**The Role of Front Line Managers in Bringing Policies to Life**
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Front line managers play a critical role in influencing employee attitudes and behaviours by the way in which they translate people management policies into practice, and can be vital in making the difference between low performing and high performing organisations (Purcell et al, 2003, Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003).It is, therefore, surprising that so little is known about the detail of the people management roles line managers actually have to perform in practice, what behaviours and competencies are required to perform this role, what factors inhibit line manager effectiveness and which factors facilitate it, and what the relationship is between HR and the line. This was perhaps understandable thirty or so years ago when there was talk of 'forgotten supervisors' (Thurley and Wirdenius 1973) and 'lost managers' (Child and Patridge 1982) but this was before the substantial growth in the people management activities of line managers.

In an attempt to plug this gap in our knowledge, myself and colleagues have been engaged in extensive research into the role of front line managers. Some of the conclusions from this research where recently delivered to an audience of HR directors from leading companies at an international conference. All could identify with the vital role that these line managers played and agreed that their skills and abilities are key to the successful implementation of HR strategy Yet all, however, admitted to this being a problematic area, and expressed concerns about line managers effectiveness in delivering people management strategies and policies in the workplace. In spite of this none identified front line managers as a unique occupational group worthy of special care or support. When asked if, when designing HR policies, these HR directors took account of the fact that delivery is down to the line manager, the response was a deafening silence. This is akin to designing a car without thinking about who is doing the driving. It's not surprising then that line mangers themselves complain that one of the barriers they face is complex policies which are hard to put into practice.

This short article presents the findings of a recently completed research project that explores the role of line managers in reward and training, learning and development through case study research, and published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the sponsors of the research (Hutchinson and Purcell 2007). The article also gives a sneak preview of research (funded by the Department of Health and due to be completed in late Spring) into the effectiveness of front line managers in delivering people management in the NHS through survey and case study material.

The managers studied are typically team leaders, group leaders, section managers, or, in the NHS, ward managers and tend to be at the lower end of the hierarchy, with direct supervisory responsible for non managerial employees. All had busy, pressurised jobs, faced competing priorities and reported increased responsibilities particularly in the area of people management. Significantly these had been taken on without relinquishing any of the old, more traditional roles. For many it was their first management position, having been promoted from the ranks of the shop floor. This in itself could create tension with competing demands and loyalties. As one manager interviewed remarked 'you are the piggy in the middle' – on the one hand expected to be the voice of management and yet on the other the champion of the team's interests.

Why are line managers so important? The earlier research explored the link between people management and performance and demonstrated not only the way front line managers implement and enact policies – or 'bring policies to life', but also that leadership plays a significant part in influencing employee attitudes, as seen in commitment, motivation and satisfaction. These attitudes strongly influence discretionary behaviour - or the choices people make about how they do their job. Positive employee attitudes encourage positive discretionary behaviour with employees prepared to 'go the extra mile' for their organisation. Some of the case studies in this research provided clear evidence of line management influence. At Selfridges, the upmarket retail store, there were marked improvements in certain employees attitudes and experiences following an improvement to the team leader role. This included a new selection procedure which focussed on people management behaviours as well as skill sets. Similar findings occurred at the Royal United Hospital in Bath following the appointment of a new ward manager with good people management skills. Other researchers also emphasise the importance of leadership behaviour. Social exchange theory shows how a reciprocal relationship exists between employees' perceptions of the degree of support the organisation provides to meet their expectations and their own behaviour. This is seen in the psychological contract. One key element in the contract is the interpersonal relationships between managers and their subordinates- known as leader member exchange which places emphasis on the relationship between the employee and his or her boss. Research for the CIPD on the psychological contract shows that supervisory leadership was the strongest factor associated with organisation commitment. Other studies also point to the difference between intended practices and the actual practices as experienced by the employees themselves – in other words between the rhetoric and the reality with the gap often explained by the variability in line managers behaviour.

Line management responsibility for people management is not a new concept. Indeed it seems quite logical that this should be part of their role – they are after all closest to the employees, and are ultimately responsibility for their performance. Back in Victorian Britain supervisors enjoyed extensive delegated powers including sole responsibility for hiring and firing. Over the next century these powers diminished as we witnessed the development of the personnel/HR function as a profession. Since the 1990s however this trend has reversed and we have seen a 'return of HRM to the line'. A variety of factors are at play to explain this but undoubtedly one key influence is the changing role of the HR function. The recent emergence of the HR shared services model, for example, in which HR become strategic business partners and centres of expertise, transfers day to day responsibility for people management matters to line managers.

The two recent studies confirm that many of the traditional day to day activities associated with the HR function are now in the hands of front line managers. Devolvement is greatest in the NHS where ward managers take responsibly for recruitment and selection, induction, maintaining staff records, appraisal and personal development plans, planning and delivering training, mentoring, communication, ensuring effective teamwork, absence control and 'managing difficult people'. This is addition to their clinical work, planning the rotas, delivering service targets, ensuring quality care and managing operational costs. It's not surprising that our survey reveals that 92 per cent of these managers agreed/strongly agreed that their job required them to work very hard, over three quarters (78 per cent) felt they never had enough time to get their job done, and a similar percentage felt (78 per

cent) that their job was stressful. Front line mangers also have much greater role to play in informal practices than formerly recognised. In some organisations we studied, where line managers appeared to have little discretion over the formal reward system, there was strong evidence of unofficial practices creeping in as a means of motivating people such as allowing time off, access to training, providing development opportunities and giving more challenging work. In learning and development, although there was extensive evidence of involvement in traditional structured activities there was equal support for the less formal like on the job training. This clearly has implications for workload, but also raised questions about consistency and control.

It is, however, clear that the quality of line management behaviour varies, and concerns about the effectiveness of line managers were raised by all we interviewed – including the line managers themselves. A common complaint was that managers lacked the necessary skills and competencies to perform the people management aspects of their job effectively, and this was attributed largely to lack of training and support. Only a handful of managers interviewed felt that they did not actually need training and that managing people was just common sense, and some who felt that competencies were best gained by learning on the job.

Another consistent theme was competing priorities in the role with the harder, more pressing business priorities dominating. This was particularly acute in the NHS where managers faced constant pressure to deliver service targets, reduce costs whilst at the same time meet the NHS plan of becoming a model employer. In most organisations people management was a 'discretionary' element of the job and not placed in any performance expectations – formal or informal. It's not surprising then that line managers fail to take their people management roles seriously when the organisations fail to value this aspect of their work highly. Excessive workloads, lack of time and, in the NHS, staff shortages, added frustration to the role with many managers complaining that they could not perform at their best. Other barriers included lack of senior management support, poorly designed HR policies and lack of role clarity. A few clearly resented the extra burden placed upon them, particularly in terms of administration which they saw as the responsibility of a specialist HR function. As one manager interviewed explained:

> "Although I agree with the responsibility of the line manager in the recruitment of staff I feel that the administration burden placed on line managers by the new system is intolerable and a very inefficient use of an expensive resource.'"

In one organisation which had recently restructured the HR function to a single service delivery model, some line managers complained about the loss of the local personnel team– referred as 'the pink and fluffies' down the corridor and felt they had been 'dumped upon'.

These problems were true to the all organisations studied, although to varying degrees, and some were consciously trying to improve the effectiveness of their line managers. All saw formal management training courses as one of the main – if not the main way - of equipping people with the necessary skills to perform these roles. However these tools were not always used, often due to lack of time or resources, and insufficient on their own to skill managers. Additional supportive conditions are needed and HR has a key role to play here such as in advising- for example, on how

to cope with problems such as holding that 'difficult conversation' with poor performers – something most managers dislike doing and would avoid. Line managers also need well designed HR policies which are simple to use in their people management activities, and perhaps some involvement in this design. HR can also provide mechanisms to measure and monitor line manager effectiveness so that good people management skills can be rewarded. Care needs to be paid to the selection of line managers paying particular attention to behavioural competencies necessary for good people management rather than technical expertise which is often the dominant requirement. Senior management support and active commitment is crucial – not just from the immediate boss but also those higher up. This includes establishing an appropriate organisation climate which supports and rewards people management behaviours, and good role modelling.

Although our research has still to be completed it is clear that front line managers must be recognised as a unique and vital group with their own needs, attributes and difficulties. They need to be given recognition, support and a sense of involvement. At the moment however too little is being done to get line managers fit for the purpose of delivering people management.

### References
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