



Activate your managers to drive performance

Whilst many organisations say that their employees are their most important asset, their actions do not always reflect their words. In this article we look at the role of front-line management in unlocking the potential of employees and increasing both performance and innovation.



Front-line managers hold the key to staff performance

To ensure continuity and experience, most front-line managers are promoted from 'within the ranks'. However, many are poorly equipped to perform successfully in their new role.



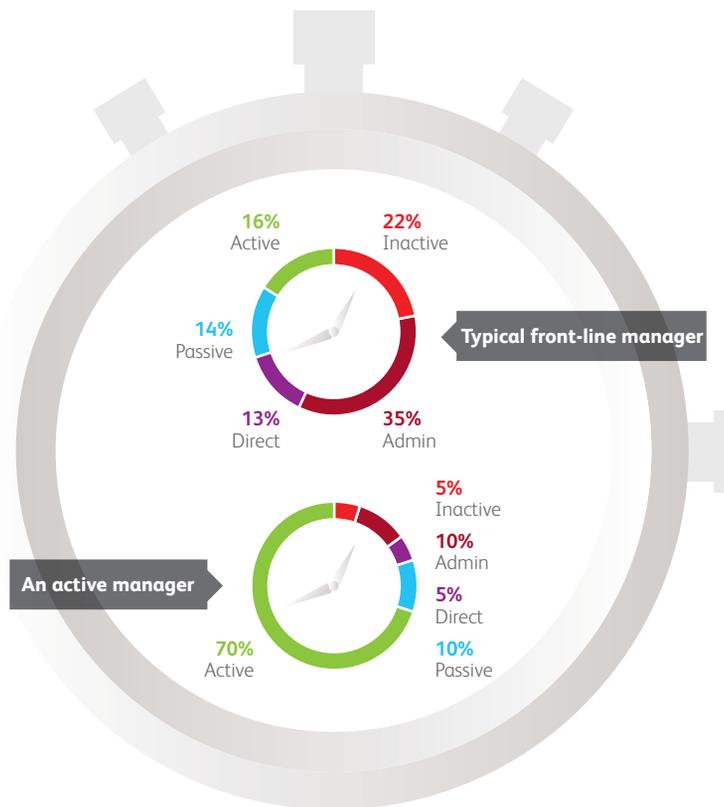
80%

Front-line managers have usually been promoted into the role because of their content expertise.

They are rarely best equipped to be good managers yet directly supervise up to 80% of the workforce.

How front-line managers spend their time

Active management involves front-line managers providing coaching, guidance, assistance and support to their staff in a positive and constructive way. Their goal is to optimise the effective utilisation of the resource under their control. Ideally front-line managers should be spending at least 60% of their time 'actively managing'. Unfortunately, the reality can be quite different.



Even natural leaders need help too

Management as a science has been around for a long time – a lot has been learned and understood. The onus is on organisations to ensure its newly promoted managers in pivotal front-line roles are appropriately equipped with this understanding. Today's front-line managers are tomorrow's senior executives. Just because they are in a leadership position, don't assume they know what they are doing.

Walking the walk: making front-line managers successful

Appropriately equipped, front-line managers hold the key to operational improvement

Would a professional football league club promote its best player to manage the team at short notice? Frankly, no – assuming the footballer in question had no relevant training. Nobody would expect the former player to have the skills to manage team performance. He would not just be required to manage coaching and training of the playing staff, but he would also have responsibilities for organisational, financial and commercial management, needing strong interpersonal communications skills and charisma to deal with senior staff, shareholders and journalists as well as the vision and ability to plan ahead for the future. It would be insane for the club to take this step but that's exactly what many companies do to their best employees.

Celebrating the accidental manager

First the good news: appropriately equipped front-line managers are fundamental to sustainable improvements in corporate performance. In an extensive study, research company Gallup identified which organisational factors most strongly predicted success¹. 'Whilst we tend to celebrate "great" companies, in reality there are only great managers,' commented Gallup lead researcher Curt Coffman. 'It is *on the front-line* that the hard work of building a stronger workplace gets done.'² Similarly, a 2004 Corporate Leadership Council study of 50,000 worldwide employees concluded 'the manager of front-line employees – in particular his or her effectiveness at managing people – is the most important driver of performance and engagement.'^{3,4}

Unfortunately, front-line managers are rarely given the support they need when they start their supervisory journeys. A significant proportion of front-line managers get the role because they were good engineers, call-centre agents or field technicians. One moment they are one of the



IN 30 SECONDS

- Front-line managers are critical to an organisation's performance, as their ability to motivate and direct staff is fundamental
- Many new managers are selected simply on the basis of being good at their current jobs, given minimal training and then left to their own devices
- A review of multiple performance-improvement initiatives conducted over twenty years has shown that to deliver sustainable front-line management performance, up-front training and skills development needs to be supplemented by ongoing mentoring and coaching
- This approach turns 'accidental' front-line managers into 'active' managers and delivers sustainable performance improvements

60%

Proportion of front-line managers who underperform during their first two years⁴

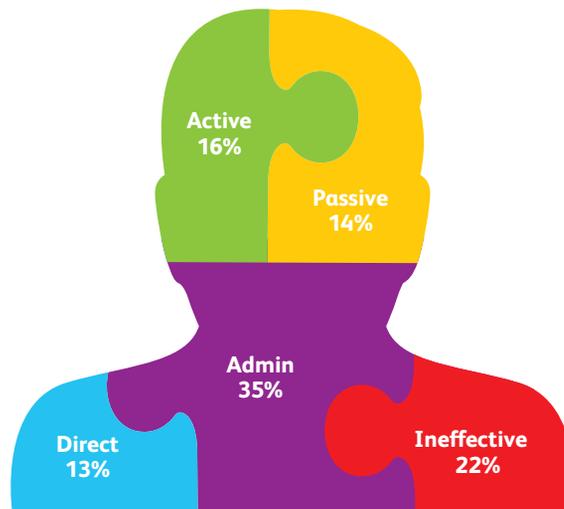
It is easy for front-line managers to get distracted by answering emails and 'making the system work', resulting in many organisations forgetting what front-line managers were actually hired to do – to manage!

guys; the next they are expected to be an enlightened manager, but they are ill-prepared to perform the role in reality. As one of our clients told us, 'I was trained on the day to day activities required for my job but I was never trained how to manage or develop my team. That's been trial and error, and sometimes more error than I would have liked.'

At best, managers may be offered 'sheep dip' management training; more often than not they will learn on-the-job from their (potentially equally ill-equipped) peers. Talent management analyst Josh Bersin notes, 'Most supervisors and front-line managers learned how to manage from another manager. If a strong development program is not in place, people are "learning how to lead" by chance.'⁵ The result is a lack of competence to perform the role they now find themselves in – managing their former colleagues. This causes employees to underperform as they are led by managers who mirror the performance and behavioural norms of those around them.

Is it fair however, to condemn a front-line manager for underperforming? As noted by Susan Whittaker and Mick Marchington back in 2003, competing priorities alongside ever-increasing workloads, coupled with insufficient training and support and a lack of appropriate skills and competencies, leads to poor performance that does not reflect the front-line manager's true potential.⁶ Undoubtedly, the role has become more complex, with many tasks performed historically by support functions having now become their direct responsibility. The preponderance of new technology has provided many front-line managers with a perfect excuse to abdicate responsibility. It is easy to get distracted by answering emails and 'making the system work', resulting in many organisations forgetting what front-line managers were actually hired to do – to manage!

Figure 1: The accidental manager
Typical front-line manager time allocation analysis



Source: BearingPoint Institute Report 005, 2014

Can this situation in the workplace be changed? To find out, we have delved into our archives of ActiveManager programmes that we have worked on over the last twenty years with over 40 blue chip clients spanning the Financial Services, IT, Telecoms, Utilities and Outsourcing sectors, analysed how over 10,000 front-line managers spent their time and identified where sustained improvements in performance have been achieved. Interestingly, the findings vary little by sector or function when individuals are appointed to managerial positions, their success is highly dependent on the availability and the quality of development and support they receive.

This was the case for two new accidental-manager appointees we saw in a recent performance improvement programme. Whilst one progressed well over a period of 12 weeks, supported by a coach, to reach the level of management competence required, the other (with no such support) resigned within weeks, stating that he no longer enjoyed his work. The knock-on effect of this coaching can be a virtuous circle: our research tells us that successful front-line managers spend at least 60% of their time providing coaching, guidance, assistance and support to their staff. In contrast, as shown in figure 1, most front-line managers spend less than 30% of their time on such activities, with the bulk spent on administration and less useful activities.

This paper considers how organisations can realise performance improvements that impact the bottom line by better equipping and engaging their front-line managers. We share guidance as to what is required for organisations to embed these improvements based on our insights from successful programmes. Our analysis reflects the need for organisations to focus on one aspect in particular – turning accidental managers into active managers.

Successful front-line managers spend at least 60% of their time providing coaching, guidance, assistance and support



AN ALL-TOO-COMMON SCENARIO

Fired up after attending a management training course, the manager called a meeting to explain to her team that she had experienced an epiphany and her role was now transformed: she promised to ‘be there’ for them, to challenge them and make them into a high-performing team. For the next few days she initiated numerous activities, including setting out regular one-to-one meetings, running early-morning team briefs, putting performance charts up on the wall and setting targets for everyone in the team. Initially, the team was taken aback. Then the rumour mill went into overdrive, with concerns raised about job security and that perhaps she had been put on notice about her performance as a manager. After a couple of days, the pressure on the manager became too much and she abandoned her new regime. The team breathed a collective sigh of relief and continued to work as they always had done. The manager’s targets and drive for improvement became a distant memory.

'A good manager has the potential to increase an employee's commitment to their job by 34%, yet has the power to increase emotional commitment to the organisation by 38% and to the team by an astounding 47%.'

CORPORATE EXECUTIVE BOARD'

A subset of performance-focused competencies have a higher impact on front-line manager's efficiency – notably performance management, results focus, planning and active management

Focus on the management competencies that really matter

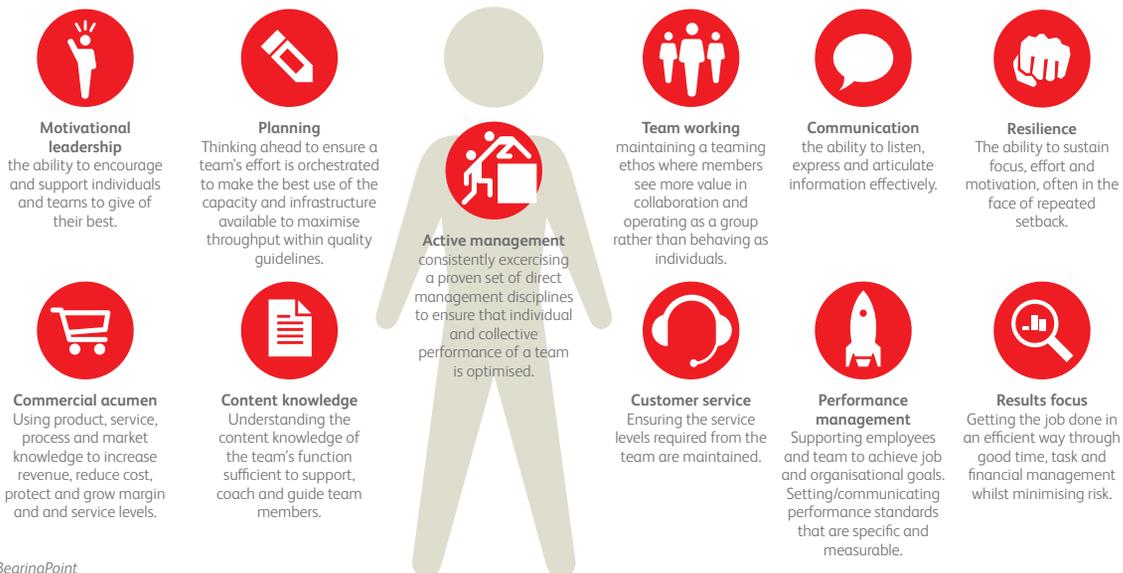
The starting point for developing effective front-line managers is to understand the competencies today's organisations require for the role, and how these can be developed. In our experience, Figure 2 highlights competencies that front-line managers are required to have.

Detailed analysis tells us that for front-line managers, a subset of performance-focused competencies have a higher impact on tangible improvement – notably performance management, results focus, planning and active management.

Assessing and understanding existing managers' competency levels creates a starting point for training and skills development. Whilst many organisations already undertake gap analysis and skills development initiatives, such effort can often be wasted if it is not reinforced by ongoing support. Indeed, despite large investments in human resource development, apparently only about 10%-40% of training is ever used on the job⁸ – our experience would suggest this statistic is even lower.

Why is this? Quite simply, the pressures of the day-to-day job often take precedence and opportunities to 'practise' new behaviours and implement recent learning are seen as low priority in the face of routine challenges. Added to this, it is rare for specific plans to be in place to ensure the integration of new learning. As a result, old habits are retained and managers do not realise the benefits of their new training and development. To quote *The Wall Street Journal* 'Teaching employees new skills is one thing. Getting them to apply what they have learnt is quite another.'⁹

Figure 2: Assess overall front-line competency levels and impact on performance
Front-line manager competencies



Source: BearingPoint

Time that should be spent actively managing – planning, coaching, guiding, assisting and supporting team members – to optimise the team’s effectiveness

60%

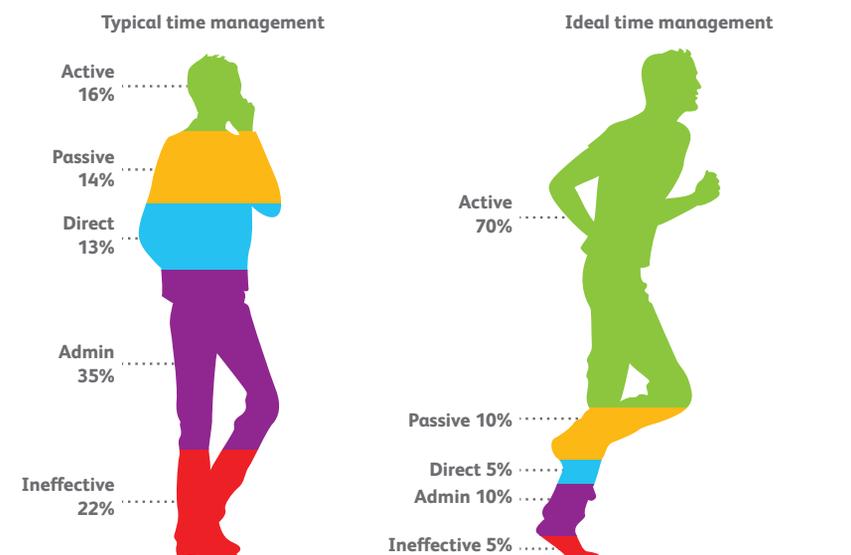
From BearingPoint’s experience of programme delivery across multiple sectors and functions, we have learned how important it is to continue such efforts beyond the training-room door. It takes an extended period of positive reinforcement for front-line managers to evolve their behaviours and fundamentally change their daily routines. Rarely is this change achieved in less than 12 weeks: it takes that long for new ways of working to become established as new routine behaviours that are exhibited without the need for conscious thought.

Driving performance through active management

The impact of coaching on performance is well documented and can be measured accurately. For example, results from a Sales Executive Council study showed that sales representatives who consistently received more than three hours of coaching a month achieved 107% of their performance target, whilst those who received less than two hours a month underperformed by 10%.⁹

If the front-line manager’s new skills can be established as part of their normal behaviour, the results can be profound, both for the managers involved and on the effectiveness of their teams. As shown in Figure 3, managers move away from passive towards active management, where the majority of their time – in excess of 60% – can be spent planning, coaching, guiding, assisting and supporting their staff in order to optimise the team’s effectiveness.

Figure 3: Move to active management to unlock team’s performance
Typical versus ideal front-line manager time allocation



Source: BearingPoint Institute Report 005, 2014

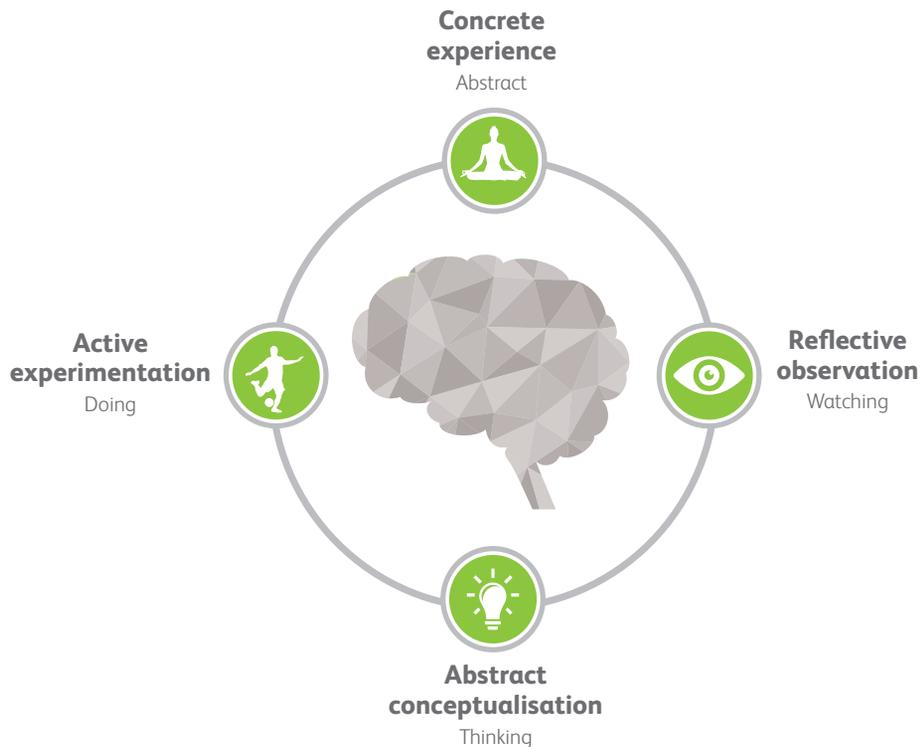
30%

Performance gains for a team after 12 weeks of targeted front-line management development and subsequent coaching

This is not a surprising finding for educationalists as it backs up existing research. For example, Kolb's Learning Theory, written in 1984, identifies that ongoing practice and reflection are crucial for effective learning to take place¹⁰. However these elements are not always built into the design of learning interventions or post-training programmes in the corporate environment. So, how can this be assured? Given that companies allocate large budgets to developing their intellectual capital in order to gain competitive advantage and build sustainable value, it is vital that learning and development interventions result in measurable gains. Clear, qualitative and quantitative baselines should be established at the outset, against which improvement can be measured and assessed. One way to achieve this is to base an improvement programme on a well-established learning framework, such as Kolb's own 'experiential learning cycle'.

Clearly, this process cannot take place without the goodwill of the front-line manager concerned. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are the final keys to ensuring long-term embedding of new knowledge and lasting behavioural change. As one newly promoted manager told us, 'My level of motivation to apply what I had learned increased when I started the coaching sessions.' Positive and constructive feedback related to the

Figure 4: Ongoing practice and reflection are crucial for effective learning
The Kolb experiential learning model



Source: *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Kolb, D., 1984. <http://bit.ly/1ocJh6l>

'[Front-line leaders are] the most sought out, yet uninformed, ill-equipped, and under-utilised communication vehicle of an organisation.'
MELCRUM¹¹

learning process both from the coach, up-line managers and peers has been shown to greatly assist learners in the breaking of old habits and facilitating the entrenchment of new ones.

In our experience, targeted front-line management development and subsequent coaching can realise performance gains within a front-line manager's team of up to 30% in just 12 weeks. Whilst this period may appear arbitrary, using Kolb's learning cycle as a reference point, it can take several 'cycles' for learning to be fully embedded. Concepts must be applied in practice, then assessed and reflected upon, with feedback from a mentor to inform the learner how best to apply their new knowledge or skills next time around. This cycle is then repeated until extrinsic knowledge becomes intrinsic behaviour – the definition of 'unconscious competence'.¹²

Many such gains come in the latter part of the coaching programme, as key competencies start to 'dovetail' together. The front-line manager can continue to build on this foundational level of competence as continued 'cycles' of experiential learning reveal new insights that are fed back into the process. According to one study, 90% of learners will transfer a new skill into their own work routines or workplace if they have an opportunity to put theory into practice and received corrective feedback¹³. This point is reinforced by our own clients – 'By becoming more transparent about our performance goals across the management population and offering our first and second line managers coaching and continual support – we will see impacts on processes, customer journeys, structure and systems.'

Accidental managers represent a hidden opportunity to positively impact the bottom line

Dwight D Eisenhower is quoted as saying 'The sergeant is the army'. In the same way, our front-line managers are what make our organisations tick. They ensure that work gets done, standards are maintained, customer needs are satisfied, throughput is maintained and all this is completed efficiently by content, motivated staff.

Intuitively we know the importance of their role yet, despite this, a capability gap exists at front-line management level in most organisations – test this with any experienced line manager and they will verify it. Why this gap exists can vary. For example, have organisations equipped their front-line managers with the skills they need to manage effectively in the first place? Or is it down to modern technology, where e-mails and 'administrative systems' absorb huge amounts of time that should be spent managing? Or maybe organisations have increased spans of control too far, diverting front-line managers on to one too many 'special projects'?

We believe front-line managers should be spending at least 60% of their time actively managing. The norm is 30% or less which directly



MOTIVATION – INTRINSIC OR EXTRINSIC?

- Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a part in a successful coaching programme for front-line managers
- Intrinsic motivation is driven by goal-setting and personal action plans
- Extrinsic motivation is provided by the coach (or manager) and work environment factors, including management and peer support

'Front-line supervisors – not senior managers – are the opinion leaders in your organisation'.

T J LARKIN AND SANDAR LARKIN¹⁴

impacts the effectiveness of their teams. By increasing the levels of active management performed by front-line managers from less than 30% to over 60%, the lost or hidden capacity that currently exists within their teams can be released and used effectively. The results can be dramatic – BearingPoint has seen performance improvements of between 10% and 30% across an organisation. This improvement can be realised through a blended learning programme combining competency assessment, management development and a sustained period of individual coaching and support.

Both in the short and long term, the challenge faced by front-line managers and the opportunity it provides to realise a stepped, recurring improvement in performance should not be ignored.

Front-line managers are on a journey, typically from having been team members, through to becoming senior managers once they have proved themselves in the role. In time they may become the next inspirational and highly effective executive managers. By equipping front-line managers with the appropriate skills, tools, knowledge, insight and confidence you are helping them not just for the 'now' but for the future as they progress in their careers. 



KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- While front-line managers directly supervise up to 80% of the workforce¹⁵, they are usually promoted into the role because of their current expertise and are rarely best equipped to be good managers
- Our experience shows that a focus on a subset of key management competencies, coupled with individual coaching and support, is critical to sustained performance improvement
- An untapped opportunity exists to achieve recurring productivity improvements of between 10% and 20%, whilst growing the calibre of the management community now and in the future
- The effectiveness of front-line managers directly impacts productivity and quality of service. Performance improvements yield tangible business benefits and run straight to the bottom line
- A minimum period of 12 weeks of positive reinforcement post development is required to ensure competencies and changes in behaviour become sufficiently established as part of 'business as usual'

About the author



Brendan Cahill
Partner, BearingPoint, London

Brendan Cahill is a Partner at BearingPoint in the UK. With qualifications in Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management, he has over 20 years of consulting experience. He is the former CEO and co-founder of Trinity Horne, which was acquired by BearingPoint in late 2013. Specialising in operational transformation Brendan's client base extends across Telecoms, IT, Resources & Utilities, Financial Services, BPO and Government sectors. In 2012, he co-authored a book entitled *Britain's Productivity Challenge*.

brendan.cahill@bearingpointinstitute.com

Project team

Tony Farnfield, Joe Gilmartin and Louisa Latham.

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