



## Managing Performance: Building Capability at the Front Line

Managing performance is about achieving results through people, and line managers need a strong capability in “getting the best from people” and creating a high-performance culture within their teams.

It is critical therefore that the frontline managers have the skills and development support needed to make this happen. This requires building line management capability at both team and individual level to develop these skills - and to deploy them effectively.

It is important that line managers regard ongoing performance management as an integral part of their role rather than an additional “bolt-on” to their job, or indeed something that only kicks in where underperformance becomes a problem issue. Essentially, frontline managers need to develop the capability to hold quality and meaningful conversations with their reports about performance - both individual and team performance.

A periodic review of how well line managers are managing their staff’s performance is recommended - to evaluate current manager practices, skill sets and decision-making to ensure that these are fit for purpose in terms of generating engagement, trust and consistently high levels of performance. This review should identify target areas that require attention or adjustment e.g. behaviours, application of policies, or strengthening skills and competencies at both team and individual level.

## Developing Line Manager Skillsets

Setting expectations and giving regular and timely feedback are two of the key elements of effective performance management, and line managers need to do this well.

Setting clear expectations is about bringing clarity to the role and ensuring that effort and focus is on delivery. Line managers and their direct reports must be aligned in terms of the priority deliverables, and it is essential that the direct report understands exactly what he/she is accountable for.

Clarity around measurable objectives is relatively straightforward – the “what” I need to deliver. This is more difficult with softer “behavioural” objectives - where the focus is on “how” I deliver my key result areas - e.g. effective client relationships, teamwork, living the values, contributing improvement ideas etc. Line managers require specific guidance and training in how best to communicate (and to evaluate) these behavioural requirements.

A critical support for line managers is the deployment of a competency framework - identifying and explicitly describing the behaviours, attitudes and skills required for superior performance in the core elements (key result areas) of a role. An established set of competencies support the manager in communicating the standards of behaviour across teams in a clear and consistent way, with clear descriptions of the required standard.

Giving effective feedback involves regular quality conversations with each report – not only the structured monthly/quarterly/annual set-piece conversations - but also giving ongoing and ad hoc, “in the moment” feedback.

Surveys consistently confirm that line managers regard “giving and receiving feedback” as one of the most difficult parts of their job, and it is not uncommon that line managers can struggle in doing this well (or indeed may avoid giving feedback until performance falls well below standard and becomes a more problematic and time consuming issue).

Line managers will benefit from coaching and development to build their skills in giving effective feedback. An understanding of the three types of feedback is valuable:

- Recognition/appreciation - saying “thanks-your effort is noticed!”
- Coaching feedback - “here is a better way to do this”.
- Evaluation - “here is where you stand”.

A skilled manager needs to deliver all three in the right context and in the right way.

The SBI (Situation – Behaviour – Impact) framework (created by the Centre for Creative Leadership) is a useful tool for managers in preparing for, and delivering, difficult conversations, and ensuring that the feedback is delivered clearly and objectively (by structuring the message in a coherent way) – the situation or context; the behaviour I saw or experienced; and the impact (on/people/client/colleagues results etc).

### Building Consistency Within the Line Manager Team

Effective performance management requires the frontline management teams to manage in a consistent way - and to have an aligned understanding on the application of policies and procedures around performance (e.g. Performance Improvement Plans, Performance Agreements, Disciplinary procedures etc).

The team needs to come to a common understanding of what “great performance” looks like (and poor performance!). Alignment is needed on what performance and behaviours are unacceptable - and at what stage conversations should move into performance improvement plans or performance agreements (or indeed into disciplinary procedures.)

To develop this clarity and alignment across the line manager team, a periodic facilitated workshop is recommended - to create a space to share experiences of performance management issues - what worked/what did not work etc.

Reviewing “critical incidents” openly in this way provides managers with a powerful learning forum and is a highly effective way to build the team’s performance management capability.

An important outcome here is consistency on managing performance issues, as well as the development a set of criteria for making difficult performance management decisions.

If you would like to talk to us about any of the above issues, or about engaging your people through the period ahead, please get in touch with me at [karl.mcdonagh@stratis.ie](mailto:karl.mcdonagh@stratis.ie) or any one of our [Partners](#).

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