THE IMPACT OF LINE/MIDDLE MANAGERS ON WORKPLACE PERFORMANCE

REPORT SUMMARY

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Within and outside the NHS, discussions often take place about line/middle managers, their place in NHS management structure and the positive role they play in good people management. NHS Employers wanted to understand what available evidence there was to support this assertion, so we approached the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMa) to examine scientific literature on the subject in order to answer four questions:

1. What are line and/or middle managers?
2. What are the roles and practices of line/middle managers?
3. What is known about the impact of these roles and practices on workplace performance?
4. What roles and practices have the biggest impact on performance?

The report was discussed by HR directors in a workshop at our Strategic Workforce Forum in October 2019. We have summarised the report's findings in this briefing. You can also listen to the slides and audio from the workshop, which capture the presentation and group discussion.

Key findings

While the roles and practices of line and middle managers and their effect on organisational outcomes are widely studied, the available evidence is rich in quantity but not quality.

After reviewing the literature, the CEBMa reviewers learned that while the results were important, most of the studies focused on topics such as strategy, change and implementation, which involve many variables, and high-quality studies are not available. There was also an absence of studies on topics such as HR-related activities, for which line/middle managers have an influence.

As a result of these limitations, the reviewers decided to extend the search to examine findings from other CEBMa reviews to identify which management roles and practices have the biggest impact on staff performance.

The roles and practices that have the biggest impact on performance

The CEBMa reviews identified five factors that have a large impact on organisational outcomes:

- Social cohesion
- Perceived supervisory support
- Team empowerment
- Psychological safety
- Group goals

Factor 1. Social cohesion

Social cohesion refers to a shared liking or attraction to a group, emotional bonds of friendship, caring and closeness among group members, and enjoyment of each other's company. It is influenced by the kind of support and directional clarity that managers provide.

How does social cohesion affect performance?

A high level of social cohesion among team members creates a psychologically safe environment in which team members feel free to explore new ways of doing things. Workers with strong feelings of belonging and attachment to their colleagues are more likely to cooperate and interact with each other, and so are more likely to exchange ideas and share information. For example, operating room nurses are more likely to share innovative ideas to improve patient safety with surgeons when there is a high level of social cohesion between these two professional groups.

Factor 2. Perceived supervisory support

When workers interact with and receive feedback from their line manager, they form perceptions of how the manager supports them. This perception is based on how the workers feel the manager helps them in times of need, praises them or the team for a task well done, or recognises them for extra effort.

How does perceived supervisory support affect performance?

When a manager helps their employees in times of need or recognises them for extra effort, these employees tend to reciprocate in a way of value to the manager and to the organisation as a whole, such as meeting goals and objectives. The employees who perceive their manager to be supportive of them are more likely to 'go the extra mile' for that manager.

Factor 3. Team empowerment

Team empowerment refers to shared perceptions among team members that they can perform their tasks competently and have the autonomy to decide how to do their jobs, and that their behaviour makes a difference. Managers contribute to team empowerment through the support they provide to teams and their respect for the decisions that teams make.

How does team empowerment affect performance?

Psychological empowerment has been associated with a wide range of outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment. It enhances performance by increasing the amount of information and control workers have over their work; the level of work-related knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees; and the motivation employees have to achieve organisational goals.

Factor 4. Psychological safety

Psychological safety refers to the shared belief held by members of a group that other members will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up. Psychological safety includes respect for each other's competence; caring about each other as people and trust in each other's intentions.

Managers influence psychological safety through the consideration they show for team wellbeing, and respect for the input teams provide and the decisions they make.

How does psychological safety affect performance?

If group members feel psychologically safe, they will be more willing to ask for help, to admit an error and to seek feedback. In turn, those actions foster learning in the group, which then improves performance.

Factor 5. Group goals

Organisational goal setting can refer to desired work or business outcomes, as well as the intention or plan to act towards these outcomes. Difficult goals yield higher performance than easy goals, and specific difficult goals yield higher performance than specific easy goals. Several studies suggest that setting goals at group level may yield higher performance than individual goals. In addition, it is assumed that group goals trigger unique motivational mechanisms such as planning, cooperation, and morale building within a team. Managers contribute to group goals by promoting two-way information sharing and their own efforts to support team performance.

How do groups goals affect performance?

According to goal-setting theory, goals affect performance through three causal mechanisms. First, goals serve a directive function. They call an employee's attention and effort towards goal-relevant activities and away from goal-irrelevant ones. Second, goals have an energising function: high goals lead to greater effort than low goals. Third, goals affect persistence. When employees are allowed to control the time spent on a task, hard goals prolong effort.

Other findings

How are line/middle managers defined?

While the review identified a large number of research articles using 'line manager' in the title, the term was rarely defined and the distinction between line and middle managers was often not clear.

In some studies, line managers are broadly described as 'the managerial position closest to employees'.

In other studies, line managers are defined as part of the vertical chain of command. As such, they are different from 'functional' managers (e.g. HR managers) or 'project' managers (e.g. change managers). In the research literature, the term 'middle management' extends to managers located below top managers and above first-level supervisors. However, the distinguishing feature of both line and middle managers is not where they sit in the organisational chart, but their access to top management coupled with their operational knowledge.

What are the roles and practices of line/middle managers?

The research literature demonstrates that line/middle managers' roles are diverse. Not only do they communicate information and coordinate activities, they also implement strategies and policies, act

as change agents, and oversee the day-to-day running of the business. Other roles mentioned include supporting, coaching, supervising and evaluating employees, diffusing information, and mediating between implementation strategy and day-to-day activities.

What is known about the impact of these roles on workplace performance?

A large number of studies on the roles and practices of line/middle managers showed a substantial impact on a wide range of organisational outcomes. These include strategy development and implementation, innovation, support for change, compliance, performance, employee satisfaction, absenteeism, commitment and workplace climate.

Studies also showed that line and middle managers play an important role in conflict management, which in turn affects outcomes such as staff turnover, absence rates and workplace climate.

One high-quality study demonstrated that middle managers' support for workplace interventions affects staff support and influences how the intervention is perceived. In addition, middle managers' support has a positive effect on learning climate.

Summary

The studies and research identified by CEBMa found that the roles and practices of line and middle managers substantially affect a wide range of organisational outcomes, making them an indispensable link between the organisation's top management and its frontline employees. NHS Employers believes that there is also a clear synergy between the review's five key factors that impact workplace performance and Michael West's work on leadership, which has shaped leadership development within the NHS and the national strategic framework for leadership, Developing People, Improving Care.

For NHS organisations, it will be important to use this scientific evidence from CEBMa alongside other sources of evidence, which are your own expertise, organisational data and stakeholder views. These four sources, as well as six steps to achieving evidence-based practice, are highlighted in infographics from CEBMa (see below).

Resources

- [A rapid evidence assessment of the research literature on the impact of line and/or middle managers on workplace performance](#) - The CEBMa report in full, including the research methodology and criteria.
- [Slides and audio](#) from the Strategic Workforce Forum, October 2019.
- Two CEBMa infographics defining the [four sources of evidence-based practice](#) and the [six steps to achieving it.](#)
- [Developing People, Improving Care](#) - The national strategic framework for leadership in the NHS.

Contact us

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