Launch: Leadership Behaviour Assessment
Week 2	Half-Day VILT 1: Understanding Transitions & Leading with EI
Week 4	Pre-Workshop Simulation: Transitioning Manager-of-Managers
Week 5	Gamified Learning Module: Understanding Transitions & Leading with EI (Master-O®)
PHASE 2 NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION	
Week 6	Harvard ManageMentor® Module: Career Management
Week 7	In-Person 2-Day Workshop: Building Organisational Agility
Week 8	Gamified Learning Module: Strategic Change Management & People Leadership (Master-O®)
Week 9	Group Coaching: Debrief on Application Assignment (Watkins' First 90 Days)

PHASE 3 TRANSITIONING TOWARDS NEW BEGINNINGS

Week 11	Half-Day VILT 2: Leading Innovation with Gen AI
Week 12	Gamified Learning Module: Fostering Innovation with AI (Master-O®)
Week 14	Post-Assessment Launch: Leadership Behaviour Assessment

Programme Components

The T2T programme integrates nine carefully sequenced learning components:

14-Week Learning Journey	Structured progression across 3 phases mirroring the Bridges transition model
In-Person 2-Day Workshop	Building Organisational Agility - immersive, facilitated, case-based
2 Half-Day VILTs	VILT 1: Transition Management VILT 2: Leading Innovation with Gen AI
Leadership Simulation: <i>The Transition</i>	Customised, immersive simulation which enables leaders to successfully transition through critical decisions
Gamified Learning (Master-O®)	3 microlearning modules; 10x higher engagement, 300% higher skill retention
Harvard ManageMentor®	42 modules, 230 lessons; content refreshed 4x per year

Application Assignment	Watkins' First 90 Days framework applied to real transition context
Group Coaching Session	Live coaching + peer learning debrief on application assignment
Pre & Post Leadership Assessment	Behavioural measurement to track needle movement

Phase 1: The Ending - Recognising What You Are Leaving Behind

This phase creates the space that most organisations skip: honest, facilitated reflection on professional identity and what must be released. Participants engage in structured diagnostics to understand their current values orientation, their current time allocation, and their implicit assumptions about what good performance looks like. Drawing on InspireOne's proprietary Leadership Behavioural Assessment, leaders identify the specific identity attachments most likely to derail their transition - and begin the cognitive and emotional work of releasing them.

Phase 2: The Neutral Zone - Building the Manager of Managers Capability Set

This is the core skill-building phase, grounded in Ram Charan's Passage Two competencies and Dr Watkins' transition imperatives.

- Selecting and assessing managers - evaluating managerial capability and making courageous placement decisions.
- Strategic thinking under BANI conditions - external and internal environment analysis, strategy choice canvas.
- Leading change - change agility, the Change Acceleration Process, aligning systems and structures.
- Leading diverse teams - multigenerational workforce dynamics, inclusive leadership, career conversations.
- Driving accountability through collaboration - shifting from functional to enterprise mindset.

This phase is delivered through facilitated workshops, peer learning cohorts, case-based simulations (including the Leadership Simulation: The Transition), Harvard ManageMentor® modules, and gamified microlearning on Master-O®.

Phase 3: New Beginnings - The 90-Day Action Architecture

Drawing explicitly on Dr Watkins' framework, participants complete an Application Assignment designing their own First 90 Days transition plan. A structured Group Coaching session then provides live coaching and peer learning debrief, ensuring that learning translates into sustained behaviour change. The journey concludes with a Post- Leadership Behavioural Assessment to measure needle movement in leadership behaviours.

Leadership Learning, Reimagined: The Blended Platform

InspireOne's T2T programme offers a blended leadership development journey that combines the scale and consistency of digital learning with the depth and impact of human-led experiences.

One Integrated Digital Learning Platform

- Centralised platform for learning content and progress insights
- Self-paced learning on Harvard ManageMentor® - 42 modules, 230 lessons, refreshed 4x per year
- Gamified microlearning via Master-O® - challenges, points, badges for sustained engagement
- 60% of digitally enabled learning journeys report measurable improvements in learning efficiency

Human Touch Points That Matter

- Facilitated, high-impact in-person workshops
- VILTs to align learning with organisational realities
- Group coaching for mindset shifts, accountability, and real-world application
- Peer learning and reflection sessions for sustained cohort accountability

Master-O®: Gamified Microlearning

Gamified microlearning modules delivered through Master-O® reinforce key concepts through interactive learning experiences and skill-building challenges. Master-O® enables companies to modernise frontline readiness with measurable impact:

10x



higher engagement

300%



higher skill retention

70%



faster go-to-market

50%



less daily downtime

The T2T programme includes three dedicated Master-O® modules: Understanding Transitions & Leading with EI (Week 5), Strategic Change Management & People Leadership (Week 8), and Fostering Innovation with Gen AI (Week 12).

Harvard ManageMentor®: World-Class Digital Learning

Fuelled by the latest thinking and proven practices from Harvard Business Publishing's world-class experts, Harvard ManageMentor® delivers actionable learning for today's busy leaders. Research-based 42 modules comprising 230 lessons from Harvard Business School, Harvard Business Review, industry experts, and an advisory panel. Harvard ManageMentor® drives learning transfer and business impact through an innovative work-based learning approach that focuses on application of skills on the job. Content is refreshed four times a year. Participants earn a Harvard Business Impact Certificate on completion.

Why Now: The Indian Leadership Imperative

India's economic ambition is well documented. The country is targeting a 2030 GDP of \$7 trillion and is home to some of the world's fastest-growing companies across technology, manufacturing, financial services, and consumer sectors. Achieving this ambition requires not just capital and markets - it requires leaders.

The quality of management at the Manager-of-Managers level will determine whether Indian organisations can execute strategy, develop the next generation of leaders, and sustain the pace of growth that their ambitions demand. As research consistently shows, the middle of the hierarchy is where strategy either translates into action or quietly dies.

There is also a generational dimension. India's millennial and Gen Z workforce - now the largest cohort in most organisations - does not tolerate poor management. Gallup research on engagement consistently identifies the direct manager as the single most important factor in employee experience. The Manager of Managers shapes the culture and capability of an entire layer of direct managers, who in turn shape the daily experience of thousands of frontline employees.

The multiplier effect is enormous.

Finally, the pace of transition itself has accelerated dramatically. Dr Watkins' research documents a 30 per cent reduction in average leadership tenure at senior levels since 2013. Indian organisations are experiencing similar compression. Leaders move faster, are expected to perform faster, and have less time to find their footing. A structured transition programme is not a luxury: it is a risk mitigation strategy.

The InspireOne Advantage

InspireOne has spent over two decades working with India's most respected organisations to build leadership capability at every level of the hierarchy. Our work with Managers of Managers is grounded in three distinctive capabilities:

Contextual Depth

We understand the specific cultural dynamics of Indian organisations - the weight of hierarchy, the informality of relationships, the complexity of matrix structures, the challenge of giving candid developmental feedback

within a relationship-oriented culture. Our programmes are not global models adapted for India: they are built from Indian organisational realities up.

Research Integration

We understand the specific cultural dynamics of Indian organisations - the weight of hierarchy, the informality of relationships, the complexity of matrix structures, the challenge of giving candid developmental feedback

Sustained Impact

We design for transfer, not for training. Our programmes include structured 90-day post-programme support, peer coaching cohorts, and organisational impact metrics that demonstrate ROI. We measure not just participant satisfaction, but managerial behaviour change and team performance outcomes.

Our Client Impact

InspireOne is India's leading leadership and organisation development firm, with more than 25 years of experience. Our footprint of delivery capabilities spans 1,000 consultants across 50 locations and over 80 countries.

India's most respected organisations. We are exclusive partners to Harvard Business Impact for India. Our clients include Acuity Analytics, Blue Star, Mahindra, Siemens, TVS, Bajaj Finserv, Airtel, Carlsberg, Kohler, and many more of

Recommendations for Organisations

Based on the evidence presented in this white paper, we recommend that Indian organisations take the following actions:

- **Audit your transition gap:** Identify how many people in your organisation are currently operating in the Manager-of-Managers role without having received structured transition support.
- **Recognise the transition as a distinct development moment:** The move from Manager of People to Manager of Managers is not a continuation of the same journey. Treat it as a separate, critical passage.
- **Design for both skill and identity:** A transition programme that

- addresses only new skills will have limited impact. Effective programmes must also address the values shift and identity transformation that Passage Two demands.
- Build in emotional scaffolding: Drawing on Bridges' work, create structured space for leaders to acknowledge what they are leaving behind before asking them to embrace what is ahead.
- Anchor in 90-day action: Drawing on Watkins' framework, ensure that every transition participant leaves with a specific, time-bound action plan for the first three months of their new role identity.
- Measure at the right level: Evaluate success by tracking managerial behaviour change, direct-report manager development, and team performance outcomes - not just programme satisfaction scores.

Conclusion

The Manager-of-Managers transition is the invisible passage of Indian organisational life. It is the moment that determines whether the leadership pipeline flows or clogs, whether the middle of the hierarchy becomes a transmission belt or a traffic jam, whether the organisation's strategic intent translates into real-world execution or quietly dissipates.

The research is unambiguous, the stakes are high, and the solution is clear. Organisations that invest in structured, research-grounded transition programmes for their Managers of Managers will build a more resilient leadership pipeline, a more engaged workforce, and a more capable organisation. Those that continue to treat this transition as routine will continue to pay the invisible cost.

InspireOne's Transition to Transform programme exists to eliminate that cost. We invite you to begin the conversation.

About InspireOne

InspireOne Consultants Pvt. Ltd. is India's leading leadership development firm, with over two decades of experience partnering with India's most respected organisations to build leadership capability at every level. We work across sectors including technology, manufacturing, financial services, healthcare, and consumer goods, with a distinctive approach that integrates global research with deep contextual understanding of Indian organisations.

We help organisations and leaders achieve sustainable growth through our strategic framework for developing future-ready organisations - RISE. Our solutions are developed on the global and researched know-how of our global partners - Tack TMI. We are exclusive partners to Harvard Business Impact to bring their flagship digital learning solutions to clients across India.



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