

HRACUITY<sup>®</sup> EMPLOYEE RELATIONS PLAYBOOK



# PEOPLE LEADERS:

The Critical Link To Great Employee Relations



When I founded HR Acuity, I had three goals in mind:

- + To create the leading employee relations technology.
- + To build a strong community of ER leaders and practitioners that could help each other solve common challenges.
- + To become the leading source for industry best practices and benchmarks.

I knew that delivering on these goals would fill a void, elevate our profession as a whole, and lead to better outcomes for organizations and their employees.

This series of employee relations playbooks is designed to help you build your practice on a strong foundation. I'd like to think these feel like the copious notes you'd take if you were at one of our ER roundtable events, hearing from the people who are the pioneers in this growing profession.

Thanks for downloading this series of frameworks. I can't wait to hear what you think.

*Deb Muller*  
CEO, HR Acuity

## Establishing a high-value Employee Relations (ER) function in your organization requires a strong partnership between the expertise contained within your ER team and your people leaders on the front line.

It's no surprise that strong people leaders are critical to building a culture of trust and accountability, the kind of culture that naturally reduces employee complaints and increases productivity. If employees feel that managers are fair, consistent, and honest in their feedback, they are far more engaged in the workplace. That engagement translates into a more productive workforce.

Unfortunately, there's a pretty big gap between people leaders' and ER professionals' perceptions of how effectively issues are handled on the front line. According to HR Acuity's 2021 research report [People Leaders and the Gap in Managing Employee Issues](#), 52% of people leaders report being very confident in their ability to manage people issues while only 2% of ER professionals would agree. While that 2% is troubling, 52% is not much to celebrate either. In both instances, we recognize an opportunity to educate and better support people leaders in their ability to effectively manage employee issues. So, what are the real ramifications of poor people management?

### Poor people management *impacts* morale and engagement.

According to [Gallup](#), managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores. If we do the math, it's clear that providing our people leaders with the skills, confidence, and empowerment to effectively manage employee issues will drive real engagement and, by extension, higher levels of growth.

Sticky issues can actually become the glue that helps your employees feel trusted and valued in your company. We know that sounds counterintuitive, but in this playbook, we focus on what the employee relations team must do to build the confidence and competence of people leaders who find themselves handling unpleasant employee issues. By clearly defining roles and providing practical tools, templates, and guidance, empowering them can be easier than you think.

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Designed to guide your team, this playbook *accelerates* how you can empower your people leaders to become more effective at handling ER issues on the front line.

This playbook isn't a primer on how to create ER policies, but rather a tool to evolve your own protocols in the context of today's world of work.

Here's what you can expect to gain from this playbook:

- Suggestions for defining key roles and responsibilities
- Training approaches for people leaders
- How to use data to coach and inform people leaders

We hope you'll find this playbook an invaluable part of your toolkit.



# Part 1: Roles & Responsibilities

Help everyone *stay in their lane.*

Employees see their leaders as the face of the organization. Therefore, outsourcing leadership is not an option. Even if ER “officially” manages all issues, even those related to performance, your people leaders will still be on the front line. Once you understand that, the real decision becomes pinpointing the handoffs between people leaders, ER, and HR. Answering this question requires that we define who is responsible for what, set those expectations, and then equip everyone to succeed in their given role.



**INSIDER TIP:** For more on ER organizational models, check out our playbook: [Designing and Optimizing Your Employee Relations Organization.](#)



## The Role of Employee Relations

High-integrity ER teams make it their mission to enable a workplace culture in which employees feel safe, valued, and respected. The typical ER team is a concentrated powerhouse of trusted advisors, each skilled in resolving a variety of issues. From performance management, policy oversight, and organizational effectiveness to workplace disagreements and full-blown investigations, ER teams (and some HR teams) are usually responsible for the following:

Ensuring integrity of the ER process

Creating and communicating organizational employee policies and practices

Responding to allegations of misconduct and conducting investigations

Driving consistency in employee-related documentation across the organization

Consulting with legal and HR to make recommendations related to employment matters

Overseeing the implementation of corrective action

Coaching people leaders on how to manage employee issues

Conducting “stay” interviews and/or exit interviews as needed

Recognizing trends related to types of issues or location/department “hot spots” that might require an organizational intervention, such as training or further understanding of deeper dynamics

Monitoring data that would indicate potential retaliatory behavior and/or trends that indicate bias against protected groups

Staying on top of external trends that influence internal issues, policies, and potential ER practice implications

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

1 2 3

## The Role of People Leaders

Great people leaders already know their job is to connect with, listen to, motivate, and support their teams. Doing these things well naturally brings them closer to employee issues. As the smallest degree of separation between employee experiences (both good and bad) and the culture of the workforce, people leaders' responsibilities include:

Providing timely and direct feedback to keep everyone in the workplace on track

Documenting conversations, performance, behavioral coaching, and more

Holding employees accountable to goals, standards, and company policies

Participating in performance and disciplinary meetings with employees (with guidance and support from ER/HR) on issues including:

- Behavioral issues (e.g. insubordination, misconduct)
- Performance concerns
- Policy violations
- Attendance issues
- Employee-related concerns

Collaborating with ER on serious or continual employee issues and possible policy violations

Reviewing recommendations from ER/HR

Making (and owning) disciplinary and performance decisions



No matter how your organization allocates tasks or roles, gaining consistency and buy-in requires clarity for everyone involved.

### The Role of Business Partners

No matter how well ER and people leaders handle employee relations issues, there will always be cases that require extra support from key partners. Strategic human resources business partners (HRBP) and the legal team play a role too.

#### HRBP Responsibilities Include:

- Communicating and championing the investigation process to internal clients
- Providing background information and business context necessary for the investigation
- Acting as a liaison to the business and partnering with the ER team
- Providing input on the recommendation given at the end of an investigation, whether that includes disciplinary action or training
- Providing recommendations regarding ER to the business leader
- Obtaining decisions from the business after remedial measures have been implemented to gather lessons learned
- Sharing outcomes with other leaders as appropriate and for organizational learning, removing identifying details as needed

- Capturing themes to address holistic issues with the business related to bias, equity, lack of understanding of policy, or other trends
- Assisting with implementation of corrective action

#### Legal Team Responsibilities Include:

- Directing investigations that involve legal risk
- Consulting on findings and recommendations in investigations
- Reviewing investigation reports
- Providing legal advice around the risks of various outcomes

No matter how your organization allocates tasks or roles, gaining consistency and buy-in requires clarity for everyone involved.



**INSIDER TIP:** Once you gain alignment on roles and responsibilities, share those in a sustainable way that will resonate with your teams. For example, publish service-level agreements in a shared place dedicated to ER.





# Part 2: Employee Relations Training for Your People Leaders

Consistently training your people leaders and holding them accountable to leadership standards is critical to establish and maintain a *consistent culture in the organization.*

Without this consistency you will always have portions of your workforce that are not engaged because they perceive that they are not being treated fairly.

Once you have established roles and responsibilities and completed your initial assessment of the data, which we will cover next, capability gaps in your people leaders should be easily identifiable. Manager and leader development around ER capabilities and processes can and should take many formats, from formal training to informal games. Keep in mind that most learning naturally occurs on the job.

Since learning budgets are typically limited, you'll need to choose what works for people leaders while delivering the greatest impact. Once you make an impact and close capability gaps, it will get easier to garner appropriate funding for ongoing development.



## Option 1: Formal classroom or virtual training required for all managers.

### Topics could include:

- What is the role of ER versus HRBP versus people leaders?
- When to contact ER
- How corrective action works
- Templates: Where are they? How to use them? What's required and what's optional? Where does performance data live in your organization, and how does it impact employee relations interventions?
- Case studies that have people leaders work through common scenarios to help them understand what they can and should do on their own versus when to reach out for help
- Documentation tips and guidelines
- How to deliver documentation
- Scenario-based training on conflict resolution and how to have difficult conversations
- Effective communication with your direct reports
- General policy knowledge

Formal training should be developed based on the company's values and policies. Be wary of "straight off the shelf" training that won't feel authentic to your managers and may not meet them where they are in their development. Using real examples and the policies and values of your organization engages your audience and sends the message that these issues are important to the organization's culture and work environment.

Remember, formal training is not "one and done." Even experienced managers need refreshers and updates on how and when to handle emerging employee topics. It is also critical to remember that some new management hires may come with a different set of expectations from their previous employer or that newly promoted managers may inherit the added challenge of becoming a leader to their peers. Think of this type of training as you would training on any other critical, company-driven process, from finance to the supply chain.

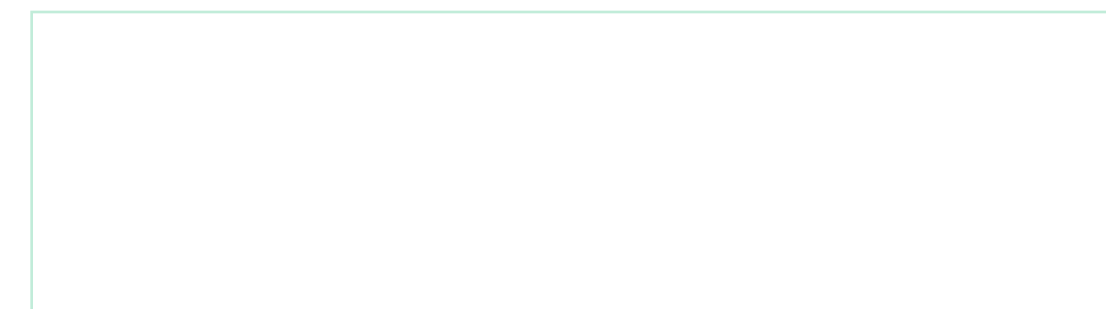
## Option 2: Ongoing management development.

- Incorporating the necessary manager capabilities related to employee relations into the entire lifecycle of the manager experience. For example, setting performance goals, providing feedback on goals and behaviors, and holding team members accountable are all typical manager capabilities.
- Consider evaluating candidates for manager roles against these during the hiring process (both in postings and interview questions), in job descriptions, and in performance reviews. If handling employee relations issues effectively is a critical part of a manager's role, why not reinforce that through your own performance management process, sharing feedback and providing guidance to ensure it's not seen as a "soft skill" that might be considered optional?
- A mentoring or coaching program. As managers grow, these relationships, when established with specific objectives and milestones, can be invaluable learning experiences. Consider how you can multiply the efficacy of your excellent managers by utilizing their coaching and peer mentoring skills. Provide a forum for managers to share recent employee relations issues they have tackled. Make it easy for them to gather feedback from each other on what they did and how they communicated.
- Consider monthly or quarterly lunch-and-learns or coffee chats with a community of practice.

- Play a game! Sometimes having fun is the best way to learn. Games are perfect for this, and luckily, they already exist. Make sure the options you look for:
  - Can be customized
  - Can be used by multiple players
  - Can be done in person or via Webex or Zoom
  - Reinforce learnings from other sessions and teach managers where to find information online



**INSIDER TIP:** One of our community favorites is ER Jeopardy. You can find that game and many others at <https://jeopardylabs.com/play/employee-relations-jeopardy-11>



### Option 3: Technology built for people leaders.

Technology can also be an impactful way to enhance the confidence and skill set of your people leaders. A growing number of organizations are investing in technology that gives managers the ability to easily access company policies, see employee history, and receive push notifications for guidance and training on challenging issues.

With this technology, ER teams gain oversight into issues without the need to get involved in every step of the process (i.e. empowering their people leaders to do more). What's more, the additional data technology curates gives ER teams the insights and trend analysis they need to identify issues they wouldn't typically see. With better insight, ER teams have the chance to proactively address issues before their managers have to escalate, saving everyone time.

Learn more about managER, powered by HR Acuity, [here](#).

### Option 4: Creating an ER toolkit.

When creating an ER toolkit, think about whether you want a toolkit just for managers, a separate one for managers and employees, or one that both managers and employees will use. The more transparent your organization, the more likely one toolkit will work.

One toolkit format that many ER leaders have tested is one that includes the following topics with links to organizational documents and processes:

- An overview of what compliance looks like
- Actions to take before contacting ER
- When to contact ER
- How to contact ER
- FAQs
- Resources:
  - Links to applicable policies
  - Templates
  - Employee assistance program (EAP)

# Part 3: Using Data to Coach and Inform People Leaders

## Metrics that signal *success*

You can't improve what you don't measure. Tracking employee relations issues is critical to identifying trends, hot spots, and areas of opportunity. It's important to consistently track and share insightful data such as how many cases you have, what types of cases are most common, and what outcomes you are regularly seeing. Knowing this data will create a meaningful frame of reference, whether it's year-over-year or month-over-month, and will uncover valuable insights.



## Which metrics matter most?

That depends on your organization, but here are metrics many ER practitioners consistently review to understand their people leaders' effectiveness in managing employee issues:

- **Engagement scores:** An improvement in annual or pulse surveys may indicate higher manager effectiveness. If employees feel heard and respected, then engagement scores tend to go up.
- **Volume of complaints:** On the plus side, a decrease in employee complaints may indicate an increase in manager effectiveness. However, if the change is too sharp or happens too quickly, it may indicate a suppression of complaints, so that data point should be looked at carefully.
- **Documentation benchmarks:** Consistent data across the organization about case volume can help you identify leaders who are behaving outside of expectations. If a leader's documentation numbers are too low compared to their peers, it could be a sign that they are avoiding tough conversations or ignoring issues altogether. On the flip side, if a leader's numbers are dramatically higher, there may be an opportunity to improve how they hire, onboard, and train their teams.
- **Trend analysis:** In addition to simply tracking data over time, you should consider analytics that tie data points together and tell you a bigger story. For example, if you spot trending complaints about work/life balance, it

could encourage a leader to do a prioritization exercise with the team or practice good balance by avoiding off-hours communication absent an emergency. Another example is growing complaints of favoritism, perceived harassment, or discrimination. Each can help identify possible policy violations, but can also uncover an opportunity to educate people leaders and help them improve their communication skills within the team.

- **Case volume:** An increase in case volume—particularly across a specific business unit or location—can be a good sign or a bad sign. On the plus side, the increase in volume may reflect an increase in employee trust in the process. On the flip side, the increase could signal more cultural concerns or broader leadership issues. Left to fester, these issues could escalate to the point of regretted turnover, EEOC filings, and state employment board cases. Getting to the bottom of this data point is critical.
- **Faster case closings:** Closing cases faster can show a trend that issues are being brought forward earlier in the process so that they can be resolved more quickly than if an issue is allowed to fester and escalate. However, you should fully investigate this data point to ensure that cases are brought forward in a timely manner.

- **Bias or disparate impact:** Spotting trends in individual leader bias or disparate impact on underrepresented groups takes the ability to see the big picture and drill down into the details. Without proper documentation, tracking, and analysis, there would be no way for your ER team to proactively intervene. This is a critical data view to share with your DE&I leader.
- **Reduced litigation/legal fees:** This one seems obvious, but it's a great business metric to track. Lower legal fees can signal that issues are being handled earlier and manager education is working.
- **Escalations:** Fewer cases involving legal risk often signal that issues are being identified and addressed in their nascent state, well before they are allowed to fester and grow complicated.

### Options for Tracking and Analyzing Data

Data is a critical part of helping people leaders improve how they handle everyday employee relations issues. In this final section, we cover how that gets done: the process of tracking and analyzing data. There are several options, and the one that's right for you depends on the size and scope of your team:

1. Easy templates provided by HR
2. Case management software, including insights from platforms like HR Acuity. [Learn more.](#)

3. Manual spreadsheets. Consider what types of data or reports your company or department may need.

Examples of fields could include:

**Date**

**Date Action Delivered**

**Location**

**Business Unit**

**Department**

**PC (i.e., Primary HR Contact)**

**Name**

**Employee ID**

**Job Title**

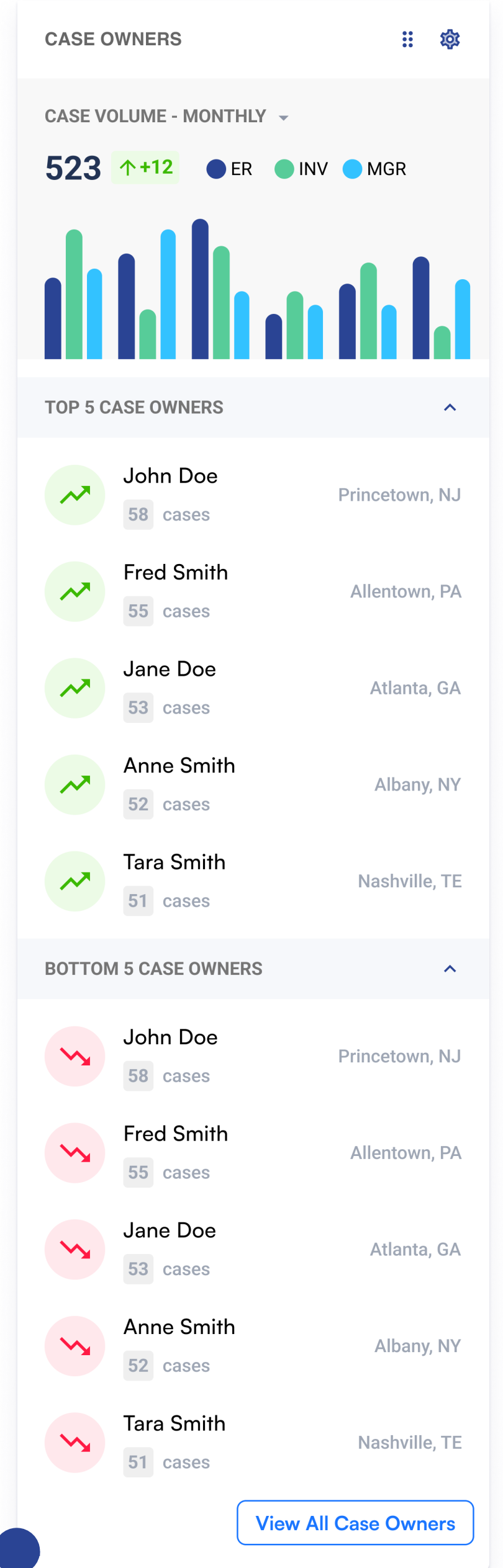
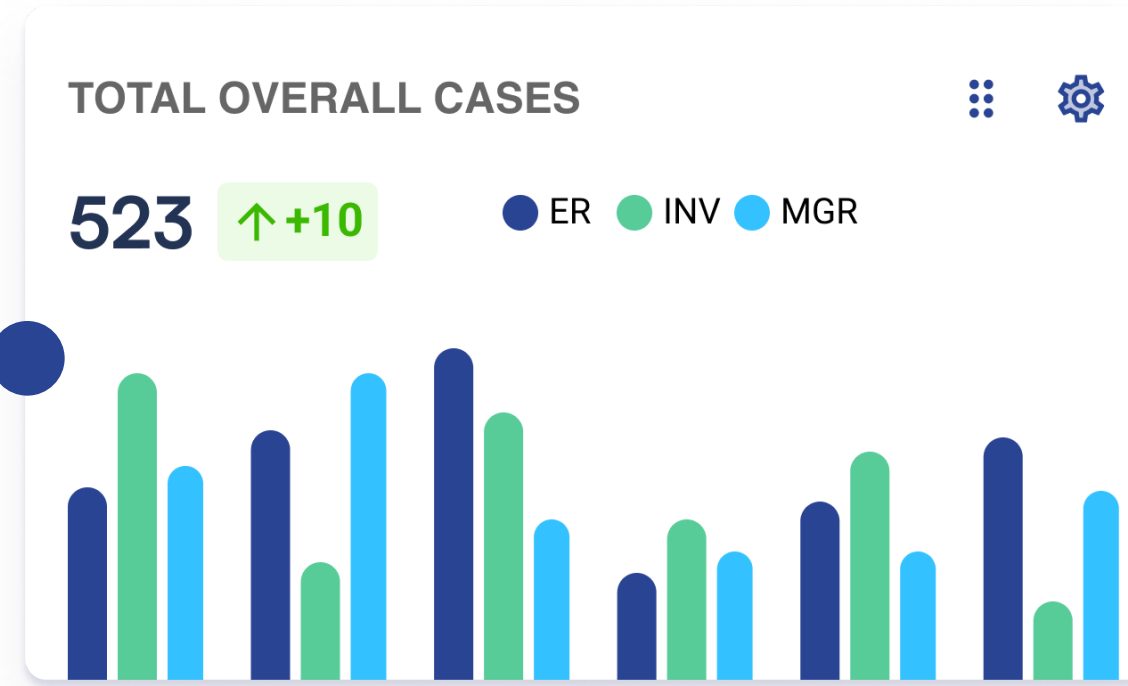
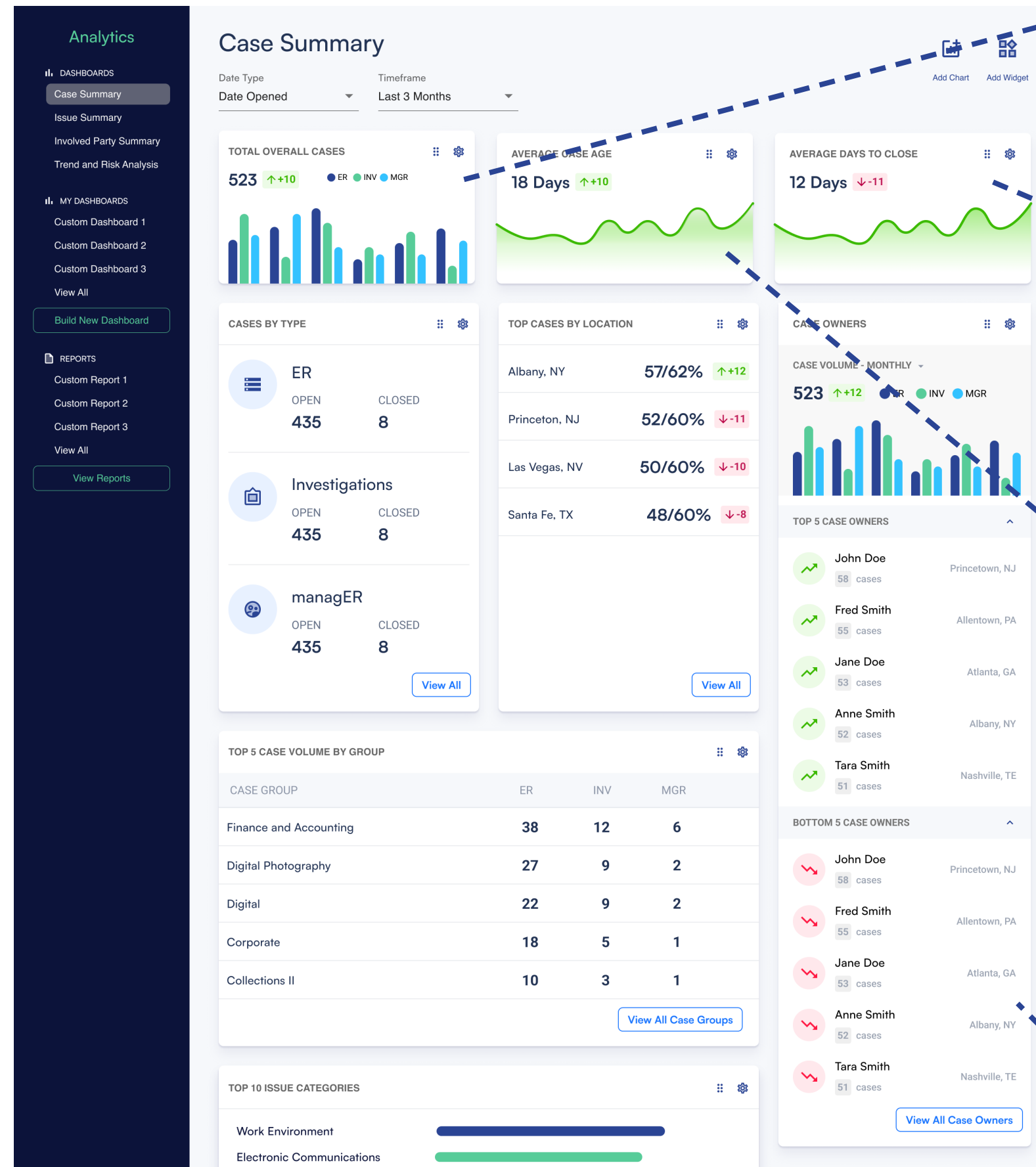
**Hire Date**

**Type of Action**

**Primary Reason**

**Special Details**

Below is an example of a dashboard purpose-built for ER that helps teams understand what's really happening in their organization:



USING DATA TO COACH AND INFORM PEOPLE LEADERS



With data discussions come legal discussions around privacy and data protection laws. A few of the considerations you should review with your legal team include:

1. Where will you house documents?
2. Who keeps the documents, managers or HR? Paper files? Electronic files?
3. What is the retention policy on the deletion of documents?
4. Who has access to what information?
5. What information will be shared, and at what level of detail?
  - HR Only: The data may be more detailed
  - Executives: High-level summary with key insights and actions
  - People leaders: Proper mix of detail and summary to preserve privacy



# Conclusion

As an ER leader, it's critical to recognize the importance of *empowering your people leaders* to effectively manage day-to-day issues.

It's also important that you strategically plan to incorporate these manager skills and capabilities into their leadership learning plans and performance goals. Doing this will result in people leaders who address employee issues in real time and naturally promote a culture of trust and accountability. The end result is a workforce full of employees who can focus on important work rather than the distraction of interpersonal conflict.

If you liked People Leaders: The Critical Link to Great Employee Relations, we think you'll love our other playbooks:

- Investigations: From Allegation to Aftercare
- ER Org Structure: How to Design and Optimize



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[HR Acuity Employee Relations Benchmark Study](#)

[Study: People Leaders and the Gap in Managing Employee Issues](#)

[Employee Relations Success Starts \(or Stops\) With People Leaders](#)

[ER Technology Buyers' Guide](#)

Additional resources shared by members of the HR Acuity Employee Relations Roundtable can be found on [empowER](#), the only online employee relations community.

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# We'd love to help

Employee Relations is growing more complex daily. Yet while you've got more challenges, you've also got *more opportunities* to drive organizations forward and influence company culture than ever before. Thankfully, you've also got more tools at your disposal.

We'd love to talk to you about how we can help you and your team build trust and engagement between your organization, leadership and employees through our purpose-built software and robust community of employee relations professionals.

GET IN TOUCH