



**2026**

# **What Candidates Actually Want From Their Manager**

## **The Leadership Qualities That Make Candidates Say Yes**

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### **What You Will Learn**

- Why candidates in 2026 are assessing your management culture before they accept a role
- The five qualities top candidates look for in a manager right now
- How psychological safety and career visibility directly affect your ability to retain new hires
- What your recruitment partner can tell you about the leadership reputation your business carries in the market

### **The Interview Is No Longer One-Sided**

Salary still matters. So does flexibility, brand reputation, and the role itself. But a quieter evaluation is happening in every candidate conversation right now, and most hiring managers are not aware of it.

Candidates are assessing the manager. Not just the business.

Research published across 2025 and 2026 by Gallup, Adecco, Perceptyx, and O.C. Tanner points to the same pattern: management quality has become one of the most influential factors in whether a candidate accepts an offer, settles in, and stays.

For hiring leaders this is both a challenge and an opportunity. Understanding what candidates want from the person they report to gives you a measurable advantage in a competitive market.

Here are the five areas that matter most in 2026.

#### **1. Clarity That Removes Noise, Not a Personality That Fills the Room**

Gallup's 2025 State of the Global Workplace report flagged a significant decline in employee engagement, with unclear expectations cited as a leading driver. Candidates have taken note.

**WHAT CANDIDATES ACTUALLY WANT FROM THEIR MANAGER**

In 2026, candidates are not looking for the most charismatic manager in the room. They are looking for the clearest one. A manager who sets precise priorities, communicates expectations without ambiguity, and protects the team's focus from constant noise and shifting demands.

When candidates ask questions such as 'How do you measure success in this role?' or 'How often do priorities change?', they are not making conversation. They are diagnosing how well this manager communicates direction.

When briefing candidates on a role, be specific about how your leadership team communicates direction. A manager who can articulate expectations clearly in an interview will stand out immediately.

## **2. Presence That Goes Beyond Being Available**

Adecco's [Workforce Trends 2026 report](#) highlighted a growing distinction between managers who are technically accessible and managers who are genuinely present. Candidates in specialist sectors are acutely aware of the difference.

Candidates, particularly those moving from organisations where they felt invisible, are actively seeking leaders who listen, respond thoughtfully, and make time that feels purposeful rather than transactional. A manager who is always on email but never genuinely engaged in a conversation does not score well.

This is not about open-door policies or monthly one-to-ones on a calendar. It is about whether the manager is genuinely interested in the person doing the work.

When your recruitment partner discusses a candidate's motivations for moving on, listen for phrases like 'I feel like just a number' or 'My manager doesn't know what I do.' These signals tell you exactly what standard candidates will measure your business against.

## **3. Development That Happens in the Day-to-Day, Not Once a Year**

The [TalentLMS Learning and Development Report 2026](#) found that development opportunities are now among the top three factors professionals weigh when evaluating a new role. The operative word is opportunities, plural and ongoing.

Candidates have grown sceptical of businesses that promise development in an interview but deliver only a once-yearly appraisal. The organisations they are drawn to are those in which learning is embedded in the rhythm of the work itself.

This means managers who give real-time feedback, involve team members in decisions that stretch their capabilities, and talk about career progression as a living conversation rather than a box-ticking exercise.

For hiring managers, the question to ask yourself is: if a candidate were to shadow your team for a week, would they see development happening?

**WHAT CANDIDATES ACTUALLY WANT FROM THEIR MANAGER**

Be specific in interviews and offer conversations about how development happens in your team. Concrete examples carry far more weight than a line about 'growth opportunities' in a job description.

#### **4. Psychological Safety: The Permission to Speak Up**

UK-specific data published by [People Management in 2025](#) showed a measurable decline in psychological safety across the workforce. Employees are less likely than five years ago to feel safe raising concerns, sharing ideas, or admitting mistakes.

For candidates who have worked in environments where speaking up carried professional risk, this is a live concern. They are looking for managers who model openness, respond to challenges without defensiveness, and make it structurally safe to say 'I am not sure' or 'I think there is a better way to do this.'

The CIPD and [Workplace Options](#) have both published evidence in the past 18 months linking psychological safety to retention, performance, and well-being. Candidates who research your business will look for signals of this culture in everything from your Glassdoor profile to the tone of the interview.

During the interview process, the way your managers respond to candidates' questions is itself a signal. A candidate who asks a challenging question and receives a thoughtful, open answer will leave with a positive impression. One who feels brushed off will not.

#### **5. Career Visibility and Recognition That Feels Personal**

O.C. Tanner's [State of Employee Recognition 2026](#) report found that generic recognition, delivered en masse to the whole team or driven by a quarterly award cycle, actively reduces engagement rather than building it. Candidates who understand this dynamic are looking for managers who notice individual contribution.

Equally, [Perceptyx research published in 2025](#) identified company stability and credible leadership as the most significant shift in engagement drivers recorded in a decade. Candidates are not chasing the most exciting-sounding role. They are looking for a business where the leadership is credible, the career path is visible, and they can see themselves progressing in three years.

Managers who can articulate the career pathway for a position, who speak honestly about where the business is heading, and who give recognition that is specific and timely have a considerable advantage in a candidate-driven market.

Brief your recruitment partner on the genuine career trajectory available in the role. Candidates who can see a clear pathway are significantly more likely to accept offers and stay beyond the first year.

#### **Your Management Culture Is Part of Your Employer Brand**

The candidates who are right for your business are evaluating far more than the job description. They are evaluating the environment they are moving into and the manager they will spend most of their working week alongside.

**WHAT CANDIDATES ACTUALLY WANT FROM THEIR MANAGER**

The businesses that attract and retain the best talent in 2026 will be those that treat management quality as a hiring advantage, not an afterthought.

If you would like a candid view of how your business is perceived in the current market, and what the best candidates are saying when they are not in the room, a conversation with a specialist recruitment partner is a good place to start.

## A little about Sarah Bishop and Recruit Recruit Ltd



Whether you're a sole trader hiring your first team member, a VC-backed startup needing to scale fast, or a corporate looking for top-tier C-suite talent, one thing stays true:

Your business grows when your people grow.

### I help founders, CEOs and business leaders build brilliant teams through:

- **Recruitment:** finding and placing the right people for the right roles or embedding a talent team into growing businesses
- **Sales & Leadership Training:** developing high-performing teams that sell, lead and deliver
- **Speaking & EmCeeing:** energising events and conferences with insight, humour and practical takeaways
- **Coaching:** supporting leaders to grow confidently, communicate better, and build culture that sticks

Over the years, I've supported businesses at every stage, from bedroom startups to scale-ups and established firms navigating change. What they all have in common? A vision to grow and the ambition to get the right people on board to make it happen.

### I bring no-nonsense advice, energy, empathy and results, whether I'm:

- Hiring a game-changing leadership role
- Training a founder-led team to sell with confidence
- Speaking on stage about team-building, fearless follow-up, or people strategy
- Coaching a business owner through their first ever hire

### So, let's talk if:

- You're ready to grow and want to hire with confidence
- You need training or coaching to get more from your team (or yourself!)
- You're planning an event and want a speaker or EmCee who brings both energy and value

Drop me a message or connect - let's build something brilliant together.

### Now - #1 Bestseller on Amazon -

**Scale Up!: The Founders' Guide to Accelerating Growth by Building Dream Teams by Sarah Bishop**

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