State of the Front-Line Manager
Management and Supervisory Skills Development
Introduction: Houston we have a problem

Who in your organization directly manages individual contributors? We call them front-line managers but you might use team leads, supervisors or a dozen alternatives. Whatever names you use, do you see them as an underdeveloped talent pool? One where improving their development would make a big difference to how your organization performs?

It’s no secret that front-line managers are essential to your organization’s success. They form the base of your leadership development funnel and, most likely, account for over half of all your organization’s leaders. Improving how front-line managers perform yields mouthwatering increases in how individual contributors perform, increases that show up in engagement, retention, and productivity.

Yet, in study after study, executives say that front-line managers lack the capabilities they desire. Team members feel underserved. HR leaders consider front-line leaders their least ready work group. And even front-line managers themselves...
aren’t happy. More than two thirds say they don’t enjoy the role.

Improving how an organization develops their front-line managers is not a new or unusual goal. Large organizations have wanted to systematically develop front-line managers for literally centuries (think about the British Royal Navy). And what successful front-line managers do is neither unduly complicated or arcane. There’s even a diverse support industry dedicated to helping this group improve, providing assessments, training, and coaching all geared towards front-line managers.

You might expect making improvements to be a quick hit. Given how long organizations have been working this problem, shouldn’t it be low hanging fruit to borrow from what they’ve found works and bring it to your organization? Unfortunately, not. Even organizations who have made significant investments in developing and supporting front-line managers are often not confident that they’re achieving the results they seek.

So, what’s the barrier?

In this guide, we take a closer look at the impact of front-line managers, the root cause of why many struggle, and the management skills they need to succeed. You won’t be surprised that we view the challenge of developing front-line managers as a multi-faceted problem. As you consider how to support your front-line managers, you may be tempted to launch another set of workshops or invest in different reference resources. Before you do, would you like an overview of the landscape you face?
An appealing opportunity

Think about your front-line managers. You may imagine supervisors on your plant floor, team leads in your customer service group, shift managers in your retail locations, or project leads in your IT team.

Now picture a few of those front-line managers and ask yourself a few questions. Are they hard-working? Earnest and well-intentioned? Eager for their teams to perform well? Adept at supporting their people and enabling their teams? Well, if you’re like many others, the way you answered that last question stands out like a sore thumb from how you answered the others.

Steven Covey urges us to start with the end in mind. If you are considering investing in developing your front-line managers, is the view worth the climb? That is, will your investment pay off and give you the results you need to help your organization be more successful? The Conference Executive Board provides some insight.

This chart shows the impact on individual contributors of having an effective manager. Performance up over 20%; retention up 40%, and engagement up over 50%. In short, yes, the view is worth the climb! In a time when organizations are keen to encourage commitment from their front-line, grow performance, and implement strategic change, you might find it hard to think of another area that promises benefits of such a magnitude.
“ONLY WHEN THE OBSTACLE IS REMOVED CAN SOCIAL FLOW FREELY THROUGH AN ORGANISATION”
Capabilities front-line managers require

If you choose to tackle improving how you develop front-line managers, just how big a job are you taking on? How complex a set of capabilities must they master to be effective? The role of a front-line manager can seem downright daunting, especially to a first-time manager.

To be successful, do you require that front-line managers become supermen or women able to master a double handful of different roles like: Coach, resource manager, talent developer, motivator, customer advocate, change leader, innovation driver, problem solver, and prioritizer-in-chief?

The world is awash in competency models, many of which offer twenty plus skills for front-line managers to tackle.

Seems complex!
At the same time, focusing lists like these, with their attempt to be complete and comprehensive, can inadvertently lead you to lack focus when developing front-line managers. From analyzing over 10,000 manager observations, Google boiled down that complexity to a list that they call “Eight Habits of Highly Effective Managers.” Google states that for you to be an effective front-line manager, in order of importance, you must:

- Be a good coach;
- Empower your team and don’t micromanage;
- Express interest in employee’s success and well-being;
- Be productive and results-oriented;
- Be a good communicator and listen to your team;
- Help your employees with career development;
- Have a clear vision and strategy for the team;
- Have key technical skills, so you can help advise the team.

Now, does that sound a little more manageable?

In our own work, we’ve identified a set of four concrete capabilities that front-line managers require. These enable managers to carry out the eight habits Google identified and, based on our work across clients, we add implementing change to the mix.
Within each of these four capabilities, we’ve mapped out a small set of specific, actionable skills that front-line managers must be able perform to be successful.

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<tr>
<th>Managing self</th>
<th>Drive performance</th>
<th>Develop team</th>
<th>Manage change</th>
<th>Lead the business</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Knowing self</td>
<td>• Set expectations</td>
<td>• Onboard team members</td>
<td>• Prepare for change</td>
<td>• Create a shared vision</td>
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<td>• Planning your transition</td>
<td>• Monitor performance</td>
<td>• Coach</td>
<td>• Communicate change</td>
<td>• Manager your budget</td>
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<td>• Give feedback</td>
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In short, data has shown (and our experience supports) that the 80/20 rule applies and managers can succeed by mastering only a limited set of skills. It’s not the volume and breadth of skills that holds organizations back from successfully developing managers.

But are these skills mysterious, arcane, or difficult to develop? Not particularly! Thought leaders have provided sound models and pragmatic ways of working for not just what frontline managers must do but also how they can do it.

In sum, when it comes to identifying just what we want front-line managers to be able to do, we face good news. To create effective front-line managers, you can target a compact set of concrete skills for which proven models exist. You can think “rifle shot” not “shotgun”.

Still, you’re not out of the woods. As the next section discusses, even with this clear target and even with some organizations investing significant energy, results continue to lag.
Management and Supervisory Skills Development
The unrealized opportunity

We saw above that to develop capable front-line managers, we face a focused target. That makes the challenge seem practical to tackle. But is it worth the effort? After all, organizations face many options for focusing their limited energies in developing their people.

What’s the business case for focusing on front-line managers? Prior research lets us offer perspectives from multiple audiences: executives, HR leaders, team members, and front-line managers themselves. To what extent do each of these different audiences find that gaps in the capabilities of the front-line managers impact their ability to succeed?
## Management and Supervisory Skills Development

<table>
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<th>Role</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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| Executives            | • 79% believe shortcomings in front-line manager development detracts from their firm’s performance.  
                          • 90% believe shortcomings in front-line manager development detracts from employee engagement.  
                          • “Companies say they are finding they don’t have the managers to spearhead new projects or step in for departing executives, a problem as companies try to shift into growth mode.” |
| HR Leaders            | • “HR leaders rate their first-line managers as their ‘least ready’ workgroup, even less capable than their entry-level employees.”  
                          • “Sixty percent of organizations are facing a shortage of readily available leadership skills.” Organizations struggling to fill higher level management positions often trace problems back to the frontline position.  
                          • Only 25% of companies report that their process for developing front-line managers is effective. |
| Team Members          | • 1 in 3 employees feel their supervisor is ineffective.  
                          • 51% of employees are actively looking for a new job or watching for new job openings. One in two employees have left their job to get away from their manager at some point in their career. Gallup estimates that the manager accounts for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores. |
| Front-line Managers   | • 68% of all managers admit they really don’t like being managers.  
                          • 45% of front-line managers found their first year “challenging”  
                          • Only 19% of frontline leaders rated their development as high quality. |
The Unrealized Opportunity

Not a pretty picture! Linda Hill, in her seminal study of the transition into management, cites 20 years of research showing that this is the “level in the organization from which come the most frequent reports of incompetence, burnout, and excessive attrition.”xvi We’ve seen that effective front-line managers create tremendous impact through increasing productivity, engagement, and retention. And that the skill set they require is not complex. And still, the data shows voices across organizations are flatly dissatisfied with how well front-line managers perform. What will it take to do better?
The Root of the Issue

So, developing front-line managers appears both worthy and practical. But then why has it proven so hard for so many organizations to help their front-line managers develop? As you might suspect, it’s more than a training problem. Let’s take a step back and take a more holistic look at what barriers organizations face when seeking front-line management excellence.

Organizations don’t pick the right prospects

First, are you choosing the right people to lead your front-line? Think about how you recruit for other pivotal roles. What do you seek? Specific skills? A passion for the work?

In most organizations, the person who gets asked to lead the team turns out to be the one who is the highest performing individual contributor. But there’s an enormous chasm between the mindset and work required to be an effective individual contributor from that required to be an effective team leader. As a result, many organizations promote “accidental” managers who are ill-equipped to perform successfully.xv

Furthermore, it’s rare for an organization to accurately predict when and where they’ll need a new front-line manager. As such, they seldom have ready a waiting pool of talent. According to Gallup, organizations fail to choose a candidate with the right talent for the manager job a whopping 82% of the time.xvi

In addition, those new front-line managers themselves often take that job promotion for the wrong reasons. How often do people take that new management job because their main passion to create greater impact through leading others? Not often enough. According to DDI, the leading reason prospects take the job is that ever-sought-for pay increase. Yet DDI reports, “Many of the respondents who
took the job for money quickly became disillusioned. They were 57 percent more likely to regret the promotion than those who wanted to make a greater contribution.”

**Front-line managers spend their time in the wrong ways**

So what does a successful front-line manager do? According to Cahill, successful front-line managers spend at least 60% of their time providing coaching, guidance, assistance and support to their staff.

However, Cahill found most front-line managers spend their time far differently, spending less than 30% of their time on those activities. Instead, the bulk of their time is spent on administration and less useful tasks. MindGym finds even that dismal picture to be optimistic, reporting that front-line managers spend as little as 10% of their week actually managing front-line employees and that this time is often spent checking compliance or fire-fighting immediate problems.

To develop front-line managers, organizations must help them allocate their time where it will matter most.

**Front-line managers are overconfident in their skills.**

It’s hard to improve when you already feel you are capable. How well do your front-line managers think they’re doing at managing? In our own work, we’ve found a gap between how executives and HR leaders view the capabilities of their front-line managers compared with how those front-line managers think of their skills. In a recent, fairly typical project, we were engaged by a company that sought to tackle a new market and, to do so, wanted to drive a suite of accompanying strategic changes. Leadership was convinced that their frontline managers, who had not previously been a focus for development, needed substantial development to keep individual contributors engaged and drive change.

But when we asked the front-line managers directly about their skill levels in managing their teams, we heard a different story. 87% rated themselves as being either a “master” or an “adept”. Only 13% rated themselves in the two lower categories, “journeymen” or “novice”. This disjoint was echoed by DDI, who also find that 87% of front-line managers rate their skills as “good” or “excellent”.

The problem here is clear: when people think they’re already good at doing something, they’re not motivated to improve. So, unless organizations help front-line managers create concrete goals for improvement, their development investments are unlikely to have much of an impact.
Front-line managers aren’t developed once they are in role

This may seem obvious, but a simple root cause for why it’s so hard to develop front-line leaders is that a lot of organizations simply don’t do it. If you don’t invest, well then, you won’t see results. The Associated for Talent Development (ATD) reports that only 38% of organizations have a formal development process for front-line managers.\textsuperscript{xxi} DDI found similar numbers and report that the “trial and error” method, the most common way front-line managers reported they learned their jobs, “was linked to less positive attitudes about their organizations.”

If your organization is lacking such a program, then chances are you will have challenges helping prospects develop critical supervisory or management skills, and make the transition to successful front-line manager.

Even when we try to develop them, we often struggle

Even when organizations define formal methods for developing front-line managers, do their investments in learning translate to improved performance back in the real world? The data is stark. ATD reports that nearly 25% of companies said that their leadership programs provided little or no value.\textsuperscript{xxii} KnowledgeAdvisors finds that 41% of training for frontline managers is not applied back on the job. McKinsey says that only 10% of front-line managers believe their training was effective in actually preparing them to lead people. Bersin reports that “Just 13 percent of companies report that they are “excellent” at building global leaders and, when it comes to Millennials, this figure drops to 7 percent.”\textsuperscript{xxiii}

These statistics are echoed in the dozens of conversations we’ve had with talent development leaders. The large majority tell us that they are unclear on the results they achieve … and they suspect the results are not what they want.
The Next Step: Bridging the Learning - Doing Gap

We’ve seen that the state of the front-line manager represents a challenge and a significant opportunity. Few are happy with how well front-line managers perform. Even when organizations invest, they often do not achieve the results they seek. What’s blocking success? Why is it that investments in development have so often shown such scant results?

After all, in many ways, organizations start from a position of strength when they seek to develop front-line managers. In our conversations with talent leaders, when we ask, “what goes right”, we hear many positives. They tell us “our organization cares about the problem”, “we know what skills we want to target”, and “we can provide compelling workshops based on quality content.” They usually even say, “we get wonderful ratings on our events.”

Given all these positives, what causes the disappointing results that the research shows? Our conversations with talent leaders provides an insight. When we ask, “what happens after your training events?” the most common answer we hear is “Well, we’re not that sure. Our front-line managers go back to the job and disappear. While we don’t really know, we suspect it may not be good.”
Imagine the plight of Sarah, a typical new front-line manager. Yesterday, Sarah was the peak performer in her small team of project managers. Tomorrow, she will be the team leader. She’ll need to shift her attitude towards “what’s my job” and will be rewarded on team performance not individual performance. She’ll be in over her head with responsibilities she hasn’t previously prepared for. She’ll be tempted to make a series of rookie errors, including simply spending her time in unproductive ways. And, even if her organization offers her a role transition development program, it may well be packaged as a two-day workshop. Sarah may very much appreciate the support she receives. Yet, if she’s like many new frontline managers, she may find it difficult to dedicate time to put what she learns into action. It takes time to try out new ideas. Even more of a barrier, it feels awkward to expose your fledgling skills to your team members.

Helping front-line managers find ways to practice what they learn on the job appears to be the missing link when it comes to developing them. In the learning field, we know that application is critical. 87% of talent development leaders agree manager training is a waste of resources without sustainment (that is, actions to engage learners and ensure that they apply what they learn over time in the field).

Yet, their actions tell a very different story. 82% don’t strongly believe their company has been successful at manager development sustainment so far. And an overwhelming 67% don’t have strong faith that sustainment of manager training is even possible in their organization. This isn’t unusual. Across roles, 89% of managers do not hold their employees accountable for applying training back on the job.

However, given the barriers frontline managers face to applying what they learn, the lack of support and accountability for converting learning to action is particularly debilitating for front-line managers.

We call this syndrome the **Learning-Doing Gap**, that is, providing frontline managers training while not also giving them an environment which helps them to convert what they learn to “doing” on the job. Want to explore our thoughts on how to overcome the gap? See our white paper, *Bridging the Learning Doing Gap*, in which we describe how to implement four principles to move beyond “training” to “demonstrated performance.”
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