CIPD

Practice summary
and recommendations
July 2023

Effective people managers

An evidence review

The CIPD has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With almost 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

Guide

Effective people managers: An evidence review

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1 Introduction

People managers have an important role in organisations. They are the interface between an organisation and its employees and, as such, can play a pivotal role in influencing organisational outcomes and performance. However, their role is often unclear and the value they add to organisations is often questioned.

This evidence review looks at why people managers are important, what makes an effective people manager, and how to develop effective people managers. Throughout the evidence review, we use the term people manager to encompass all roles which have responsibility for managing employees, including line managers and middle managers.

This report complements the CIPD's analysis of our Good Work Index survey data on the importance of people managers.

An evidence-based approach

We live in an age of information overload, in which it is easy to be swayed by the latest fads or received wisdom. Effective decision-making can be difficult – it requires us to critically question our assumptions, not be biased by anecdotes and avoid cherry-picking the evidence that confirms our world view. Evidence-based practice offers well-established approaches to help with this. Hard proof is elusive, but we can identify the best available evidence, including the most promising options, to achieve our desired outcomes. Employers and HR professionals need to take note of this if they are to identify the best bets for action.

This evidence review summarises the best available scientific research on effective people managers. It is based on two rapid evidence assessments (REAs), one on people manager effectiveness and one on leadership training. The REA method is a shortened form of the systematic review. To read about our methodology and technical aspects of the studies on which this report is based, see the accompanying scientific summaries.

For more information on evidence-based practice, see our factsheet, guide and introductory course.

2 What is a people manager?

What do people managers do?

The role of a people manager is diverse, but their responsibilities include:

- overseeing day-to-day business operations
- communicating information
- coordinating work tasks and activities
- supporting, coaching, supervising and evaluating employees
- implementing organisational strategies and policies
- acting as change agents.

Definitions: Line managers and middle managers

Different terms are often used to describe people managers, including 'line managers' (or 'first' or 'front-line managers') and 'middle managers'. These terms are often used interchangeably, although some see them as different: line managers are sometimes defined as the managerial position closest to non-managerial employees, whereas middle managers are sometimes defined as supervising front-line managers, with themselves being supervised by an organisation's senior managers. In this review we do not make this distinction, focusing instead on all people managers. However, we exclude function-specific managers (such as HR managers) and project managers who do not directly manage people.

Are people managers leaders?

Leadership is an extremely popular and widely studied concept, and it's a fundamental ingredient in organisational success. However, there is no consensus on what leadership is. Definitions in research tend to describe it as a *process* of influencing others to garner their commitment and support to achieve shared goals and tasks, but many people use the label of 'leaders' to refer to senior managers, whereas others use it to refer to managers throughout the organisation.

How leadership differs from management is also widely debated. Conventional wisdom holds that managers are concerned with how things get done, whereas leaders build commitment and vision and enable change. By this understanding, management and leadership are clearly different, but they are not mutually exclusive and there is inevitably overlap – given that a key part of a people manager's role is managing employees and work tasks, it follows that they need to be able to influence others to gain their support to achieve goals. In this evidence review, we focus on the leadership qualities and behaviours of people managers throughout the organisation and on training that develops both leadership and management.

Assessing leadership

There are many tools and questionnaires that claim to assess or measure leadership directly, but a recent systematic review found that the majority of these lack rigour and are not trustworthy. It is easier to measure the outcomes that relate to effective people management and leadership (see Section 3) or the impact of leadership training programmes (see Section 5).

3 Why are people managers important?

Middle management receives a good deal of critique. Managers can be seen as obstructing progressive change, being insufficiently supportive of aims that sit beyond their own team, or simply being unnecessarily bureaucratic or hierarchical. It's by no means a view shared by all,[2] but there is no denying that managers are often referred to as a resistant layer of 'permafrost' that senior leaders struggle to break through to reach the foot soldiers doing the 'real' work,[3] or indeed a fatty layer or 'tax' on the organisation that employers do well to minimise.[4]

Without doubt, some managers will be ineffective, but academic research paints a very different picture. It's no exaggeration to say that people managers are an essential component – even a lifeblood – of most organisations.

There is a strong body of research to show that people managers have a substantial impact on a wide range of organisational outcomes. People managers who are capable and well supported have a positive influence on:

- **employee wellbeing**, through supporting employees
- **HR outcomes**, including employee commitment, work engagement, workplace climate, absenteeism and turnover
- **capability and performance**, through practices such as clear goal-setting, communication, implementation of HR practices and resource distribution
- **innovation**, including by freeing employees to spend time finding and implementing improvements
- **strategy implementation**, in particular due to managers' knowledge of operations, workforce capability and capacity, and external markets
- **organisational change programmes**, by fostering employee support for change and building the organisation's capacity to change.

Recommendations for practice

- Think about and treat people managers as a critical component of organisational success.
- Scope people manager roles to reflect the potential contributions they can make – from employee wellbeing to performance to implementing strategy.
- Work to ensure that people managers have the information, capability, support and advice they need to be effective.
- Actively involve people managers in planning strategy implementation and change interventions.

4 What does a good people manager look like?

It's clearly important to ensure that organisations have effective people managers, given their influence on a wide range of outcomes that are essential for organisational success. But what makes for an effective people manager? Below we provide an overview of the most relevant factors that influence the effectiveness of people managers.

Leadership style

People managers spend a substantial amount of their time influencing employees to understand what needs to be done and how to do it effectively, as well as supporting employees to accomplish shared objectives. Leadership style is the way in which managers do this. Impacts include:

- Transformational leadership contributes to employees' work engagement.
- Supportive leadership increases employees' commitment to the organisation, altruism and conscientiousness.
- Ethical leadership in turn leads to more ethical behaviour among employees.

Skills and experience

Research shows that for people managers to fulfil their varied roles and responsibilities and positively impact organisational outcomes, they must possess good people skills. More specifically, they should be skilled in communication, mentoring and coaching, resolving conflict and building trust, psychological safety, and cohesion within their teams. Providing people managers with training to develop these skills is important for improving their impact and performance – this is discussed in more detail in Section 5.

To some extent, people managers tend to be more effective if they have more varied experience of managing people, including those in different job roles and geographical locations. However, it's important to note that the effect of varied people manager experience on team performance is small.

Bandwidth and support

'Span of control' refers to the number of employees reporting to a people manager. A larger span of control reduces the amount of time they have to spend with each member of their team, reducing their effectiveness as a manager. There is no consensus on what constitutes a large or small span of control. An evidence review of the topic by CEBMa[5] found that the average span of managers' control varied across studies from nine employees to as many as 77. What is a reasonable number of people to manage clearly depends on the nature of the work and how much close supervision is needed.

It may be more helpful to focus on the time people managers have to carry out their managerial roles. Research evidence demonstrates that the more time managers spend on non-managerial work – that is, doing work that should be carried out by their team – the worse their team's performance. Ideally, managers should spend no more than 30% of their time on non-managerial work.

How well supported managers are is not only a question of the technical arrangements for their roles. It is also affected by the wider organisational culture, or more specifically, *climate*.[6] A supportive organisational climate is a necessary condition for people managers to be able to effectively support their teams. This includes access to support, advice and training. Where people managers feel supported by top management, they are also more likely to act as a broker – connecting, informing and engaging employees who are 'out of the loop'.

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What does a good people manager look like?
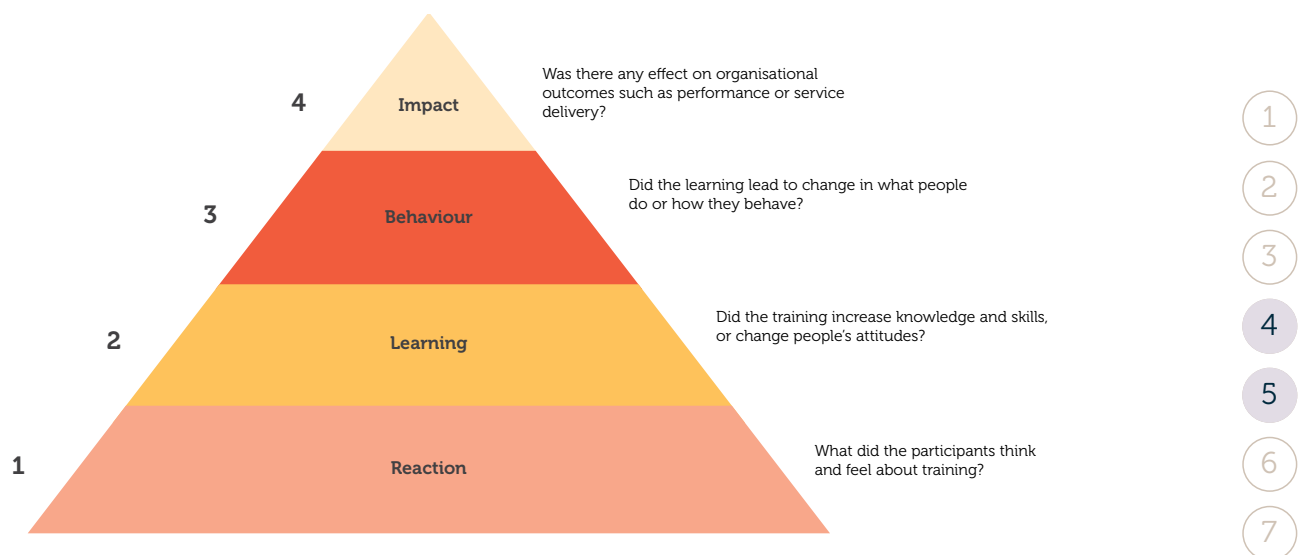
Recommendations for practice
- Recruit people managers based on their people skills and provide training to further enhance these capabilities.
- Protect the time people managers have to carry out their management responsibilities – including by ensuring they manage a reasonable number of people and they do not have too much non-managerial work themselves.
- Cultivate a supportive organisational climate, which includes giving people managers good access to advice, guidance and training, and a clear message that HR colleagues and senior leaders are there to support them.

5 How to develop people managers

Leadership training is a huge and fast-growing global business, estimated at US$3.5 billion in 2019.[7] It includes development programmes that aim to develop a range of managerial capabilities, including for coaching, communication, collaboration and teamwork,[8] innovation, feedback,[9] and other interpersonal skills.

There is a large body of research on the impact of leadership and management training. Most good studies draw on Kirkpatrick's model for training evaluation, which describes four levels (see Figure 1). The first level – training participants' initial reactions – is the easiest to measure and the most common feature in evaluations. The latter levels are more consequential but are harder to assess and less commonly measured.

Figure 1: Kirkpatrick's model of training evaluation (adapted)

Level	Stage	Question
4	Impact	Was there any effect on organisational outcomes such as performance or service delivery?
3	Behaviour	Did the learning lead to change in what people do or how they behave?
2	Learning	Did the training increase knowledge and skills, or change people's attitudes?
1	Reaction	What did the participants think and feel about training?

Are leadership training programmes effective?

There is strong evidence to show that leadership training programmes can have a positive impact on a range of important outcomes – these include managers' communication skills, effective leadership behaviour, goal-setting, ability to motivate employees, and change management skills (as we discuss in Section 2, it is hard to directly measure leadership quality itself). These impacts can also be sustained long term: the effect of training on skills and leadership remains stable or even increases over time, even though 'declarative knowledge' – information that a person is aware of knowing – decays over time.

There are certain circumstances in which the impact of leadership training is greater: it is more effective in public sector organisations and has a slightly larger impact for female managers than male managers.

It's also important to note that the effects of leadership training are subject to diminishing returns – those managers who already use good leadership techniques are unlikely to gain as much from additional training as those who do not. Given that the quality of leadership is important for managers at all levels of the organisation,

this suggests that employers do well to target development especially at less capable or less experienced leaders, above those who are already seen as talented.

Although leadership training clearly has positive outcomes, the evidence on the financial return on investment is limited, and the research we do have delivers mixed results. Given this lack of clear evidence, employers may do well to limit training expenditure – for example, by capping travel and accommodation expenses or avoiding 'high-end' training. Having said that, there are characteristics of leadership training that learning and development (L&D) professionals should employ, to which we now turn.

What makes for an effective training programme?

Training programmes for people managers vary considerably in terms of both content and delivery. As a result, they vary widely in how effective they are. Below, we provide an overview of the key characteristics of effective training programmes.

Training needs analysis

Training needs analysis is a process that identifies the gap between actual and required skills for a job. Research has found that training programmes which are designed based on the results of a training needs analysis are more effective than generic untailored programmes. In addition, conducting a training needs analysis has a positive influence on the motivation of those undertaking training to learn and, when trainees set clear and specific learning goals, their ability to apply what they have learned is greater.

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Skills focus

What management capabilities should training focus on? A meta-analysis found that the skills that transfer best to leader behaviour are general management skills, such as goal-setting, performance appraisal and time management. Unfortunately, recent research has found that many off-the-shelf training courses in the UK show serious omissions when it comes to teaching general management skills.

Training on interpersonal skills, such as listening, questioning, negotiating and mentoring, is also effective, albeit to a lesser extent. This may be because interpersonal skills are inherently harder to develop, rather than it being less appropriate to train on them.

Duration and repetition

There is good evidence which demonstrates that to be effective, training programmes should be of reasonable length (at least three days) and repeated periodically. But that doesn't mean that courses have to be long and complex to be effective. Training is also more effective when it is delivered over a period of time, rather than as a one-off.

Learning and teaching methods

Training is most effective when it includes a combination of learning methods – for example, structured lessons, tutorials and reflective learning – and when multiple instruction methods are used, such as lectures, group work and action learning projects. Training that has an evidence-based design has also been found to be more effective, both short term and long term.

Provide opportunities to practise

Training is more effective when it includes opportunities for trainees to put their learning into practice, linked to real-world situations or trainee-generated scenarios (often referred to as experiential, problem-based or action learning). This is particularly the case when training concerns the teaching of practical skills, soft skills, and vocational knowledge. However, this relies on having the right organisational climate, as we discuss below.

A safe organisational learning climate

For practice exercises to be effective, learners need to feel psychologically safe – that is, able to practise their newly acquired knowledge without fear of being punished or humiliated. It is thus important that managers and L&D professionals create a safe learning climate within the organisation, so that training occurs in an environment where trainees feel accepted and respected, supported to develop, and apply their learning in their day-to-day work. Factors that help include providing recognition, feedback, mentorship and support, all of which motivate trainees to learn and apply their learning.

More broadly, employers should communicate that good leadership is valuable throughout the organisation and developing it is an ongoing priority, not a one-shot event. These principles can then be embedded into organisational processes and the organisational climate.

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How to develop people managers

Recommendations for practice

- Invest in leadership training to develop all people managers throughout the organisation: leadership development should be for the many, not the few.

- In general, to get most impact from investment, prioritise training on core people management skills and to a lesser extent on interpersonal skills.

- Prioritise training for people managers who do not already possess good leadership and management techniques.

- Identify development needs through a training needs analysis and be careful to select training that addresses these needs.

- Select training of sufficient duration, with multiple teaching and learning methods, including experiential learning.

- Promote a climate in which good leadership is valued and opportunities to develop it are embedded in day-to-day organisational life.

6 Conclusion

People managers play a pivotal role in organisational success. They are a vital link between the organisation's top management and its employees – between strategy and the coalface of operations – and in maintaining a healthy, productive workplace. Good people managers can improve a wide range of organisational outcomes and organisational performance, and poor people managers can have the opposite effect.

People manager roles need to be filled by people with the right capabilities, but organisations will also need to develop capable leaders in-house. In addition, senior leaders and people professionals must ensure that people managers have sufficient support and resources to be effective in their roles.

This review can be considered a reliable summary of the best available evidence on effective people managers. The research is focused mainly on why people managers are important, the factors that make for an effective people manager, and how to develop effective people managers. Our recommendations are targeted primarily towards HR and L&D professionals, but the insights are relevant for anyone within the organisation.

Key insights are summarised below.

People managers influence a wide range of organisational outcomes. These include organisational and team performance, employee commitment and engagement, absenteeism and turnover, strategy implementation, innovation, and the success of change interventions and the introduction of new practices. Given the influence of people managers, ensuring that they have the right capabilities and support should be an organisational priority.

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Several key factors influence the effectiveness of people managers:

- **People managers' leadership style has a direct impact on employee behaviour and attitudes.** This includes employees' work engagement, commitment, altruism, conscientiousness, and ethical behaviour. Although there is no one 'correct' leadership style, it's important to ensure people managers possess the qualities which align with that of the organisation and what it is trying to achieve.
- **Good people management skills are vital to improving organisational outcomes.** This includes effective communication skills, the ability to build trust, psychological safety and cohesion within their team, mentoring and coaching skills, and conflict management skills. Varied managerial experience helps but only to a small extent. It is thus more important to prioritise skills rather than previous work experience.
- **People managers need adequate time and support to carry out their roles effectively.** This includes ensuring they manage an appropriate number of employees to be able to dedicate sufficient time to managing each, typically spend no more than 30% of their time on non-managerial duties, and have access to advice and training from the organisation.
- **Management and leadership training is an effective way to develop good people managers.** Such training has a positive impact on a wide range of outcomes, and these impacts are sustainable. It's most beneficial for managers who do not already possess good leadership techniques.

The design and delivery of training for people managers influences its effectiveness. To ensure leadership training programmes are effective, L&D professionals should:

- **Use a training needs analysis**, ensuring content meets development needs. A training needs analysis also increases managers' motivation to undertake such training and improves their ability to apply their learnings to the workplace when clear learning goals are set.
- **Focus on developing general management skills** (such as goal-setting, performance appraisal and time management) and to a lesser extent interpersonal skills (such as listening, questioning, negotiating and mentoring).
- **Design programmes of a reasonable length** (at least three days long), spaced over a period of time, and repeat them periodically.
- **Incorporate multiple teaching and learning methods**, including experiential learning, which provide opportunities for managers to practise their skills.
- **Back them up with an appropriate organisational climate**, working with other people professionals and senior leaders. The aim should be for the whole organisation to recognise that leadership development is an ongoing process, not a one-shot event, and for managers to feel safe to develop and put their learning into practice. Recognition, feedback and mentorship can all play their part in this.

Conclusion

7 Endnotes

1   Barends, E. (2023) *Effective people managers: An evidence review.* Scientific summary. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

2   Kirkpatrick, I. and Malby, B. (2022) *Is the NHS overmanaged?* NHS Confederation; The King's Fund. (undated) Myth four: The NHS has too many managers. The King's Fund.

3   Viki, T. (2017) In defense of middle managers who stifle innovation. *Forbes.* 30 July.

4   Hamel, G. (2011) First, let's fire all the managers. *Harvard Business Review.* Vol 89, No 12, pp48–60.

5   CEBMa. (2021) *Rapid evidence assessment of the scientific literature on managers' optimal span of control.* Leiden, NL: Center for Evidence-Based Management. Unpublished.

6   See our evidence review on organisational culture and climate for discussion of the difference between these aspects of organisational life and how they can be strengthened.

7   Training Industry. (2020) *The leadership training market.* Webpage, 20 November.

8   See our evidence review on factors that drive effective teams.

9   See our evidence review on what works in performance feedback.

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