



CRF DIGITAL COMMUNITY EVENT: 2ND MARCH 2022

TALENT, LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

The last two years have been among the most challenging for the 'squeezed middle' – front-line leaders and middle managers who have had to maintain team performance and motivation in a hybrid work environment while managing their own wellbeing in a time of high uncertainty.

At a Zoom Interactive Roundtable on 2nd March, CRF's Talent, Leadership, and Learning Community came together to discuss strategies for supporting and developing middle managers and front-line leaders.

This summary shares some of the key insights from the discussion.



OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES

CRF's Managing Director Richard Hargreaves launched the discussion by reviewing the issues.

First, what is CRF hearing from members and why is the issue of developing middle managers more important than ever? Several key themes have emerged:

- The world is more complex – externally and internally.
- Hybrid working is increasing the pressure on line managers.
- There is an increasing focus on wellbeing across the workforce.

Managers are increasingly expected to express the organisation's position on societal issues, but are often ill-equipped to do so.

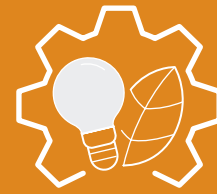
In short, expectations are increasing at the same time that the 'job' is becoming harder. Further complicating things, first-line managers are still often promoted for technical excellence rather than their management skills. This is creating a 'perfect storm' at some organisations, wherein years of underinvestment in the middle, sometimes coupled with overinvestment in leadership development, is coming home to roost. After all, it's in the middle where change tends to get stuck.

Following Richard's overview, attendees then discussed the following points.



TO THE EXTENT THERE ARE GAPS BETWEEN WHERE YOU ARE AND WHERE YOU NEED TO BE, WHAT ARE THE MAIN FEATURES OF THOSE GAPS? ARE THEY THE SAME AS THEY WERE PRE-PANDEMIC OR HAS COVID CHANGED EXPECTATIONS?

- It was generally agreed that management capability is an enduring issue; at some organisations, the pandemic has exacerbated this. Some argued that communication skills, the ability to build trust and to give feedback were gaps pre-pandemic, but that the pandemic is now being used as an excuse for these existing challenges – challenges which have actually been around for decades. Furthermore, the virtual working world of the pandemic has allowed many managers to avoid being held accountable for not doing these parts of the job effectively.
- At some organisations, the enduring issues around management capability have their roots in the failure of the organisation to upskill very junior and/or technically excellent people who have been promoted to people management roles.
- Some managers have 'blossomed', improving their people management skills as they faced the challenges of the pandemic, but this has widened the gap with those managers who struggled during the pandemic.
- Time and resource are issues at many organisations. Some managers are struggling to manage effectively due to a lack of resource within their teams; others are struggling to carve out space for formal development.
- There is a gap around knowing the basic essentials of good management / having core people skills. Gaps include:
 - Communication skills, including effectively giving feedback and listening.
 - The ability to develop trust and lead with compassion.
 - The ability to coach and develop team members (and to connect this to the broader talent agenda).
 - The ability to have great career and development conversations. As one attendee explained: "The landscape of career has changed a lot, and we are trying to help our managers understand how to best develop their team in an agile and ever-changing world."
 - The ability to have difficult conversations. Attendee comments on this issue include the following:
 - "Managers have avoided having difficult conversations whilst working from home, and now we are moving to a hybrid model, issues that were brushed under the carpet are coming to light."



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- "Difficult conversations, even standard performance conversations, are difficult when 'everyone is trying their best / working their hardest' – but results/ outcomes aren't being achieved. Managers don't know how to approach the conversation."
- "I think certain conversations will always be difficult until people are comfortable giving constructive feedback and handling potential conflict."
- "High quality deep developmental conversations with team members is the biggest challenge – the balance between unfiltered honesty on one hand and fear of being direct on the other are at odds."
- There was acknowledgement that the manager / employee relationship has been harder to develop in the virtual environment, which has impacted on managers' ability to practice good people management such as having effective conversations. As one attendee put it: "Management is a very difficult job. And it has gotten harder over the last couple of years. And among those more technical types, some are genuinely fearful of opening coaching conversations and giving feedback when they haven't had an in-person relationship with direct reports."
- It was generally agreed that HR is having to do a lot of 'hand holding' of managers with regard to the basics of good management / people-facing aspects of the job.
- As one attendee described the situation: "Managers seem to be willing to address the leadership aspects of their role and learn and develop in those ways, but what the business wants most is for managers to get to grips with manager self-service using technology and information systems. Managers seem very reluctant to pick up the nuts-and-bolts process and people parts of the job; they seem to want hand holding in those areas, which in turn pressures HRBPs who want to provide more support at the strategic end. It seems that the nuts-and-bolts is too difficult, and so managers reach for help, which holds everyone back. For example, there is a real reluctance to engage with getting better at interviewing skills – assuming that the talent team will bear the brunt of that. There is a lot of demand for hand holding around performance reviews, both in terms of accuracy and time frame."
- At some organisations, there is a gap around linking organisational goals to managers' day-to-day role of delivery.
- Several organisations reported that their managers are struggling to balance productivity demands with performance development.
- Some organisations reported that they do not have a clear and up-to-date view of the capabilities expected of managers, and how those capabilities have changed post-pandemic. A few of these organisations are looking

to re-set their development and managerial competency programmes in the near future.

- Some organisations reported that their managers struggle to understand and utilise policies and processes.
- The ability to think more strategically, such as around organisation design and development and managing change, is a gap among managers at some organisations.
- Finally, there is a gap around some managers' ability to make judgement calls, especially in conditions of ambiguity.
 - Managers need to be equipped for ambiguity and given the confidence to make judgements in these conditions, which includes understanding when and how to seek clarity.
 - Managers need support to judge which tool / framework to use for which problem / condition. As one attendee put it: "Application and judgement of frameworks and tools is essential. The tried and tested methods don't always work."



WHAT ARE THE MAJOR BARRIERS TO ENHANCING THE CAPABILITY OF YOUR LINE MANAGERS?

- Expectation-setting (lack thereof) is a major barrier. There was acknowledgement that managers are under intense pressure from above and below, but organisations are falling behind on upskilling and equipping them with the essentials of people management. Articulating what is expected is a key part of the journey for managers moving from operational to people management.
 - Job design is important: explicitly designing managerial jobs to clarify outcomes, expected behaviours and skills. Good job design provides a framework against which to assess managers for the purpose of manager selection, development and to evaluate managers' performance.
 - There needs to be clarity around what is required, and what is optional.
 - Clarity includes clear guidance on how long different activities should take.
 - Equally, it should be clear what is not expected.
 - Shifting from being great technically to being a great people manager is a huge mindset and cultural shift for many people.
 - The mindset and cultural issues are exacerbated by the fact that many managers never experienced a great development journey or quality talent management themselves.
- There is a challenge around helping managers to practically apply development – moving beyond a training course to integrate learning into daily jobs / activities.



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- Technology is a barrier at some organisations. As one attendee put it: "Are we giving managers the right tools to help them in their jobs? We may be bogging them down with overly complex tools." Frequency of engagement with systems is also an issue. As one attendee put it: "Some systems managers are expected to work with.... if they only go in very occasionally, they actually just can't remember how to do it."
- Psychological safety can be a barrier. As one attendee put it: "Managers are in that classic business sandwich – strategy above them, action below them, and their job is to turn strategy into action. But is it safe to speak up if they are struggling to get everything done? This is a cultural issue."
- How we determine and measure performance as a manager as opposed to a contributor is a barrier at many organisations. Attendees described the issue thus:
 - "The reality is, if it is not measured, managers don't do it. So to create change, we need some formality of measurement of how well they manage not just how well they deliver business KPIs."
 - "Expectation setting across the organisation is important. There needs to be an emphasis on measuring performance as an effective people manager over business KPIs alone. Accountability and alignment across each level of leadership is important. Consistency in how we measure this is also important."
- Time is a barrier. It takes managers time to make the transition from 'this used to be HR's job, but now it's part of my role'. One attendee estimated that this can be a three-year journey for managers.



WHAT'S NEW OR INNOVATIVE IN THIS SPACE?

- One organisation has created a 'Working Together Apart' programme to help line managers apply their training. The programme was described thus: "Line managers and one of their direct reports come to the programme together, and both look at the aspects of a good working relationship. They break out and talk about what's missing / not working, then come back together and each hears insights from the other. They do the same process again with issues such as good feedback, contracting, and so on. The model is to learn, breakout, practice, and share feedback. The programme is really highly rated and has been very well received. But to be effective there needs to be lots of trust and psychological safety in the organisation – so some organisations may need to lay that groundwork first. Managers and self-reports self-nominate to attend, and either can approach the other with a request to attend. Some line managers have found that it creates such a great foundation, that they have come back with multiple reports to do it again. While it was launched as 'Working Together Apart' during the pandemic, we are now thinking about rebranding it to 'Great Working Relationships' since that is fundamentally what it is about."
- Responding to challenges in transferring learning to the job, one organisation has started a Management (not Leadership!) Apprentice programme. This programme was described thus: "We realised how little application to the workplace there was of leadership and management development. For example, they've all done feedback training but there wasn't a culture there to say 'you need to do it in the workplace as well'. So on the back of that, we created an apprenticeship programme, and the structure and formality of the programme is helping to embed learning. The programme involves core management skills, such as how to do a 1:1, how to manage budgets, how to deal with challenging situations – the real fundamentals. We are trying to address the missing link between expectations being set and the support to embed it."
- Several organisations expressed a need for, are currently developing, or already have a self-assessment tool for managers to assess against management capabilities.
- One organisation, acknowledging that it is in a transition phase, has an ongoing programme that sets out what the organisation does and does not expect of managers. The programme was described thus: "It's about trusting your people, and understanding that your role as people manager is to guide, develop, and coach your people. We are running masterclasses around six key management



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characteristics, with pre- and post-work to embed learning. We are not taking a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead are using a tool to understand the needs at the individual level.”

- With respect to building managers’ judgement and confidence, one organisation has found using an analogy helpful. It was described thus: “It’s not just the ‘what we want you to do’ but the ‘how you do it’. This links back to organisation culture and psychological safety, and understanding that the way things have been done before is not always going to help now, in this new, fast-paced environment. So in conversation with managers, we’ve used an analogy around understanding the rules – we say, ‘there are times you need to be on the pitch – the player, in amongst it; there are other times when you need to be on the side of the pitch, coaching; and there are still other times when you need to be in the stands, being the leader’. We’ve found that this analogy has helped managers create mental frameworks about how and when to do what.”

PARTICIPANT POLL

Currently, if you look at the capability of your managers against where you need to be as a business, how would you assess the current state?

We are doing well

0%

We are more or less where we need to be

4%

There are some gaps we need to address

54%

There are significant gaps

38%

We are a long way from where we need to be

4%



ARE YOU CHANGING HOW YOU ASSESS FOR MANAGEMENT POTENTIAL/ WHAT YOU LOOK FOR WHEN YOU SELECT MANAGERS?

- There was general agreement that just because a person is good technically, doesn’t mean they will be a good manager. There was discussion about whether organisations are picking the right people to be leaders / managers, and how the selection criteria is, or is not, evolving.
- At one organisation, the hiring manager has the final decision, so what they value and need in their team prevails. Often, this translates to still seeing line managers who are experts in task but not so good at the people side of things.
- One organisation is starting to have conversations during larger career conversations about line management versus being a technical expert, and ensuring any recruitment process for line managers really evidences the desire and capability for line management.
- Criteria for line management cited by many organisations include: empathy, communication skills, the ability to take people with you (which involves being authentic and relational), trust, inclusivity, ‘being human’, and the ability to creatively solve problems.
- It was agreed that it is very important to have equally valued career tracks. That is, the technical career track should have a similar level of recognition and prestige as the manager career track. What are the alternatives for critical technical people and what is the career ladder for those people?
- One attendee remarked: “The only place I’ve seen technical and managerial careers have parity in reward is Investment Management where someone can be a specialist Portfolio Manager and earn more than a People Manager.”



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HOW ARE ORGANISATIONS EVALUATING MANAGER PERFORMANCE?

In the last few minutes of the session, there was brief discussion of how line managers are being evaluated.

- One attendee explained: “We have touchpoints in the cycle – the mid-year check-in, the annual review, and we are weighting equally what you do and how you do it.”
- Another attendee described their organisation’s approach thus: “We are developing tools and frameworks, and holding bimonthly webinars for managers and leaders to address different aspects of those tools and frameworks. We are also holding workshops to discuss more difficult issues. We are measuring effectiveness by the number attending those sessions, and also by checking our surveys for staff comments that hopefully reflect changes. We have also surveyed the managers of those participating in our programmes and are looking for evidence in their feedback of changing behaviours and outcomes on the part of the participants.”

FURTHER READING


Chopra-McGowan, Anand. 2022. **Effective Employee Development Starts with Managers.** *Harvard Business Review.* <https://hbr.org/2022/03/effective-employee-development-starts-with-managers>

CRF. 2022. **Applying Social Science to Behavioural Change.** Research. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-applying-social-science-to-behavioural-change>

CRF. 2020. **Better Conversations: Why They Matter and How to Have Them.** Post Meeting Notes. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/post-meeting-notes-better-conversations-why-they-matter-and-how-to-have-them>

CRF. 2020. **Recommended Readings: Better Conversations – Why They Matter and How to Have Them.** Reading List. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/recommended-readings>

crf NEXT COMMUNITY EVENT

 Register now for our upcoming TLL Community event:

Tuesday 29th March, 12.00pm

2022 Talent Trends from Mercer

Kate Bravery, will share highlights from Mercer’s 2022 Talent Trends research, exploring how organisations are taking advantage of the opportunity to redesign work, working and the workplace.