

Why HR must empower the line manager

A Guest Article by Phil Brown
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The vital role of line managers

A wealth of research in recent years has highlighted the importance of line managers within HR processes – a point that was underlined at the recent CIPD conference “HR and the role of line managers”.

Line managers play a vital role in ensuring that employees are motivated, productive and competent, and aligned behind the business strategy. They are also vitally important in making sure that the organisation complies with relevant laws and regulations.

Ill equipped

However, many line managers, under pressure to meet operational targets, often struggle to fulfil their people management duties. This is partly because they are not equipped with the tools, skills and knowledge they need to be effective.

As a result, managers sometimes effectively abdicate responsibility for aspects of people management. The phrase “that’s HR’s job” is heard too often in many companies – whether describing employee development, managing an individual’s performance or dealing with absenteeism issues.

This places a heavier burden on the HR department and means that many HR professionals, rather than being proactive and spending time on high-value activities, are bogged down with basic administration, fire-fighting and hand-holding. A recent survey of senior HR managers found that over 80% believed their departments would be able to add more value to the business if their line managers were better equipped.

Poor management hurts the bottom line

Ineffective line management doesn’t just impact on the HR department: it hurts the bottom line. The survey also found that over 80% of HR managers felt that employees would be more productive if their line managers were better equipped.

Recent research involving nearly 3,000 employers by the Work Foundation and the Institute for Employment Studies found that organisations with a comprehensive, structured approach to people management, covering areas such as recruitment, development plans and employee appraisals, perform measurably better than those without, indicated by higher profits per employee, higher profit margins and higher productivity.

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Lack of guidance and information

Sometimes it's easy to be critical of managers, but often they're not properly equipped to be effective. Investment in management training is often patchy, support consists of a set of policy documents sitting on a server somewhere, and useful information on their employees is stored in a database or a filing cabinet that only HR can access.

Faced with a lack of clear guidance and easily accessible information, it's not surprising that many line managers' response when an issue arises is either to pick up the phone to HR or to ignore the problem and hope it goes away (or at least transfers to someone else's team).

Holding on to power

Part of the problem may also lie with the HR department itself. For all the talk about wanting to devolve more responsibility to the line, in practice HR professionals are sometimes reluctant to trust line managers to manage.

They are unwilling to give managers the tools and information they need to do the job effectively: after all, knowledge is power, and by being the gatekeepers of all information relating to employees, policies and processes, HR may feel that it has power.

However, this is not in the long-term interests of the HR function.

Releasing HR's potential

If HR teams are to fulfil their potential and be true partners to the business, then they need to let go a bit more and trust their managers with the day-to-day stuff.

This doesn't mean being unsupportive or abdicating responsibility for the way that people are managed. It does mean defining strategies and policies and then putting in place the frameworks and the systems that enable managers to take accountability for the day-to-day execution – but in a controlled, informed and effective way.

Working smarter

Just wishing that line managers would take more accountability and HR professionals could be more strategic is not going to make it so, of course. Better solutions are needed to support key people management processes and

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it's likely that intelligent use of technology is likely to represent at least part of the answer.

Cost-effective support

Technology-based services offer organisations the potential to give much greater support to their line managers, but in a highly cost-effective way. Line managers can be given tools to walk them through common processes, access to comprehensive information about their employees, guidance on how to manage effectively, and prompts when tasks or actions are due – all accessed via a single web-based service.

The advantage for HR is that the line managers can be more empowered and more self-sufficient, while the HR team retains control over the processes and the policies and has full visibility over how managers are managing.

Phil Brown
Managing Director – Youmanage

If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact **TCii** on **020 7099 2621**.