

Why not develop your own?

By Simon Davies

As the pace of transformation in South Africa accelerates, many companies are rethinking the way their frontline managers are developed. Indeed, while many organisations are reporting chronic management skills shortages, smart players are looking within and proactively up-skilling their frontline managers.

The above, however, begs the question: why are people selected from the ranks of workers to become frontline managers (supervisors, foremen, etc.) in the first place? The simple answer is that they are usually good workers. However, being good a worker doesn't necessarily mean an individual will be equipped to succeed in a managerial role.

The fact is that most workers obtained their managerial skills from watching their managers for a number of years. And in the past, when the pace of managerial turnover was slower, this method worked just fine. However, in today's fast paced world the development timeline for new managers is shrinking. The old paradigm of managers learning how to manage, just by watching their bosses, doesn't necessarily apply anymore.

This brings us to South Africa; never before have so many companies complained about frontline skills shortages. Quite often, though, these organisations are ignoring the underlying problem, and in the process setting themselves – and their new generation of managers – up for failure. Companies that understand this, and actively develop the skills of frontline management, are the ones that are likely to be successful in the new South African business environment.

Often newly appointed managers receive development training, which is undoubtedly helpful. However, there is a world of difference between training and coaching. Imagine being expected to learn how to drive a

car simply from classroom training – the same principle applies to new managers.

Frontline coaching is about teaching managers to observe the dynamics of their workplace while also providing them with the tools and confidence to review and influence team performance as the work day progresses. Indeed, it is about empowering the individual to make those knowledge-based, minute-by-minute decisions that make the difference between average and outstanding team performance.

Often, this involves not just the "know-how" but also the "know-why". Once frontline managers understand this, they are less likely to revert to old ways of doing things; less likely to act like a worker; and more likely to act like a manager who leads his or her team to outstanding results.

Surely direct coaching for managers is expensive? It is undoubtedly not cheap, which is why it is important to link frontline coaching to tangible business outcomes. For example, what would a 15% productivity boost add to the bottom line of your organisation? When you use frontline coaching to achieve a specific financial or operational outcome, the results pay for themselves while you are at the same time up-skilling your management team.

Undeniably, the up-skilling of workers is a priority for most organisations today. The question, however, is does your organisation see the up-skilling of frontline management as a priority? The next time you hear someone complaining about a lack of managerial skills, remember the saying – it's a poor artisan who blames his tools. P

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