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Supporting the underperforming manager

Teaching the soft skills that can make all the difference

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No organization can afford to employ an under-performing manager who fails to add significant value to the business – yet it is surprising how many inadequate managers exist in British industry.

The most recent Hay Group directors' survey identified middle management as the Achilles heel of British industry, concluding that under-performing managers are costing the UK economy £220 billion a year.

The Hay Group survey also revealed that senior managers are aware of the issue – four out of 10 directors believed that poor middle management was the single greatest barrier to their organization's success.

So, if the people in power are aware of the situation, what can be done to change things? After all, effective managers who can increase productivity and profit are essential to a company's survival as well as a country's long-term economic competitiveness.

Playing the blame game

Why are middle managers getting the blame? Are they being made scapegoats or do people work hard to get to the top and simply lose their momentum as they progress up the ladder?

Not surprisingly, the answer is more complex than either scenario. In my work with companies of all sizes and from a range of sectors, the crux of the problem seems to be that frequently talented people are promoted to positions that they are not adequately trained or prepared for. A surprising number of companies still operates the habit of systematic promotion as a pat on the back or a reward for longevity and loyalty. The result is a high number of managers – 60 percent, in fact – described as “reluctant” by the Institute of Leadership and Management.

Make training a priority

Skills such as performance and relationship management, delegation, time management and team building are labeled “soft” skills. Despite the fact that these skills are an essential part of effective management, many departments are investing their increasingly restricted training budgets in areas that sound more impressive. However, to neglect equipping a

newly promoted or emerging manager with the new skills that he or she will need is irresponsible and shortsighted.

Training does not have to be an expensive residential course full of management theory, but should aim to build essential skills and confidence in performance management, managing difficult conversations, effective team meetings, delegation and communication skills. When employers cut their training budgets to save money, they often fail to appreciate the resulting cost in poor management and decline in productivity, as good managers are the most cost-effective resource that an organization has.

Four key areas

Good management is basically a combination of skills and the confidence needed to deploy them effectively. In my work with companies across the UK, it has become obvious that both experienced and newly promoted managers benefit hugely from improving their skills and confidence in four key areas.

Self-awareness

Managers, particularly those who are newly promoted or who feel threatened by junior members of staff, can sometimes respond to their new position by going all out to stamp their authority on their new team. This can result in an overbearing, didactic approach that is unlikely to win loyalty from staff. Alternatively, some managers try to curry favor by consulting members of their team on every matter; a strategy hardly designed to win confidence.

It is important for managers to take time to give honest consideration to their own strengths and weaknesses. They need to reflect on how their language and behavior affect others. At the same time, they must be prepared to accept that their views and opinions will not always be shared by others. If a manager can identify his or her stress triggers and strongest motivators, and have an insight into the behavioral style of others, he or she will be well on the way to managing the team more effectively. Behavioral profiling can help with this enormously, but so can the old-fashioned and under-used skills of listening, questioning and observing.

Delegation

“Work smarter, not harder” should be the mantra for middle managers. There often is a sense that the privilege of promotion should be repaid by working longer hours; perhaps being first in the office and the last to leave. In fact, many managers work 12-15 hours a day and never complete their workload, while their colleagues are going through the motions, working through a non-challenging list of tasks and clocking off as soon as the clock strikes 5 p.m.

Managers fail to delegate for two main reasons. First, they feel unable to trust others to do as good a job as they themselves believe they can do. However, the right person with interest and aptitude can soon be taught what to do, and with some support and coaching will soon

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develop into a role. Moreover, it is part of a manager's responsibility to develop staff. Organizations can only grow effectively when their people grow with them; allocating tasks and responsibilities to the right people is key to this.

Secondly, managers may feel that they need to do everything themselves in order to prove their worth. Not only is this stunting staff development, it is unsustainable and a poor example.

Communication

Communication skills are rarely taught, but underpin everything that a manager does. Whether it is presenting a new strategy, motivating a team, managing performance appraisals or chairing meetings, managers will succeed or fail on their ability to communicate well with a variety of people in a range of situations.

It is all too easy to use technology to do our communicating for us, but an e-mail or text message is no substitute for face-to-face discussion. Managing meetings, keeping the focus and making them meaningful is a difficult skill to master and definitely improves with experience. It can also be greatly enhanced with a little training – but is an area that is rarely invested in by many businesses.

Organizational skills

Managers can be promoted for a range of reasons: their knowledge of the industry; a proven track record; great sales figures; or simply as a reward for time served. However, none of these qualities or achievements automatically means that they are great organizers.

The job of manager inevitably becomes more complex as incumbents immediately become responsible for others – which in turn means that they need to be able to organize not only their own time and processes but also those of others.

To be effective, managers need to become comfortable with time management, planning and the consistent application of systems and business processes. This does not come naturally to everyone, so the best advice as a starting point is to tackle one thing at a time, ensure standards are consistently applied and allow time to reflect, plan and review.

Cultivate a supportive ethos

Management has its rewards but it can also be an isolated place where seeking help is still interpreted as a sign of weakness or incompetence. The higher the climb, the further there is to fall. Even the experienced and confident manager can feel vulnerable and exposed at times.

While managers understandably feel unable to turn to junior members of staff for encouragement and support, they do have an important ally in other managers. A well run company should foster a system of peer support where it is acceptable to admit to doubt and seek advice. Ultimately, managers learn best from other managers and get support and encouragement that they may be unable to find elsewhere. Peer groups are also a great place to grow as a manager; supporting, mentoring and sharing best practice with others, while learning through the experiences of trusted colleagues. A company with a newly promoted manager should always appoint a more experienced manager to mentor him or

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her in the early days in the new position to ensure that the person is able to benefit from the experience of others and continue the company's management ethos.

Managers have a lot riding on their shoulders and a lot is expected of them. They need to be given the tools and training to carry out their role effectively. Now is the time to address the failings in management; not by apportioning blame but by looking at how the potential that middle managers have can be developed and maximized for individual organizations and the economy as a whole.

Note

Rosie Garwood is Managing Director of Reflection Consulting Ltd. The core of her business is providing practical, relevant training and support for managers and trouble-shooting for teams in all sectors. More information is available at www.reflectionconsulting.co.uk

She also runs the Rising Stars Management School for emerging managers and leaders of the future. Visit www.risingstarsmanagementschool.co.uk for more information.

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