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Role of the front-line manager

Front-line managers are crucial to the success of HR policies and practices. This chapter starts with an analysis of their role generally and their people management responsibilities particularly. It continues with an examination of the respective roles of HR and line management and a discussion of the line manager's role in implementing HR. The chapter concludes with suggestions on how to improve front-line managers as people managers.

THE BASIC ROLE

Front-line managers as defined by Hutchinson and Purcell (2003) are managers who are responsible for a work group to a higher level of management hierarchy, and are placed in the lower layers of the management hierarchy, normally at the first level. They tend to have employees reporting to them who themselves do not have any management or supervisory responsibility and are responsible for the day-to-day running of their work rather than strategic matters. The roles of such managers typically include a combination of the following activities:

- people management;
- managing operational costs;

- providing technical expertise;
- organizing, such as planning work allocation and rotas;
- monitoring work processes;
- checking quality;
- dealing with customers/clients;
- measuring operational performance.

Hutchinson and Purcell noted that in all the 12 organizations in which they conducted their research, the most common people management activity handled by front-line managers was absence management. This could include not just monitoring absence and lateness but also phoning (and even visiting) absent staff at home, conducting back-to-work interviews, counselling staff and conducting disciplinary hearings. Other people management activities were coaching and development, performance appraisal, involvement and communication (thus providing a vital link between team members and more senior managers), and discipline and grievances. In many organizations, recruitment and selection was also carried out by line managers, often in conjunction with HR. Thus in all these organizations front-line managers were carrying out activities that traditionally had been the bread and butter of personnel or HR departments. These people-management duties were larger and encompassed more responsibilities than the traditional supervisory role.

THE LINE MANAGER AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

The CIPD research on employee well-being and the psychological contract (Guest and Conway, 2005) established that too many line managers are failing to motivate and improve the performance of the people they manage. Under half of respondents to the CIPD survey reported that they were regularly motivated by their line manager, only 45 per cent were happy with the level of feedback they received and just 37 per cent said that their manager helped them to improve their performance. This suggests that the organizations concerned were failing to get managers to understand their role in motivating people and were also failing to manage performance as effectively as they might. As the report emphasizes, 'One of the biggest challenges for HR is to support line managers in managing and developing their people and this means that the respective roles of line and HR managers need to be understood.'

THE RESPECTIVE ROLES OF HR AND LINE MANAGEMENT

It has been the accepted tradition of HR management that HR specialists are there to provide support and services to line managers, not to usurp the latter's role of 'getting things done through people' – their responsibility for managing their own HR affairs. In practice, the HR function has frequently had the role of ensuring that HR policies are implemented consistently throughout the organization, as well as the more recent onerous responsibility for ensuring that both the letter and the spirit of employment law are implemented consistently. The latter responsibility has often been seen as a process of ensuring that the organization does not get involved in tedious, time-wasting and often expensive employment tribunal proceedings.

Carrying out this role has often led to the HR function 'policing' line management, which can be a cause of tension and ambiguity. To avoid this, HR specialists may have to adopt a reasonably light touch: providing advice rather than issuing dicta, except when a manager is clearly contravening the law or when his or her actions are likely to lead to an avoidable dispute or an employment tribunal case that the organization will probably lose.

It has also frequently been the case that, in spite of paying lip-service to the principle that 'line managers must manage', HR departments have usurped the line managers' true role of being involved in key decisions concerning the recruitment, development and remuneration of their people, thus diminishing the managers' capacity to manage their key resource effectively. This situation has arisen most frequently in large bureaucratic organizations and/or those with a powerful centralized HR function. It still exists in some quarters, but as decentralization and devolution increase and organizations are finding that they are having to operate more flexibly, it is becoming less common.

It is necessary to reconcile what might be called the 'functional control' aspects of an HR specialist's role (achieving the consistent application of policies and acting as the guardian of the organization's values concerning people) and the role of providing services, support and, as necessary, guidance to managers, without issuing commands or relieving them of their responsibilities. However, the distinction between giving advice and telling people what to do, or between providing help and taking over can be blurred, and the relationship is one that has to be developed and nurtured with great care. The most appropriate line for HR specialists to take is that of emphasizing that they are there to help line managers achieve their objectives through their people, not to do their job for them.

In practice, however, some line managers may be only too glad to let the HR department do its people management job for them, especially the less pleasant

aspects like handling discipline and grievance problems. A delicate balance has therefore to be achieved between providing help and advice when it is clearly needed and creating a 'dependency culture' that discourages managers from thinking and acting for themselves on people matters for which they are responsible. Managers will not learn about dealing with people if they are over-dependent on HR specialists. The latter therefore have to stand off sometimes and say, in effect, 'That's your problem.'

How HR and the line work together

Research into HR management and the line conducted by the IPD (Hutchinson and Wood, 1995) produced the following findings:

- Most organizations reported a trend towards greater line management responsibility for HR management without it causing any significant tension between HR and the line.
- Devolution offered positive opportunities for the HR function to become involved in strategic, proactive and internal consultancy roles because they were less involved in day-to-day operational HR activities.
- Both HR and line management were involved in operational HR activities. Line managers were more heavily involved in recruitment, selection and training decisions and in handling discipline issues and grievances. HR were still largely responsible for such matters as analysing training needs, running internal courses and pay and benefits.
- There is an underlying concern that line managers are not sufficiently competent to carry out their new roles. This may be for a number of reasons including lack of training, pressures of work, because managers have been promoted for their technical rather than managerial skills, or because they are used to referring certain issues to the HR department.
- Some HR specialists also have difficulty in adopting their new roles because they do not have the right skills (such as an understanding of the business) or because they see devolution as a threat to their own job security.
- Other problems over devolution include uncertainty on the part of line managers about the role of the HR function, lack of commitment by line managers to performing their new roles, and achieving the right balance between providing line managers with as much freedom as possible and the need to retain core controls and direction.

The conclusions reached by the researchers were that:

If line managers are to take an effective greater responsibility for HR management activities then, from the outset, the rules and responsibilities of personnel and line managers must be clearly defined and understood. Support is needed from the personnel department in terms of providing a procedural framework, advice and guidance on all personnel management matters, and in terms of training line managers so they have the appropriate skills and knowledge to carry out their new duties.

The research conducted by Hope-Hailey *et al* (1998) in eight UK-based organizations revealed that all of them were shifting responsibility for people management down the line. In practice, this often meant that responsibility for decision-making on HR issues had been devolved to line managers, but that the HR function continued to be responsible for operational functions such as recruitment and pay systems. As they commented: 'There seemed to be little indication that this move had reduced in any way the level of necessary bureaucracy associated with the implementation of personnel policies and procedures.' However, they noted that 'personnel was no longer seen as a rule maker or enforcer, but it was still regarded – in part – as an administrative function'. With reference to the activities of the HR functions in these organizations, the research established that there was 'more emphasis on achieving behavioural change through a more "nuts and bolts" systems approach rather than large scale organizational development activities'.

THE LINE MANAGER'S ROLE IN IMPLEMENTING HR POLICIES

HR can initiate new policies and practices but it is the line that has the main responsibility for implementing them. In other words, 'HR proposes but the line disposes.' If line managers are not disposed favourably towards what HR wants them to do they won't do it, or if compelled to, they will be half-hearted about it. As pointed out by Purcell *et al* (2003), high levels of organizational performance are not achieved simply by having a range of well-conceived HR policies and practices in place. What makes the difference is how these policies and practices are implemented. That is where the role of line managers in people management is crucial: 'The way line managers implement and enact policies, show leadership in dealing with employees and in exercising control come through as a major issue.' Purcell *et al* noted that dealing with people is perhaps the aspect of their work in which line managers can exercise the greatest amount of discretion. If they use their discretion not to put HR's ideas into practice, the result is that the rhetoric is unlikely to be converted into reality. Performance management schemes often fail because of the reluctance of managers

to carry out reviews. It is, as Purcell *et al* point out, line managers who bring HR policies to life.

A further factor affecting the role of line management is their ability to do the HR tasks assigned to them. People-centred activities such as defining roles, interviewing, reviewing performance, providing feedback, coaching and identifying learning and development needs all require special skills. Some managers have them, many don't. Performance-related pay schemes sometimes fail because of untrained line managers.

Further research and analysis at Bath University (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003) confirmed that: 'The role of line managers in bringing policy to life and in leading was one of the most important of all factors in explaining the difference between success and mediocrity in people management.'

HOW TO IMPROVE FRONT-LINE MANAGERS AS PEOPLE MANAGERS

The following suggestions were made by Hutchinson and Purcell (2003) on how to improve the quality of front-line managers in people management:

- Front-line managers need time to carry out their people management duties, which are often superseded by other management duties.
- They need to be carefully selected with much more attention being paid to the behavioural competencies required.
- They need the support of strong organizational values concerning leadership and people management.
- They need a good working relationship with their own managers.
- They need to receive sufficient skills training to enable them to perform their people management activities, such as performance management.