**Paper PD02**

# Invest in First-Line Managers

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## ABSTRACT

First line managers are like the front-line workers of an organization performing on-the-ground management duties. They are the bridges that hold heavy traffic while ensuring organizations carry out their goals on a day-to-day basis. Most organizations acknowledge that not everyone is cut out for a role as a first line manager, but they need to promote staff into those roles after several years of excellent on-the-ground support. Overachievers previously performing project management in individual contributor roles find themselves lost when it comes to people management. Investing in first line managers and developing them for leadership roles can help achieve the organizations maximum return on their investment.

The paper will focus on some tools and techniques that organizations can adopt to develop their first line managers that go beyond the mundane induction training systems.

## INTRODUCTION

First line managers can best be described as the bridges that link an organization's senior leadership and the work force. While these first-level leaders have a big impact on organizational success, more often than not these leaders find themselves pushing forward through myriad of challenges. Some of the most common challenges generate from the fact that these individuals are promoted from the work stream after several years of excellent on-the-ground support with minimal or no management experience. An important concept in this area was introduced by Canadian educator and "hierarchiologist" Laurence Johnston Peter. According to 'The Peter principle' people in a hierarchy tend to rise to "a level of respective incompetence." It translates to a consideration that employees are promoted based on their success in previous jobs until they reach a level at which they are no longer competent, as skills in one job do not necessarily translate to another. Although the concept in this principle can be viewed as unsettling and harsh, there is an observed element of truth. Unassumingly, with the evolution of organizational structures - from top heavy leadership models to enablement of middle and first-line management - these individual contributors who moved into managerial roles are required to display soft skills – like communication, collaboration, time management, critical thinking, decision making - to manage the team and cast vision for the project. It can be argued that there is no 'standard' manual to teach soft skills, but if organizations 'invest' more time and resources they can surely cultivate an environment of constant learning and leadership mindset. Throughout this paper we will identify some of the key areas where organizations can invest and upskill their first line managers and enable them to become successful future leaders.

### Back to Basics

A first-line manager's job is, but not limited to, to creatively using available resources, balancing employee workloads, preventing staff burnout, while ensuring the success of the project. In a nutshell, a manager needs to manage the resources, run operations and develop the team. Organizations can play a substantial role in enabling the managers in all three crucial role-defining but often challenging areas.

### Resource Marshal

One of the most important roles of a manager is to use the resources effectively and efficiently. The resources are not limited to human resources but also what tools and strategies they have at their disposal as a manager, within the boundaries of their organization, that they can avail to effectively run the day-to-day operations.

Organizations must ensure, when they bring in a new person in a managerial role having no prior people management experience, they facilitate some coaching and counseling around resources available to them. Organizations should invest in developing their in-house training materials while incorporating learnings from industry level trends.

## Running Operations

Organizations must empower the first line managers by sharing the bigger picture, so they can strategically assess high priority or low payout projects and zoom in on operating necessities. Due to their proximity with day-to-day operations and challenges faced by the work force during those operations, it is advisable to bring in the first line managers in strategic decisions.

The focus should be moved from organizational separation to collaborative engagement because it isn't a question of more information; it is about enabling the decision makers to use available information better. Senior leadership can provide conceptual knowledge while mid-level and first-level leadership can bring in inputs on operational acceptance of new initiatives.

## Developing A Star Team

Goals give an organization a purpose and roadmap to move towards during the entire year and beyond. In order to create effective teams, organizations must train managers to create SMART goals for their teams. Goals that are Specific (S), Measurable (M), Achievable (A), Relevant (R) and Time-Bound (T) and aligned with the organizational goals. Goals should be written to complete a project or improve performance. Having some templates readily available for the new managers helps them navigate, which can otherwise feel like a daunting task. Learning to set goals for the team that contribute to broader company goals can help managers feel more invested in the company's objectives since they contribute to developing them. Setting goals for their team gives them the opportunity to display and develop their people skills.

There are several other ways organizations can empower these novice leaders to excel at their job: by providing training and development opportunities, mentorship or executive shadowing, engaging early and constantly capturing and monitoring their engagement metrics, expanding opportunities and being transparent with respect to their performance and periodic recognition.

## Training and Development Opportunities

Since the pandemic was declared a national emergency in mid-March 2020, the fluidity of work situation dynamics was revealed on a global scale. Organizations were forced to adopt new ways of working and at times reskill their personnel to close talent gaps. Managing hybrid, teams across multiple locations required a shift in mindset and even day to day operations. The traditional leadership programs - focused on face-to-face meetings, and overused buzz words like 'effective leadership' and 'leadership styles' were rendered obsolete. The current situation demands organizations to invest time and resources into creating custom-tailored solutions that foster engagement and inclusion for all employees. These trainings need to be integrated as a part of experiential learning with a focus on business vision and need of potential leaders.

## Executive Shadowing

Shadowing is a widely used concept where a newcomer observes a leader in day-to-day interactions. Executive shadowing can be a powerful tool to accelerate the development of first line managers and bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical work experience as they see the workplace from a more strategic viewpoint. The seemingly feasible solution might present itself with potential challenges when you have a birds' eye view. This practical learning helps first line managers move from an operational to tactical and strategic mindset. Organizations should work on creating some programs where they capture interests and career aspirations of a first line manager and match them with an executive. Needless to say, both the coach and recruit should be invested and committed for the success of the match.

## Early Involvement

Often it is seen that some major decisions that impact the whole organization are relayed to first line or middle management late in the game and there are very valid reasons to do so e.g., to avoid additional complexity or a potential clash of opinions. The decision-making process is not always easy as the results may go as expected or completely downhill. Bringing in the first-line managers from different business pillars spanning technical, cultural, and political aspects of the decision, may help organizations make more informed decisions, surface blind spots and get a formal buy-in from people who will be implementing the decision. By involving the first-line managers in the decision-making process, organizations also relay a message of trust and value of opinion. This increases employee engagement which we talk about in our next section and trains and prepares them for their next leadership positions.

## Engagement Index

Engagement Index is defined as the measure of involvement and enthusiasm of employees in both their work and workplace. Employee engagement is a foundational component that can help senior leaders grasp where organizational efforts need to focus so that employees feel a stronger sense of belonging and commitment. Deeper understanding of employee engagement can help drive real change within teams and organization.

Most organizations have a prescribed series or ‘index’ of survey questions that go out to all employees from time to time. However, having a focused set of questions targeting the first line managers can result in valuable insights and accountability, which in turn leads to action and results.

We encourage senior leadership to review the results of these surveys with the budding leaders in regular one-on-one meetings and seek insights on personal and professional goals.

## Expand Opportunities

Once a high performer is brought into a management role and they have crossed the hump of initial learning, it is very natural for them to look at what their next potential move in the organization would be. Other than that, managers often find themselves distant from business details, which they were used to before, especially if they manage a high performing team of independent contributors.

Organizations need to identify the first signs of boredom and dissatisfaction with a high performer and expand opportunities for career development outside of conventional corporate-ladder promotions. Organizations must focus on encouraging and enabling employees by sharing opportunities at industry level e.g., chairing a committee or taking a lateral move or accepting a governance-oriented volunteer role on a not-for-profit board are few examples.  A lateral move can give the employee a chance to expand their skills and network with a new circle of employees and customers.

## Transparency

Fostering a culture of transparency and communication can help create a positive and productive work environment.  Annual employee performance reviews are an underutilized tool in this area. Most companies have a standard process for conducting their annual employee performance reviews. These reviews often entail evaluating the work of employees over an extended period to help identify areas they need to improve and find solutions to help them improve in those areas. While these reviews can be effective and efficient, the tenacity with which they should be conducted gets thawed over the years, particularly for long-time associates.  Timely feedback and performance reviews help new managers to get a better understanding of how their position contributes to company goals and helps them feel more invested in the success of the organization. Organizations must emphasize and invest in creative ways to transparently link employee goals to business priorities while maintaining a strong element of flexibility.

## Recognition

Good old recognition whether verbal, written or monetary goes a long way. Recognizing and rewarding the budding managers and their team creates a positive work culture, boosts productivity, and motivates employees to do their best work. Organizations should try to come up with creative ways of appraising the team through various social recognition, bonuses, and incentive programs.

## CONCLUSION

Organizations should enable these front-line future leaders with the right tools and continual and curated training and development plans. The concept of investing and empowering managers is not new to industry but continuing with legacy leadership trainings and concepts may not result in expected outcomes. Hence organizations should consider going an extra mile and revisit their concepts and align with the current paradigm. Nevertheless, the investment is not one-sided. It is imperative that first line managers become self-aware of their shortcomings and seek avenues to overcome them. Continued feedback through self-assessment surveys, proactively requesting their staff and leadership for candid feedback will provide an objective view to strengthen their areas of development. By striving for a collaborative and transparent work culture, it's a win-win situation for both the employer and the employee.

### REFERENCES

Peter, Laurence J. and Hull, Raymond. 1969. *The Peter Principle. William Morrow & Co Inc. (Pan Books ed., 1970).*

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### RECOMMENDED READING

1. *The First-Time Manager* by Jim McCormick, Loren B. Belker, Gary S. Topchik.
2. *Welcome to Management*: How to Grow From Top Performer to Excellent Leader by Ryan Hawk

### CONTACT INFORMATION (HEADER 1)

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