

Executive Briefing



Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

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Nearly 60% of frontline managers underperform during their first two years and more than 50% would rather not manage people.

- Corporate Executive Board



Introduction: Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

Times of change present many challenges for organizations, particularly for frontline managers whose people will be responsible for implementing the change. Pressure to perform is high, as are emotions, and everyone is expected to do more with less.

The effects of poor frontline management may be particularly damaging at service companies, where researchers have consistently detected a causal relationship between the attitudes and behaviors of customer-facing employees on the one hand, and customer perception of service quality on the other.

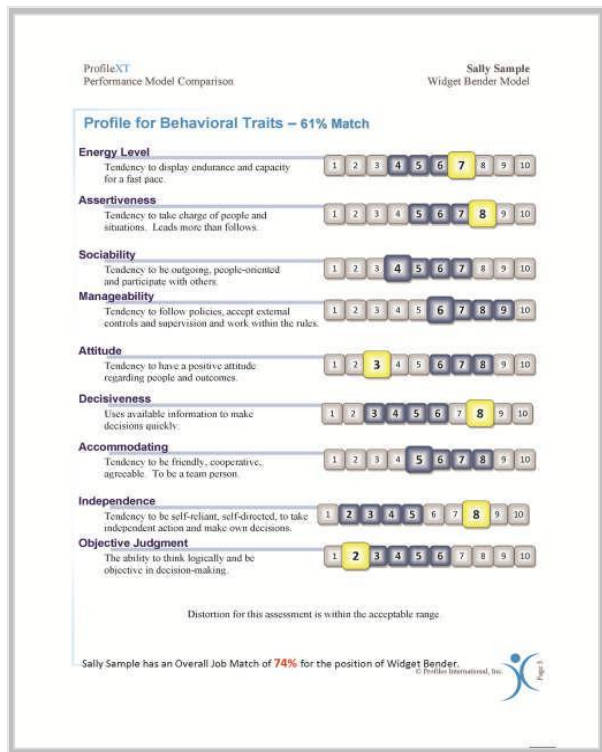
In service industries, research has found that three factors drive performance: the work climate; the ways teams act together and the ways that things are done; and the engagement, commitment and satisfaction of employees. Leadership—particularly the quality of supervision and the nature of the relationships between supervisors and their teams—is crucial to performance in each of these areas.

This fact inspired us to identify six keys to unlock the potential of frontline managers:

1. Identify employees with the capability and interest to be good managers
2. Help your managers clarify their teams' goals and roles
3. Help your managers understand the people they manage
4. Help your managers understand themselves and how they impact their people
5. Don't assume your managers know how or when to coach
6. Minimize administrative work to give managers more time to develop people

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

1. Identify employees with the capability and interest to be good managers



Don't assume a top individual contributor will succeed as a manager.

We've probably all heard the story of the company that promoted its best sales person to a sales management position, only to have the person fail miserably in the role and then leave the company. Let's face it, managing sales people to achieve a collective goal rather than directly through individual efforts isn't for everyone. Then there's the administrative burden of overseeing time and attendance, approving expense reports, interfacing with the muckety-mucks in corporate to implement a new policy that will go over with your team like a lead balloon, and of course, all of the personal drama.

Although the prior example is a common one, the same situation often applies to creative, technical and professional people as well. The best designer, programmer or attorney in your firm will seldom make the best manager. Not everyone is cut out to do this job; nor does everyone *want* to do this job. You need to identify these rare individuals and then have a clear plan for developing them. Sadly, according to our research, two out of three organizations lack a process for doing this (see AMPC follow-up research).

Actions to identify employees with the capability and interest to be good managers:

- Use assessments to identify employees who demonstrate the behaviors and interests that will make them successful managers.
- Help managers understand the core behaviors, capabilities and preferences of the people they manage so that they can adapt their communication and management styles to get the most from their people.
- Help managers develop the mindset that they will be more successful if the people they manage succeed. This helps managers become invested in the success of each individual.

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

2. Help your managers understand their teams' goals and roles



Think "big-picture."

Even a very willing and capable manager will not be successful unless she aligns her people and efforts with the organization's objectives. It is both difficult and frustrating for everyone to hit a moving target.

One of the most productive steps you can take is to help your managers develop a clear understanding of the results they need to achieve and how they're going to achieve them. This helps them align their people and activities with the outcomes most important to the organization. It also creates a foundation for discussing resources, priorities and timing. When everyone has a clear understanding of what is expected, then the manager can communicate this and get everyone on the same page.

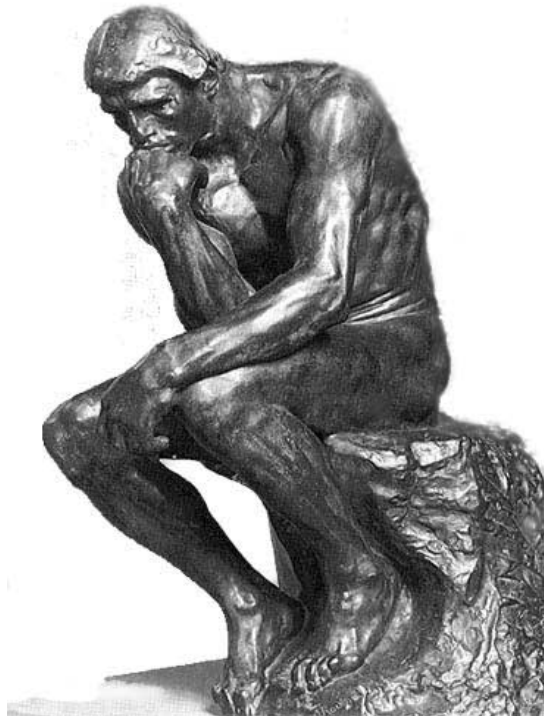
Whenever possible, work with your manager to set reasonable milestones and goals that are leading indicators of her success. This too creates an effective starting point for progress and performance discussions.

Actions to help your managers understand their teams' goals and roles:

- Use these goals to create a personal "dashboard" that helps the manager set his own priorities that drive results. Require the manager to update his goals weekly, and use his progress to facilitate a coaching discussion. Finally, check back with the manager on a periodic basis to ensure that his priorities and the individuals on his team are properly aligned.
- Create tools to help your managers communicate these requirements and track progress toward these goals. Seek direct input from frontline employees in the form of employee surveys and 360° management assessments to determine if the message is getting through. Finally, encourage open communication between employees and their managers in order to clarify job requirements and eliminate work that doesn't add sufficient value.

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

3. Help your managers understand the people they manage



“No law or ordinance is mightier than understanding.” — Plato

Clearly defining goals and jobs is important, but people in those jobs need to perform if the manager and the organization are to be successful. Each of us has our own style and preferences, and this influences how we best respond to our managers. When a manager understands his people, he can also be aware of potential conflict or “chemistry” issues between himself and other members of the team. Thus the manager can be more aware of—and proactive in—dealing with issues that may impact performance.

Additionally, nearly one in three people we surveyed did not believe that their organization made good use of their abilities. This represents significant potential that the organization can tap to improve productivity. When people feel valued and enjoy their work, they perform better.

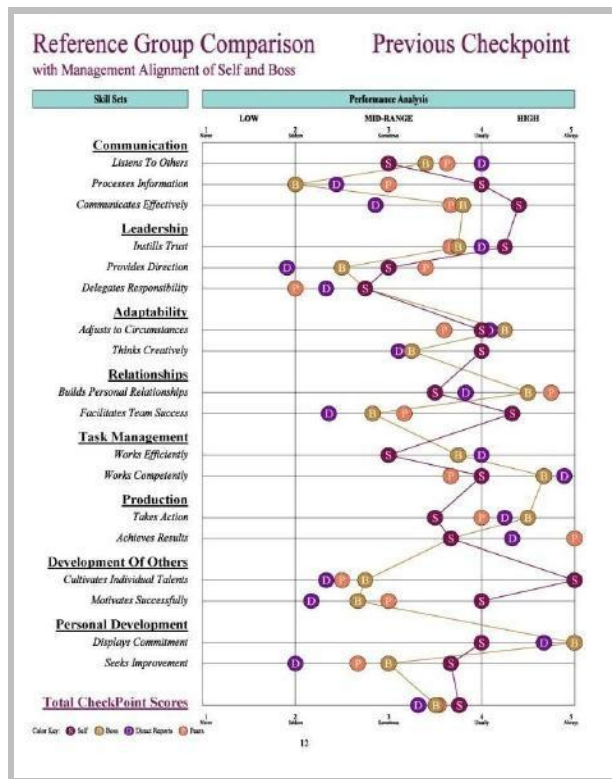
Actions to help your managers understand the people they manage:

- Human beings are complex creatures that can be very hard for the average manager to read, especially in the early stages of the working relationship. Ironically, this is when the manager needs the most help. A valid assessment process can be very helpful for an organization to develop a deeper and more objective understanding of its people.
- Helping a manager to understand his people’s skills, behaviors and interests helps him build on his people’s strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. It helps the manager communicate better with the employee, zero in on the employee’s most critical developmental needs, and focus both informal coaching dialogue and formal training and development investments in the employee.

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

4. Help your managers understand themselves and how they impact their people

“A man is what he thinks all day long.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson



Self-awareness is being conscious of what you're good at while acknowledging what you still have yet to learn. This includes admitting when you don't have the answer and owning up to mistakes. This is especially true when it comes to a manager's leadership and communication style. In many cases, managers don't know what they don't know. For example, if a manager comes across as insensitive or aloof, point out the behavior and help him improve. It is important for the manager to understand his natural management style and how it impacts others both positively and negatively. The manager can't be expected to improve if he never receives concrete feedback.

Making a manager aware of his negative attitudes (“I am just another associate when I go on the store floor,” and “My job is to make sure that tasks get done”) makes it easier for him to accept change and develop the right skills and capabilities. By learning how to counter these thoughts and adopt more positive ones (“I regularly provide my employees with constructive feedback and tips,” and “My job is to ensure that tasks are complete and that customers are served as well”), the manager can be aware of more appropriate behavior and thus improve his performance.

Actions to help your managers understand themselves and how they impact their people:

- Management is all about people, and this requires a high degree of self-awareness. Managers should go through the same assessment process as their employees in order to understand how their innate behaviors, interests and skills either complement or hinder their personal interactions.
- It is also extremely valuable for managers to receive feedback from multiple constituents, including their supervisors, peers and subordinates, to illuminate developmental needs, misalignments and other issues that may be difficult to communicate openly under challenging circumstances.

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

5. Don't assume your managers know how or when to coach



“Confidence is contagious. So is lack of confidence.” – Vince Lombardi

Managers often aren't truly coaching the front line. At over 1000 companies we surveyed, only half of the respondents agreed that their direct supervisor coached them to do their very best. A McKinsey survey of retail district managers, for example, showed that much of the time they spend on frontline employees actually involved auditing for compliance with standards or solving immediate problems (Exhibit 2).

Don't take for granted that your managers know how or when to coach – even if they are very experienced in their jobs. Coaching is a skill that requires training and continuous improvement if you want your managers to achieve and sustain a high level of effectiveness. When you develop the fundamental coaching skills of your managers, you will also develop a culture of coaching.

Actions to help your managers know how or when to coach:

- Help your manager understand his leadership style and motivation. Many of us have a number of key leadership qualities, but we still need feedback so that we can build on our strengths and fortify our weaknesses. In some cases where it is clear that a manager really isn't ready to lead, the discovery process can help identify other career options that are better suited to his style and abilities.
- Provide feedback from multiple constituents. It is extremely valuable for managers to receive feedback from their supervisors, peers and subordinates to illuminate developmental needs, misalignments and other issues that may be difficult to communicate openly under challenging circumstances.
- Develop the fundamental coaching skills of your managers, and develop a culture of coaching.

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

6. Minimize administrative work to give managers more time to develop people



Time is money, so maximize your return on investment

Time is a precious commodity, and time not spent managing must be kept to a bare minimum.

According to a recent study by management consulting firm McKinsey, across industries, frontline managers spend 30 to 60 percent of their time on administrative work and meetings, and 10 to 50 percent on non-managerial tasks (traveling, participating in training, taking breaks, conducting special projects, or undertaking direct customer service or sales themselves). They spend only 10 to 40 percent actually managing frontline employees by, for example, coaching them directly.

Poor time management is very unfortunate for the organization, the manager and employees. Time spent developing people multiplies workforce productivity and sends the message that every employee is respected and valued. And time not spent developing others places an inordinate burden and stress on the manager who realizes that she will never be able to dig herself out of the hole that has been created for her.

Actions to minimize administrative work to give managers more time to develop people:

- Think very carefully about the administrative tasks you assign to your frontline managers and be sure that it adds sufficient value. Consider capturing fewer but more essential indicators.
- Make the information easy to get so that they aren't spending a whole lot of time aggregating and formatting spreadsheets and making presentation decks look pretty. Provide administrative support, and invest in tools or make the exercise so simple it can be completed in a very short period of time.
- Then, minimize formal meeting times and interruptions that are administrative in nature.



Summary:

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

1. Identify employees with the capability and interest to be good managers
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