

The Manager's Guide to
**Uncertain
Economic
Times**



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6 Mistakes to Avoid When the Outlook Is Hazy

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Dealing with **ambiguity**

Complicated. Complex. **Uncertain.**

Or as your Magic 8 Ball might have said, “Cannot Predict Now.”

We’re running out of ways to describe our complicated economic landscape. And for good reason. There are:

- Lingering concerns about inflation and recession
- Worries of additional interest rate hikes
- Labor market and supply chain pressures
- Persistent skill gaps worsened by the Great Resignation

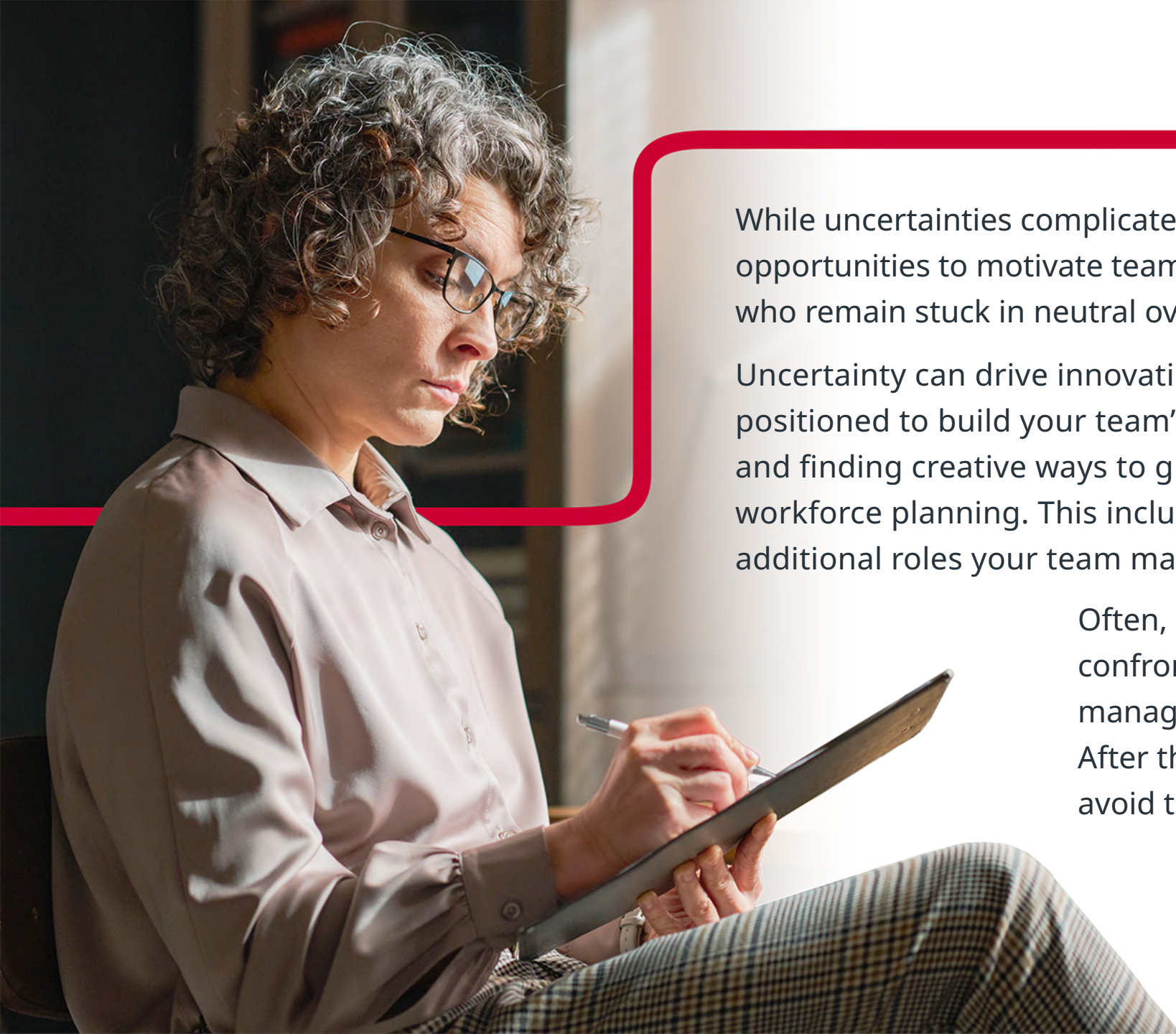
This guide can help managers better navigate expected and unexpected workplace challenges, avoid missteps, and maximize opportunities to build successful teams.



Uncertain times present both **challenges and opportunities**

It's well known that business uncertainties make it more difficult for leaders to steer a company, but a sense of haziness about the future can filter down to every manager, as well. Economic and market circumstances that continue to be in flux may result in unclear or conflicting company and departmental priorities, sudden shifts in leadership, and varying decisions about hiring and salary limitations. All of these can make it especially challenging for managers to maintain productivity and morale within their teams.





While uncertainties complicate managers' jobs, they can also present opportunities to motivate teams, move forward and pass competitors who remain stuck in neutral over fear of the unknown.

Uncertainty can drive innovation. As a leader, you are uniquely positioned to build your team's resilience by boosting their skills and finding creative ways to grow the organization with flexible workforce planning. This includes anticipating future skills and additional roles your team may need.

Often, accomplishing these goals requires first confronting potential pitfalls and the mistakes managers can make during uncertain times. After that, managers must strategize how to avoid them.

MISTAKE NO.1:

Letting **uncertainty** get in the way of **progress**

INSTEAD: Promote a resilient, forward-thinking mindset.

Uncertainty makes employees worry. They know that changes might come, but they don't know exactly what or when.

The sense of a cloudy future isn't always caused by economic uncertainty. Changes such as an unprecedented event, introduction of new technologies, shifting consumer tastes, and disruption in an organization's structure or leadership can also create worry and stress. That makes building resilience — the ability to more readily adjust to change — within yourself and your team an essential managerial skill.

“Guide and support your team to find their inner resilience. My approach is always to emphasize the positive. Being negative in an uncertain environment puts you and your organization in an even more vulnerable position.”

— *Trey Barnette, Regional Director, Robert Half*



What you need to know

- Professionals often stay in or leave a job based on their manager. Your employees will take their cues from you in times of uncertainty, so demonstrate the behaviors you expect from them, including not letting ambiguity immobilize them. If you remain poised, adaptable and positive, your staff will be more likely to follow suit.
- Your team members need to know that their group and individual efforts are paying off. Learn and share how they are objectively making a difference for your organization and customers. It'll help your staff move forward confidently with their projects rather than being hesitant or skeptical.
- Many leaders feel isolated as they face continual change and uncertainty. This is when it's most important to reach out to your network for support and perspective.



Get started **now**

- ✓ Boost your team's repertoire. Cross-training among employees will give them the skills and confidence to contribute in new and different capacities. This goes a long way in reassuring them during uncertain times.
- ✓ Tap your team members at all levels for their observations about roadblocks they're encountering in their work and challenge them to come up with solutions. Offer to help your staff oil their creative gears by brainstorming with them.
- ✓ Don't stop building your team. Some employers are adopting a more measured approach to recruiting, but firms slow to hire risk losing their top choices to competitors making job offers faster. Avoid letting uncertainty stop you from augmenting your workforce.
- ✓ Cut yourself some slack. As a manager, challenges can come at you from all directions at once. Acknowledge when you're struggling, and work with your own manager and your team to generate ideas that will keep you moving forward.

“ It's OK to show your team you're human, to be transparent and empathetic with them. I often ask my direct reports, 'Who do I need to do a quick check-in with?' Unplanned outreach is authentic and important in good and bad times. ”

— Megan Slabinski, District Director, Robert Half



MISTAKE NO.2:

Rushing to **cut costs**

INSTEAD: Maintain a long-range talent strategy.

Every business has to make hard decisions about staffing levels from time to time, but don't let uncertainty blind you to the risks of putting a full stop on hiring. The best managers recognize that strong teams are hired, built and invested in over time, during all economic conditions.

Retention must remain a priority, too. When a company tries to cut costs by freezing promotions or reducing benefits, the first employees to leave are often the best performers. This drags the company's bottom line down further, along with its reputation as an employer of choice. The ripple effects of losing key talent can cost more than would be saved by freezing salaries.



What you need to know

- It's hard to predict when you'll have to hire, so always remain on the lookout for fresh talent. A top performer may unexpectedly quit, or your company may enter a period of rapid growth.
- Over the past couple of years, salary increases were key in attracting talent but created pay inequities between new and tenured employees in some companies. And many workers have noticed. To maintain equitable pay, consult trusted resources such as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Statistics Canada and the Robert Half Salary Guide.
- When budgets are tight, promote non-monetary perks and flexible work arrangements that are highly valued and tend to increase employee engagement. Examples include remote and hybrid work options, additional time off, and nontraditional schedules.
- Give workers a challenge. People crave new opportunities to expand their skills. Create stretch assignments for team members. If they feel stagnant in their careers, they'll look elsewhere for their next role.

“Keep in mind that pay and benefits were a big part of your employees' decision to join your team. For them, it was a contract. When considering cuts, try not to damage this priceless trust.”

— Brenda Arnold, Supplier Inclusion Program Manager, Robert Half



Get started **now**

- ✓ Make your people a top priority. Ensure they feel valued, know their work is appreciated and want to remain with your firm. Work closely with them to help them grow their career.
- ✓ Identify skill gaps, and address them by upskilling internal staff, bringing in contract professionals or hiring for new permanent roles.
- ✓ Find out which perks and benefits your employees value most via workplace surveys or one-on-one feedback.
- ✓ Stay in contact with your professional network, including trusted talent solutions firms, to learn about promising potential hires.



MISTAKE NO.3:

Letting heavy workloads push people **beyond their limits**

INSTEAD: Understand and address the pressures your team members are experiencing with empathy and solutions.

With some companies taking a more deliberative hiring approach, employees are commonly dealing with heavy workloads. Many teams are running lean, and a portion of your employees are almost certainly struggling to keep up.

“Managers are in one sense ‘first responders’ for employee mental health. They’re in the position to notice and reach out when team members are struggling. So make sure you are prepared to address your employees’ concerns and needs. You’ll come up with a better game plan to help them that way.”

— *Trey Barnette*

Robert Half research found that:

38%

of workers in
the U.S.

36%

of workers
in Canada

**feel more burned out today
than a year ago.**

37%

of workers in
the U.S.

39%

of workers
in Canada

**are uncomfortable discussing
burnout with their boss.**

Source: Robert Half surveys of more than 2,400 workers in the U.S. and more than 1,150 workers in Canada

What you need to know

- Easing stress and addressing burnout require direct action by a manager. You could, for example, re-prioritize projects and bring in extra support during peak periods by engaging contract professionals.
- You could also give employees more flexibility in when and where they work, allowing them to choose arrangements and schedules that sync better with their personal obligations. This can increase their job satisfaction, engagement in their work and, ultimately, their productivity.
- Encourage staff members to prioritize their well-being. Promote resources the company offers, such as an employee assistance program. Advocate for healthy workplaces and practices.
- In a Robert Half survey, 64% of managers in the United States and 65% of managers in Canada said they plan to increase the number of contract workers in their department. It's a strategy that makes sense because interim professionals can ease the workload of overburdened teams and keep business-critical initiatives moving forward.



Get started **now**

- ✓ Emphasize the importance of taking time off to recharge. Set an example by booking time off for yourself.
- ✓ Announce an open-door policy for employees who are struggling with workloads. Be a resource for them and find ways to reduce their burden.
- ✓ Determine if and where bringing in a contract professional makes the most sense. This allows you to relieve staff while showing them you prioritize their well-being, all while helping keep your department moving forward.
- ✓ Postpone or reschedule projects when workloads pile high. Even though it can feel like it at times, not every initiative is a top priority. Employees will be appreciative and better able to focus their energies on the issues most critical for the business.

“ Hiring contract talent is a simple and cost-effective way to fill job gaps strategically. It can also help prevent employee burnout, attrition and missed deadlines. ”

— Savannah Crawford, Branch Director, Robert Half



MISTAKE NO.4:

Micromanaging employees

INSTEAD: Empower your employees by giving them autonomy and responsibility.

When uncertain times make it harder to give your team consistent direction, it may be tempting to become a more controlling manager. But you have to avoid being overbearing. Mistakes will happen occasionally, but you don't want your staff to hold back on showing initiative because they worry about being overruled.

When team members feel empowered and trusted, they're more likely to take pride in and ownership of their work, use their judgment to achieve business goals, and contribute innovative solutions that benefit the company.



What you need to know

- Giving workers more autonomy with their projects doesn't mean failing to provide adequate direction. That creates confusion, bottlenecks and delays. Instead, when assigning work, be as clear as you can about expectations and explain how employees' efforts will help the company, department or customers.
- Regularly solicit feedback from your team members on your leadership approach to ensure you're empowering them and not standing in their way. Adjust your strategies based on what's working and what isn't.
- Collaborate with employees on deadlines. When that's not an option, explain why certain dates were chosen and how others' work could be impacted if the schedule is not adhered to.
- As you manage your team, think deeply about how you would feel and perform working for a leader like yourself. An honest assessment will help you determine if you're micromanaging or being ineffective in any other way.

“When a manager asks about how a professional is doing with their work, it's often from a position of caring and support. But this can be misinterpreted. Make sure the employee knows why you are asking the questions — because their work is important to you, not that you doubt their abilities.”

— Ash Athawale, Senior Group Managing Director, Robert Half



Get started **now**

- ✓ Avoid taking on too much by yourself. Trust your team and their capabilities by not hoarding priority projects or important tasks.
- ✓ Communicate regularly with your people to ask if they have everything they need — but don't micromanage with too many meetings or calls to check on a project's progress.
- ✓ Ask team members for feedback on your management style and substance. Alternatively, ask your boss to solicit this feedback as part of your performance review. Be open to what you learn and make adjustments to your management approach as needed.



MISTAKE NO.5:

Scaling down training and development programs

INSTEAD: View challenges as opportunities for learning.

Periods of uncertainty are not the time to postpone investments in employee development. No matter what's on the horizon, upskilling can enhance an organization's adaptability, competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

Offering these learning opportunities can also benefit your retention efforts. Picking up more skills can help ease employees' worries of job loss because it increases the number of roles they can take on. They'll appreciate how you helped them advance their career during challenging times.

“ Even as other decisions are put on hold during uncertain times, there's no reason to stop investing in your staff with tailored training and development opportunities. You'll get even more traction if you align these opportunities not just with company needs but with employees' own passions and abilities. ”

— Deborah Bottineau, Managing Director, Robert Half



What you need to know

- Help employees stay current on industry trends and emerging technologies, and make it easier for colleagues to learn from their peers by giving them a forum, such as a team meeting, to share insights.
- Encourage your staff to take what they learn from training and development programs, and apply it directly to their jobs and share it with their colleagues.
- According to Robert Half's Examining the Multigenerational Workforce report, many employees are concerned they won't be visible for opportunities and promotions when not working in the office. It's essential to ensure that remote, hybrid and on-site employees have equal access to professional development and stretch projects.



Get started **now**

- ✓ Conduct a professional development audit, identifying training programs that employees value most, what your company offers and what may need to be added. Work with your HR team to address any gaps.
- ✓ Subsidize employees' costs related to professional certifications and advanced education. Also, leverage the large number of low- and no-cost options available, such as those offered by industry associations.
- ✓ Celebrate employee learning. Reward the achievements of staff who pursue additional education.
- ✓ Set up mentoring opportunities so individuals proficient with specific tools or skills can share their expertise with others. Also consider reverse-mentoring arrangements, where newer employees advise more-tenured colleagues.
- ✓ Don't criticize employees when they take risks that don't work out. Rather, discuss what worked and what didn't work and how they can build on the experience in the future.

Helping your team prepare for AI

It's likely that many of your employees will need to adapt to using artificial intelligence in their roles. While some may fear job loss due to automation, others recognize the benefits of these tools. Robert Half research found that:

41%
of workers
in the U.S.

**believe generative AI will
have a positive impact on
their career.**

27%
of workers
in Canada

14%
of workers
in the U.S.

**worry about becoming
redundant.**

17%
of workers
in Canada

Education and training can help your team understand AI's productivity powers and how to use it ethically. Talk to staff members individually about their concerns and address any issues you can. Proactively upskill employees whose jobs may be disrupted by AI to prepare them for new positions.

Source: Robert Half surveys of more than 2,500 workers in the U.S. and nearly 1,150 workers in Canada

MISTAKE NO.6:

Failing to communicate

INSTEAD: Keep employees informed, even when solid answers aren't available.

Transparent, consistent and frequent communication is always important, but especially so during uncertain times. Poor communication can cause even more uncertainty among your team members. Remain open about changes and challenges and whether the organization's priorities are shifting.

In a Robert Half survey, managers in the United States and Canada said the greatest management mistake employers make in times of economic uncertainty is failing to communicate the firm's financial situation and future plans to employees. Maintaining the needed level of communication is not easy, but it's a must.

“ Leaders need to understand that difficult conversations can't be avoided. Don't put them off. Use the opportunity to learn how to better help your team and grow as a manager. Face the music — you'll have a great concert. ”

— Ash Athawale



What you need to know

- Employees will always want to understand the “why” behind a change or situation and appreciate any information you can share. This will help them feel engaged as circumstances evolve and better enable them to contribute valuable ideas.
- Communication has to work in both directions. Seek to understand your team’s concerns and, whenever possible, act on their feedback. Be transparent if you don’t have answers or more information.
- Different communication channels resonate better with some employees than others. Leverage multiple methods simultaneously to ensure your messages reach everyone effectively.

“When you need to get a message out the right way, know who your internal partners and allies are. They’ll help you set the tone and spread the word. Remember, workplace influencers aren’t always on the leadership team — and they may not be the people you think.”

— Megan Slabinski



Get started **now**

- ✓ During times of change, check in regularly with your own manager on the latest company developments so you can relate them back to your team.
- ✓ Tap your internal network. Identify a handful of trusted colleagues you can consult with confidentially for support and insights, to exchange ideas, and to help you identify your management blind spots.
- ✓ Establish a variety of channels your team can use to present ideas and concerns, such as employee surveys and departmental meetings. Great ideas can come from anywhere, but you'll miss out on them if you don't provide opportunities for everyone to share them.



A chance for **managers to shine**

Finally, find appreciation for uncertainty. It offers the perfect time to analyze issues from a different vantage point and get the creative juices flowing. When nobody knows all the answers, people have the opportunity to find new ways to get work done.

Often, innovations come when the chips are down and organizations are compelled to adapt. This is also when new stars emerge.

“ We sometimes grip the bat too tightly as managers, especially when we’re feeling the stress of change or uncertainty. But these are times for people to shine. The only constant is change; the ones who fight it are lost, and the ones who roll with it can win. ”

— *Trey Barnette*



About Robert Half

Robert Half (NYSE: RHI) is the world's first and largest specialized talent solutions firm that connects companies with highly skilled job seekers. Offering contract talent and permanent placement solutions in the fields of finance and accounting, technology, administrative and customer support, legal, and marketing and creative, along with executive search services, Robert Half has more than 300 locations worldwide, including nearly 100 locations in 18 countries outside the United States. Robert Half is the parent company of Protiviti®, a global consulting firm that provides internal audit, risk, business and technology consulting solutions. Robert Half, including Protiviti, has been named to the *Fortune*® Most Admired Companies™ and the Forbes' Best Employers for Diversity lists. Robert Half and Protiviti have also each been named to the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For® list. Explore our comprehensive solutions, research and insights at roberthalf.com.



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