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Middle management malaise

Does the UK have the managers it needs to compete with the rest of the world? Or has something gone badly wrong with the way managers are selected and developed? The evidence from a series of recent reports and discussions is pointing to a serious malaise in British middle management that needs some urgent intervention.

In fact the problems appear to be growing so acute in some companies that human resources managers will need to reappraise their training and development priorities to address deteriorating relationships between rank and file employees and their immediate supervisors.

While bosses and soon-to-be bosses have been benefiting from a fashionable obsession with leadership programmes and talent management schemes, the ranks of junior and middle managers appear to be under strain from years of under-investment in solid people management skills.

Two recent pieces of research have shed some light, not only on just how neglected UK middle managers are feeling, but why their morale may have fallen to an all-time low.

The first piece is based on a survey released today by Accenture, the management consultant. Its research among 1,300 middle managers in the UK, US, France, Spain, Germany, Austria and Switzerland found a much lower rate of job satisfaction among UK middle managers than their counterparts in the US and the rest of Europe. Just over a third of UK middle managers in the survey reported a high degree of satisfaction with their job, compared with two-thirds among the US sample and just under a half of the other Europeans.

Unlike their counterparts elsewhere, the UK managers were uniquely gloomy about their working conditions and had comparatively little that was positive to say about their training and development opportunities.

This might help to explain why four out of 10 of them said they were looking for another job, partly because they could see few prospects for advancement and partly to find better paid work elsewhere.

There is evidence in other research to suggest that one reason for this malaise is that the skills of the British middle manager are no longer respected at either end of the employment spectrum. A survey carried out among 570 customer-facing employees in the UK on behalf of Prosell, a training and development company, found that three out of five of the employees in the sample blamed their immediate managers for poor customer services and a failure to capitalise on sales opportunities.

Too few managers, they said, were prepared to spend much time speaking with their teams, leading to complaints that managers were sparing with their praise. Less than half of those questioned said they drew inspiration from their managers.

"The incompetence of managers to interact and guide their teams in their day-to-day roles must be costing UK business millions, if not billions, of pounds in lost sales,"

says Simon Morden, the chairman of Prosell.

British businesses used to pride themselves in having some of the best managers in the world. So what has gone wrong?

Chris Bones, group organisation effectiveness and development director at Cadbury Schweppes, shortly to take up a new appointment as principal of Henley Management College, believes that at least part of the problem lies in the emphasis that companies and the management education community has been placing on leadership rather than management. The result, he said, to put it bluntly, is too many "crap managers".

"It's time to go back to people management," he told HR managers at a London based HR conference held by Human Resources magazine last month. "Your ambition in the next 12 months should be about improving management rather than leadership.

"If I was going to invest in a whole set of skills and abilities I think that great management is more important than great leadership. Leadership is terrific if you are going to set a vision and a strategy. But it doesn't actually deliver anything."

Too many companies, said Mr Bones, are experiencing a serious gap in management skills in the late-20s to 30 age group because management training has been neglected. "It's the big insight that has hit us and it's an insight that has hit a lot of other organisations," he said.

Good managers, he argued, can get people to put in the discretionary effort that is the hallmark of a high performing company. Employees willing to apply themselves and capable of applying themselves in this way, he said, are those who understand what is expected of them because a manager has taken time to explain the job, to recognise the efforts of those who are working well and to deal with those who are not.

While agreeing with most of his sentiments, I wonder if the existing unrest in UK middle management has an earlier origin than the current obsession with leadership development and talent management?

Does it not go back to the fashion in the 1990s for slicing away layers of management and throwing thousands of experienced managers on to the scrap heap? How many highly skilled managers are sitting at home kicking their heels in frustration when they still have so much to offer?

It is true that not all managers were prepared to abandon "command and control" approaches that, it should be accepted, did little to encourage discretionary behaviour either. But good managers lost out with the poor ones, often simply because of the greying of their hair.

The irony in today's workplace is that while many employees have been given much more responsibility over their work, they are receiving too little guidance and feedback from their so-called team leaders who are either unwilling, or ill-equipped, to manage properly.

Ian Brinkley, chief economist and head of the economic and social affairs department at the Trades Union Council, points to recent findings by the Economic and Social Research Council. Its workplace research revealed that, although workers had been

given more responsibilities in the past 10 years, their opportunities to exercise discretion had been reduced. "This is because they now have more people looking over their shoulder," he said.

Mr Brinkley was speaking at the launch last week of a Microsoft-sponsored report on the future role of trust in work by Carsten Sorensen, senior lecturer in Information Systems at the London School of Economics.

Mr Sorensen hinted at what may be another underlying cause of distrust among office workers and their supervisors a creeping dissatisfaction today with much white collar work. "We are going through a phase now," he said, "where white collar workers will have to realise that they are the blue collar workers of the 21st century."

**The Future Role of Trust in Work The Key Success Factor for Mobile Productivity, is published by Tomorrow's Work, a long-term Microsoft-sponsored study, www.microsoft.com/uk/business/trustinwork/default.aspx*

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