Insights into organization

How do I unlock the value of my frontline leaders?

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Why is this important?

Many companies treat their frontline managers purely as intermediaries, there to relay marching orders from executives to workers. But the average frontline manager controls an astonishingly broad book of business, manages up to two-thirds of the workforce, and bears responsibility for coaching and developing the people who deliver the product or service to the customer.

Frontline managers are found in almost every company but are particularly important in industries with distributed networks of sites and employees, such as retail, manufacturing, infrastructure, and logistics. Their job titles can range from area manager to store manager and site manager to line supervisor. Despite the breadth of their role, many of them operate most of the time as cogs in a wheel, with little scope for creativity or initiative.

Indeed, far too many organizations treat the frontline manager’s role as merely one of oversight: keeping things under control, enforcing rules, reporting results, and escalating problems. In other words, a frontline manager is meant to communicate decisions, not make them; ensure compliance with policies, not help develop them; and supervise the implementation of changes, not contribute ideas for better ways of working.

Important though oversight undoubtedly is, making it the sole focus of the job squeezes out other equally vital tasks. It leaves little time for dealing with new demands, improving operations, developing frontline employees, or deepening customer relationships. This is a mistake: our experience shows that using frontline managers primarily as span-breakers, auditors, and enforcers makes companies less productive, less agile, and less profitable. The result is a working environment with limited flexibility, few incentives to make improvements, and low morale among workers and managers alike.

The fact is that life moves fast, and the best companies recognize that staying nimble requires workers at the front line to make full use of their creativity, judgment, and initiative. When this works well, the resulting levels of motivation, responsiveness, and continuous improvement far outweigh the costs of building the necessary skills and accountability. What’s more, the prime factor in the job satisfaction and retention of frontline workers is their relationship with their direct manager. Having a real leader in this role is crucial to developing an empowered, accountable, and engaged workforce.
What do I need to know?

The key to unlocking the value of frontline managers lies in shifting their time and attention away from low-value activities like reporting up, sitting in routine meetings, and dealing with administrative tasks. They should instead focus on addressing the specifics of their particular operation; foreseeing trouble and stemming it before it begins; and encouraging workers to be constantly on the lookout for opportunities for improvement.

There are four critical insights that help companies make this shift: recognize that your structure could be tying your frontline managers’ hands; turn scorekeeping into a team sport; don’t make it a battle for frontline managers to get to the front line; and beware the mindset minefield.

Recognize that your structure could be tying your frontline managers’ hands

Breadth of role often comes at the expense of depth of impact. Your business model should dictate the spans of control that will enable your frontline managers to function as genuine leaders. Aim to keep the numbers at the low end of the range – say, 12 to 15 direct reports rather than 25 – so that your managers can provide guidance and coaching on an individual basis. A frontline manager who is overseeing too many people is not going to be able to spend enough time with individual employees, identify problems as they arise, or have the clarity to see a path forward. When stretched this thinly, good managers will naturally prioritize the most critical tasks at hand and coach only the weakest employees.

Let’s look at this another way. How much individual attention – directing, coaching, giving feedback, instilling discipline, ensuring accountability – should a frontline employee expect to get from his or her manager? Twenty minutes per day doesn’t sound like a lot, but for a manager with 25 reports, that’s already more than 40 hours per week. And most frontline managers say that attending meetings, filing routine reports, and fighting fires already take up as much as 30 hours of their week.¹

Turn scorekeeping into a team sport

Tracking success must be done not in private in the manager’s office but out in the open where frontline workers can see how the things they do translate into actual results. Adopting a highly visible, easy to understand method for tracking metrics gives frontline managers a valuable way of engaging their teams in continuous improvement, aiding problem solving and feedback, and communicating to their team and their own managers.

¹ McKinsey carried out research among more than 1,600 managers from a broad range of manufacturing and service industries who completed a detailed questionnaire on frontline managers’ roles, allocation of time, development programs, training, leadership responsibilities, and barriers to effectiveness. See Aaron De Smet, Monica McGurk, and Marc Vinson, “Unlocking the potential of frontline managers,” The McKinsey Quarterly, August 2009.
To do this well, frontline managers need to be able to track the right results and KPIs: those that allow their team members to identify cause and effect rapidly. Examples might include unplanned equipment downtime and preventive maintenance hours in a manufacturing environment or number of customers greeted, items per sale, and conversion rate at a clothing retailer. The best way to focus everyone’s attention on these KPIs is to post a large scoreboard with employees’ names and current results for the relevant metrics in an area regularly frequented by staff, such as the restaurant or stockroom. Individual team members can take turns to update the results so that it is not just the frontline manager who “owns” the scoreboard.

**Don’t make it a battle for frontline managers to get to the front line**

You can’t change frontline managers’ behavior without first eliminating the administrative activities that eat up their time and keep them off the floor. Our research shows that frontline managers from a range of industries typically spend 30 to 60 percent of their time on administrative work and meetings, and 10 to 50 percent on non-managerial tasks such as travelling, participating in training, taking breaks, conducting special projects, or undertaking direct customer service or sales themselves. They spend only 10 to 40 percent of their time actually managing frontline employees. Compare this to best-practice companies, where frontline managers allocate 60 to 70 percent of their time to the floor, coaching employees, providing real-time feedback on their performance, tracking results, and helping teams solve problems as they arise.

Coaching should be – but often isn’t – a core activity for frontline leaders (Exhibit 1). For instance, the retail district managers who responded to our survey reported that much

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**Exhibit 1**

What is the frontline manager’s role?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closest description of frontline managers</th>
<th>Percent of respondents*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fire fighter</td>
<td>Perform assigned tasks, identify and fix problems, tackle everyday challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditor</td>
<td>Oversee work of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro manager</td>
<td>Perform assigned tasks themselves, involving direct reports only if help needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Spend time directing, coaching, managing others</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages do not add up to 100% because of rounding

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- Tactical responsibilities viewed as primary focus of most managers
- Very few respondents prioritized coaching (which may explain the lack of time spent on it)
of the time they spent with frontline employees involved auditing for compliance with standards or solving immediate problems. At some companies, district managers devoted just 4 or 5 percent of their time — as little as 20 minutes a day — to coaching teams. To put this another way, a district manager in retailing may spend as little as one hour a month developing people in the more junior but critical role of store manager.

**Beware the mindset minefield**

Focusing on administration rather than people can be a convenient distraction, covering up deep-seated beliefs that shape how frontline managers choose to spend their time. Many of them see limits to how much they can accomplish. Some recognize the need to restructure their roles yet fear the change involved. Others have unhelpful ways of thinking.

One area manager at a specialty retailer with thousands of outlets said, “Coaching? A good store manager should just know what to do — that’s what we hire them for.” A store manager at a global convenience retailer told us, “There are just good stores and bad stores; there’s very little we can do to change that.” Senior management’s attitudes can be equally negative, as a comment from a store manager at a US electronics retailer illustrates: “They told me, ‘We don’t pay you to think; we pay you to execute.’”

Mindsets matter enormously because frontline managers’ behavior is shaped by who they think they are (and by who you think they are). In fact, for the people we surveyed, mindsets represent the second biggest barrier to improving frontline manager performance after the demands of the current workload (Exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived barriers to improved frontline manager performance</th>
<th>Percent of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time spent on administrative tasks</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job responsibilities</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs/behavior of frontline managers</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes/beliefs of senior managers</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of available talent</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to develop right skills</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to offer widespread training</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Multiple responses allowed

- Job structure (tasks and responsibilities) viewed as chief barrier to improvement
- Mindsets of key personnel seen as second most important barrier
How do I unlock the value of my frontline leaders?

Changing the mindsets of individual frontline managers – especially when they are deeply rooted in personal identity – is no easy feat. Many people have strong associations with their role (“When things get broken, I fix them”). Moving a habitual fire fighter onto the role of coach (“When things get broken, I help others figure out how to fix them”) entails unfreezing the old identity and replacing it with a new but equally powerful one. The challenge is even tougher in organizations where the role of the coach is undervalued or unrecognized.

One retail chain tackled the issue by making its frontline managers aware of the mindsets that prevented them developing desired skills and capabilities (such as “My job is just to make sure tasks get done”). They learned how to adopt more positive mindsets that promote helpful behavior and better performance (such as “My job is to make sure tasks get done and customers get served”).
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