CHAPTER 7

THE ROLE OF THE LINE MANAGER

INTRODUCTION

Previous chapters have examined the contribution to organizational learning made through the adoption of a variety of workplace learning techniques. How the Human Resources (HR) function and in particular its Learning and Development (L&D) component can facilitate the process has also been discussed. These contributions are both necessary and extremely valuable. However, there is an additional contribution that will determine to a large extent whether organizational learning practices will be promoted and sustained, or whether they will disintegrate and eventually disappear. This is the contribution made by the line manager – the person charged with the achievement of the department or unit's performance goals, and with creating conditions in the workplace where employees can give of their best.

THE PARTICULAR ROLE OF THE LINE MANAGER

The role of the line manager as a facilitator of workplace learning has perhaps only been recognized relatively recently. Given that the job of the manager has undergone many changes since the end of the nineteenth century when it was first identified as a field of expertise in itself, it is not always easy to define. Various perspectives (Stewart 1985; Drucker 1993) describe managers' responsibilities in terms of objective setting, planning, decision making, organization of structure and work, motivating, communicating, measurement and control and development of self and others. More recent classifications, for example, Gosling and Mintzberg (2003), have described the role as managing one's self, managing one's relationships with others, managing the context, managing organizations and managing change. Whatever the classification, it would seem clear that a manager's job comprises a variety of roles and tasks that must be integrated for effective performance. Managers' ability to perform depends also on the cross-functional networks to which they belong, rather than their position in the hierarchy, as organizations become flatter, with increasing importance being placed upon external relationships as sources of power and influence, and even of career development

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Although many of the classic definitions of management are still popular today, it is fair to say that the role of the manager has been changing in accordance with changing perceptions of how organizations work and their associated practices and technologies. This change in the 'organizational landscape' has involved the development of more flexible, 'organic' forms, moving away from more 'mechanistic' forms (Morgan, 1997). This has had an effect on the particular capacities and predispositions required of managers. Newer forms of organization require all organization members to exercise more discretion, use more initiative and in general assume a much greater responsibility for their own management. In addition, managers in this environment must be more accountable for their own performance, as well as the performance of others. Against this background, the role of the line manager as a facilitator of learning assumes much greater importance.

Two recent studies support these earlier classifications, and reflect the complex range of skills that effective managers are still required to demonstrate. On the positive side, Whetten and Cameron (2002) conducted a qualitative survey of 402 individuals rated highly as managers and identified the 10 most frequently cited characteristics as follows:

- verbal communication (including listening)
- managing time and stress
- managing individual decisions
- recognizing, defining and solving problems
- motivating and influencing others
- delegating
- setting goals and articulating a vision
- self-awareness
- team-building
- managing conflict.

Looking at management capabilities from the other end of the spectrum, a study by Camp, Vielhaber and Simonetti (2001), which involved 166 focus groups with 830 managers and focused on why managers fail, identified the following, in order of importance:

- ineffective communication skills
- poor interpersonal skills
- failure to clarify expectations
- poor delegation and empowerment
- inability to develop teamwork
- lack of trust and integrity

- inability to motivate others
- poor planning
- failure to monitor performance and feedback
- failure to remove performance roadblocks.

It would seem from the above that in the view of many, some distinct characteristics of what might be called the 'best' and 'worst' managers become apparent. For instance, the ability of a manger to communicate effectively seems to be particularly highly rated. Setting goals, providing vision and clarifying expectations are also prominent. Motivating others appears on both lists, as does developing teamwork and effective delegation.

More specifically in a learning context, Heraty and Morley (2008) offer some further direction. In their review of the elements necessary to support organizational learning, they cite the role of the manager as a facilitator of learning as significant. They also cite reduced hierarchy and broader jobs as well as a team approach to work design, factors which also involve important roles for the manager. They support the view that managers should be perceived as coaches and partners in the learning process, rather than experts in organizational learning as such. The manager's job is to create the conditions where collaboration can take place, thus facilitating learning, including learning across organizational boundaries where appropriate.

Work by Ellinger and Bostrom (1999) also examined the role of managers as facilitators of learning. Although their results indicate the importance of a number of factors including managers' beliefs (which will be discussed later in the chapter), it is the managers' behaviours that will be discussed now. Their study suggested the existence of two broad clusters of behaviours relevant to the role – empowering behaviours and facilitating behaviours – which between them account for a high proportion (37 per cent) of the effect. Examples of these behaviours are described in Table 7.1. It seems that managers who demonstrate these behaviours are creating the challenging conditions where individuals are encouraged to perform, yet at the same time are providing an appropriate level of support so that the individual still retains the optimum level of belief in their ability to perform.

Table 7.1   Empowering and facilitating behaviours

Empowering behaviours	Facilitating behaviours
Holding back and not providing the answers	Creating and promoting a learning environment
Framing questions in a way that encourages individuals to think through issues	Getting individuals to see things differently through the use of different perspectives and analogies
Transferring ownership for problem solving to individuals	Setting and communicating expectations
Removing obstacles for them where possible	Giving and receiving feedback

Source: From Ellinger, A. and Bostrom, R. 1999. Managerial coaching behaviours in learning organizations. *Journal of Management Development*, 18(9), 752–71. Reproduced with permission.

Still on the subject of empowering behaviours, Zhang and Bartol (2010) examined the relationship between an empowering style of leadership and creativity. Empowering leadership has been defined by Ahearne, Mathieu and Rapp (2005) as highlighting work significance, providing participation in decision making, conveying confidence that performance will be high and removing bureaucratic constraints, much the same description of empowering behaviours as that outlined above. It is also relevant because in Chapter 4 it was argued that creativity is one of the key contributors to organizational learning, and through it innovation, effectiveness and survival. They suggested that the relationship is significantly affected by three mechanisms – psychological empowerment, creative process engagement and intrinsic motivation. Once again, this is about allowing the space for individuals to perform, using and developing their skills and abilities while making a meaningful contribution.

Another insight into how this might be achieved is provided in work by Beck and Plowman (2009). They contend that organizational success depends on learning to deal effectively with 'rare and unusual' events, that is, novel problems requiring more creative solutions. They argue that middle managers are particularly well placed to view and interpret these events for their staff, thus facilitating learning.

Finally, to further support the importance of the above, the issue can be looked at from the opposite perspective. The study by Harper and Glew (2008) on what inhibits learning in an organization, already discussed in Chapter 5, identified a number of factors that relate to the role of the line manager, such as a reluctance to address performance issues, shortcomings in communication upwards, downwards and across, a lack of empowerment and an unwillingness to experiment.

FACILITATING BEHAVIOURS

In a somewhat more specific context, that is, managers' role as facilitators of learning, the results of a study undertaken by Beattie (2006) provide a useful categorization of behaviours seen as important. Indeed analysis of the data from her study suggests a hierarchy of developmental behaviours, those same behaviours which have been discussed above. These are shown in Figure 7.1

Category	Behaviours	Increasing complexity
Challenging	Challenging perceptions and assumptions	
Developing developers	Development of people skills in those with people management responsibility	
Empowering	Delegating; Trusting	
Thinking	Reflective or prospective thinking; Clarifying	
Assessing	Providing feedback and recognition; Identifying development needs	
Advising	Instructing; Coaching; Guiding; Counselling	
Being professional	Role modelling; Standard setting; Panning and preparing	
Informing	Sharing knowledge	
Caring	Supporting; Encouraging; Being approachable; Reassuring; Being committed/involved; Empathising	

Figure 7.1   Facilitating behaviours
Source: From Beattie, R.S. 2006. Line managers and workplace learning: Learning from the voluntary sector. *Human Resource Development International*, 9(1), 99–119. Reproduced with permission.

The hierarchical structure in Figure 7.1 is interesting. Those behaviours at the bottom of the hierarchy are regarded as more likely to be seen in any even vaguely people-oriented manager, easier to develop and consequently practised by most managers. These include caring, informing and being professional. Being caring involves being approachable, building confidence in employees' ability and showing an understanding of their situation. Being professional means clarifying expectations with regard to what performance is acceptable and structuring learning opportunities to enable that to happen. Behaviours further up the hierarchy are considered more demanding, somewhat harder to acquire and therefore less in use by managers. Within the hierarchy, advising, assessing and thinking are seen to include behaviours such as instructing, coaching, guiding and counselling, as well as providing feedback and recognition. A further important aspect of this cluster is taking time to reflect on what has happened, and how such incidents will be dealt with in the future. At the top end of the hierarchy lie behaviours such as empowering and challenging. Arguably, empowering (this is about real empowerment, not just giving people a bit of leeway), developing others and challenging individuals to perform at a high level and justify their decisions can be seen as behaviours requiring the greatest amount of skill to develop and maintain. Empowering necessitates having trust in employees and not being afraid to delegate appropriately to them. Challenging individuals to perform better also requires skill, and for this reason these issues will be dealt with in more detail.

A MODEL FOR FACILITATING LEARNING

It might be useful at this point to suggest a model through which these elements exert their effect on the learning and performance of individuals in the workplace, before looking at them in more detail. The model is shown in Figure 7.2.

Elements of the model will be dealt with in turn, but first it is appropriate to say a word or two concerning managers' motivation to be managers in the first place. Possessing particular sets of skills is one thing. While it is necessary, it is not sufficient to succeed in managing people effectively and facilitate their learning. The impact of the manager's belief in the importance of effective people management is raised in an analysis of the role of managers as facilitators of learning conducted by Ellinger and Bostrom (2002). A series of interviews with line managers in a variety of organizations identified a number of themes relating to how they perceived their role, including particular beliefs they hold and behaviours they engage in. For example, a high proportion of the managers interviewed held some relevant beliefs such as:

• A belief in their role in facilitating the learning and development of their staff;

- A belief that coaching (which is about helping people grow and develop) is different from management (which is more about telling people what to do);
- A belief that although the roles of manager and coach are distinct, managers in learning organizations gradually shift from the former to the latter with experience.

The importance of these beliefs for effective management of people is a critical starting point, and is all too often underestimated or even ignored. Without a genuine interest in people and their development it is difficult to sustain such a style and continue to facilitate learning in the long term. This issue has also gained attention in the academic literature in the context of managers' implicit person theories (IPTs), based on work on social psychological theory by Dweck (1999). An implicit person theory is a belief about the personal characteristics such as ability and personality that affect human behaviour, and tends to take one of two viewpoints. Entity theorists believe that such characteristics are essentially fixed, while those who believe they can change and be developed are categorized as incremental theorists. Heslin, Vandewalle and Latham (2006) conducted a number of studies to determine the extent to which managers' IPTs affected their approach to coaching their staff. Not surprisingly, they found that entity theorists got significantly less positive assessments from the staff they coached. What was also interesting from a developmental point of view was that even for those categorized
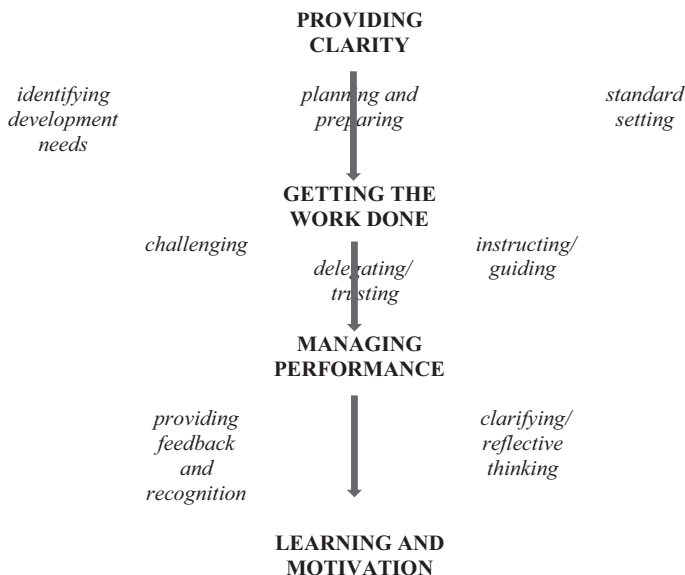
PROVIDING CLARITY

identifying development needs   *planning and preparing*   *standard setting*

GETTING THE WORK DONE

challenging   *delegating/ trusting*   *instructing/ guiding*

MANAGING PERFORMANCE

providing feedback and recognition   *clarifying/ reflective thinking*

LEARNING AND MOTIVATION

Figure 7.2   A model for facilitating learning

as entity theorists, it was possible to persuade them to adopt an incremental IPT and thus stimulate their coaching behaviours. The persuasion process used in the study had a number of different elements, including counter-attitudinal idea generation (getting the managers to take a point of view in opposition to their own), reflection on and advocacy of that idea. This observation reinforces the notion that being a good coach is not something that happens by accident, but perhaps of even greater significance is the possibility that skills in this area can be developed.

BOX 7.1 MANAGER SUPPORT FOR LEARNING

It might be reasonable to expect that managers who are incremental theorists will score more highly on measures of management support for learning than others. Management support also featured in Chapter 4 as one of the most important work environment influences on learning transfer, so being able to assess the level of management support being provided could be useful in identifying at least some of the barriers to organizational learning. The questions below are taken from the 'manager support and coaching' factor that is part of the Learning Transfer Evaluation© instrument which will be discussed further in Chapter 8. The scale is scored from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). A maximum score of 40 denotes an extremely high level of manager support.

Question		Score (1–5)
1	My manager discusses my ideas and gives me feedback on my efforts to put learning into practice	
2	My manager discusses the training and development I have attended after training	
3	My manager 'opens doors' for me in the wider organization	
4	My manager is generally open to new ideas and changes	
5	My manager works with me to set performance goals following training	
6	My manager gives me encouragement and support in trying out new things	
7	My manager demonstrates listening and empathy	
8	My manager discusses training and development needs with me before training	
Total		

LEADER–MEMBER EXCHANGE

Managers who understand the people they manage know that each individual is different – different in terms of their ability, and different in terms of their motivation to do the job. At one extreme, some will require plenty of guidance

(to help improve their ability) and plenty of support or recognition (to help with their motivation) to keep them performing. At the other extreme, some will require very little of either, and can be delegated to with ease. In this way, different approaches to learning, different levels of ability and motivation and indeed different leadership styles can all be accommodated in the process of facilitating engagement in learning.

One framework which has been developed to take account of these differences is that known as Leader–member exchange (LMX). First introduced as the Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) model (Dansereau, Graen and Haga 1975), it differs from other leadership approaches in that its particular focus is on each dyadic relationship (i.e. between two people, in this case a boss and direct report) that leaders have with their followers, rather than on characteristics of the leader, leader behaviours, or aspects of the leadership situation. The approach is based on a fundamental assumption that leadership is potentially different for each leader–follower relationship, in that the leader's behaviour is likely to differ depending on the follower. An important feature of the relationship is the degree of 'negotiating latitude' allowed to the follower. In essence this is about the degree of autonomy they have in determining how to accomplish tasks. Thus higher levels of negotiating latitude equate with greater levels of empowerment (as described above), higher levels of trust in the ability of the follower and lower levels of control by the leader.

BOX 7.2 MEASURING THE QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Determining the quality of a relationship such as LMX should be reasonably straightforward. In practice, almost all instruments used in the context of employee engagement and organizational climate surveys, or as part of a 360-degree assessment exercise contain questions about the working relationship between bosses and their direct reports. More specifically, Scandura and Graen (1984) report the use of a seven-item 'LMX scale' to measure the quality of the exchange. In any event, anyone wishing to do so informally might consider the following questions:

- How would I characterize my working relationship with them – do I know where I stand?
- How well do they understand my motivations, my development needs and my problems?
- How far would they go in helping me (when I really need it) to deal with challenges I encounter in my work?

IMPLICATIONS

There is plenty of evidence to support the idea that relationships with a high degree

of leader–member exchange have positive consequences, including learning. For example, a meta-analysis (a review of a number of studies) by Gerstner and Day (1997) found many instances where employees in a 'high LMX' relationship (i.e. a higher level of trust, support and interaction) were more satisfied with their work and their bosses, were more committed to their organization, experienced greater clarity about their role and in general performed better than those in 'low LMX' relationships. From some more recent work (Bezuijen et al. 2009) and of particular interest for this chapter is the finding that high LMX relationships also have indirect effects on engagement in learning activities on the part of followers. Interestingly, the link between the two is that in high LMX relationships, leaders are seen to set more specific and challenging goals, and provide more learning opportunities with which to achieve them. Goal-setting will be discussed shortly in the context of the performance management process.

EXPLORING THE MODEL

The model described in Figure 7.2 can be used as a starting point to look more closely at what managers can do to facilitate learning for their staff with a view to maximizing individual and organizational performance.

PROVIDING CLARITY

planning and preparing   identifying development needs   standard setting

Planning and Preparing

First, if we think of individual and organizational learning as a process, then perhaps the obvious place to start is for the manager to provide the necessary clarity for staff to do their job. Unless reasonable clarity is provided (recognizing that the degree of clarity necessary will depend on the situation and the people involved, a significant component of the LMX approach) then managing the resulting performance is made all the more difficult.

Identifying Development Needs

Second, while desired performance should be determined primarily by the objectives of a unit or department, in the context of individual and organizational learning the manager should consider in parallel the learning needs that can be met through exposure to appropriate experiences and responsibilities. These needs are likely to have emerged as an ongoing aspect of a performance management process.

Standard Setting

Finally, in terms of performance, clear and relevant expectations are the critical starting point. The role of goal-setting is an important one here. Research has clearly shown, particularly in the work of Locke and Latham (2002), for example, that in general terms, setting specific and challenging goals results in better performance. For learning goals, the positive effects seem to apply as well. For example, Seijts et al. (2004) demonstrated that a specific learning goal (with a focus on ways in which a goal might be achieved) resulted in higher performance than a specific performance goal (focusing just on the outcome). Indeed, the nature of the LMX relationship will also determine the extent to which the focus is on the former or the latter. This has implications for the role of the manager. Managers are usually the ones responsible for goal-setting for their staff, irrespective of whether these goals are set in a participative or non-participative way.

BOX 7.3 THE PERFORMANCE MATRIX

Communicating all of the above to employees in a clear and concise manner is thus critical if they are to gain the most from the proposed learning experience. One way in which this can be facilitated is by constructing a simple 'performance matrix' which enables both manager and employee to see clearly what is expected, and where necessary, how a task is to be undertaken. An example is shown below.

	Outcomes	Tasks	Behaviours
Desired			
Actual			

At the broadest level, what is required of individuals is usually expressed in terms of outcomes – the final results required. Providing a written report outlining sales figures for the last quarter, or conducting a fair and balanced interview are examples of outcomes. For some employees, particularly those who enjoy a high degree of 'negotiating latitude' with their manager, this level of detail may be sufficient. However, for those who have more to learn, or indeed are slower to learn, it may be appropriate for the manager to specify in some detail how the task should be performed to achieve the stated outcome. For the above example, the manager could include a list of what she'd like to see in the report or how long it should be (*'make sure to include comparisons with last year'* or *'keep it to four pages'*). In the right circumstances this should help build the individual's confidence by providing guidance as to how the task should be completed. At an even more specific level (perhaps in the case of someone who lacks both confidence and ability) the manager might want to highlight specific behaviours to be considered when performing the tasks (*'this needs to be accurate, so take care with it…'*).

The matrix can be used for example to make clear to a new person what their main responsibilities are and how they should go about them. It can also be used to identify a problem with some aspect of their performance, by comparing the actual (performance)

with the desired (expectations). Finally, it can be used as a basis for setting objectives for employees. They can be set in terms of outcomes (e.g. acquiring a certain number of new customers); tasks (e.g. prepare a list of prospects to be contacted); or behaviours (e.g. not to be too pushy when making contact).

GETTING THE WORK DONE

challenging   delegating/trusting

Challenge

Clear goals and expectations are an essential starting point, and in most cases matters are straightforward from there on. However, where the focus is on generating learning that will improve performance, the right balance must be struck between the individual's level of comfort in what they're doing and their level of anxiety about the outcome – the tasks need to provide challenge. As defined before, employee engagement in learning activities is about a desire to master new knowledge, skills and abilities. Managers can help with this by providing appropriate learning opportunities. Particular examples are challenging job assignments such as taking on new or unfamiliar responsibilities, or joining task forces or project teams that work across boundaries. By exposing the employee to novel situations that require new ideas, approaches and skills, learning is facilitated. However, this only works up to a point. Overly challenging experiences can cause great uncertainty in the learner and as a result can hinder learning. This issue is well discussed by DeRue and Wellman (2009). They suggest that too many challenges at the same time can cause the learner to divert focus from problem solving and learning-related processes to worries about failure and negative evaluation of their performance. Thus beyond a certain level of challenge, performance will decrease.

Delegation and Organizational Learning

The concept of challenge is inherent in the notion of delegation. All of the chapters so far have argued for the benefit of learning from experience, and reflection on that experience. In addition, empowerment has been seen to be a critical component of effective performance and motivation. Thus there are several reasons why effective delegation is important. As the individual most likely to be delegating or distributing the work to be performed, the way in which the line manager goes about this task will have important implications for learning, development and performance. For example, Manikutty (2005) suggests that in order to optimize learning, these tasks or assignments should:

- Test a certain aspect of the assignee's competence and potential;
- Give enough autonomy to the assignee to enable them to take decisions;

- Be 'stretch' assignments where the individual is charged with delivering a difficult-to-attain result.

Although delegation has long been regarded as an essential management tool, the academic literature on the subject has been surprisingly sparse. The practitioner literature (for example Danby 2009; Fleming 2009) provides plenty of examples of what should and shouldn't be delegated, ways in which it should be carried out and its benefits and drawbacks. What is not dealt with in detail, however, is investigation of *why* managers do or don't delegate, or indeed empirical evidence of the effects of delegation on motivation and performance. Having said that, reports of findings drawn together by Schriescheim, Neider and Scandura (1998) offer some guidance:

- Managers delegate when they need extra help to complete tasks;
- The degree of confidence managers have in their staffs' ability has a major influence on the amount they will delegate;
- Higher-level, more experienced managers tend to delegate more than lower-level managers;
- Delegation tends to occur in work units characterized by less conflict and stress.

Not surprisingly, their review also indicated that reluctance on the part of managers to delegate can be attributed to a perception that the task to be delegated is too difficult or too important, and/or that they don't have confidence in the ability of that individual to undertake the task to be delegated. This observation is particularly pertinent in the context of managing performance, and the specific role of the manager as a coach. It will be discussed later in this chapter.

DELEGATION, PERFORMANCE AND SATISFACTION

In relation to delegation and performance or satisfaction, there is certainly some evidence for a relationship with each, although in general the strength of these relationships is not seen as overwhelmingly positive. There is reason to suspect that the quality of LMX affects both of these outcomes. Bear in mind that, as discussed earlier, high LMX relationships are characterized by high degrees of trust, support and interaction: it is not surprising that delegation should be more effective under these circumstances. This would also go some of the way towards explaining the link found by Chen and Aryee (2007) between delegation and what they call organization-based self-esteem, that is, the value that organization members place on themselves as functioning members of the organization. Once again, higher levels of self-esteem are associated with higher levels of performance and satisfaction.

So, despite the overwhelming support amongst practitioners for the idea of delegation, and at the same time the lack of a body of evidence to support its effectiveness, it is interesting to speculate on why it is seen as so important. Perhaps its benefits are now so taken for granted that interest in the study of delegation has waned. However, where it would seem to make a difference is in the balance of challenge and support, allied to real-life work issues that a delegation opportunity demands. Effective delegation involves achieving the right balance of trust and control, while providing the appropriate levels of freedom to perform. In that context, some tips for effective delegation are now summarized in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2   Delegation for organizational learning

Do	Why?
Consider the level of ability of the person to whom you're delegating to accomplish the task	This will enable you to decide the appropriate level of challenge for them – neither too much nor too little
Provide the appropriate level of 'stretch', depending on the balance between their ability and the demands of the task	A serious challenge successfully overcome is highly motivational for individuals
Consider the level of motivation of the person to whom you're delegating to accomplish the task	If their motivation to undertake a delegated task is low, then you need to find out why, and act accordingly
Regularly discuss learning needs arising from performance of new tasks, and provide appropriate support	This is part of the ongoing coaching process, and is essential to maintain and improve performance
Focus on team performance	This will help share the learning arising from task performance
Accept that mistakes will be made	They are an inevitable part of the learning process

BOX 7.4 EMPOWERING YOURSELF

Not all bosses are perfect! There are many instances where individuals find that their boss's leadership style doesn't allow them to perform with the degree of freedom they would like, thus narrowing their range of learning opportunities and impeding their development. This may be true for some or all aspects of the individual's work. One of the ways of doing this is to demonstrate to the boss that you can be trusted with greater responsibility – in effect you're increasing your own level of 'negotiating latitude'. The 'levels of freedom' (Oncken and Wass 1999) are indicated overleaf.

Level	Description
1	Wait until you're told what to do
2	Ask what's to be done
3	Recommend what's to be done
4	Make decisions yourself, but let the boss know immediately
5	Make decisions yourself and report only routinely

For most people in most aspects of their work, it's better to be further up the scale, as this enables greater control over one's time as well as greater freedom to perform. This is in effect self-empowerment. How it's done is to determine the level you're at for a certain piece of work, and decide what level you'd like to be at. Slowly closing the gap is recommended, for example consistently making good recommendations (level 3) over time, and, seeing that they are acceptable, making decisions in that area (level 4) from a certain point onwards. Based on the premise that 'it's easier to beg forgiveness than to seek permission', most bosses will be glad.

MANAGING PERFORMANCE

providing feedback   *reflecting/clarifying thinking (see model p. 107)*

Although it can be argued that 'performance management' should be taking place at all times for organizational learning to be maximized, literature on some of the more formal aspects of the process is of interest. Basically a cyclical process, managing performance comprises a number of elements:

- Establishment of goals at the start of the cycle;
- Monitoring performance against those goals;
- Rewarding good performance through intrinsic or extrinsic rewards;
- Improving poor performance through feedback.

Although on the surface of it this process seems straightforward, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that much more value could be derived from it. A lot of this is down to managers and how they approach managing performance. Some reports (e.g. Brown, Hyatt and Benson 2010) suggest that managers hate conducting appraisals, believing them to be very stressful and not worth the effort. It is quite probable that the reluctance of many (some would even say most) managers to give negative feedback is behind this, and once again evidence from the literature (including Ilgen, Fisher and Taylor 1979, to cite an early and influential example) supports the argument. The consequence for learning is that real feedback on performance, which of course is a vital element, may not reach its intended target, or may become sufficiently diluted to render it useless.

BOX 7.5 REFLECTING ON PRACTICE

As we saw earlier in the book, many organizations that are serious about learning have developed structured ways of highlighting learning from both successful and unsuccessful undertakings. Individual managers can do this in less formal, though no less valuable ways. Following the completion of a potential learning experience such as handling an industrial dispute or migrating to a new customer database, for example, a set of questions such as the following can be asked:

- What were the most positive aspects of the project (in terms of either task or process)? Why was that the case?
- What were the greatest difficulties we encountered during the project (in terms of either task or process)? Why do we think that was the case?
- What did we learn?
- How might we use that learning the next time?

Elements of Performance Management

What makes for good performance management? In the formal setting, Brown and colleagues suggest that the quality of a good performance appraisal is characterized by four indicators. First of all, employees need to be clear about the role and purpose of the appraisal. For example, is it more summative (in the case of deciding performance ratings or bonuses)? Or does it have a more formative, developmental aspect (with an emphasis on identifying what learning has occurred)? Second, the extent of communication and flow of information between the manager and the employee is important. Whether the appraisal involves discussion and dialogue between the parties and the opportunity to challenge opposing points of view will determine the amount of learning that ensues. Third, the whole process will be more effective if there is a higher level of trust between the parties. If the employee trusts the motives of the manager (with reference to the first point), trust which will be facilitated by the confidence that the manager understands their (the employee's) job, they will be more likely to use the experience as a learning opportunity. Finally, employees want to be treated fairly, particularly in relation to others. Of course these principles apply in the case of informal, ongoing performance management as well.

The Value of Feedback

The extent of any learning challenge, discussed earlier, is determined by the size of the gap between the learner's perception of the demands of the situation and their perception of their current skills and ability to meet those demands. Experience suggests that if this gap is too wide, then engagement in learning-orientated behaviours will be inhibited. Thus the key is to keep the gap at the right level. In

the case where the individual feels there is too much challenge, feedback from the manager can achieve one or both of two things:

- Help build up the learner's perception of their capabilities, or
- Help modify their perception of the task demands.

Of course it can always work in the other direction, where an individual may not wish to engage in learning because they see no challenge at all. In that case, the manager's feedback may be aimed at lowering the learner's perception of their abilities, or raising their perception of the task demands. In these circumstances, the ability of a manager to give appropriate, timely and specific feedback to others is arguably one of the most important skills they can develop. Feedback can be given when helping someone with on-the-job training. It is also an essential part of coaching. We'll now look at giving feedback in more detail.

Giving Feedback

Feedback, either as part of coaching or more specifically in training, aims to close the gap described above. It does this either by making individuals feel more confident about what they *can* do, or less worried about what they *have to* do, or both. This is why the way in which either positive or negative feedback is given is extremely important. Badly given feedback will tend to widen the gap, while properly given feedback should help close it. It is worth remembering that:

- Positive feedback isn't always helpful (its meaning may not be clear, or it may be seen as insincere if repeated too often).
- Negative feedback isn't always unhelpful (it may create the 'energy' to improve actual performance).
- Both positive and negative feedback can be motivational.
- The same rules apply to giving negative feedback as apply to giving positive feedback.
- The words used (i.e. how it is said) are very important in giving helpful and honest feedback.

Feedback Guidelines

We saw in the previous section how important feedback is when attempting to improve performance. Yet most people do not like giving feedback, particularly if it's negative feedback. Perhaps they don't know how to, or perhaps they are afraid of the reaction of the person receiving the feedback. The guidelines below should help make it easier.

1. Feedback should be intended to be helpful. Getting pleasure from telling someone about a mistake they've made with some figures just because you don't like them is not helpful at all, and in fact may just make the problem worse.

2. Feedback should be given directly to the person, face to face. This helps make sure that the person understands exactly what you mean.

3. Feedback should be specific rather than general. It is very different saying to someone '*You're always late*', instead of saying '*You have been late two days in the last week*'. In the first case, it is easy for them to say to you '*No, I was here early the last two days*'. The same applies with positive feedback. To say to one of your staff '*You're great*' is not nearly as useful or motivational as describing something specific they did, e.g. '*I really liked the way you kept calm when that caller was insulting you this morning*'.

4. Feedback should always describe facts or behaviours, rather than being seen to make any judgment of a person. To take the previous example, it is far better to tell a person that they have been late on a number of occasions than to suggest or imply that they are lazy, or not committed to their work.

5. Feedback should focus on the effects of the behaviour. This is true of positive as well as negative feedback. With positive feedback, it can be very motivating for the person to know what good their hard work led to: '*thanks to you noticing that the time of the meeting had changed we were able to call her before she left home*'. With negative feedback, focusing on the effects of the behaviour is the best way to get them to accept it: 'because *you were late, we had one less person to answer the phones and had some complaints from callers about how long they had to wait*'.

6. Feedback should be given when the person appears ready to accept it. If your staff member is still angry after an argument with a customer at the counter, they will probably not be in the mood to hear more criticism from you. Your best move might be to mention that you would like to talk about the incident a little later.

7. Feedback should include only those things that the person can do something about. A manager complaining '*if only you were more like Deirdre*', or '*I think you're too old for this job*' is at best useless and at worst insensitive and insulting.

8. Feedback should never cover more issues than a person can handle at any one time. You should resist the temptation to list all the things that a person is doing wrong. It will only distract from the main message you want to give them.

9. Finally, properly given feedback should give a person the opportunity to check that they have understood you properly. You should be aware of their body language, and ask questions to make sure they know what you mean.

INTEGRATING THE ELEMENTS – INTERNAL COACHING

We have examined the behaviours demonstrated by managers that, taken together, seek to create and maintain a climate for learning in the workplace. Perhaps another way of describing these behaviours collectively is internal coaching – a set of practices gaining in popularity as a means of optimizing performance under certain sets of working conditions. Within the practitioner literature in particular, much of the discussion concerning managers' ability to promote and sustain learning within their areas of responsibility relates to this role. As discussed in Chapter 2, coaching is described in terms of a one-to-one process in which one person (the coach) assists another (the client) to learn. The relationship is about enabling them to learn for the future, by creating a relationship whereby the person being coached is encouraged to set performance goals for themselves and is supported in reaching those goals. Having said this, it is possible to generate this learning in other ways. Some of it can be 'taught' by an expert in that area. Or an individual may attend seminars or read up on the subject. Yet what sets coaching apart from other ways is that the coaching process operates largely by means of asking powerful questions rather than giving advice, with the implication that at all times the responsibility for learning and the actions taken as a result remain with the person being coached. This description is also relevant to at least some aspects of the manager–employee relationship. Indeed Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie (2006) note that the concepts of 'coaching' and 'facilitation of learning' are often used interchangeably in the literature and thus suggest they are synonymous. Given the description of coaching, 'coaching' managers, by assisting individuals in terms of self-discovery and learning, thus help create a workplace climate where learning thrives.

MANAGERIAL COACHING BEHAVIOURS

A number of studies have managed to categorize these managerial coaching behaviours (Ellinger and Bostrom 1999; Beattie 2002a, b, 2004; Hamlin 2004). Examples of themes that consistently run through the descriptions include:

- Encouraging employees to think through issues rather than simply providing answers
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Clearly communicating expectations
- Getting employees to look at problems from different perspectives
- Providing support, encouragement and empathy
- Being challenging
- Inclusion in communication and decision-making processes.

All of these behaviours have been discussed already. Thus a manager skilled in internal coaching will be likely to find it easier to generate the sort of climate that facilitates learning than one who isn't.

CREATING A CLIMATE FOR LEARNING

We have seen throughout this chapter the vital role that line managers can play in optimizing the amount of learning resulting from the regular, day-to-day activities of the organizational unit for which they're responsible. A range of behaviours (and as we have seen, some attitudes as well) have been identified that need to be demonstrated to co-ordinate the efforts of those in the unit effectively, thus enabling both better organizational performance and personal development. The necessity of some of those behaviours, such as planning and delegating, are obvious from a performance point of view, yet if they are used in the right way they can also have important developmental consequences. On the other hand, challenging and empowering are strongly people-oriented behaviours that also have long-term consequences for performance. Also, we have seen in earlier chapters that learning is a social process. Thus the role of the line manager becomes one of creating a climate where learning from shared interpretation of experience and implementation of that learning combine to drive organizational performance, and at the same time provide real development opportunities for the individuals within that organization.

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