



## From Individual Contributor to First-Line Manager in Indian CROs: Direct Reports' Perspectives in Centralized Clinical Research Teams

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**ABSTRACT:** The transition from Individual Contributor (IC) to First-Line Manager (FLM) represents a critical career milestone in the highly regulated Indian clinical research sector. Within centralized operational models such as Centralized Monitoring and electronic Trial Master File (eTMF) oversight, FLMs are required to balance technical compliance demands with effective people leadership. Despite the strategic importance of these roles, empirical research capturing direct reports' perspectives remains limited. This study adopted a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory principles to explore how direct reports perceive managerial behaviors, effectiveness, and challenges in centralized teams. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine professionals (n = 9) working across centralized functions in Indian contract research organizations (CROs). Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to identify recurring patterns in the manager-report relationship. The findings indicate a clear contrast in leadership experiences. Positive direct report perceptions were associated with relational trust, psychological safety, consistent communication, and empowerment. In contrast, negative experiences were linked to technical credibility gaps, communication breakdowns, and perceived favoritism. Reporting duration emerged as an important contextual factor: shorter reporting tenures reflected greater tolerance for managerial learning curves, whereas longer tenures without visible developmental progress were associated with frustration and reduced morale. The study highlights that FLM effectiveness in centralized clinical research teams is a developmental process shaped by relational competence and organizational support. By foregrounding psychological safety as an important enabler of trust and team resilience, this study contributes a bottom-up perspective to leadership literature within the clinical research industry and offers practical insights for designing interventions that strengthen communication, fairness, and psychologically safe team environments during early managerial transitions.

**KEYWORDS:** First-line manager transition, Individual contributor transition to FLM, Direct reports' perspectives, Centralized clinical research teams, Indian contract research organizations (CROs).

### INTRODUCTION

The transition from Individual Contributor (IC) to First-Line Manager (FLM) is widely recognized as a significant career milestone that involves a fundamental change in role responsibilities and expectations. Individuals moving into FLM roles shift from a primary focus on personal task execution toward achieving outcomes through others, requiring a reorientation toward leadership, coordination, and people management capabilities.<sup>3</sup> This transition is not merely procedural but involves learning to exercise authority, provide feedback, manage performance, and support team members in ways that differ substantially from prior IC roles. Research on FLM transitions has consistently documented challenges associated with early managerial tenure, including role ambiguity, reluctance to delegate, and difficulty managing former peers.<sup>3,12</sup> These challenges arise as new managers negotiate changing expectations and redefine professional identity in the context of leadership responsibilities. When early managerial capabilities remain underdeveloped, organizations may experience negative consequences such as reduced employee morale, disengagement, and increased turnover, with implications for overall organizational performance.<sup>17</sup> To mitigate these risks, organizations often invest in pre-promotion readiness initiatives, mentoring, coaching, and Human Resource-led support structures aimed at strengthening early managerial capability.<sup>4,13,18</sup>

The significance of the IC-to-FLM transition is particularly pronounced within the clinical research industry, which operates in highly regulated environments characterized by complex workflows, strict compliance requirements, and heightened accountability for quality and risk management. Clinical research operations involve rigorously defined processes related to trial conduct, documentation, audit readiness, and ethical oversight, placing substantial operational demands on teams and their supervisors.<sup>8</sup> In

Indian Contract Research Organizations (CROs), centralized operational models—such as Centralized Monitoring and electronic Trial Master File (eTMF) oversight—intensify these demands by combining high workloads, tight timelines, and digitally mediated coordination across functions. Within such contexts, variation in first-line managerial styles has been shown to influence employee outcomes, underscoring the importance of effective FLM leadership for both people and operational outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Direct reports are uniquely positioned to observe and evaluate managerial behavior as it is enacted in day-to-day operational contexts. Through routine interactions, communication practices, and feedback processes, they experience leadership not as an abstract role but as a set of enacted behaviors that shape trust, support, and perceived fairness within the team. Despite growing research on first-line manager transitions, limited empirical work captures direct reports' lived experiences in centralized clinical research environments, particularly in Indian CROs.

Existing leadership scholarship further emphasizes that the IC-to-FLM transition constitutes a process of identity transformation rather than a simple change in task allocation. Individuals entering managerial roles reconstruct their professional self-concept around leadership responsibilities, negotiating legitimacy through everyday interactions rather than role occupancy alone.<sup>2,3</sup> From a relational perspective, the quality of dyadic relationships between FLMs and their direct reports plays a central role in shaping trust, support, and perceived fairness at work, as articulated within leader–member exchange (LMX) theory<sup>7</sup>.

Accordingly, this study examines the IC-to-FLM transition within Indian CRO centralized teams from the perspective of direct reports. By foregrounding this bottom-up lens, the study seeks to identify managerial behaviors associated with positive and negative work experiences and to explore how perceptions of FLM effectiveness evolve over the duration of the reporting relationship.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The transition from IC to FLM represents more than a hierarchical progression; it entails a substantive shift in role expectations, identity, and capability requirements. Early work emphasized that individuals moving into new roles must renegotiate behaviors and interactions to establish legitimacy and effectiveness<sup>12</sup>. For FLMs, this transition involves moving beyond a task-focused identity grounded in technical expertise toward a leadership orientation centered on coordinating work through others.

Existing literature frames this process as identity work, wherein managers reconstruct their professional self-concept in response to new relational and organizational demands. First-time managers experiment with leadership behaviors while negotiating tensions between their former IC identity and emerging managerial responsibilities<sup>3</sup>. Social identity theory reinforces this perspective, highlighting that organizational roles carry identity-defining meanings that influence how individuals see themselves and are seen by others.<sup>2</sup> Legitimacy as a manager is thus constructed progressively through enacted behaviors rather than conferred solely by formal role assignment.

Empirical studies show that while technical expertise may provide initial credibility, sustained effectiveness depends on relational, communicative, and people management capabilities.<sup>10,14</sup> Early tenure challenges such as role ambiguity, reluctance to delegate, and difficulty managing peers are well documented.<sup>3,11</sup> When these competencies remain underdeveloped, organizations risk reduced morale, disengagement, attrition, and diminished psychological safety.<sup>17</sup> To mitigate such risks, organizations increasingly invest in pre-promotion readiness initiatives, mentoring, and HR-led support structures.<sup>4,13,18</sup>

Relational leadership behaviors are central to this transition. Psychological safety, a shared belief that individuals can speak up, ask questions, and report concerns without fear of negative consequences has been identified as a critical enabler of learning, communication, and effective performance in teams.<sup>5</sup> For FLMs, whose influence is most proximal to daily team functioning, their behaviour strongly shapes whether psychological safety is cultivated or undermined. Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory further emphasizes that the quality of dyadic interactions between managers and direct reports characterized by trust, mutual respect, and obligation has meaningful implications for employee attitudes and behaviors.<sup>7</sup> Supportive managerial behaviors, including accessibility, responsiveness, and fair treatment, positively influence motivation and commitment.<sup>15</sup>

The industry context further amplifies these dynamics. Clinical research environments are characterized by stringent regulatory requirements, intense documentation demands, and high accountability for quality and compliance. Centralized operational models, such as centralized monitoring and eTMF oversight, heighten the stakes of first-line leadership, as ineffective behaviors can compromise both employee experience and operational reliability.<sup>8</sup>

Despite growing literature on FLM transitions, much of the existing work privileges managerial self-reports or senior leadership viewpoints. Direct reports' perspectives remain underexplored, leaving a critical gap in understanding how psychological safety,



trust, and fairness are constructed or eroded in practice. This gap underscores the need for empirical research that foregrounds direct reports' experiences, particularly within Indian CRO centralized teams, to inform more contextually grounded leadership development interventions.

### Study Objective and Research Questions:

The objective of this study is to explore how direct reports in centralized teams within the clinical research industry perceive the managerial behaviors of FLMS, with particular attention to behaviors that contribute to positive and negative direct report experiences, as well as how these perceptions evolve over the duration of the reporting relationship.

To address this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do direct reports perceive the managerial behaviors of FLMS that contribute to a positive direct report experience within centralized teams in the clinical research industry?

**RQ2:** How do direct reports perceive the managerial behaviors of FLMS that contribute to a negative direct report experience within centralized teams in the clinical research industry?

**RQ3:** How does the duration of the reporting relationship shape direct reports' perceptions of FLM behaviour over time within centralized clinical research teams?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design informed by grounded theory principles to explore direct reports' perceptions of first-line managerial behaviors and experiences within centralized clinical research teams. Grounded theory–informed qualitative designs are appropriate for examining underexplored organizational phenomena and developing analytically grounded categories from participants' accounts.<sup>6</sup> The design was suited to the study's focus on interpreting how managerial behaviors are experienced and evaluated at the team level, without imposing predefined theoretical assumptions.<sup>19</sup>

### Research Context

The study was conducted within centralized operations hubs of CROs in India. These hubs support critical clinical trial activities, including centralized monitoring and eTMF oversight. Although operational workflows are digitally mediated and globally distributed, FLMS and their direct reports are typically organizationally co-located within centralized hubs. This context creates a distinctive supervisory environment that combines high regulatory accountability with close interpersonal interaction.

### Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit information-rich participants capable of providing detailed accounts of their experiences working under FLMS.<sup>19</sup> Participants were selected based on their relevant exposure to FLMS leadership within the clinical research context. Consistent with the broader study design, eligible participants were required to:

- Work within centralized clinical research functions, such as centralized monitoring or eTMF management, and
- Currently or recently report to a FLM in their first managerial role or within the first 24 months of promotion.

A total of nine direct reports ( $n = 9$ ) participated in the study. Participants represented a relatively homogeneous group in terms of role type, regulatory environment, and operational context, which supported in-depth exploration of shared and divergent experiences. In practice, reporting durations among participants ranged from approximately 1 to 2 years, allowing participants to describe their experiences across different stages of the manager report relationship.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no substantively new categories or insights emerged from successive interviews. Saturation was reached by the ninth interview, consistent with prior qualitative research suggesting that focused, relatively homogeneous samples often reach saturation within a relatively small number of interviews.<sup>16</sup>

### Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted using a mixed-mode approach to accommodate participant availability and geographic constraints. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in private professional settings or virtually via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Semi-structured interviewing was appropriate



because it supports systematic coverage of domains of interest while allowing participants to elaborate on lived experience and provide concrete examples.<sup>19</sup>

To prioritize participant comfort and confidentiality within a highly specialized and competitive industry context, interviews were not audio- or video-recorded. Instead, detailed real-time field notes were taken, capturing participants' responses and salient non-verbal cues. These notes were expanded into comprehensive post-interview transcripts immediately following each session to preserve contextual richness and descriptive detail.

The interview guide comprised open-ended questions designed to elicit direct reports' experiences of working with first-line managers during early managerial transition within centralized clinical research teams. Questions captured reporting context and explored perceptions of managerial effectiveness across domains such as technical support, guidance in day-to-day operations, risk identification and escalation, communication practices, feedback quality, recognition, trust-building, and support for development. Participants were also invited to describe both positive and negative incidents and to reflect on whether and how their perceptions evolved over time. Probing questions were used to clarify meanings and obtain concrete examples.<sup>19</sup>

### Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the constant comparative method to support iterative coding and systematic comparison across participants' accounts.<sup>6</sup> Expanded interview records were imported into ATLAS.ti (version 25) to support data management, coding, and retrieval. Analysis proceeded through iterative stages consistent with grounded theory-informed qualitative analysis:

- **Open coding** to identify discrete incidents and descriptions of managerial behavior;
- **Axial coding** to cluster related codes into higher-order categories; and
- **Selective coding** to integrate categories into a coherent explanatory structure aligned with the research questions.

This iterative approach enabled comparison across interviews and supported identification of recurring patterns associated with positive and negative direct report experiences, as well as how reporting duration shaped perceptions over time.<sup>6</sup>

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained retrospectively from the relevant Institutional Review Board. All participants provided verbal informed consent prior to participation. To safeguard anonymity within the Indian CRO community, all identifying information, including organizational names, project details, and personal identifiers, was removed during transcription and reporting.

## RESULTS

### Participant Profile

Nine in-depth interviews (n = 9) were conducted with Direct reports (DRs) of FLMs working in Indian CROs. Participants represented specialized centralized functions, specifically centralized monitoring and eTMF management (table 1).

**Table 1. Summarizes participant characteristics. Overall work experience ranged from 2 to 7 years, and reporting duration to the FLM ranged from 1 to 2 years.**

Respondent	Overall Experience (years)	Reporting Duration (years)	Team
A	4.5	1.5	Centralized Monitoring
B	4	2	eTMF
C	6.5	1	Centralized Monitoring
D	6	1	eTMF
E	7	1.5	Centralized Monitoring
F	4.5	2	Centralized Monitoring
G	2	1.7	Centralized Monitoring
H	6	2	eTMF
I	5	2	eTMF
<b>Mean</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1.6</b>	



## Coding Overview and Thematic Saturation

Data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti (version 25) to support systematic coding and organization of interview data. The analysis yielded a total of 104 discrete codes, which were iteratively refined through constant comparison and grouped into higher-order thematic categories. These themes were subsequently organized to address the study's three research questions, reflecting patterns in direct reports' perceptions of first-line managerial behaviors and experiences.

Thematic saturation was achieved by the ninth interview, as successive interviews did not yield substantively new categories or alter the structure of the emergent themes. While individual nuances were observed across participants, the core thematic patterns were consistently reflected across centralized roles and reporting relationships. This consistency provided confidence that the data captured sufficient depth and breadth to address the research objectives within the bounded organizational context of centralized clinical research teams.

### RQ1: Positive Managerial Behaviours

**Relational Trust, Empathy, and Psychological Safety:** Participants consistently emphasized empathy and confidentiality as foundations of trust. One noted: *"Looks very genuine in behaviour,"* while another added: *"Empathetic."* & *"checks on stress or conflict."* Active listening was repeatedly valued: *"is a good listener,"* and *"Active listening was important."* Confidentiality reinforced openness: *"Keeps confidentiality of sensitive discussions."* Conversely, lapses were described in terms such as *"People felt ignored or unsafe to share"*

Psychological safety was consistently described in relation to positive experiences. Managers demonstrating empathy and discretion were associated with descriptions of trust, whereas lapses in listening or fairness were described alongside reduced perceptions of safety.

**Communication and Feedback Practices:** Structured practices such as *"monthly catch-ups are happening"* and *"regular metrics reviews"* were valued. Clear articulation and openness supported dialogue: *"Provides feedback,"* and *"Open to conversations."* Yet, feedback quality was uneven: *"Feedback was vague or generic,"* and *"Some feedback ignored."*

Communication clarity was commonly associated with positive evaluations of managers, whereas unclear communication was linked to less favorable descriptions. Regular, structured updates built confidence, while vague or inconsistent feedback undermined development.

**Recognition and Empowerment:** Appreciation boosted morale: *"Manager gives appreciation equally and appropriately,"* and *"Appreciation shared via email and one-on-ones."* Empowerment was equally valued: *"Empowers team members,"* and *"Supports skill building."* However, favoritism was noted: *"Favouritism in recognition was observed."*

Recognition and empowerment were described alongside increased motivation, while perceived bias in appreciation was mentioned in connection with reduced trust.

**Learning Orientation and Competence:** Managers who demonstrated growth were praised: *"Shows improvement over time,"* and *"Proactive learning attitude."* Prior IC experience enhanced credibility: *"Past IC experience helped understanding."* Yet, gaps persisted: *"Technical understanding lacking."*

Participants linked a visible learning orientation with more favorable perceptions over time, while technical deficits continued to be noted in several accounts.

### RQ2: Negative Managerial Behaviours

**Technical Credibility Gaps:** Several participants described insufficient technical knowledge: *"My manager's understanding is not great as previous experience is from another department,"* and *"Technical understanding was a challenge."*

**Communication and Relationship Deficits:** Irregular or poorly structured meetings were frustrating: *"Without agenda catch-ups,"* and *"Too frequent catch-ups at times."* Communication style sometimes felt punitive: *"Direct emails construed as escalation."*

**Feedback and Evaluation Challenges:** Feedback was often vague: *"Enhance your understanding, but what was not clear."* Performance ratings were perceived as unfair: *"Ratings could not be justified."* Selective appreciation dampened morale: *"Selective appreciation affecting team morale."*

**Trust and Fairness Issues:** Bias and favoritism were repeatedly cited: *"At team level people feel biasness,"* and *"Bringing personal challenges in assessment."* Lack of psychological safety was stark: *"I was ignored within the team."*

**Responsiveness and Decision-Making Gaps:** Delayed action was common: *"Spontaneous action is lacking,"* and *"Had to remind every time."* Conflict handling was weak: *"Improper conflict handling."*

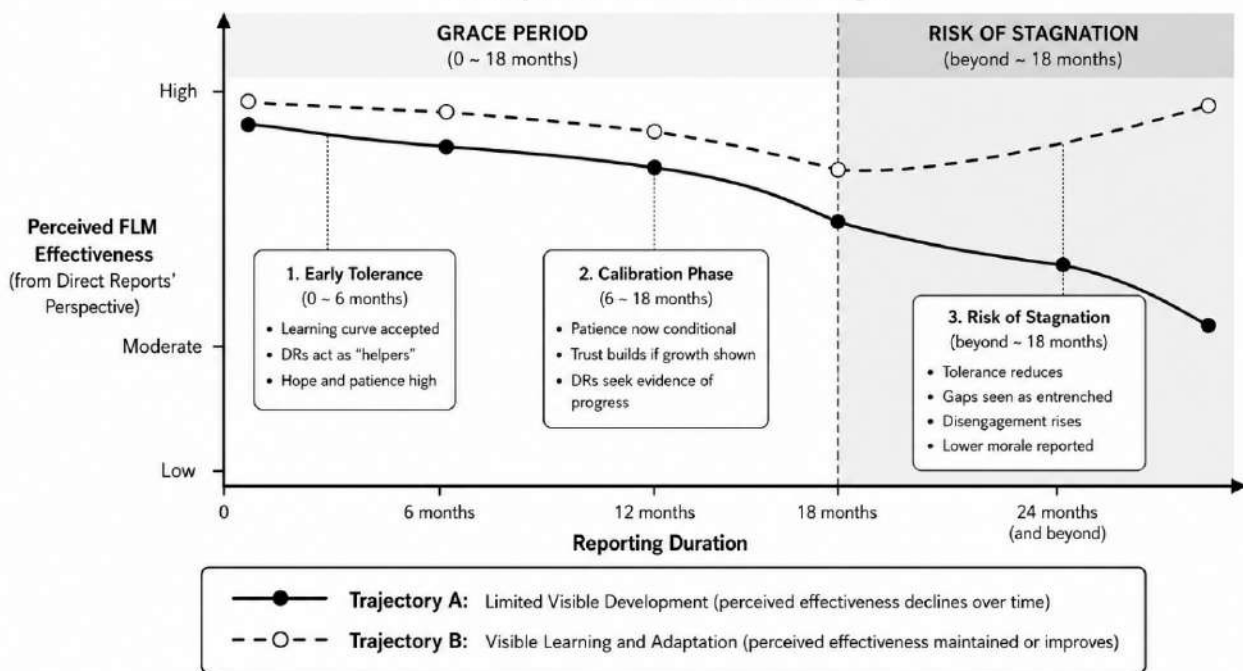
Negative experiences were described across issues related to credibility, communication, and fairness. These issues were described alongside reduced psychological safety, disengagement, and frustration.

**RQ3: Duration Effect**

**Grace Period (first ~18 months)** Participants often displayed patience, framing gaps as part of the learning curve. One noted: “Learning curve slow, but manager shows improvement over time.” Another added: “Better support for career growth as time progressed.” One participant also highlighted “initial lack of technical understanding” and “hesitation in decision-making.” During this period, DRs sometimes positioned themselves as “helpers” to the new manager.

**Stagnation Phase (beyond ~18 months)** Tolerance diminished when gaps persisted. One participant reflected: “Issues like lack of constructive feedback worsened over time, leading to demotivation.” Another noted: “Manager got into comfort zone, no further development.”

**Figure 1. Conceptual Representation of the Duration Effect in Direct Reports’ Perceptions of First-Line Managers**



Note. This figure is a conceptual representation derived from qualitative findings (n = 9) and does not represent measured longitudinal change.

FLM = First-Line Manager; DR = Direct Report.

**Figure 1: Participants described changes in their perceptions over different reporting durations. Shorter tenures reflected optimism and patience, while longer tenures without visible progress aligned with frustration and disengagement.**

**Integrative Insights**

- Positive experiences were repeatedly described in relation to trust, psychological safety, and clear communication, reinforced by recognition and empowerment.
- Negative experiences were described in relation to credibility gaps, vague feedback, and perceived bias, alongside reduced psychological safety
- The duration effect revealed a developmental trajectory: patience early on, but frustration if growth plateaued. This highlights the importance of structured support and ongoing feedback loops during early managerial tenure.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the transition from IC to FLM role within centralized teams in the Indian clinical research industry from the perspective of direct reports. By foregrounding this often underrepresented “bottom-up” viewpoint, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how first-line managerial behaviors are interpreted and experienced at the team level in regulated, high-pressure operational contexts.

### Interpretation of Positive Managerial Behaviors

Direct reports’ perceptions of positive work experiences highlight the centrality of how FLMS enact relational and interactional aspects of their role. The findings suggest that managerial behaviors perceived as supportive are less about formal authority or technical command and more about how managers engage with team members in everyday interactions. This aligns with leadership research that emphasizes the importance of relational competence, empathy, and trust-building during early managerial transitions.<sup>3</sup> Psychological safety emerges here not as an abstract construct, but as something experienced through concrete managerial actions—such as openness to dialogue, attentiveness to stress or conflict, and discretion in sensitive situations. In centralized clinical research teams, where work is compliance-driven and risk-sensitive, these relational behaviors appear particularly consequential. The interpretation suggests that FLMS function as key translators of organizational expectations into local team climates, shaping whether direct reports feel able to raise concerns, seek clarification, or engage fully with their work.<sup>5</sup>

Communication discipline further emerges as an interpretive mechanism rather than a simple operational practice. Predictable interactions and clarity in guidance appear to signal managerial reliability and intent, contributing to a sense of stability in demanding environments. Rather than frequency of communication, it is the perceived usefulness and structure of interactions that shape positive experiences, reinforcing prior research on the developmental role of clear, actionable managerial communication during early tenure.<sup>10,14</sup>

Recognition and empowerment reinforced motivation and autonomy, while perceived favoritism undermined morale. These findings resonate with Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory<sup>7</sup>, which emphasizes the role of trust and fairness in shaping employee attitudes. Managers who demonstrated proactive learning orientation and leveraged prior IC experience were perceived as more credible emphasizing on experiential grounding in managerial transitions<sup>14</sup>.

### Interpretation of Negative Managerial Behaviors and Capability Gaps

Conversely, behaviors contributing to negative direct report experiences illuminate how perceived capability gaps are interpreted through everyday managerial conduct. Technical limitations, when present, are not inherently destabilizing; instead, they become problematic when combined with reduced support, unclear escalation guidance, or inconsistent decision-making. This interpretation suggests that technical credibility functions relationally—its impact depends on how managers acknowledge limitations and compensate through collaboration, learning orientation, or support-seeking.

Operational and communication-related challenges further illustrate how patterns of behavior, rather than isolated incidents, shaped negative perceptions. Unstructured meetings, vague feedback, and perceived micromanagement were interpreted as signals of uncertainty in managerial judgment, undermining confidence and trust. These findings align with research emphasizing that supportive, consistent managerial behaviors are critical determinants of employee motivation and clarity, particularly during periods of transition.<sup>15</sup>

Perceived favoritism and inequity amplified negative experiences and eroded relational trust. Even when unintentional, these behaviors were interpreted symbolically, influencing perceptions of fairness and inclusion. Consistent with leader–member exchange theory, the quality of dyadic relationships appeared central to how direct reports evaluated managerial legitimacy and effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>

### Temporal Dynamics in Perceptions of First- Line Managers

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in its attention to the temporal evolution of direct report perceptions. Rather than evaluating FLMS as effective or ineffective in static terms, direct reports assessed managerial behaviors dynamically as reporting relationships matured. Early tenure was characterized by tolerance and developmental patience, with direct reports accepting learning curves as a normal part of FLM transition.

However, this tolerance was conditional and time-bounded. Beyond approximately 18 months, direct reports became less forgiving when earlier gaps were perceived to persist without visible improvement. At this stage, behaviors such as micromanagement, poor

communication, or limited responsiveness were interpreted as entrenched rather than transitional, leading to disengagement and declining morale. This temporal insight suggests that time in role alone does not confer legitimacy or perceived growth; instead, direct reports attend closely to whether managers demonstrate learning, adaptability, and responsiveness over time. This finding extends identity-based accounts of managerial transition by highlighting that managerial legitimacy is continuously negotiated through enacted behavior rather than achieved automatically through role tenure.<sup>2,3</sup> It also underscores the importance of sustained developmental support beyond initial onboarding, particularly in operationally demanding environments.

### **Integrating Bottom-Up and Top-Down Perspectives**

When considered alongside prior research capturing senior leaders' perspectives on first-line managerial transitions in CROs<sup>1</sup>, the present findings contribute to a more holistic, multi-stakeholder understanding of first-line leadership development. Senior leaders often emphasize strategic capability, emotional intelligence, and leadership pipeline resilience, while direct reports reveal how these expectations are experienced in situated, day-to-day team interactions.

The convergence between these perspectives reinforces the importance of relational competence and communication clarity, while tensions between them illuminate where organizational intentions may not translate cleanly into experienced leadership practice. This synthesis underscores the value of aligning leadership development initiatives not only with strategic objectives, but also with the realities of team-level enactment in centralized clinical research environments.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces and extends existing scholarship on the transition from IC to FLM by foregrounding the interpretive role of direct reports in constructing managerial legitimacy and effectiveness. Prior research has largely conceptualized the IC to FLM transition as an identity shift experienced by the manager, emphasizing sensemaking, role redefinition, and identity work from the managerial perspective.<sup>2,3</sup> The present study complements this view by demonstrating that managerial identity is not only self-constructed but also continuously negotiated through direct reports' interpretations of enacted behavior in everyday work contexts.

By examining managerial transition through a bottom-up lens, this study highlights how relational behaviors such as communication clarity, fairness, responsiveness, and discretion serve as critical cues through which direct reports assess managerial credibility. This finding supports relational and dyadic perspectives of leadership, including leader-member exchange theory, which emphasize that leadership effectiveness is shaped within ongoing interpersonal relationships rather than determined solely by role occupancy or positional authority.<sup>7</sup> The results suggest that the quality of these relationships is central to how early managerial transitions are experienced and evaluated at the team level.

The study also contributes to psychological safety literature by demonstrating how safety is experienced as a localized, manager-enacted phenomenon within centralized and regulated environments. Rather than functioning as a purely organizational climate variable, psychological safety in this context was interpreted by direct reports through day-to-day managerial behaviors, reinforcing its situational and interactional nature.<sup>5</sup> This extends psychological safety research into the underexplored domain of centralized clinical research teams, where regulatory demands and risk sensitivity heighten the consequences of managerial conduct. A distinctive theoretical contribution of this study is its articulation of the temporal dimension of direct report perceptions. Findings indicate that evaluations of first-line managerial effectiveness are dynamic rather than static, evolving as reporting relationships mature. The identified "duration effect" suggests that early tolerance for learning curves is conditional and time-bounded, with legitimacy increasingly dependent on visible learning, adaptation, and behavioral change. This insight extends role transition and identity-based theories by illustrating that time in role alone does not confer legitimacy; instead, legitimacy is earned through sustained relational enactment.<sup>3,12</sup>

From a practical perspective, the findings offer several implications for organizations seeking to strengthen First-line leadership capability within centralized clinical research teams. First, the study suggests that organizations should move beyond technically focused onboarding for new managers and prioritize early development of relational and behavioral competencies. Training programs for FLMs should explicitly address communication discipline, feedback quality, trust-building, and fairness, as these behaviors were central to how direct reports evaluated managerial effectiveness. The findings also highlight the importance of domain familiarity when appointing first-line managers in highly specialized centralized operations. Direct reports described recurring challenges when managers transitioned from different functional backgrounds, affecting their ability to provide contextual



guidance and operational support. In environments such as centralized monitoring and eTMF oversight, technical understanding appears to serve as an enabling foundation that supports effective people leadership, particularly during early tenure. Organizations may therefore benefit from incorporating structured technical immersion or mentoring mechanisms for first-line managers entering adjacent domains, thereby strengthening early credibility, confidence, and manager–direct report trust.

Second, the temporal nature of direct report perceptions underscores the importance of sustained developmental support rather than one-time interventions. While many organizations invest in pre-promotion readiness or early transition programs, the findings suggest that ongoing coaching, mentoring, and feedback mechanisms are critical beyond the initial transition period. Without such continued support, early capability gaps may become entrenched, eroding direct report confidence and engagement over time.<sup>4,13,18</sup>

Third, the results highlight the need for organizations to incorporate direct report feedback systematically into leadership development processes. Direct reports are uniquely positioned to observe how managerial behaviors are enacted in practice and to identify gaps between organizational expectations and lived leadership experience. Mechanisms such as structured upward feedback, check-ins facilitated by HR, or development-oriented pulse surveys may help surface early warning signals before managerial credibility deteriorates.

Finally, the study has specific relevance for clinical research organizations operating in centralized, high-reliability environments. In such settings, FLMs play a critical dual role: ensuring technical and regulatory oversight while fostering psychologically safe team environments that support learning, escalation, and risk awareness. Investment in relational leadership capability at the first-line level is therefore likely to yield benefits not only for employee experience but also for operational reliability and quality outcomes.<sup>1,11</sup>

## Study Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of certain limitations inherent to its design and scope. First, the study is based on a small qualitative sample ( $n = 9$ ) drawn from centralized teams within Indian CROs. While this sample size is appropriate for in-depth qualitative inquiry and thematic exploration, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable and should be understood as contextually grounded insights applicable to similar centralized clinical research environments.

Second, the study deliberately foregrounds the perspectives of direct reports to understand how FLM behaviors are experienced at the team level. Although this bottom-up lens provides valuable insight into everyday leadership enactment, it does not incorporate the perspectives of FLMs themselves, HR stakeholders, or senior leaders within the same reporting relationships. Consequently, the findings reflect perceived managerial behaviors rather than triangulated assessments of managerial intent, sense-making, or self-reported learning processes.

Third, interviews were not audio-recorded and relied on detailed real-time field notes that were expanded immediately following each interview. This approach was adopted to enhance participant comfort and confidentiality within a competitive and regulated industry context; however, it may have limited the capture of certain verbal nuances or emphasis that audio recordings can provide. Finally, the study represents a snapshot of perceptions within a defined time frame rather than a longitudinal examination of how managerial behaviors and direct report experiences evolve across extended periods. While reporting duration provided an important temporal lens, future research employing longitudinal designs could offer deeper insight into how FLMs adapt over time and how perceptions of effectiveness change across different stages of the managerial journey.

Building on these limitations, future research could extend this work by examining the FLM transition directly from the perspective of first-line managers themselves. Incorporating managers' own reflections would provide complementary insight into how managerial behaviors are understood, rationalized, and developed, and how identity work, learning processes, and contextual constraints shape early managerial transition. Multi-perspective or longitudinal research designs that integrate direct report, managerial, and organizational viewpoints may further enrich understanding of first-line leadership development in centralized clinical research teams.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the transition from IC to FLM within centralized teams in the Indian clinical research industry from the perspective of direct reports. By adopting a bottom-up analytical lens, the study extends existing leadership transition research especially in clinical research domain. It brings forward the lived experiences of employees who directly encounter and interpret FLM behaviors in day-to-day operational settings.

The findings reveal that direct reports evaluate FLMs through a relational lens rather than a technical one. Psychological safety, communication clarity, fairness, and empowerment emerged as the primary determinants of positive work experience, while credibility gaps and perceived inequity were the principal drivers of disengagement. Crucially, these evaluations are not formed at a single point in time but evolve as the reporting relationship matures.

A key contribution of this study lies in its identification of the dynamic, temporal nature of direct report perceptions. Rather than forming static evaluations of managerial effectiveness, direct reports assessed FLMs over time. Early tolerance for learning curves was evident, but this tolerance was conditional on observable learning, responsiveness, and behavioral adaptation. Where such progress was not perceived, patience diminished and confidence eroded. This “duration effect” highlights that time in role alone does not guarantee perceived managerial development; legitimacy is constructed through sustained relational and behavioral enactment.

When considered alongside prior research capturing senior leaders’ perspectives on first-line managerial transitions in Indian CROs, the present study contributes to a more holistic, multi-stakeholder understanding of first-line leadership development. While senior leaders<sup>1</sup> emphasize strategic capability and pipeline development, direct reports reveal whether and how those intentions translate into everyday team-level practice. Bridging both viewpoints is essential: leadership development shaped by organizational intent alone, without grounding in lived team experience, risks missing the relational realities that determine whether FLMs are perceived as credible and effective.

Theoretically, the study extends identity-based and relational leadership frameworks by foregrounding the direct report as an active evaluator of managerial legitimacy — not merely a passive recipient of managerial behavior. Practically, it underscores that in regulated, centralized environments, investment in relational leadership capability at the first-line level yields returns not only for employee experience but for learning, trust, and operational resilience.

In foregrounding direct reports’ voices, this study highlights the central role of FLM behavior in shaping both leadership effectiveness and employee engagement during early managerial transition. By recognizing the conditional and time-bounded nature of tolerance for managerial learning curves, organizations can better support FLMs in translating role authority into sustained relational credibility and effective leadership practice.

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