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Frontline Managers: Are They Given the Leadership Tools to Succeed?



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IN FEBRUARY 2014, Harvard Business Review Analytic Services surveyed its readers about the role of frontline managers in today's organizations.¹ The goal of the survey was to understand how important frontline managers are to organizational success, to what extent frontline manager effectiveness impacts business performance, and whether frontline managers are given enough support and leadership development to optimally fulfill their roles and responsibilities.

With 610 participants, the topic clearly struck a chord with *Harvard Business Review* readers. Respondents were a diverse pool of cross-industry, senior-level managers and executives from companies across the globe with more than 100 employees. A full 60 percent came from companies with more than 1,000 employees. Most held titles of executive management, director, senior manager/department head, or manager/supervisor.

Vital to Organizational Success

It would not be difficult to make a case that frontline manager performance directly and dramatically impacts the bottom line. Take just one metric: one of the most expensive and controllable costs, turnover. In 2013, despite the nearly 8 percent unemployment rate, the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that more than 2 million Americans quit their jobs each month. Studies have consistently shown that having a bad manager or a poor relationship with one's manager is a top reason an employee quits. So this link between frontline manager effectiveness and turnover rate is just one example to justify investing in and developing these leaders.

Not surprisingly, the survey results verified the consensus view that frontline managers increasingly play a vital role in any organization's success. As Linda A. Hill, the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, writes in *Becoming a Manager*, "Managers on the front line are critical to sustaining quality, service, innovation, and financial performance."

¹For this survey, frontline managers were defined as first-level leaders whose direct reports are employees with no management responsibilities.

HIGHLIGHTS

77%

of respondents said frontline managers are important in helping their organization reach its business goals

33%

of respondents said their organization's frontline managers are competent in business-based decision making

12%

of respondents said their organization currently invests sufficiently in the development of frontline managers

With fewer hierarchical layers in many companies, more and more frontline managers have become the glue that connects the strategic (top management’s business priorities) with the tactical (specific responsibilities employees are given to accomplish those goals). They need to have technical knowledge and expertise in the areas they supervise. They also need to master “people” skills like leadership, communication, problem solving, and teamwork (both as leader and participant). Increasingly, they are tasked with goal alignment, connecting individual, tactical employee goals with the broader, strategic goals of upper management.

Figure 1

Frontline Managers Are Vitally Important to Achieving Business Priorities

Please rate the importance of frontline managers to your organization in helping achieve the following business priorities. [PERCENT RATING 8, 9, OR 10, WHERE 1 = NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT AND 10 = EXTREMELY IMPORTANT]



In fact, it could be argued that frontline managers are more important today than ever before, says Peter Cappelli, George W. Taylor Professor of Management and director, Center for Human Resources at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. This is because “spans of control are bigger—each manager supervises a lot more people—and we also expect those frontline workers to do more, to be more responsive to customers, to cross-sell, to solve problems. These managers have to make that happen and monitor to make sure it continues,” Cappelli explains.

Respondents agreed that frontline managers are integral to the success of their companies in many mission-critical ways. On nearly every performance metric—from customer satisfaction to employee engagement to productivity to achieving business goals to contributing to effective communications—respondents said frontline managers play a fundamental role in achieving business priorities. [figure 1](#)

But Not Performing Optimally

This survey shed light on one of the more vexing aspects of running an organization: Significance does not always equal results. Despite their importance, the survey showed a chasm between frontline manager responsibility and effectiveness. Frontline managers received mixed reviews on some of the most critical aspects of their jobs. In particular, the survey showed clear room for improvement on vital leadership competencies such as strategic and innovative thinking, developing talent, and inspirational leadership. [figure 2](#)

Why does this gap between what is expected and what is delivered exist? The survey showed that, first and foremost, it derives from a lack of leadership development. To some extent, this problem is endemic:

Figure 2

Frontline Managers Get Low Marks on Many Business Competencies

How would you rate your frontline managers on the following leadership competencies?

[PERCENT RATING 8, 9, OR 10, WHERE 1 = NOT AT ALL COMPETENT AND 10 = EXTREMELY COMPETENT]



More than 90 percent believed frontline managers' lack of leadership development negatively impacts employee engagement results.

Many companies fail to provide enough leadership development across multiple levels. “Organizations are failing to offer enough leadership and training to all their managers. To the extent to which they do offer training, it seems to follow a trickle-down model: the most for the top executives, the least for the first-line supervisors,” Cappelli says.

The survey showed that in the vast majority of organizations, frontline managers are not offered robust enough training and development programs to meet the rising job demands. Leadership development for this level tends to be ad hoc, sporadic, or too brief to adequately cover all the responsibilities that are within their purview. The vast majority of respondents—71 percent—said that frontline managers received training and development only occasionally or infrequently, with nearly half (44 percent) indicating a frequency of once a year or less. Only 14 percent said that their companies offered a comprehensive leadership development program that included frequent mentoring, 360-degree feedback, and leadership tools.

Overwhelmingly, respondents cited the lack of training and development of frontline managers as having either a “somewhat negative impact” or a “significant negative impact” on organizational performance. A full 79 percent believed that the lack of frontline leadership tools, training, and development negatively impacts their firm’s performance “moderately” or “substantially.” This is particularly striking when looking at employee engagement, communication, goal alignment, innovation, and teamwork.

figure 3 More than 90 percent believed frontline managers' lack of leadership development negatively impacts employee engagement results. Other areas that are adversely affected are productivity, quality, customer service, and turnover.

“What employers need to tap is discretionary effort, what employee engagement tries to measure. We expect frontline workers to do lots of complicated things as well as work hard for the employer, typically in contexts where we cannot easily monitor their performance. The execution of business strategy often rests on how they perform those tasks. If we undervalue and underinvest in those areas, we pay a price. If our internal accounting systems aren’t very good, it may be hard to see the connection between employee effort and business outcomes, but it is there,” Cappelli says.

When training is given, respondents cited on-the-job training (67 percent) as the most frequently used tool. The next most popular development methods companies use were classroom training (61 percent), personality and leadership assessments (43 percent), online learning (43 percent), 360-degree feedback (42 percent), coaching (42 percent), and mentoring (41 percent). Other methods that were mentioned included providing reading materials/abstracts and webinars, and offering cross-functional assignments and job rotations.

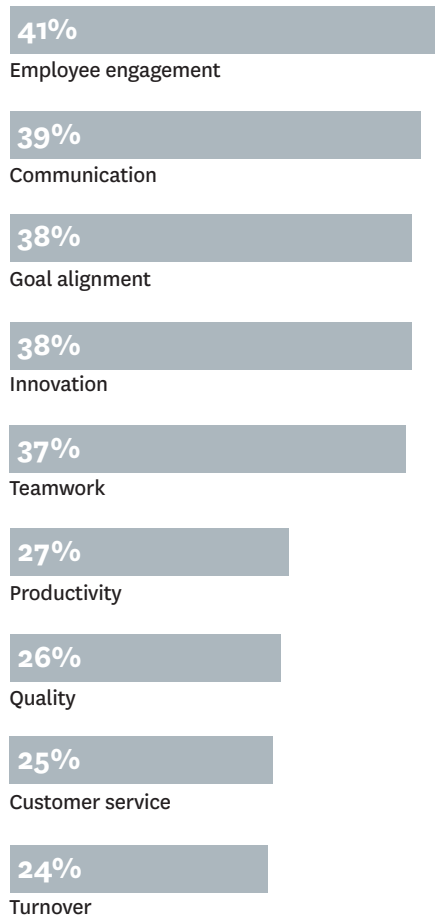
Respondents were asked to describe the training and development tools offered to frontline managers at their firms. Their replies showed that development is largely ineffective both in how it is administered and in its frequency. “It goes in spurts; at times we get high-quality training. But the ongoing growth is an issue,” said one respondent. Another described their program this way: “Two years ago they did a one-

Figure 3

Lack of Development, Training, and Tools Causes Negative Impact on Business Performance

To what extent has a lack of frontline leadership tools, training, and development had a negative impact on each of the following aspects of your organization's performance?

[PERCENT SELECTING "SIGNIFICANT NEGATIVE IMPACT" ON ASPECT OF ORGANIZATION'S PERFORMANCE]



time extensive leadership development program, but there's only been occasional training since then." Another respondent explained that training was more incentive-based, a way for upper management to show appreciation, but that these offerings didn't help improve day-to-day operations. Others characterized the feedback managers receive as largely punitive: "Only negative feedback [is given] when failures happen. Punishment in the form of bad performance reviews, notices of corrective action, and terminations are the rewards for failure," one said.



Respondents identified frontline managers as a linchpin of organizational success.

A Call to Action

A significant 40 percent of respondents believed that frontline managers do not receive sufficient tools and training to develop into highly effective leaders. [figure 4](#) But there was no clear reason offered as to why. Respondents negated the ideas that “senior management does not believe we need to invest more in developing frontline managers” or that it is “too expensive to invest further in the development of frontline managers.” Most also did not believe the gap was due to their companies being in a fast-growth cycle. It is conceivable, though, that by focusing unrelentingly on profitability over these past several years, most organizations have failed to invest enough in the longer-term development of their talent. Taken as a whole, it seems that respondents have seen the crack in the armor and may be willing to advocate for further investment in frontline manager leadership development.

It’s important to note that, in some ways, frontline managers need extra care in their development—more rope, not less. In her book *Becoming a Manager*, Linda Hill writes, “Given the complexities of their new responsibilities and all that they have to learn, new managers, no matter how gifted, will make mistakes and will need the support and assistance of others. Despite the nod that senior management may give to more of a focus on learning and development, more often than not people report they are being punished for missteps that inevitably happen when given stretch assignments. If missteps and failures—two essential elements of any learning—are harshly criticized, employees will shy away from taking on assignments outside their comfort zones, and organizations will lose the opportunity to develop our leaders of tomorrow.”

Overall, the results of this survey were unequivocal: Respondents identified frontline managers as a linchpin of organizational success. Despite this, it revealed, most frontline managers are not equipped with the requisite resources to excel in their organizations. Respondents believed that the gap between what is expected of frontline managers and what is provided to them is adversely impacting organizational performance in myriad ways. The survey may serve as a call to action for senior managers to eliminate the barriers to success that frontline managers face.

Figure 4

Frontline Managers Not Getting Much in the Way of Leadership Development, Training, and Tools

Please rate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements about leadership development in your organization. [PERCENT RATING 8, 9, OR 10, WHERE 1 = STRONGLY DISAGREE AND 10 =STRONGLY AGREE]

40%

Frontline managers do not receive sufficient tools and training to develop into highly effective leaders

23%

Senior management does not believe we need to invest more in developing our frontline managers

15%

We are in a fast-growth cycle at our organization and do not have the time to devote to developing frontline managers

12%

We invest a sufficient amount already in the development of frontline managers

12%

It is too expensive to invest further in the development of frontline managers

Methodology and Participant Profile

An online survey with the readers of *Harvard Business Review* during February 2014 asked respondents at organizations with more than 100 employees to answer 10 questions. The survey achieved a total of 610 respondents.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Job function

General management was the most common job function represented at 17 percent, followed by operations at 16 percent, sales and marketing at 13 percent, strategy and business development at 10 percent, IT at 10 percent, and HR at 9 percent. All other job functions were less than 8 percent.

Job title

Manager/supervisor was the most common title at 37 percent, followed by senior manager/department head at 22 percent, vice president/director at 21 percent, and C-level/executive management at 9 percent. All other job titles were less than 6 percent.

Regions

More than half (58 percent) of respondents were from North America, followed by 22 percent from the Europe/Middle East/Africa region, 16 percent from the Asia/Pacific region, 3 percent from Latin America, and 1 percent from the rest of the world.

Sponsor's Perspective



PAUL LOUCKS
PRESIDENT AND CEO
HALOGEN SOFTWARE

One of my own beliefs as CEO of Halogen Software is that all employees deserve to work for a great leader. At Halogen, we not only build talent management solutions that help frontline managers develop their leadership skills, we also strive to empower our own management team with the tools, training, and development they need to be successful leaders.

We understand that a well-trained and supported frontline leadership team is integral to meeting Halogen's long-term business objectives and high levels of customer satisfaction. Frontline leaders are responsible for managing more than 75 percent of our employees. They also have the formidable task of maintaining high levels of employee performance and engagement, and making sure their teams get the tools and development time to effectively meet their goals and objectives. Our frontline leaders also have the critical job of regularly reinforcing Halogen's mission, vision, and values to support our culture.

Our managers require a broad mix of leadership skills to succeed at Halogen. We combine a robust leadership program and our own suite of talent management solutions to help them develop these competencies. From ongoing performance feedback to goal alignment and development planning, one-on-one meetings, and talent pool development, we've taken the best practices in talent management and applied them to our software solutions. Both our customers and our own leaders use these tools to foster better self-awareness and understanding between managers and employees, and to improve communication, coaching, teamwork, and ultimately, performance.

The high value we place on the development of our own leadership team is one of the main reasons we partnered with Harvard Business Review Analytic Services to conduct this survey. Our ultimate goal for the survey? To gain valuable insights into what other companies are doing and what their perspectives are on frontline leadership development.

We hope the survey findings serve to reinforce the important role your frontline managers have on business performance and emphasize how critical leadership training, tools, and resources are to help your managers succeed. Ultimately, frontline manager success means your employees will be better supported, engaged, and productive. They'll achieve better business outcomes, and you'll have established your talent as a lasting competitive advantage.



Paul Loucks
President and CEO
Halogen Software

ABOUT HALOGEN SOFTWARE

Halogen Software offers a cloud-based talent management suite that reinforces and drives higher employee performance across all talent programs—whether that is recruiting, performance management, learning and development, succession planning, or compensation. With 2,000 customers worldwide, Halogen Software has been recognized as a market leader by major business analysts and has garnered the highest customer satisfaction ratings in the industry. Halogen Software's powerful, yet simple-to-use solutions, which also include industry-vertical editions, are used by organizations that want to build a world-class workforce that is aligned, inspired, and focused on delivering exceptional results. For more information, visit: <http://www.halogensoftware.com>. Subscribe to the Halogen Software TalentSpace Blog: <http://www.halogensoftware.com/blog/> or follow Halogen Software on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/HalogenSoftware>.

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