

How to support young workers:

A frontline manager's quick guide

This guide is developed for the SVA [Employer Innovation Lab](#), drawing on high-quality academic and non-academic sources.

Why it's important to support young workers

For many organisations, young workers are part of the workforce change story. They bring energy, fresh ideas, and new ways of thinking—but they're still learning how to be workers. That means frontline managers need to play the role of mentor, not just supervisor.

Without the right support, it's harder for young workers to thrive—and harder for your business to retain them.

About frontline managers

Frontline managers (managers, team leaders or supervisors) play a big role in helping young workers settle into a job, stay motivated, and build the skills they need to succeed. But many managers aren't given the tools or training to guide young workers properly.

This quick guide outlines what effective frontline support looks like and why it matters—especially when young people are entering work for the first time.



How can a frontline manager support a young worker

A young worker is a ‘learning worker’ – they are still learning how work works.

They’re trying to figure out routines, responsibilities and what’s expected of them. That takes time, patience and guidance from their managers.

A frontline manager can help young workers:

- build real-world, job-related skills
- make sense of work — what their role is, why it matters, how they can grow in it.

In practice, this looks like:

- explaining what the job means and how it fits into the bigger picture
- making expectations clear — role-modelling the right behaviours focusing on demonstrating positive attitudes, fairness and empathy
- giving feedback and reinforcing what good looks like
- checking in to see how they’re making sense of the work
- providing development opportunities.





Building frontline manager capability: What the evidence says

Training managers in technical skills is the easy part. What really makes a difference is building capability in human skills – things like communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. These skills have a bigger impact on team performance and workplace culture.

Here's what works when it comes to frontline manager training:

- There is no one-size-fits-all model. The best programs are tailored to your workplace and your people.
- Good training includes a mix of needs assessment, feedback, face-to-face sessions, and hands-on practice.
- Learning is more effective when it's spaced out over time, not squeezed into one session.
- Combining soft and hard skills gives managers a well-rounded approach.
- Training should include real scenarios; role plays and activities that help transfer skills into daily practice.
- Self-directed learning has its place, but ongoing support from internal and external trainers leads to better outcomes.



The six frontline skills that matter the most



Managing self

- Being engaged, approachable and available.
- Showing a positive and empathetic attitude toward work and staff.
- Role modelling calm, consistent and approachable behaviour — especially under pressure.
- Setting a good example by managing your own time and energy.
- Prioritising wellness and mental health of self and others, to show care.



Leadership

- Using a coaching/and mentoring approach to supervision.
- Driving an inclusive culture where workplace bullying and harassment are not tolerated.
- Supporting/empowering staff so they can work independently and be successful at their job.
- Holding self and others accountable when standards are not met.



Communication

- Recognising individual contributions.
- Actively listening and involving staff in identifying problems, solutions and decision making.
- Inviting feedback from staff.



Achieving results

- Recognising individual contributions.
- Providing paths to job success and incentivising staff.
- Being fair, approachable and open to feedback.
- Helping young workers break down challenges and getting them involved in creating solutions.
- Giving young workers space to try, learn and adapt.



Teamwork

- Promoting meaningfulness and building an understanding that being part of a team involves something bigger than oneself.
- Dealing effectively with underperforming team members.



Planning and organising

- Planning and organising.
- Arranging work in ways that are fair.
- Seeking input from staff in decision making.
- Respecting everyone's work/life balance.

What young workers value in a manager and what makes training stick



Young workers value a manager who:

- has a positive attitude
- actively listens
- gives and receives constructive feedback
- is fair and empathetic
- offers training and development opportunities.

Frontline training that works well:

- includes a needs analysis and practical activities
- blends technical and human skills
- builds on real scenarios, not just theory
- offers ongoing coaching, not just one-off sessions.

Self-paced training has a place, but real change happens when there's space for practice, reflection and support.





This guide is developed for the SVA Employer Innovation Lab, drawing on high-quality academic and non-academic sources. It is based, in particular, on the literature review [What Makes Supervision Successful for Young Workers: Core Skills and Effective Training for Supervisors](#), commissioned by SVA in January 2024, along with a range of other resources.

It is part of a broader suite of support from the SVA [Employer Innovation Lab](#).

If you're building up your frontline capability or want tailored advice, reach out to our team careerladder@socialventures.org.au