



Change agenda

Learning and the line

The role of line managers
in training, learning and
development

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Introduction

This Change Agenda is the second of three reports derived from research being undertaken in six organisations on the role of line managers in aspects of people management. In our first report, *Rewarding Work: The vital role of line managers* (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007b), we focused on line managers and reward. Here we look at managers' roles in influencing activities concerned with the training, learning and development of their staff, and themselves.

Research was undertaken in six organisations (see Appendix 1 for details) through interviews with members of the HR/personnel team and with line managers at various levels of seniority. Additional material was collected from their literature, company documentation and websites. The organisations chosen for research come from a wide range of sectors across the economy. Two are in the public sector: Wiltshire County Council, and Defence Logistics Organisation/Defence Procurement Agency (DLO/DPA), which is part of the Ministry of Defence. Two are professional service firms with distinct challenges in managing professionals in knowledge-intensive market sectors (Standard & Poor's, a McGraw-Hill company, and Halcrow, a well-established engineering consultancy and design company). One is a sophisticated retail department store, John Lewis Partnership. The sixth company is a major force in logistics and distribution – Wincanton.

All are large organisations, and so some of the conclusions of the study, but not all, cannot be taken to apply equally to small firms. What is common, however, is that line managers do play a vital role in encouraging, facilitating, initiating, and even inhibiting, the learning and development of their staff.

Learning and the line

In March 2005 the CIPD published a report – *Who Learns at Work? Employees' experience of training and development* – based on a survey of 750 employees across sectors. The results powerfully demonstrated the critical role of line managers as facilitators and providers of learning. Just under half of respondents said it was their line manager who initiated their most recent training activity, compared with a third who identified the HR/training department. And where this training was evaluated, it was the line manager who led the discussion on the effectiveness of the training in over half the cases.

In terms of the type of training provided, off-the-job, classroom-based activity was still dominant, but on-the-job and one-to-one training were often mentioned. However, in terms of people's preferred method of training, learning by doing with guidance from colleagues or the line manager was top of the list, especially for those with few qualifications. The survey report concluded that:

The role of the line manager is critical to training and development in organisations. Line managers initiate a high percentage of the training that takes place. They are also responsible for over half of the discussions with employees on the effectiveness of training that takes place. Ensuring that line managers have the skills for and are committed to support learning and development is essential. (p15)

The annual CIPD survey of learning and development professionals has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of line managers. The most recent survey (CIPD 2007) confirms increasing line manager involvement in learning and development (almost three-quarters of respondents report that line managers have taken on greater responsibility for these activities in the last two years) and indicates almost universal support for the view that line managers are important in supporting learning and development.

This begs three questions:

- 1 Getting beyond the rhetoric that learning and development are 'good things' in their own right, why is it important to recognise the line manager's role here?
- 2 Do line managers support training, learning and development, and what are the 'skills' necessary to do this?
- 3 How can HR and learning and development professionals support the line in developing the requisite skills and commitment?

Understanding the people and performance link

Our previous major research project (Purcell et al 2003) provides very useful material to allow us to answer the first question, 'why are line managers important?' The purpose of this research, therefore, is to enable us to answer the second and third questions on line manager skill and commitment to learning and development, and the role of people management professionals in HR and learning and development departments.

Understanding the People and Performance Link: Unlocking the black box (Purcell et al 2003) explores the link between people management and better organisational performance. The central thesis of this link is the need to gain the commitment of employees to their organisation, what is increasingly called 'engagement', and to achieve high levels of job satisfaction. These attitudinal attributes are strongly associated with positive behaviours, such as engaging in positive discretionary behaviour ('going the extra mile'), good attendance and reduced levels of labour turnover and, of particular relevance here, a propensity to learn and build levels of competence. The critical question is how this is achieved.

Social exchange theory tells us that a reciprocal relationship usually exists between employees' perceptions of the degree of support the organisation

provides to meet their expectations and their own behaviour. This can be seen in psychological contracts. One powerful element in this contract is the relationship with the line manager and their leadership behaviour, what is called 'leader-member exchange', or LMX (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007a). Another is employees' experiences of various HR practices implemented by the employer, such as career development, learning and development, performance management, and many others.

Statistical tests were carried out in the previous research to see whether there are relationships or positive correlations between satisfaction with HR practices and employees' organisational commitment and motivation. Training – taken here to mean the provision of formal training both on and off the job – did appear as an important factor in employees' minds.

The vital role of line managers

If we shift attention away from training to learning, two factors stand out. First, teamworking is seen to provide a powerful means of learning 'the job', with employees often strongly agreeing that the team helps them learn shortcuts and better ways to do their jobs. This suggests that front-line managers, like team leaders, are critical agents in the people and performance causal chain since they are the ones who can create effective team functioning. Second, there is a strong association between the effective provision of coaching and guidance by the line manager and levels of employee commitment, satisfaction and motivation.

Coaching and guidance by the line manager is a fundamental learning activity and it's worth noting that the CIPD's *Who Learns at Work?* (2005) survey found that only 21% had received one-to-one coaching from their line manager in the previous year. This is an alarmingly low result given its importance. The CIPD 2007 learning and development survey suggests that part of the answer may lie in lack of training for line managers themselves. Eighty per cent of respondents report that only a minority, or none, of their line managers receive training to coach.

Another form of learning, or at least a learning opportunity, is the experience of doing the job. Where

employees find their job demanding, and feel they have a relatively high level of autonomy in how they do the job, there are much higher levels of satisfaction, which feeds into organisational commitment. If a job is easy, or requires a lower level of skill than that possessed by the worker, little learning will take place.

Demanding jobs, with relative freedom on how to do the job, therefore stimulate continuous learning. According to the CIPD's survey *Who Learns at Work?* (2005), the best way to learn, by far, is 'being shown how to do things and then practising them'. It will often be the immediate line manager who will show employees, especially relatively new ones, how to do things, and we know from our own earlier research that it is line managers who play the strongest part in structuring people's actual experience of doing a job.

In short, line managers structure and deliver learning opportunities. Line managers provide coaching and guidance, and they are the ones that lead teams to stimulate the learning of team members. Line managers also have a key, and perhaps more traditional, role to play in conducting performance appraisals and agreeing development plans. Yet as we show in this report, they also do much, much more.

Other researchers have explored the fundamental role that the line manager plays. For example, Noe (1996) indicates that support from supervisors affects employees' willingness to engage in development activities. And Gibb (2002) suggests that greater line manager involvement in learning and development promotes the notion of lifelong learning, and can improve the quality of these activities since line managers are best placed (compared with HR/personnel specialists) to understand both the organisational needs and individual needs.

This focus on learning and the structuring of learning opportunities does not, of course, mean that formal training is not important and that the extensive investment that 'our' companies make in classroom and especially in online training is misplaced. However, the popularity of 'learning by doing' (or 'sitting with Nellie') is challenging to those like Lord Leitch, who, in his recent report (HM Treasury 2006), place emphasis on portable skills and qualification-based learning.

Workplace learning can be recognised in qualifications such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), and qualification bodies have increasingly found means of assessing this learning and giving credit for it. But it's worth noting, as an aside, that few of the line managers we spoke to place much emphasis on turning learning into qualifications. Indeed, the purpose of learning is to do the job, and do it better.

For some this includes preparing employees for future jobs, but the primary focus is the immediate challenges of meeting customer or client requirements. This applies equally to line managers themselves and their own learning. And the limits of this were sometimes noted. This focus on short-term learning related to a current job can be at the expense of longer-term career development, especially where, as is often the case in large organisations, movement to different parts or divisions is the norm.

Even where organisations provide formal structured off-the-job learning as good practice – for example Standard & Poor's university learning centre 'The Gateway to Learning' – line manager support for this is required. They are the ones who give access to training. This broadens the line manager role from the provision of on-the-job learning to a wider range of learning and development activities. We look at this in the next section.

The practical meaning of training, learning and development

Formal approaches to training, mainly for skills or mandatory requirements, are still much in evidence. All the case study organisations provide formal training programmes – what Standard & Poor's calls 'classes', a language emanating from the New York headquarters. Much of this training is now booked online and some of it provided in that medium. The DLO/DPA, in particular, has developed a very extensive suite of programmes, with some linked to external providers.

Across the organisations, training programmes are usually widely advertised, for example in lifts or public areas as well as on intranets. By placing this advertising and providing online training, the burden for action – to book the course or delay for a time – is placed upon individuals and their line manager. This 'self-service' approach is not without its critics since it can encourage a 'shopping trip' mentality, sometimes referred to as 'picking the sweeties', and the training is not necessarily related to job-specific or organisational needs. One of the managers interviewed commented that the list of training courses on offer is often subject 'to ridicule'.

There is also the problem of what happens after the course and how the training is evaluated. Sometimes what is offered is seen by line managers as a little tired or not really relevant. One senior manager acknowledged that, despite the extensiveness of the formal training provisions within their organisation, the business benefits are poorly assessed and not always linked to business objectives. The impression could also be given that training managers get anxious to ensure that there are enough 'bums on seats' to justify expenditure in formal classes or off-the-job training programmes. Standard & Poor's, for all these reasons, are downplaying advertised programmes, and placing emphasis on talent development and learning, and the role of the line manager.

Some case study organisations, especially those with 'professionals' or 'knowledge workers', have

requirements in place for continuous professional development (CPD) and the completion of a personal development plan (PDP). This varied from a set number of training hours to be spent on recognised CPD activity to career development reviews and the completion of personal training plans. In one organisation, the completion of the personal training plan centres on an online planning tool. However, this online planning tool is seen as 'a bit of a burden' by some and lacking in the more personal approach that had existed when local 'personnel' managers had been involved. As an annual event it was also seen as a discontinuous activity that did not generate a culture of learning.

In general CPD activity was not popular with managers, as it is felt to be 'imposed' on people and to be generating a 'tick box' mentality. This prevents, or gets in the way of, meaningful discussions between the line manager and their staff about development needs. This, of course, is not the intended outcome of CPD activity, or personal training needs analysis, but it does throw up the problem of designing formal systems – both in the provision of a suite of training courses or classes and the encouragement and monitoring of development activities. The formality and remoteness of CPD can be at odds with organic growth of local needs and response.

This highlights the point that even formal training-based activity relies on line management support and enthusiasm. For example, in nearly every case the line manager has to approve attendance at off-the-job training and has to sign off the PDP. This becomes particularly important where attendance at training programmes is paid for out of the line manager's budget. We did come across examples of where training had been refused by the line manager on the grounds it was not relevant to the job performed or the needs of the section and, on other occasions, where the release of someone on a training programme was deemed inconvenient for business reasons.

One of the most common and traditional ways in which line managers are involved in training, learning and development is in performance management, notably in conducting performance appraisals and agreeing personal development plans. This can be both formal and informal, although it is the formal process that most of the managers we interviewed alluded to, as we discuss later.

The extension of 'learning and development' activities

These traditional approaches to training, however, as a top-down, formal provision of courses, with the line manager role essentially that of a gatekeeper, are increasingly at odds with the reality and practical meaning of modern learning and development. It's important to recognise the emphasis placed on formal training, and its value, and not to throw the baby out with the bath water. But all organisations recognised that although formal training provision was necessary, it is by no means sufficient.

The line manager role was seen as fundamental in:

- induction activities – for example, arranging for a ‘buddy’ to guide and advise the new starter, and in encouraging shadowing or working alongside a member of staff in meeting clients or project work. The 2007 CIPD learning and development survey confirmed this as a key activity for line managers, with 29% of respondents claiming induction was the main responsibility of line managers and 45% reporting some involvement of the line
- giving access to challenging work or being a member of a project team – in the professional service firms, this was particularly important. Being starved of good work in some instances was an outcome of poor performance, more so than in the use of the formal performance management system. Good performers got the cutting-edge work that provided the best route for learning new things by doing
- job rotation and the development of multi-skilling so the individual is better able to contribute to the work of the section, team or department
- coaching and guidance – where the line manager works with a member of staff in dealing with a difficult business issue, the use of technology or handling a difficult or demanding customer. Coaching staff and particularly poor performers was reported as a key activity for many line managers we interviewed
- the provision of informal training activities – often over the lunch period, where the team meets to consider and discuss a particular development or issue. This can be provided by the line manager or a team member. It’s usually concerned with technical issues rather than soft skills
- arranging for the secondment of an individual to work in another section or location for a limited period to broaden experience and build networks
- identification of external training programmes not provided for by the organisation but which are directly related to the skill needs of the team. This includes, especially for professional employees, attendance at conferences
- providing formal training, as in delivering the training courses, such as health and safety courses
- responsibility for career development and promotion – in DLO/DPA, for example, the rationalisation of the HR function through a shared service centre, and the removal of HR managers from ‘along the corridor’, has meant a shift in responsibility for career development from the HR function to a shared responsibility between the individual and their line manager
- an emphasis on knowledge-sharing, for example encouraging problem-solving group activities both on and off the job – this requires the development of a localised culture of learning. For example, in one case it was emphasised that much learning is done by ‘learning from your mistakes’. This requires a performance culture where mistakes are not penalised, and where people can openly admit to such errors.

Three general conclusions can be drawn from this wide range of line manager involvement in learning and development. First, not all managers are equally convinced that this is a fundamental part of their job. This is confirmed once again by the CIPD learning and development survey (2007), which shows that almost a quarter (23%) of respondents feel that line managers don't take their learning and development responsibilities seriously.

Discussion of PDPs or CPD is sometimes not seen as 'a live issue'. Here the relationship with HR/learning and development specialists, especially those responsible for 'talent management', is important in persuading line managers of their usefulness, and working with them to ensure that these opportunities for staff development are taken. This was much in evidence in Standard & Poor's where the talent manager, an expert in learning and development, spent time with each 'practice leader' and the line managers within their team reviewing the development needs of their staff.

One challenge faced in another organisation was that all professionals had to allocate their time to a particular client. A number of employees that we spoke to expressed the need for a time code to log development-related activities. At present this activity is classed as 'non-productive time', which tends to drive it to an evening or home-based activity. In other words, there needs to be supportive conditions, including senior management support, to encourage line managers to give attention to developing their staff.

Second, as we noted in our earlier report *Rewarding Work: The vital role of line managers* (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007b), some line managers use their role as facilitators, as well as providers, of learning and development as part of the reward system. Thus, while for some access to training was for remedial purposes (which can lead to training being seen in negative terms, a punishment or rebuke), in many cases it was used as a means of encouragement and for career development for good performers. This was particularly the case in Wincanton and Wiltshire County Council where line managers appear to have limited discretion over financial rewards. This unequal access to learning and development can be challenging to HR professionals.

Third, not all line managers are equally effective at leading and developing their staff. It was noted by more than one line manager, and by HR professionals, that this required a degree of maturity in line managers. One manager said that good line managers are 'not insecure' and are able to spend time on development for the 'benefit of others' rather than for themselves. There is a need to recognise the pastoral role of the line manager, and for the individual to be willing and able to take on the job of coach or mentor. More generally 'you need to invest time in development activities and believe in it'.

Competing work pressures was a commonly cited reason for ineffective behaviour, in addition to cost and resource implications, lack of understanding about the potential benefits of training, learning and development, and the fact that these line management activities are perceived as 'optional' rather than essential and often not subject to measurement.

Supportive conditions necessary for effective line management involvement in learning and development

This raises the question of what leads busy line managers to devote time to development activities for their staff, and themselves, and to develop the skills to do this well. Looking across the organisations we studied, five interrelated activities emerge:

- a focus on key staff
- building a language of learning and development
- creating a culture of performance where learning and development is highly valued
- designing effective performance management systems
- developing line managers themselves as a distinctive occupational group.

A focus on key staff

The case study organisations vary substantially in their activities, but in line with the ideas of ‘HR architecture’ there are clear differences in the emphasis given to different types of staff. It’s inevitable that greater emphasis or attention is given to the employees that need either high levels of technical or generic skill to perform their duties, or require high levels of a ‘unique’ skill that is organisation-specific. In the case of organisation-specific skill, this can, by definition, never be bought in but needs to be built.

Skill is a relative term. For example, customer-serving staff at John Lewis Partnership are not highly skilled in the same sense as civil engineers at Halcrow or market analysts at Standard & Poor’s, but the need for effective customer-facing staff is critical. Product knowledge is important alongside behavioural skills in dealing with customers.

Inevitably organisations tend to place more emphasis on the learning and development of ‘critical’ staff, even where there’s a rhetoric of equality of opportunity

in relation to access to learning and development.

There’s an obvious logic to this, as the supply of labour in critical areas is tight almost everywhere, and the cost of developing a fully effective member of staff is both expensive and time-consuming (in some areas in the professional service firms and in the DLO/DPA, it was estimated to take at least two years to meet effectiveness standards). The cost of staff turnover is also high. Furthermore, in knowledge-intensive work, the gap between a high and low performer is much greater than in other jobs, for example warehouse staff in Wincanton.

This focus on critical skills is not necessarily a feature of HR strategy. It comes from line managers themselves who recognise the differential importance of learning and development. We found that managers of support areas are less likely to recognise the importance of learning and development compared with those in key skill functions.

Building a language of learning and development

If line managers are central to the provision of learning and development, how does this behaviour become embedded? One interesting attribute that we noted was the way in which some of the language associated with learning and development (used initially by learning and development professionals) is spreading to line managers. In the DLO/DPA, it’s common to find managers talking about ‘competencies’ and engaging in forms of competency analysis. When asked, one manager said that he hated the term when he first heard it as part of ‘management speak’ but that he had got used to it and now found it valuable. The point here is that a common language is essential for shared understanding. The same point applies in Standard & Poor’s to the shared understanding of ‘talent’ and ‘talent management’.

The line managers we spoke to in all of the organisations were clear and coherent on the distinction between training and learning, and were able to give numerous examples of the latter – in fact more so than the learning and development professionals who saw things, sometimes, more in terms of formal needs analysis and delivery.

Creating a supportive organisational culture

In our previous research on people management and performance we noted how, beyond the adoption of progressive HR practices and effective line managers, the most successful organisations have been able, over time, to create a strong, positive organisational culture (Purcell et al 2004). This can be deliberate or emerging.

In the case of the McGraw-Hill group of companies, one emphasis in the people strategy is ‘build over buy’, placing a priority on creating a ‘diverse and experienced “home-grown” talent’. This is a critical requirement for Standard & Poor’s in the highly competitive labour market in the City of London and Canary Wharf, where they are surrounded by large, high-paying financial firms all searching for talent. The people strategy, strongly linked to business goals, sees learning and development as a key activity. The reputation for effective career development strongly aids recruitment and the delivery of learning, and the gaining of reward and recognition keeps talented staff in the business. In DLO/DPA, which offers extensive formal training programmes, this is a strong aid to recruitment.

John Lewis Partnership is renowned for its co-ownership-based culture, and in recent years has invigorated this with an emphasis on customer service and performance. Training, learning and development are a key plank in achieving this. Increasingly individuals are expected to take responsibility for their own learning and development with the support of their line manager. Integral to this is a newly introduced management of performance system. Now both section managers (first-line managers) and departmental managers conduct annual partner appraisals that are based around behaviours. These behaviours clearly link to the values of the organisation.

At the earliest opportunity line managers were involved and consulted in the development and implementation of the performance management toolkit. This helped

ensure buy-in from the line. Line managers are also supported by the personnel function at branch level. This includes learning and development advisers who help managers identify the training and development needs of their staff as well as provide development opportunities for the managers themselves, particularly in leadership skills.

The new public management ethos in the public sector has been adopted both in the DLO/DPA and Wiltshire County Council. It can be seen in an upgrading of learning and development to reinforce and implement a culture of performance, and in the devolution of responsibilities for development to individuals and line management – with extensive use of online delivery. HR professionals want to do more but have been inhibited by public sector budgetary constraints. But the key point remains that an emphasis on performance goes hand in hand with greater concern for development.

Halcrow have worked hard to improve change management and in 2004 initiated a ‘one Halcrow’ vision. The goal is to unify previously fragmented parts of the business based around the different communities of practice associated with various professional engineering disciplines and markets. This is called ‘act now: working to make Halcrow a better company’. As one Halcrow employee said, ‘At its heart is a change of behaviours and approach to improve individual and team performance and to substantially improve the business by better aligning the efforts of everyone in Halcrow.’

One way this is done is by ‘continuous improvement, where we learn from each other and celebrate our successes’. The staff attitude survey is an important source of data, which is translated into action. There was concern, for example, that among the ten bottom-scoring items were ‘feedback on performance’ and ‘feedback on development needs’. This was translated into action to improve project and ‘resource’ management in the career development review cycle.

It’s hard to see how meaningful learning and development can be accomplished without a value being placed on it, emanating from deep-seated efforts at culture change. HR practices both reflect and reinforce such culture management activities. The way people are helped and encouraged to learn, and

especially to learn new or better ways of doing things and co-operating with others, is nearly always, as in these companies, given a special emphasis. This, in turn, can be a means of embedding a learning culture.

An effective and widely used performance management system

A common feature of the way line managers manage learning and developing in the case study organisations is the performance management system.

The annual cycle of review, discussion and reward – usually in two parts with a mid-year review concerned with development needs and an end-of-year review concerned with reward – has, at its best, four attributes. First, virtually all employees take part in it. In Standard & Poor's the completion rate is 97%, helped, no doubt, by the fact that the online system doesn't allow any pay or bonus improvements unless the process is recorded as complete.

Second, online systems, while loved by few, have been accepted over time, especially as proficiency increases. Here top management action is important, as by demonstrating that they make full use of the performance management systems, their reports recognise it as a valued activity and not something to avoid.

Third, in the best schemes the real value comes from the discussion of target-setting and the self-evaluation that goes beyond form-filling. This discussion is not just between a person and their manager on development activities, vital that this is. A second avenue for discussion and review is between line managers and their manager about the performance and development needs of each person in the team or section and their group needs. Thus the successful performance management system facilitates discussion and is not an alternative to it. Reliance on email is not a substitute. As one manager put it, 'email kills knowledge-sharing'.

Finally, in the most successful performance management systems HR plays a role, not just in remote monitoring, which can be resented, but in the development discussions between the line and senior managers. This is expensive and tends to be restricted to key staff areas, with it less likely to take place in support functions. However, it is an activity valued

and welcomed by line managers. The implementation of a shared service centre, with HR advice provided remotely and often in a scripted form, can limit this type of active HR involvement in staff development discussions. This is generally regretted by both line managers and HR professionals.

Developing line managers

All our case study organisations place great emphasis on providing management training courses as a means of equipping managers with the necessary skills to deliver their people management roles, including their learning and development activities.

Wincanton offer a range of programmes, some specifically directed at the first line of supervision, such as 'Stepping Stones' – a foundation programme for people who have the potential to become managers. There's also a management development programme providing strong support systems, including an internal mentoring and coaching process.

Wiltshire County Council recently introduced 'manage2Lead', a training programme based around a framework of behavioural competencies that seeks to address different learning styles through a variety of teaching techniques, including mentoring, coaching, action learning sets, reflective practice, and the more traditional workshops and seminars.

However, all our organisations acknowledge that management development programmes on their own are insufficient. Unless the courses are mandatory, take-up can be poor, partly because of workplace pressure, or, in some cases, because of lack of commitment. Additional support mechanisms are required from the HR function and this takes a variety of forms. But much more important is the support and active commitment through the leadership and example set by senior managers.

It is frequently observed that middle and front-line managers undertake a job with numerous, complex and, at times, competing roles. Performance and success is important for their own job security and the management of their career. It's hard for line managers to be committed to the learning and development of their staff if their boss isn't, and if strong conflicting

messages come from senior management concerning the priority of immediate performance targets.

This goes back to the points made earlier about an embedded culture of learning.

The HR function can easily be undermined if what they do on a daily basis in supporting line managers in their learning and development activities is not backed by senior management in what they say and, more importantly, in what they do – for example, in providing coaching and mentoring to more junior managers, especially those recently appointed or promoted. We commented earlier that good line managers need to be self-confident in order to maximise the learning and development of their staff. The active support and role-modelling behaviour of senior managers is critically important here.

HR professionals need allies in the corporate corridors of power to build such a culture of learning, risk-taking and career development. Formal systems are the antithesis of influence, just as an over-concern with measurement tends to drive out creativity. In our best examples, and there were examples in all our cases, HR professionals were able to ‘mix it’ with line managers even if the formal system was remote and rigid. We are minded to recall the famous work of Karen Legge on the role of personnel management (1976), as it was then called, who talked, with approval, of the ‘deviant innovator’, able to go against the grain of conformity and see the bigger picture.

Other HR support

Apart from providing training for line managers, there are other ways in which the HR/learning and development function can provide support. All organisations had specialist learning and development advisers at local level to advise and support line managers in identifying the training and development needs of staff and teams. At John Lewis, where coaching and guidance is seen as a key activity for line managers, the personnel function is introducing a structured approach to coaching to improve standards and ensure consistency.

Some organisations are experimenting with 360-degree feedback as a means of assessing line management effectiveness, and most of our case study organisations

have introduced online systems to help monitor and manage processes as well as provide management information. Other tools include a self-assessment model for line managers at DLO/DPA, where research is also being conducted by the personnel team on the role of line managers in people management activities.

Central to the question of HR support are issues concerning the fundamental role of the HR function and its structure (this is the subject of a much wider study commissioned by the CIPD that will report its findings in October 2007). Many of our case studies have recently undertaken a review of the HR function with a view to improving the way it adds value and delivers HR. Two of our organisations have been influenced by the so-called Ulrich model (1995, 1997), which advocates the adoption of HR shared services together with a business partner approach.

In DLO/DPA the recent move towards a single service delivery aims to encourage line managers to take on board greater responsibility for people management, in addition to improving consistency and efficiencies, and simplifying processes. In conjunction with a business partner model, this affords personnel a more strategic role at business-unit level and seeks to encourage a more proactive approach to people management on the part of line managers. This radical change is being phased in, with full implementation due in 2008.

An HR business partner model is also being introduced at Wiltshire County Council alongside centralisation of the personnel function as part of a radical review of the traditional personnel function, although it's too early to gauge reactions. In contrast, John Lewis and Wincanton have retained a local personnel team that has a facilitating role and provides ongoing support and advice to the branch line managers, in addition to a divisional centralised support team.

Standard & Poor's have a well-resourced HR function, in part because effective people management is seen as central to the achievement of business strategy, especially where price competition for talent is too expensive. The need is to build rewarding careers in Standard & Poor's specifically, and across McGraw-Hill generally, and HR managers often work closely with line managers and senior managers in talent management.

Conclusions and implications

All the organisations studied place emphasis on learning and development. There is strong evidence that each has recognised how important line managers are to the process. These front-line managers are now recognised as an occupational group in their own right, with a distinctive contribution to make to learning and development, as well as a group with their own development needs. At the same time there's still a tendency to give priority to the provision of formal training programmes. In part, this is because it's easier to organise and is a measurable activity, and in part, because it's what is required.

Even in formal training programmes line managers play an important role: in sponsoring people; in sometimes paying for the cost out of their budget; in giving time to attend; and in evaluating the utility of the course. What our research uncovered, however, is something more important, and here we reinforce the findings of earlier researchers:

- Line managers are critical conduits of learning: from induction, the organising of 'buddies', the design of jobs that stretch, the learning function of teamworking and problem-solving, the provision of coaching (both for poor, or new, performers and for budding stars), to the assessment of development needs both formally in the annual performance management cycle and informally as is necessary or opportune.
- Line managers often play the role of formal trainers themselves, even though few are qualified to do so. This is almost always in technical, or job-related, skill areas rather than so-called 'soft skills'.
- To be good ambassadors of learning, line managers need, above all, self-confidence and a strong sense of their own security in the organisation. This, in turn, requires strong support and the appropriate training and development for newly appointed line managers. Increasingly organisations are recognising this in the selection criteria and in the subsequent training and development focused on line managers. Successful development will need to include tough 'soft skills', such as holding 'the difficult conversation'.
- Line managers always have conflicting priorities and role overload. To learn how to cope, or live, with these job pressures, line managers have to have strong, development-based support from their own superiors or bosses. It's nearly impossible to exaggerate the importance of senior management support and action on the development of line managers, and through them, on the climate of learning and development in the organisation. This also fundamentally influences and shapes what the HR professional can and cannot do. This is why an organisational culture that recognises growth and personal development as important goals linked to business strategy is so important.
- All organisations face dilemmas concerning the trade-off between formal systems and informal processes, which are valuable yet often patchy. Current pressure for measurement and monitoring, or 'evidence-based' HR, tends to crowd out the recognition of informal processes, especially how, where and when learning takes place. In many of our organisations, line managers are engaging in learning activities for their staff, and for themselves, that are out of sight of the 'experts' in HR. This organic activity needs to be recognised!

- At the same time, however, line managers can limit and stifle learning and development. This is not just that some are not interested, untrained or insecure in their learning and development roles, even with increasing attention to line manager development. It is also that line managers, for understandable reasons, are interested almost exclusively in the immediate needs of their section and the relevant skill acquisition of their team members. As a result, too much focus on short-term job-relevant learning and development can drive out consideration of longer-term career development.

Workplace talent management and succession planning takes place at a higher, strategic level, and it's this, which informs development activity, that is beyond the line manager's remit. Our best organisations could do both – the encouragement and active support of line managers in their learning and development activities, and planning for future talent through the provision of more forward-looking learning and development. Both of these levels of activity, however, do require top management support, as revealed in, or reinforced by, an organisational culture that sees development as a key linchpin to performance.

Implications for practitioners

- Organisations need to encourage line managers' buy-in and commitment to learning and development by clarifying their responsibilities through job descriptions, performance appraisal and communicating the importance and value of development-related activities.
- All managers need time to carry out their learning and development activities. Often the 'softer' people management areas of responsibility get driven out by other, more traditional, management duties.
- Line managers need training courses and development programmes. But they must be given support, both in terms of time to access them and through feedback.
- Senior management commitment is essential and leaders need to be encouraged to act as role models.
- It's important to select line managers carefully, paying particular attention to behavioural competencies that facilitate learning and development in themselves and others.

Case studies

Learning and development at Standard & Poor's, a McGraw-Hill company

Standard & Poor's (S&P), a division of The McGraw-Hill Companies, is the world's foremost provider of independent credit ratings, indices, risk evaluation, investment research, data and valuations. An essential part of the world's financial infrastructure, S&P has played a leading role for more than 140 years in providing investors with the independent benchmarks they need to feel more confident about their investment and financial decisions. The company is part of McGraw-Hill, a major US-owned corporation better known as a leading publisher.

The fundamentals of HR policy are determined in the New York headquarters. A 'people strategy' was launched two years ago that gave enhanced responsibility to line managers for 'accountability and ownership'. This people strategy specifies a system of mutually reinforcing practices to deliver the requisite workforce and business outcomes. The three strands of the strategy are talent acquisition and development ('build over buy'), performance management ('focus on performance and growth') and rewards ('value performance and growth'), all linked to business strategy and with specified workforce outcomes.

Much of the process is IT-enabled with, at its heart, a performance management system, the PMP, designed to build a performance culture in an annual cycle, from goal-setting to end-of-year decisions on merit pay, bonuses and promotion decisions. It is estimated that 97% of staff and their managers complete the online PMP each year. There's a strong incentive to do this as no decisions on merit pay, bonuses or promotion can be made without completing the process. Active involvement of those in top management is evident in their completion of the process and the way the PMP is used to determine the performance and development needs of core staff.

S&P has a European network of offices, and the London office is located in the new financial heart of the City of London. It's surrounded by major international banks and financial institutions in a very 'hot' labour market. It can't compete directly in terms of salaries and bonuses in what's often seen as an inflated labour market, with bonus payments for a select few often alleged to be in the millions of pounds.

The company's analysts, once fully competent, are highly attractive to these financial institutions and this puts pressure on the HR system for these core staff. Special care is needed in the recruitment, selection, induction, development, career management and reward of these key knowledge workers. At the same time staff in support areas like finance, sales, and HR itself, provide critical services and they too work in much the same inflated City atmosphere, albeit in different labour markets. Their development is considered equally important.

Learning and development at Standard & Poor's, a McGraw Hill company (cont'd)

There are a number of interlocking practices that help to achieve these requirements. First, emphasis is placed on building talent from the recruitment of inexperienced yet able staff. In terms of learning this means that line managers are actively involved in job placement, design and job rotation for team members. This can include seconding staff for developmental assignments in offices in Europe or the US. It's also these managers who sanction attendance at the many training courses provided by the company. The critical element here is the opportunity to learn, build a career and increase personal market worth. Much depends on line management support for this.

Second, efforts are made to achieve a strong alignment between employee interests and enterprise strategy. While the pressure of work can sometimes make this difficult, there is a strong emphasis on work-life balance. Line managers allow homeworking to complete a report, or time off for medical or family reasons. And the company recently won an award for women's careers (2006 Times/Aurora Top 50 Places in the UK that Women Want to Work). It prides itself on being different from other companies in the City in this regard, seeing this difference as a market advantage. The active support of line managers is essential in achieving a meaningful work-life balance for their staff.

Third, the PMP has led to the widespread practice of annual discussions between team managers and their managers, known as practice leaders, about each team member. Sometimes an HR manager joins the review meeting. The meetings focus on the analysis of development needs and action, overall performance ratings and the associated rewards. The use of promotion on merit, rather than driven by vacancies, is particularly noteworthy. More junior staff can expect a promotion every 18 months or so and, while the speed of movement slows the higher up you get, it's still an essential reward component. This emphasis on promotion helps create a climate of learning, since skill and competence growth is an essential prerequisite.

Training, learning and development is well established and seen as a fundamental part of HR strategy. The appointment of a highly experienced talent development director is indicative of this commitment. But behind this is the commitment of the parent company. This is seen in the key strategic choice to 'build over buy'. This indicates that the style of the company is to build its own talent.

Emphasis is given to the provision of formal off-the-job and online training with 'classes' (the favoured American term) widely advertised on the intranet and in lifts and public places. There's a requirement for 20 hours of PDP activity to be recorded for analysts. These policies are not without their critics, who find the formality and 'tick-box mentality' antithetical to learning. But they underpin the importance of development and the efforts made to embed it. Beyond this, many line managers, especially in the key analysts area, will organise lunchtime 'brown bag' sessions where new developments and new forms of analysis, technology or processes are reviewed. Many will search out external skills-based programmes or conferences. And, as indicated above, coaching, secondments and serious development reviews (with discussion both between staff members and their manager, and then between the manager and the 'practice leader') do all give real emphasis to a learning culture.

Clear recognition is given to the need to develop line managers themselves. The incentive is success in a highly competitive business environment and the perpetuation of an enviable reputation for excellence.

Learning and the line at John Lewis Partnership

Founded on the beliefs of John Spedan Lewis in 1929, John Lewis Partnership is the country's largest example of worker ownership, and one of the UK's top ten retail businesses. All 64,000 staff are partners in the business, sharing in the responsibility of ownership as well as rewards. The group comprises two operating arms – John Lewis department stores and Waitrose supermarkets. Our research centred on the John Lewis Solihull Branch, which opened in September 2001 and employs around 450 staff. In 2006, the branch achieved sales growth of more than 10%.

In recent years John Lewis has embarked on an ambitious programme of modernisation and change in its drive to become a high-performing organisation while maintaining its commitment to being 'an employer of distinction'. The company argues that the way partners feel about the employer brand is key in determining both partners' happiness and the commercial success of the business. Training, learning and development are seen as crucial to achieving this, as are the section and department managers, who were the focus of our research.

The underlying philosophy at John Lewis is that learning and development is driven and owned by the individual with the support of their line manager. Line managers help staff identify and respond to their training and development needs using a newly developed management of performance (MOP) toolkit. This toolkit provides new job descriptions and a competency and appraisal framework by which performance can be measured. This is translated into a personal development folder that sets out a job description, performance measures and expected behaviours for individuals. The folder forms the basis of the annual appraisal with the line manager and contains clear examples of what is unacceptable, acceptable and outstanding behaviour.

Following a redefinition of manager roles, both section and department managers now conduct appraisals (previously it was the responsibility of departmental managers). The appraisal process is undoubtedly time-consuming – one appraisal can take up to three hours – but the new toolkit facilitates the process and, as one manager explained, 'makes it easier to manage'.

Annual pay increases and progression through the pay scales is dependent on this appraisal, and line managers have discretion to award increases within an affordable limit. All managers receive training on how to use the folder and conduct appraisals, and this is constantly being monitored. A new IT-based payroll and management system called 'PartnerLink' alerts managers when they need to conduct a review.

Early feedback identified some difficulties with section managers conducting the appraisals, including low-calibre objectives, short-term aims and delays in completing the appraisals. As a result, all section managers went through a two-day training course and, at the time of our interviews, personnel was about to do a 'performance quality check' on section managers. This includes observing all section managers putting together a development plan for their staff. It will be followed up by an extensive training programme called Horizons, to be launched company-wide later this year, aimed at addressing the development needs of managers and non-managers. It will initially be targeted at section managers, where the greatest need for development has been identified. Plans are also under way to develop a succession planning model and a talent management programme.

Learning and the line at John Lewis Partnership (continued)

There's a strong emphasis on coaching, and the local personnel function (John Lewis prefer to use the word 'personnel' rather than 'HR') in the branch we studied were in the process of introducing a structured approach to coaching to improve standards and ensure consistency. Support at branch level is provided by a small personnel team comprising two distinct functions: personnel procedures, and learning and development coaches. The personnel manager sits on the branch steering group and has a branch responsibility, and this, as the personnel manager explained, 'helps embed the support of managers'.

In keeping with its philosophy, John Lewis have involved partners, including line managers, in the development and implementation of the new strategy, and this has ranged from joint consultation to extensive communication. When developing the new behavioural competencies, for example, rather than use consultants, a working party was set up comprising a cross-section of volunteers and personnel. It was through their work that six core behaviours were identified ('About me', 'Leading and developing', 'Vision and creativity', 'Team player', 'Passionate retailer' and 'Delivering results'), and these now provide the framework by which performance is measured. One senior manager explained, 'People like it because it uses our own language.'

The implementation programme included an extensive and structured communication timetable, individual discussions, support and review. Section managers and department managers were seen as key to this process and are expected to communicate the pay-banding proposals to their partners, review their grading (which are initially set by personnel) and discuss the possible impact.

A number of mechanisms help monitor the implementation of the new strategy. These include the Branch Council (elected by partners), which can make its views known at operational level and higher up through a system of branch forums. Employees also have a voice through the partner survey (results can be drilled down to manager level within each branch), the internal magazine, *The Gazette* (which, in addition to providing business performance information, allows partners to send anonymous letters, which can contain criticism of the people and the business and have to be answered within 21 days), department champions, and the registrar, who is independent of the branch and addresses issues of confidentiality.

Appendix 1: The additional case study companies

Wiltshire County Council (WCC) was, at the time of research, embarking on a major effort to modernise its HR management and place greater responsibility for it in the hands of line managers. Serving a population of 433,000, the majority of the 7,500-strong workforce are located in schools and social care, although there are a diverse range of occupations covering both manual and professional areas, including library assistants, trading standards officers, archaeologists, lawyers and engineers.

Training and development is at the heart of the modernisation plans, with initiatives such as 'Manage2lead' (a modular training programme aimed at enhancing management skills and competencies) and a talent management programme not just for the existing workforce but also for school-leavers and graduates.

In the **Ministry of Defence** we focused on two, now combined, organisations: the Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO) and Defence Procurement Agency (DPA). DLO, with around 20,000 staff in 80 locations in the UK, supports the armed forces throughout various stages of an operation or exercise. The DPA, with 5,400 staff in 2006, provides new equipment for armed forces and provides other procurement-related services to its customers.

In these organisations great emphasis is placed on training, learning and development activities, which are viewed as significant contributors to recruitment and retention. Although individuals are responsible for their own learning and development, line managers have a key role to play in supporting staff in a variety of ways. This includes agreeing personal development plans using competency-based frameworks, ensuring staff undertake mandatory training, providing regular ongoing feedback on performance, regularly reviewing training and development opportunities, releasing staff from regular duties to attend training, and supporting staff who are seeking promotion.

Extensive training is also available for line managers to help them in the people management activities. For example, all line managers must complete training in both competence-based assessment and equality and diversity before being able to sift applications or interview. Training is also available through a variety of mediums, including e-learning and workshops.

Wincanton is a European leader in the design and delivery of supply chain solutions and its range of services include warehousing, transport and distribution, logistics and consultancy. Our research centred on two warehouses in the Gloucester area, employing mostly manual workers (including an increasing immigrant population) in a highly unionised environment. The two sites had quite different financing arrangements, with implications for people management. One operated on a cost-plus contract with a major client and the other a fixed-price contract, where costs could not be passed on. Terms and conditions of employment are determined through collective bargaining, which limits line managers' involvement in financial reward. One consequence of this was that learning and development is used by managers as a form of reward by, for example, giving access to development opportunities and multi-skilling for good performance.

A holistic HR strategy is being developed at head office to define minimum standards, including performance and development. Recent work has focused on training and competency development, including the development of management programmes for first-line managers.

Halcrow relies almost exclusively on the knowledge, talent and motivation of its staff. The company, which keeps its partnership principles, and remains privately owned, specialises in the provision of planning, design and management services for infrastructure worldwide. The head office is in Hammersmith, London, with largest office by employee numbers located outside

Swindon, Wiltshire, in a country mansion, updated with sleek office accommodation. With interests in transportation, water, maritime and property, Halcrow undertakes commissions in over 70 countries from a network of some 70 offices globally.

Each contract requires a project team comprising of professional and technical staff from 'skill groups' headed by a technical director. In the past these 'skills groups' have tended to operate as 'silos' looking after their own staff and with little appreciation of what the centre, including HR could offer. Since 2004, however, a 'one Halcrow' culture change programme has been rolled out with active staff involvement. This includes an emphasis on continuous learning and improvement. Ultimately, though, it is the ability to get new, exciting contracts and work in project teams that provides the opportunity to learn. Investors in People accredited, Halcrow offers careers in a highly competitive market and training, learning and development are key features in its competitive offering in the labour market.

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