Briefing

Supporting line managers to foster engagement

Introduction

This short paper has been written by Dilys Robinson of the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) on behalf of NHS Employers. It is aimed at NHS staff in a position to help line managers relate to their direct reports in an engaging, motivating manner. In most cases this will be HR practitioners who are responsible for people management policies and processes; and it is HR practitioners to whom line managers typically turn when seeking advice with difficult situations. However, some actions suggested here may need approval or direction from senior leaders – and it is also vital for senior leaders to understand the importance of leading by example and supporting their own direct reports.

The paper draws on research into employee engagement conducted by the IES and others, and on the experiences of the author when delivering training sessions on the topic of engaging management to line managers in NHS trusts between 2014 and 2018. It also takes examples of good practice from the NHS and other organisations.

What is a line manager?

There is not a standard definition of the term line manager in the NHS; the term is used interchangeably with other terms such as immediate manager, supervisor and team leader. In some organisations, clinical (or professional) supervision is considered a separate role from line management. Broadly, the line manager is the person responsible for activities such as overall team performance, performance reviews, team briefings, work allocation, career discussions, disciplinaries and usually – in non-clinical areas – regular one-to-one sessions. In very large teams, the line manager may divide their staff into smaller teams and allocate some tasks, such as day-to-day work allocation and monitoring, to team supervisors, while retaining overall responsibility for performance.

Why line managers sometimes struggle with people management

Evidence from the NHS Staff Survey shows that, on the whole, line managers in the NHS are rated reasonably highly by their staff. Their overall score is 3.77 out of 5, and some aspects – personal support (helping in a crisis) and valuing staff – scoring particularly well. However, managers in the NHS are not alone in finding some parts of the role difficult.

What – I have to manage people?

Few of today's line managers joined the NHS with the specific aim of being a manager. The majority have been promoted to a line management position because they have shone in the clinical, technical or professional aspects of their chosen role: as a nurse, a doctor, an accountant, a porter, a medical secretary, a scientist, a paramedic, etc. They may find their new people management responsibilities difficult, and may be expected to carry these out with minimal training, perhaps even no training at all. HR practitioners, who are by virtue of their role focused on people management issues, and who understand the policies and processes because they are responsible for them, can sometimes find this hard to understand.

The difficulties are often compounded by the reluctance of new line managers – who, after all, have been promoted because they are high performers – to admit that they need help. A growing number of trusts are recognising the need to support and train line managers by developing comprehensive support programmes. This is also happening in other employment sectors as understanding grows of the importance of the line manager role in fostering and maintaining engagement.

Competing pressures

People management is not the only thing that line managers have to contend with on a daily basis.

- They have targets to meet, and the submission of performance data relating to those targets can often become a significant (and sometimes dreaded) event in their working week.

- They usually have a clinical or operational workload themselves, and of course it is often too easy to prioritise this rather than tackling a tricky line management issue or prepare for appraisals.

- Often, they have a large number of people to manage, and this seems to be more of an issue in the NHS than in other sectors. It is not uncommon to find people with direct line management responsibilities for ten, 20, 30 or even 50 people. Given that line management responsibilities usually include regular one-to-ones, annual or twice-

yearly appraisal, having career discussions, giving advice or instruction to team members, and tackling issues around poor performance or undesirable behaviour, it is hard to see how any line manager can manage more than around six people effectively.

Frustrations

The concerns raised by NHS line managers are summarised below – although it must be stressed that all line managers, regardless of the sector and organisation in which they are working, will probably experience similar frustrations in trying to fulfil their role.

- One big issue for NHS line managers is that they sometimes have to explain and justify new targets or decisions in which they have had no involvement. This can be difficult even when the rationale for the new target or decision has been clearly explained, especially when the manager might not agree with it. However, managers often reported that they were unsure about what has been decided and why, and what the implications might be for services and staff – leaving them in a vulnerable position when their direct reports ask questions.

- A further frustration is that line managers are often unsure how to communicate upwards the concerns and questions of their staff. They can raise matters with their own managers, but feel that their messages sometimes go astray; in addition, if their issues are discussed at a higher level, they do not always get to hear about it.

- IT is a source of frustration in just about every organisation. NHS line managers raise particular concerns around why they are being asked to provide specific data, or why they have to use several different IT systems in order to input the data. There are usually very good reasons for this, but the line manager does not always receive the explanation, so may not understand the ultimate purpose of providing data; it becomes an unpopular chore which takes time out of their day and (apparently) gives them nothing back.

The constant pressures of targets and budget squeezes, combined with frustrations around communication and IT, can cause line managers to feel unsupported, undervalued and not listened to – yet they need to be able to present a positive face to their direct reports and do all of the things that most line managers want to do. They often know what they should be doing: encourage and enable team members to perform well; develop their skills; manage their performance; recognise and celebrate their contribution; involve them in deciding the best way to tackle the team's workload; and provide a clear line of sight between the team's activities and the overall purpose of the organisation. It is a big responsibility, and line managers need support.

How can HR help?

The HR function in the NHS is, like everything else, under a lot of pressure. Many HR practitioners find it hard to find time to stand back and think about line managers' needs, or to put themselves into their shoes and try to understand their experiences. The following

suggestions are made on the basis that they might not require a massive investment of time or money in order to achieve results.

- Firstly, an assessment of the **training and development** available to line managers might reveal some gaps. Are there any training events that focus specifically on the positive aspects of people management – such as engaging behaviours to adopt, how to motivate the team, or developing a coaching style? Training for line managers, somewhat depressingly, often focuses on the less positive aspects: target monitoring, the performance review timetable, disciplining people, etc. The assumption seems to be that people will be a problem to the line manager. Line managers need to understand the importance of their role in fostering and maintaining engagement, even in difficult times, and the engaging behaviours that will help to motivate the team.

- Also on the theme of training, do line managers have any events available to them that focus on their **personal wellbeing**? Examples might include mindfulness, positive psychology and resilience sessions. A manager who feels positive and calm will help the team to feel likewise.

- Another area for assessment is the **communications** process. How do line managers hear about things like strategic or operational decisions, new developments, new policies, and changes to targets? Is it clear to them why these new things need to happen? Do they know what to pass on to their direct reports, and how this will affect their teams? Do they know who to refer to if they have questions or concerns? Do they know how to give feedback up the line – not only reactions to changes, but also good ideas and suggestions? HR practitioners (and those in other central functions) often know why changes are being made and who will be affected, and they also know who to approach due to their bird's-eye view of the organisation. It is much harder for a line manager who is distant – both in terms of geography and status – from senior managers.

- A final area to review is **HR support to the line manager.** Line managers are often desperate for support, particularly with difficult situations. Without someone being prepared to hold their hand through a process, line managers (especially if they are new to the role) may find it very hard to tackle poor performance, tricky behaviour or conflict within the team. Even experienced managers may have had a bad, confidence-knocking result on a previous occasion. Line managers in the NHS (and elsewhere – this is not a purely NHS problem) are fed up with being referred to the intranet for policies and procedures. They need advice and guidance from HR on the telephone or in person, perhaps supplemented by help from a more seasoned manager who has successfully resolved similar difficulties in the past.

Ideas to think about

This section presents some possible courses of action based on things that seem to have worked, both in the NHS and outside. They will probably need more effort and input than the

suggestions in the section above, and might need organisational approval or input from people outside HR; however, they are relatively low-cost options.

Buddying

Some organisations have developed very successful buddying schemes, whereby a new line manager is paired with an experienced individual who is known to be a good people manager. The buddy will be able to impart knowledge and give advice and guidance based on his or her own experiences; and will, importantly, know when an issue needs help from HR because it is too big to be handled informally.

Celebrating success

An energy company raised the importance of good quality people management by featuring line managers whose teams rated them very highly for their ability to engage and motivate the team. These managers were featured (with their teams) in the in-house magazine, and gave a clear message to the company that people management abilities were valued as highly as scientific and technical skills.

Networking across disciplines

Surprisingly, some line managers rarely meet people who work outside their area. Some organisations report benefits from facilitating the bringing together of managers from different disciplines and locations. There are different opportunities for doing this, requiring a lesser or greater degree of organisation. One public sector organisation, for example, had coffee and cake sessions once a month in a large central area, allowing people to meet others and discuss common issues. Training sessions for line managers are also an excellent way of encouraging people to meet others, and can lead to light-bulb moments, where staff discover solutions to problems or better understand processes.

Opportunities to meet other people in line management roles will not only enhance understanding and mutual respect; it also represents a forum for good practice to be shared and questions to be raised and discussed.

In a similar vein, some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have tackled the problem of us and them attitudes that exist between academics and support/professional services staff by setting up multi-disciplinary teams to work on specific projects. These HEIs have found that faculties and disciplines are much less likely to criticise others if they have worked together.

Involving

One action for the HR function to consider is the setting-up of a line manager forum or panel, where new or changed policies or procedures could be tested for clarity and ease of implementation. Such a forum might also be a good vehicle for not only discussing important issues, but also starting to formulate solutions: How can we, as a widely

geographically-dispersed trust, work better together? How can we tackle low engagement – what is causing the decline, what is within the remit of HR and line managers to tackle, and how should we go about it?

Spreading the load

Tackling the problem of some line managers having far too many people to manage effectively is not easy in today's climate of funding shortfalls, because it has cost implications. However, it is important for HR to understand who these managers are, and in which functions, and to discuss their particular support needs. It may be possible, for a relatively small financial input, to help these managers to delegate at least some supervisory functions (such as drawing up rotas or inducting/training new members of staff) to more experienced members of the team.

Why it is worth making the effort?

The evidence shows that there are clear benefits from having an engaged workforce. Broadly, high engagement is associated with good performance, customer satisfaction, receptivity to change and positive employee advocacy (ie talking positively about the organisation to friends and family). People who are highly engaged also tend to report high levels of personal health, wellbeing and life satisfaction. By contrast, those with low engagement levels are more likely to become burned out, to leave, or to speak negatively about the organisation.

Specific evidence about the line management role in engagement

Many studies of the drivers of engagement identify the importance of big issues such as trust, feeling valued, development opportunities, job satisfaction and communication. These are all aspects of organisational life where the line manager clearly plays a very important part, but it can be difficult to assess the line manager's exact contribution (compared, for example, to the contribution of senior leaders or a positive organisational culture).

Some studies, however, have identified the line manager as a key driver of engagement:

- Throughout an individual's employment in the organisation, it is the quality of the relationship between a manager and employee that can be a crucial driver of engagement and satisfaction with the organisation (Dulye, 2006).

- Line management style was one of the six key drivers of engagement identified in Alfes et al (2010).

- Gourlay et al (2012) showed that the quality of the line manager relationship was associated with engagement.

- Kenexa (2008, 2012) showed that the effectiveness of the direct manager and the presence of managers who respect and recognise employees were associated with high levels of engagement.

Employees' opinions about the behaviour and abilities of their manager are also important in driving engagement.

- Managers' belief in their own capabilities can have a positive influence over the engagement of their staff. In their survey of 170 managers and their subordinates, Luthans and Peterson (2002) found that a manager's self-efficacy can lead to increases in the engagement and effectiveness of their subordinates.

- Lewis et al (2011) found that the most important behaviours for managers in fostering engagement were reviewing and guiding; giving feedback, praise and recognition; and encouraging autonomy and empowerment.

- Robinson and Hayday (2009) found that the top three management behaviours linked with increased engagement were communicating and making clear what is expected; listening to, valuing and involving the team; and being supportive.

- Truss et al (2006) demonstrated that perceiving one's line manager as committed to the organisation was associated with higher levels of engagement.

References

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