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Line managers' role in supporting the people profession

Learn about the role of line management and its relationship to an organisation's people practices

Introduction

Line managers have a very important role to play, not only in managing people and operations day-to-day, but also in implementing HR and other organisational policies and in supporting their team's development. This is particularly the case in organisations which devolve these activities to line managers. It's therefore important to give proper thought to how line managers are appointed, managed and developed to make sure they are successful in their role.

This factsheet outlines the roles and responsibilities of line managers and explores their relationship with people professionals, including opportunities to work together to support organisational strategy. It stresses the need for positive relationships between line managers and their team members, and for supporting line managers in developing their own people management skills.

Who are line managers?

Line managers have responsibility for directly managing individual employees or teams. In turn, they report to a higher-level manager on the performance of those employees or teams.

The term 'front-line manager' or 'first-line manager' normally refers to those who supervise and manage employees who themselves have no supervisory responsibilities,

but a role title need not have 'manager' in it to have people management responsibilities.

Typically, the management responsibilities carried out by line managers (particularly front-line managers) might include:

- Day-to-day people management.
- Managing operational costs.
- Providing technical expertise.
- Allocating work and rotas.
- Monitoring work and checking quality.
- Dealing with customers/clients.
- Measuring operational performance.
- Developing their people.

Managers are also responsible for supporting the wellbeing of their teams, preventing ill health, monitoring workloads and ways of working when required, and seeking support from occupational health services to deal with cases of ill health. Our Health and wellbeing survey found that, although the number of sick days recorded by employers has dropped, 'presenteeism', where employees feel the need to work when unwell, and 'leaveism', where employees use their holiday allowance to work, are widespread. These attitudes are informed by the organisation's and team's culture and line managers can play a key role in shaping them.

The evolving relationship between line managers and the people profession

There are number of areas of people management practice, where the processes may be designed by HR or L&D or OD specialists, but cannot be delivered by them in part or in full. These include, for example, performance management and recognition, employee engagement, enabling employee voice, creating and maintaining a learning culture, and achieving employee work-life balance. Our 2019 report Professionalising learning and development showed that 78% of L&D professionals feel that traditional views of line managers is a blocker to implementing better ways to improve organisational performance.

Relationship between HR and line managers

The relationship between the HR function and line managers has been subject to a number of changes and tensions in recent years. Adjustments in the delivery of HR have shifted responsibility for many core activities, such as recruitment or objective setting,

away from HR. Furthermore, the trend towards individualisation of the employment relationship has placed new burdens and opportunities in the hands of line managers. An obvious example is, with collective pay-setting provisions giving way to individual performance-related pay awards in many organisations, the role of each employee's line manager has become increasingly influential in determining individual pay increases.

The practice among many organisations of outsourcing transactional HR activities has also had the effect of devolving more responsibility to line managers to maintain records, input data and manage routine HR activities such as staffing requests, booking training or submitting payroll information. When outsourcing is working well, and managers have appropriate resources, it enables them to access better and more timely information and support to carry out people management tasks and manage their staff more effectively. At the same time, where managers' workloads do not allow them time to collect relevant information, or the systems used to keep records are cumbersome or inaccessible, there is a risk that the organisation does not have an accurate grasp on people data.

Relationship between L&D and line managers

The relationship between the L&D function and line managers has also seen a shift. Previously, with L&D as course providers, managers had no role within learning, even though it could be argued managers need to show interest in embedding learning in the workplace. Managers are also expected to have a coaching role with their teams and people development has become part of their responsibility. L&D's role in this relationship is to facilitate the 'upskilling' of the line managers, to allow embedding to take place. Our 2018 research with Towards Maturity on the link between learning and performance highlights the important relationship between L&D professionals and line managers. See also our factsheet on a range of learning solutions to fit individuals' and team needs.

The role of line managers in implementing HR and L&D processes

Line managers can make a significant difference in:

- enabling HR, OD and L&D policies and practices and 'bringing them to life'
- enabling learning solutions to happen
- identifying learning needs and embedding learning in the workflow
- acting upon advice or guidance from HR, OD and L&D
- controlling the workflow by directing and guiding the work of others

- greater collaboration between the line and the people profession to support change.

Line managers and individual performance

Research carried out for us by a team at Bath University found that front-line managers play a pivotal role in terms of implementing and enacting HR policies and practices. Where employees feel positive about their relationship with their front line managers, they're more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction, commitment and loyalty – which are in turn associated with higher levels of performance or 'discretionary' behaviour. Discretionary behaviour is defined as that which goes beyond the requirements of the job to give the extra performance that can boost 'the bottom line' (or profit levels). Our subsequent work with Bath University explored the role that line managers play in people management in two key areas: reward and learning and development.

Our review of evidence on [effective performance management approaches](#) also points at the critical role of line managers in assessing and recognising performance. Practices include setting specific and challenging goals, monitoring progress and providing feedback, and assessing performance on a regular basis.

Line managers and employee engagement

The increasing focus on [employee engagement](#) in the workplace means that this aspect of the line manager's role in people management can be particularly influential. Our work on the [relationship between line management and employee engagement and well-being](#) highlights line managers' crucial role in balancing the levels of challenge at work – which motivate and engage employees – with the right levels of support – which can reduce stress and support employees' well-being. It's therefore especially important to pay close attention to how the organisation selects, develops and manages the performance of line managers. Again this puts onus on the L&D function to ensure line managers are able to carry out this new responsibility. The report resulted in development of a series of practical tools for developing line managers to support employee engagement, health and well-being.

Supporting line managers

To deliver good people management, line managers themselves need to be managed within a strong, supportive framework to enable them to develop self-confidence and a robust sense of their own role in the organisation. This further emphasises the need for

appropriate training and development for those newly-appointed in a line management role. If managers are the 'face' of the people profession to employees, the people profession must be part of ensuring this framework is in place.

Developing line managers

The critical role that line managers play in enabling employee performance and well-being emphasises the need for appropriate development for those newly-appointed in a line management role. Yet front-line managers are often promoted from operational roles and might not have any formal management education at the time of their appointment. Furthermore, our 2016 Absence management survey showed that less than half of organisations participating in the survey provided training for dealing with short-term and long-term absence to line managers.

Our [podcast on training line managers](#) discusses the importance of developing line managers and the different strategies organisations have found successful. A general overview on all aspects of [management development](#) can be found in our factsheet.

Many of the qualities and skills that are associated with higher quality line management focus on the behaviours of the line managers involved. However, it's not enough to educate line managers in the behaviours required; organisations must also ensure they're developing the environment and culture in which line managers are actively encouraged and permitted to exhibit the identified behaviours. Our [Leadership: easier said than done](#) report outlines the key barriers to management and leadership within the organisational environment. L&D professionals are increasingly seeing their work move into this cultural impact area as they move away from simply booking courses.

Our report [Real-life leaders: closing the knowing-doing gap](#) provides information on the gaps in line managers' skills from the point of view of managers themselves, as well as HR and L&D practitioners.

The role of business partnering

There's a growing emphasis in both HR and L&D on business partnering, where business partners are closely involved with supporting business strategy. . This has enhanced the people management aspects of the line manager's role. Line managers have the opportunity to develop responses and solutions to HR issues together with [HR business partners](#) with more immediacy and alignment to business strategy. For L&D, this ability to respond readily to line manager needs for their team creates a much closer and relevant function of the L&D team.

This enables both people and business issues to be considered in a wide range of

decisions that will impact on organisational effectiveness. Because the relationship is ongoing, both sides build a better understanding and develop long-term strategies and solutions rather than the HR and L&D functions being brought in to manage issues as they arise. This proactive rather than reactive approach offers better support to operations and impact on the bottom line.

Leading line managers

Well-managed line managers are more likely to go on to lead high-performing teams. Senior management support and action on the development of line managers is critical. The relationships between line managers and their own managers and with senior management tend to make a significant difference to their willingness to display discretionary behaviour in their own management activities, as they reflect the culture of an organisation in their behaviour. For HR and L&D initiatives to be truly successful with line managers, they need to be offered with full senior stakeholder engagement and endorsement.

Generally line managers are more likely to display the positive behaviours associated with higher levels of performance from those they are managing if they experience:

- good working relationships with their own managers
- good career opportunities and support to progress their careers with effective people development
- a positive work-life balance
- the capacity to participate and feel involved in decision-making
- an open organisational culture that enables them to air a grievance or discuss matters of personal concern
- a sense of job security.

Further reading

Books and reports

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Journal articles

HASSAN, F. (2011) The frontline advantage. *Harvard Business Review*. Vol 89, No 5, May. pp106-114.

TRULLEN, J., STIRPE, L, BONACHE, J. and VALVERDE, M. (2016) The HR department's contribution to line managers' effective implementation of HR practices. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Vol 26, No 4, October. pp449-470.

TRUSS, C., SOANE, E. and ALFES, K. (2013) The relationship between line manager behaviour, perceived HRM practices, and individual performance: examining the mediating role of engagement. *Human Resource Management*. Vol 52, No 6, November/December 2013 pp839-859.

WHITEHOUSE, E. (2019) Will we ever build better line managers? *People Management* (online). 25 April.

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