

Line Management Factsheet

1. Introduction

Research has shown that front line managers are critical to the success of any business because they have a considerable influence on the behaviour of employees and their overall attitude towards the organisation.

Therefore it is essential that line managers are:

- Recruited and selected to ensure they have the right skills and qualities to motivate employees and deal with difficult situations
- Trained so that they can carry out their duties effectively and also develop their own careers
- Given a balanced workload that allows the necessary time to focus on performance management
- Coached by senior managers so that they can develop their management skills, play an active role in decision making and discuss any problems they may be facing

2. What is a line manager?

Line managers are known by a number of different names:

- manager
- supervisor
- team leader
- project leader

Line managers have responsibility for managing individual employees or teams. The line managers, in turn, then report to a higher level of management on the performance and well-being of the employees or teams they manage. Line managers tend to perform the same tasks as their teams or have recent experience of the work.

The terms 'line-manager' and 'front-line manager' are sometimes used interchangeably, however, 'front-line manager' tends to be more specific and normally refers to line managers in the lower layers of the management hierarchy (for example, team leader, supervisor roles). This means that front-line managers only manage employees who have no supervisory responsibilities, and not other managers.

The number of employees that a line manager is responsible for can vary from one or two in smaller organisations, up to as many as 30 in a larger business. They are often regarded as the voice of management on the front line.

The role of the line manager typically includes:

- day-to-day people management
- managing budgets and operational costs
- organising the allocation of work and preparing rotas
- providing technical expertise and guidance
- quality control
- measuring operational performance
- customer care and dealing with client queries
- monitoring work processes and systems

3. Why is the role of FLMs changing?

In the past the main job of a line manager was to 'tell and monitor'. This means that, traditionally, line managers were responsible for instructing people on what work to do and then overseeing the work to make sure it was carried out correctly.

For some line managers there is still an element of this within their role. However, a combination of new technology and changing working practices has created a more complex picture and means that line management now has much more of a focus on the individual employees.

At the same time the relationship between the HR function and line managers has been subject to a number of changes in recent years. Responsibility for many core HR activities has now shifted from HR to the line. This means that line managers are no longer just supervising staff. Instead it is becoming increasingly common for line managers to carry out a range of HR activities.

Where there is a HR department within the organisation, then line managers may work in conjunction with the HR team. However, in many cases, line managers are now taking on full responsibility for HR duties themselves. This often includes:

- employee welfare (something that was always carried out by HR traditionally)
- dealing with 'difficult' situations such as disciplinary matters or attendance issues
- hearing grievances
- carrying out performance appraisals
- managing recruitment and selection recruitment
- providing an important communication link between the employees that they manage (who may work on the 'shop floor' or 'front-line') and the senior management above

This means that many line managers now need additional skills outside of their area of job specialism to enable them to carry out the people management aspects of their role. Front-line managers are often promoted

from within which means they are unlikely to have any formal management education. Often line managers find themselves managing individuals without the necessary training which can cause difficulties for both manager and employee.

Therefore training is a vital area of consideration for any line manager (and will be discussed in further details below – See section 6.3)

4. Why is the job of line managers so important?

Line managers have a crucial impact on employee engagement as they act as the interface between the organisation and its workforce.

Employees are vital to the success of any organisation, and are key to increased productivity and effectiveness. The person who can get the best out of both individuals and teams is often the person who most closely works with them on a daily basis, and this is usually their line manager.

Line managers are in the best possible position to:

- talk to employees – both casual chats and more focused discussions
- listen to their concerns, problems and anxieties
- counsel and coach employees as required
- find out about employee's ideas and suggestions
- check they are clear on their individual targets and are on track to meet these
- ensure employees are motivated and committed to the business

Acas point out that these people management responsibilities mean that line managers are faced with an enormous wide range of issues and problems every day. For example they may need to:

- find out why an employee is absent and arrange cover if required
- sort out a disagreement between individuals or teams
- organise a team meeting and plan the agenda
- report to senior management
- ensure the necessary health and safety procedures are followed
- deal with an angry customer or service user
- organise rotas
- take part in a recruitment and selection process
- listen to an employee grievance

On top of all of this line managers are expected to know the precise details of each employee's job, and also to step in and carry out the 'front line' work themselves when required. This can make the role of a line manager extremely challenging, as will be discussed in section 5 below.

5. What difficulties do line managers face?

The main problems facing line managers are:

- juggling a wide range of duties and responsibilities
- time management and prioritising tasks
- lack of time to deal with employee issues, staff reporting and regular one-to-one supervision sessions
- too much paperwork as a result of over-complicated policies and procedures
- the high level of interpersonal skills needed to deal with their staff and senior management
- an ambiguity in the role they play – having to be ‘all things to all people’

Acas describe how line managers in today’s workplace now have responsibilities in a wide range of areas and face pressure from all sides:

- senior management expect standards to be maintained and targets met
- HR responsibility for staff welfare and performance management
- organisational responsibility for issues such as disciplinary, grievance and attendance
- individual employees need to be managed and motivated
- external pressure from the local market and sector

Three of the most challenging areas faced by line managers are:

5.1 Having difficult conversations

Dealing with employee issues can be one of the most challenging aspects of a line manager’s job. For example, line managers may have to deal with:

- an employee who is regularly late for work because of personal problems
- two colleagues accusing each other of bullying
- jealousy in a team over a promotion
- an employee who has been heard making sexist comments

It takes patience and judgment to resolve these difficult issues, and it can be tempting to act instinctively or just ignore the problems altogether and hope that sort themselves out. It is important that managers receive training to help them deal with people management issues, and they should also be clear on when they need to approach their HR department/advisor for help.

5.2 Piggy in the middle

Line managers are in a difficult position. They can often feel stuck between the expectations of the employees they manage, and the demands of their own senior managers.

At the same time the employees they manage will need support, encouragement, leadership and reward. However, many aspects of good management are learned by example, and so the line manager will often manage their own staff in the same way as they are managed themselves.

One of the main issues with 'piggy in the middle syndrome' is that line managers need to communicate with employees and senior managers in different ways. Acas describe how it is important for line managers to interpret and translate the needs of staff and senior management so that understanding, trust and cooperation are maintained.

5.3 Bringing policies and procedures to life

How successfully line managers are able to deal with the problems they encounter will often depend on ensuring that the theory contained within organisational policies and procedures is brought to life on a daily basis within the workplace.

The number of policies and procedures in place will vary depending on the size of the organisation. However, regardless of how large or small a business may be, it is always important that managers are consistent and fair when dealing with employee issues and workplace situations.

Policies and procedures can offer the essential guidance that line managers need, but they need to be used correctly. In many cases there can be a gap between the procedure and what actually happens in reality. Acas ask whether return to work meetings do actually happen after every period of sickness absence, and do regular one-to-one supervision meetings actually take place? Line managers will always benefit from the support of more senior management in ensuring that policies work well in practice.

6. What do FLMS need to help them carry out their role more effectively?

What can be done to support line managers, make them more effective and help them to cope with all the pressure that people management responsibilities bring?

Line managers are similar to any other employee in that they need to be:

1. recruited and selected to ensure they have the right skills for the job
2. well-managed by their own manager
3. trained so that they can carry out their duties effectively and achieve career progression
4. given a balanced workload
5. coached so that they can discuss any problems and concerns



Each of these areas will be discussed in more detail below.

6.1 Recruitment and selection

It is especially important to pay close attention to how the organisation selects line managers and it is crucial to recruit somebody with the right people skills for a management role. Failure to carefully select the right candidate can leave the new employee struggling with their management responsibilities. This can cause a great deal of pressure and anxiety for the manager. It can also lead to difficulties for the individuals or team being managed, and the organisation will need to deal with any issues or grievances that are raised. Eventually the manager may end up leaving if they decide the role is not the right one for them, and further recruitment will need to be carried out. Overall poor recruitment and selection can lead to increased organisational costs and employee turnover.

Although assessing candidates for technical skills can be fairly straightforward, it is not always as easy to assess candidates for people skills and judge how they will react to people management situations.

However, the use of competencies can be helpful during the recruitment process, and the following competencies are examples of those needed to become a successful line manager:

- communication and interpersonal skills
- people management – being able to develop trust, act as a role model and motivate others
- team skills
- customer service skills
- problem-solving
- ability to handle difficult conversations about issues such as poor performance

Line managers may be asked to give examples of how they have demonstrated these competencies on their employment application form, and they can also be discussed at interview or form the basis of selection exercises. It can also be useful to ask candidates how they have dealt in the past with the kind of people management situations that might occur.

An alternative to the use of a competency framework is to simply write down a description of:

- the qualities that are needed
- how a successful line manager should behave
- how a line manager can get the best out of the people they are managing

Line managers also need to give their employees the appropriate level of freedom and responsibility over how they do their job. This will motivate employees, encourage personal development and allow them to flourish and thrive. This means that any candidates for the role of line manager need to show that they have the skills and knowledge to build strong relationships and teams, communicate successfully, deal with issues and concerns and encourage employees to come forward with their own ideas. Line managers that are overly controlling and dominant will suppress employee creativity and have an adverse effect.

However, it is important to understand that even though a line manager may have all the skills required, and also be fully aware of the behaviour that is required of them, it is still not enough unless the organisational culture encourages and allows managers to display these behaviours.

6.2 Managing line managers

The relationship that a line manager has with their own line manager, and also the organisation's senior management, is absolutely key to the way in which they manage their own staff. Well-managed line managers are more likely to be successful within a management role, display the necessary discretionary behaviour and go on to lead a high-performing team.

Line managers will struggle to deliver good people management unless they themselves are managed effectively within a strong framework.

Line managers need to be supported to develop self-confidence and a clear sense of how their role fits into the wider organisation. This must be accompanied by appropriate training (as discussed in Section 6.3 below), particularly for those who are new to line management role.

Therefore it is important that line managers experience:

- strong working relationships with their own managers
- good career opportunities and the opportunity to develop their skills
- a positive work-life balance
- the chance to participate and feel involved in decision-making
- an open culture that enables them to air grievances or discuss concerns
- a sense of job security
- an environment that encourages them to display desirable management behaviours
- training in HR policies and procedures

6.3 Training and development

The transition from team member to team leader can be very challenging. It is therefore important that line managers receive the necessary support and training. Many employees end up in management roles without the skills and knowledge needed to perform the role successfully. This can be extremely stressful for the manager concerned, and often leads to a negative effect on employee motivation and productivity. At the same time employees expect their line manager to know everything about the way the organisation works.

To be able to perform their job effectively line managers need to be trained in a number of essential areas:

- Communication skills including listening skills and questioning techniques
- Motivating a team and delegating successfully
- How to spot bullying and promote a culture of dignity at work
- The basic principles of managing discipline and handling grievances
- Dealing with staff absences
- Work-life balance
- Health and safety
- Recruitment and selection
- Staff supervision and appraisal
- Handling difficult situations
- Equal opportunities and diversity

Senior management should ensure that they discuss their line managers training needs regularly and at least on an annual basis as an absolute minimum.

Access to training can be an issue for some organisations. Acas provide a range of courses aimed at line managers that are certainly worth exploring (see contact details below). Coaching can also work well as a useful alternative to attending external training courses.

Formal policies, even if only brief, can also provide essential guidance for line managers in areas such as disciplinary, grievance and absence management. Policies and procedures enable managers to be consistent and fair, and ensure they are compiling with relevant employment legislation.

6.4 Balanced workload

One of the key skills expected of all managers is the ability to prioritise the range of tasks in their workload. Work and HR issues can all build up so that line managers become a bottleneck due to a high volume of work and too much pressure.

Line managers will find managing their workload easier if:

- policies and procedures are simple, jargon free and written in plain English
- time is ring-fenced for certain key tasks such as supervision meetings and annual appraisals
- the volume of work to be carried out each day/week is monitored
- they have some flexibility with their work routine so they can deal with urgent tasks if required
- health and well-being is promoted

It is also important that line managers have the right tools to carry out their jobs. For example:

- an employee handbook that is easily accessible
- clear policies and guidance on areas such as absence management and discipline
- training on policy up-dates

6.5 Coaching

There are several different forms of coaching including:

- life coaching – helping employees to change aspects of their behaviour
- skills coaching – personal development and improving performance
- business coaching – dealing with changes such as a merger or significant change of role

Coaching is a learning and development technique that uses one-to-one discussion. Coaching is about wanting to improve the way things are currently done and, through doing so, enabling people to achieve their full potential. For example this could mean focusing on increasing knowledge, enhancing skills or improving performance, or it could be about changing the way somebody interacts with their colleagues.

Coaching involves:

- working with a trained coach, either external or trained in-house
- non-directive guidance - meaning that employees work things out for themselves
- the chance to receive lots of feedback on both strengths and weaknesses
- focusing on individual, team or organisational goals

Coaching at work can help line managers in many different ways including:

- making a connection between personal and organisational goals
- taking responsibility for making decisions

- solving problems
- developing interpersonal skills
- developing bonds between colleagues and nurturing working relationships
- management of specific situations such as return from maternity leave

Coaching does not have to be very formal or expensive. Sometimes the best support a line manager can get is from another line manager. Employers should give line managers the opportunity to meet and share experiences.

7. Relationships with employees

Recent research published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reports that an employee's performance and attitude is closely linked to:

- how they see their line manager implementing and enacting HR policies and procedures
- their working relationship with their line manager

The way that policies and procedures are introduced and operated is often down to the discretion of the individual line manager. Research has shown that this 'discretionary behaviour' has a strong influence on the behaviour and attitude of employees. Discretionary behaviour is defined by the CIPD as that which goes beyond the requirements of the job to give the extra performance that can boost 'the bottom line'.

Where employees feel positive about their relationship with their managers, they are more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction, commitment and loyalty – which are in turn associated with higher levels of performance.

There are many ways that line managers can encourage positive behaviour and increase employee motivation. For example:

- offering coaching and guidance to new starters or for those struggling with their performance
- being receptive to an employee's problems or concerns
- giving positive feedback on work well done.
- showing flexibility and empathy

It is also important that line managers allow employees to thrive and develop by allowing them a level of discretion over how they do their job. Some level of freedom and responsibility for their own work has been proven to be key in motivating employees and encouraging their personal development. On the other hand being overly dominant and controlling can suppress employee creativity, initiative and enterprise.

Therefore line managers also need to be able to:

- develop good working relationships
- communicate effectively
- provide the necessary guidance that enables employees to take on more responsibility for their work
- build strong teams
- deal promptly with any problems
- encourage employees to come forward with ideas and suggestions

The personal interaction between line managers 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, development and coaching
- communication and involvement
- openness and conflict management
- employee representation.

How the line manager handles each of these areas will strongly influence the way an employee feels about the organisation and their workplace, and will have a significant impact on how well they do their job.

For example, line managers can:

- set a good example of achieving a work-life balance by ensuring they take regular rest breaks and annual leave
- involve employees in policy development and implementation
- coach staff to increase skills and build trust
- motivate staff through positive feedback and reward performance where possible
- always investigate any problems or grievance thoroughly so they have a full understanding of what has occurred

8. Summary

The role of the line manager is changing and being able to 'tell and monitor' is no longer enough. Line managers are now often vital in making the difference between low-performing and high-performing organisations, and managers need to use their highly-developed interpersonal skills to engage staff.

Improving employee performance is becoming more and more about influencing the choice employees make about how well they decide to do their job, and line managers have the most effect on this choice. Line managers can't always control all the issues that have an influence on job satisfaction, such as pay, job design or workplace bullying. However, they can do a lot to trigger the 'feel good' factor that helps to motivate and engage staff.

Research has revealed how this ‘feel good’ factor is strongly influenced by line managers who:

- help employees see where they fit into the broader organisational vision
- respect, develop and reward their staff
- value the voice of employees and listen to their views and concerns
- build relationships based on trust and shared values

It is important that front line managers can help to engage staff and encourage positive discretionary behaviour by:

- Bringing the theory of policies and procedures to life in the workplace. This often means giving things like appraisal meetings the time and care they deserve
- Making a connection with employees. Line managers are best placed to talk to employees, listen to their concerns and coach and them as required
- Leading by example. Managers should always demonstrate the importance of important issues like work-life balance and equality
- Managing performance by always giving praise and positive feedback for work well done. At the same time guiding and coaching to improve performance that is not up to standard, including holding that difficult conversation when it is needed

Line managers need to be:

- carefully selected
- supported by strong organisational values that show clearly the behaviours expected
- trained in all the skill areas that will enable them to fulfil the people management requirements of the job
- confident that their own managers will treat them with respect
- encouraged to reflect on their own behaviour and how they are perceived by those they manage
- given sufficient time to carry out their people management duties
- encouraged to commit to the people management aspects of their role through clearly drawn up job descriptions, performance appraisal and on-going communication

1) Guidance for employers on Line Management can be found in the Acas guide ‘Front Line Managers’ which can be downloaded at: www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=802

2) Additional advice and guidance from Acas on Front Line Managers can be found at: www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=3620

- 3) A step-by-step guide from Acas on 'How to get the best out of your staff' can be found at:
www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4267
- 4) A step-by-step guide from Acas on 'Employee engagement' can be found at: www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2701
- 5) Health and Safety information on the line manager's role in tackling stress can be found at:
www.hse.gov.uk/stress/roles/yourteam.htm
- 6) Information on Acas courses for line managers can be found at: www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2031

Notes compiled by Clare Cooper with information from the following sources:

1. Acas guide – Front Line Managers
2. CIPD factsheet – The role of line managers in HR

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