

Are You Making the Most of Your Frontline Managers?

By Jim Sirbasku



How to Target and Develop Effective Frontline Managers

Frontline managers have difficult jobs. They have to know the business (better than their staff does). They're expected to supervise and coach their employees not only on how to do their jobs, but how to do so with their right attitude and behaviors. And they've got to be able to step into the breach at that inevitable moment when a disgruntled customer utters the words "I'd like to speak to your manager."

Most businesses have grown so large that there's a considerable divide between the executive team and the frontline. Frontline staff perform different functions depending on the industry: in retail, they're cashiers and sales clerks; in healthcare, they're triage

nurses and doctors and administrative staff; in travel, they're flight attendants and reservationists; and in the service sector, they staff the call center.

Customers are demanding, and why shouldn't they be? If they're willing to buy products or services from you instead of from your competitors, they should have a pleasant experience (or at least a not unpleasant one). And if something does go wrong, the best companies have well-trained frontline staff and managers who are skilled at fixing the situation, which can make or break a customer for life.

For instance, imagine being in the unfortunate position, a couple months ago, of being a frontline manager at

the stadium whose staff had to tell 400 ticket holders that they couldn't sit in the seats they'd bought to watch the Super Bowl. As a case study, this situation is ripe in so many things; but for a moment, consider what it would take to successfully weather a similar uproar in your own business: you'd need to be empathetic and understanding; confident, but not arrogant (or panicky); informed and empowered.

Valuing Effective Frontline Managers

Coach your frontline managers. Instill in them the company's values. Remind them of how pivotal their role is in representing the company to its customers. Help them to be as efficient as possible, with the flexibility to resolve issues quickly and, most importantly, to the customer's satisfaction.

Take a look at how your customers interact with your business. Are your frontline staff and managers an asset or a liability? While they may not rank high on the flow chart, their value is crucial.

The effects of poor frontline management may be particularly damaging at service companies, where research has consistently found a direct 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, three factors converge to drive performance:

- *The work climate*
- *How teams act together and how things are done*
- *Employee engagement, commitment, and satisfaction*

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.

Six Keys to Unlocking the Potential of Frontline Managers

Identify which employees can develop into good managers. Use assessments to identify employees who demonstrate the behaviors and interests that will make them successful managers.

Help managers to understand their staff's core behaviors, capabilities,

and preferences, so that they can adapt their communication and management styles to get the most from their people.

Encourage managers nurture the success of each individual. Foster the mindset that managers will be more successful if the people they manage succeed.

Help managers to clarify their team's goals and roles. Use these goals to create a personal "dashboard" that helps the manager set his own priorities that drive results. Require managers to update their goals weekly, and use this progress to facilitate a coaching discussion. Finally, check back with the manager regularly to make sure that priorities are properly aligned with all individuals on the team.

Create tools to help your managers communicate these requirements and track progress toward these goals. Use employee surveys and 360° management assessments, for direct input from



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the front line as to whether the message is getting through. Finally, encourage open communication between employees and their managers – clarify job requirements, eliminate work that may not be worth the time it takes.

Help managers to better understand their people. 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 useful for letting an organization get to know its people in a deeper, more objective way.

Once a manager understands people's skills, behaviors, and interests, he or she can build on their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. It improves communication and helps zero in on the employee's most critical developmental needs. Combine informal coaching and formal training to develop each employee's investment in their own professional growth.

Help your managers to understand themselves. Management 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 personnel interactions.

Feedback from multiple constituents – managers' supervisors, peers, and subordinates – is also extremely valuable for bringing developmental needs or misalignments to light. Some issues may be difficult to communicate openly under challenging circumstances.

Help your managers to know how (or when) to coach. Develop your managers' fundamental coaching skills, and develop a culture of coaching.

Every manager must understand their particular leadership style and motivation. Many of us have certain key leadership qualities, but feedback helps us build on our strengths and

fortify our weaknesses. In cases where 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.

Minimize administrative work, so managers have more time to devote to their people. Think very carefully about the administrative tasks you assign to your frontline managers – do they add sufficient value? Consider capturing fewer but more essential indicators.

Make information easy to obtain, so that they aren't spending too much time pulling spreadsheets together and making presentation decks look pretty.

Provide administrative support, and either invest in tools or simplify the exercise so that it takes less time to complete. **N**

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