Improving line managers' capability

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Line managers play a central role in implementing HR policies and procedures, but are they up to the task and are they receiving the support that they need?

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Key points

• There has been an increasing trend towards devolving responsibility for day-to-day people management down the line over the past few years.
• Research shows that four employees in 10 (39%) think their manager's behaviour increases their stress levels.
• Seven employers in 10 (72%) think that line managers are not comfortable having difficult conversations, according to XpertHR research.
• Eight employers in 10 (78%) told XpertHR that training needs to be compulsory if line managers are to perform people management tasks effectively.

Time and again, high profile government reviews or authoritative research programmes have highlighted the crucial role played by line managers in engaging employees, encouraging high performance and managing employees. As the 2009 national review (PDF format, 973K) (on the Department for Business, Information and Skills website) into employee engagement by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke states:

"An engaging manager is at the heart of success in engaging the workforce. Accenture's internal research showed that 80% of the variation in engagement levels was down to the line manager. As a result, employees' most important relationship at work is with their line manager; people join organisations, but they leave managers."

A number of XpertHR's own research studies also point to line managers forming the vital link in the people management chain. This article presents some of this survey evidence and examines the kind of competencies and support line managers need in order to implement HR policies on a daily basis and motivate their teams.
Line managers take centre stage

Line managers have a significant influence on the way people behave because they have a day-to-day relationship with their teams. This typically includes responsibility for implementing most HR policies, and therefore it is not surprising that the view employees have of the organisation is directly shaped by the quality of the relationship with their first line manager - as well as by the confidence and skill of that line manager in applying those HR policies.

"Effective line management is a vital part of any organisational success story," says Huw Hilditch-Roberts, director at the Chartered Management Institute (CMI). "Engaged staff will be more motivated and, in turn, be more prepared to engage customers and aid customer retention. They will also be less likely to go off sick or leave the organisation and create staff retention problems and re-recruitment costs - CMI research shows that half of those who left their jobs in 2010 left because of bad line management."

The cost of poor management

Management style is often an expression of, and will have an impact on, the employment relations climate within an organisation. However, evidence shows that managers do not always deliver on their people management role. For example, XpertHR’s 2011 survey on conflict management found that the most common reason given by employees for an individual dispute was dissatisfaction with their line manager (76.3% of employers).

A 2011 study (external management) by the CMI suggests that a lack of competence and misplaced confidence among managers is creating "a stressed out, unfulfilled workforce". The research shows that more than half (55%) of the 2,000 UK employees surveyed didn't think their line manager had the right level of confidence or sufficient ability to do the job, while nearly four employees in 10 (39%) thought that their manager's behaviour increased their stress levels.

Going a step further, poor management is often blamed for the UK's productivity gap; for example, the 2006 Leitch review of skills (PDF format, 244K) (on the gov.uk website) pointed to differences in management practice accounting for between 10% and 15% of the manufacturing productivity gap between the UK and US, and highlighted good management practice as a key element in increasing productivity.

Devolvement down the line

The past couple of decades have seen an increasing trend towards devolvement of responsibility for day-to-day people management issues to line managers. Thus the implementation of most HR policies and procedures rests primarily with line managers, who will have considerable influence on their effective application and the commitment of the workforce to corporate goals.

While this decentralisation seems to make perfect sense - managers have daily contact with their teams and are in the best position to manage and motivate them - in some cases it can place unwelcome additional responsibility on people who may be technically expert in their job but who may not be well equipped with the competencies, knowledge or confidence necessary for management. For some newly promoted managers, it can mean a conflict of priorities as they have to marry their operational responsibilities with new people management ones.
An important consideration in this model of greater devolvement is the role of HR and HR's relationship with line management. A 2007 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) report on reward and the "vital role of line managers" (PDF format, 420K) (external website) says that one of the hardest management problems to resolve is that relating to the role of HR professionals themselves. It flags up the risk of HR professionals being removed from any involvement with line managers unless dealing with problem cases.

One example of where greater responsibility for people management has been devolved to line managers, with HR acting in a coaching and supporting capacity, is at Herbert Retail (see box 1).

**What are the qualities of a good line manager?**

Hilditch-Roberts says that strong communication skills are one of the most important competencies of an effective line manager: "One of the key roles for a line manager is leading people - being able to motivate their team and articulate the reasons for a certain course of action is vital. It's important that the line manager communicates within their immediate team and on a wider basis across the organisation."

In Hilditch-Roberts's view, emotional intelligence and the ability to identify with employees in their team who may have a variety of different circumstances and issues at work and at home is also a key management quality. This means being able to adapt management style to suit the differing needs of employees, as well as not shying away from having difficult conversations with staff.

A CIPD factsheet (external website) on the role of line managers in HR points out that, in order to encourage the kind of discretionary behaviour from employees that is associated with higher performance, line managers need to:

- "Build a good working relationship with their staff - they need to lead, listen, ask, communicate, be fair, respond to suggestions and deal with problems;"
- help and support employees to take on more responsibility for how they do their jobs by coaching guidance; and
- build effective teams."

**Case study: Line manager training and development at Herbert Retail**

Herbert Retail supplies products and services to the retail sector and employs around 180 people in Suffolk. Established more than 250 years ago and family owned, the company has traditionally adopted a paternalistic management style but, increasingly over the past few years, responsibility for implementing people management policies has been devolved to line managers. For example, the 15 or so line managers in the company now have sole responsibility for performance management and day-to-day responsibility for other areas such as absence management, discipline and grievance and recruitment. "We have gradually devolved responsibility down the line with HR acting in a facilitative and coaching capacity to help and support line managers," says Tracey Roach, HR director.

HR has been encouraging managers to take a more proactive, rather than reactive, approach to managing people. "It is important that managers understand that managing people effectively means they will do their jobs more efficiently," says Roach. "This means that good and proactive management, and nipping any problems in the bud, will help managers meet their targets - a convincing argument to help managers buy in to the importance of their line management role." For HR's part, Roach says that it is equally important for her team to understand the business and the
operational demands on managers so that HR is in a position to give line managers the appropriate advice.

Herbert Retail offers a range of support for line managers - including written guidance, formal training provision, coaching and mentoring, as well as day-to-day advice from HR. Training and development is provided to all managers covering the key people management areas for which they are responsible, such as appraisal and performance management and discipline and grievance. This is delivered in a range of formats including informal help from managers and colleagues, external one-off conferences and seminars, in-house sessions and coaching from HR. Roach says that, although external programmes can be effective, they don't necessarily address the cultural and behavioural dimensions of managing people at Herbert Retail. As she comments: "You can give managers the tools to manage but it is how they use them that is important; part of a manager's role is to reinforce the desired employment relations climate here." In her view, an open management style and being able to have difficult conversations are two of the most important elements of effective line management.

Since devolving greater responsibility for people management activities to line managers, the company has experienced a gradual shift in areas such as employee engagement. As the HR director concludes: "As an organisation it is our belief that the development of our line managers is key to the success of the company as a whole. We have recently adopted a coaching model and the HR team is central to this. This will, over time, ensure that our people management is consistent and our managers are learning to manage their teams more successfully. By not marketing this as a 'culture change' but by addressing it 'by stealth' we have seen real changes in line manager behaviour - this has been excellent and a measure of the success of the programme."

Key people management activities fall to line managers

The Acas guidance (PDF format, 304K) (external website) on front line managers (FLMs) says that the personal interaction between FLMs and the employees they manage is particularly important in the following areas:

- "performance management - especially if linked to pay and reward;
- work-life balance and flexible working;
- training and development and coaching;
- communication and involvement;
- openness and conflict management; and
- employee representation."

Acas says that the FLM's handling of each of these areas will strongly influence the way an employee feels about their place of work and how well they do their job.

XpertHR's extensive research covers the breadth of people management activities and, without fail, one common thread emerges in all of these surveys. When asked what factors determine the successful implementation of these policies or processes - be it absence management, or performance management, or employee retention - HR respondents always point to the fundamental role played by line managers as a key determinant in their effectiveness. Below, we present some examples of our findings.

Managing absence
Successive surveys carried out by XpertHR have found that line managers play a fundamental role in managing absence.

For example, XpertHR's 2010 research on absence initiatives identified improving line managers' buy-in to taking an active role in absence management as the absence management measure most frequently given top ratings by employers. Three of the seven most effective measures directly involved the engagement of line managers (improving their buy-in, absence management training for managers, and providing them with absence statistics).

Similarly, our 2010 research on return-to-work interviews found that line managers are typically responsible for organising, conducting and recording return-to-work interviews.

But a high proportion of respondents told us that line managers either lack the skill, confidence, buy-in or time to conduct return-to-work interviews consistently in their organisations. This is partly because seven employers in 10 (72%) think that line managers are not comfortable having difficult conversations.

Managing performance

Another area where line managers play a pivotal role is performance management: in our 2010 survey on managing under-performance, more than nine organisations in 10 (94.2%) told us that responsibility for managing underperformance principally lies with line managers.

However, six employers in 10 (59.1%) disagreed with the statement that "managers are competent in managing underperformance in my organisation".

Respondents to the survey told us that developing effective working relationships between managers and staff is the most effective way of deterring poor performance, again emphasising the influence that line managers have in this area. In fact, a closer examination of the factors voted the most effective in preventing poor performance reveals that line managers are central to more than half of them, even if not explicitly stated.

For example, the three factors of clear communication of performance objectives (the second most important factor in deterring underperformance), acknowledging good performance and shared expectations between managers, teams and individuals would all typically depend on the employee's line manager carrying out these responsibilities effectively.

Training and support for line managers

"According to CMI research, only one UK manager in five is management-qualified and less than half of employers have a written line management process," says Hilditch-Roberts. "And yet management is a profession like any other with recognised skills and competencies, so all managers should undergo continuing professional development. Too many people are promoted into management positions without the necessary support." In his view, the fact that CMI research shows that only 49% of management training programmes are initiated by board members indicates that there should be greater leadership in this area by senior management.
According to a 2007 report by the CIPD (external website) on "learning and the line", line managers have conflicting priorities and role overload. To learn how to cope, or live, with these job pressures, line managers have to have "strong, development-based support from their own bosses or superiors". It is nearly impossible to exaggerate the importance of senior management support and action on the development of line managers, says the study.

XpertHR’s 2010 line manager training survey found that line managers are frequently expected to perform challenging people management tasks without the benefit of relevant training. Eight employers in 10 (78%) told us that they believe that training needs to be compulsory if organisations want line managers to perform people management tasks effectively, and yet just 12% of the organisations surveyed guaranteed training for managers in these areas.

Recognising the need line managers have for good quality guidance to help them fulfil their people management responsibilities, XpertHR has developed a line manager service. It provides clear, simply written online briefings on employment law and good practice specially designed for line managers.

This article was written by Rachel Suff, researcher/writer, employment relations.

Additional resources on XpertHR

- Line manager training survey 2010: HR wants compulsory training
  This 2010 survey on people management development reveals significant gaps in training coverage, and a broad consensus among HR professionals that line manager training should be compulsory.

- XpertHR absence initiatives survey 2010: role of line managers is key
  Employers that are actively tackling sickness absence achieve an average reduction in lost working time of 30%, and the involvement of line managers is key to success, according to XpertHR research.

- Return-to-work interviews survey 2010: line managers' effectiveness
  The return-to-work interview is a well-established tool, but its efficacy stands or falls according to the competence and confidence of line managers.

- Managing underperformance 2011 survey: line managers' role
  The success of an organisation's ability to deter poor performance and boost effective performance among employees depends upon the role played by line managers, according to our survey of 165 employers.