Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)
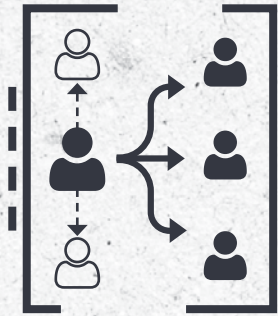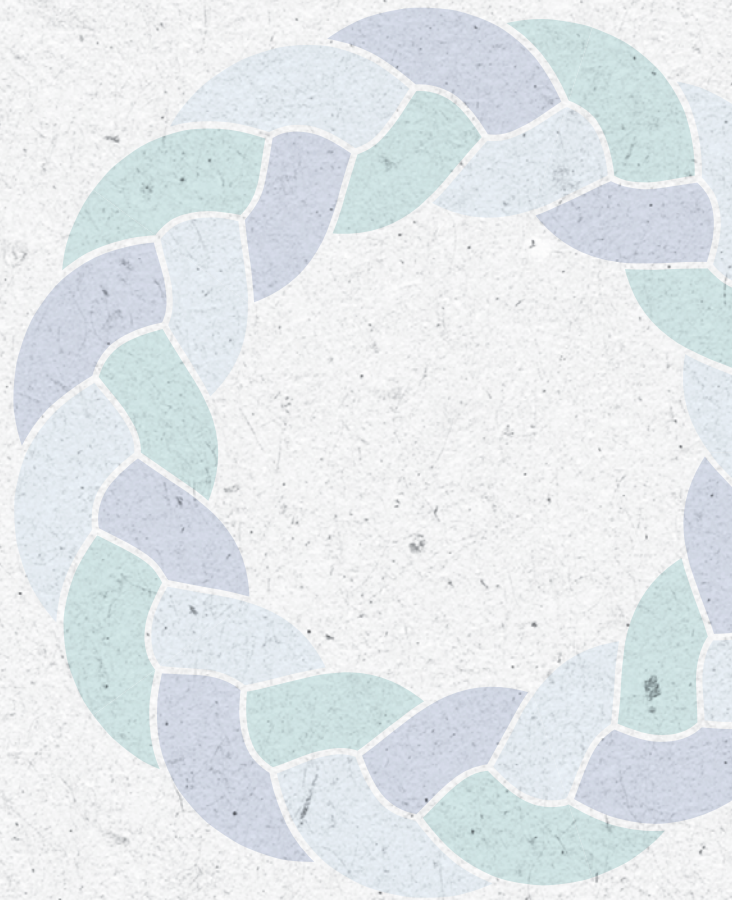
IMPACT OF LINE AND/OR MIDDLE MANAGERS ON WORKPLACE PERFORMANCE

a summary of scientific literature

October 2019

Culture Review **Implementation**

our journey of positive change

ACT Government

CEBMa
center for
Evidence Based Management

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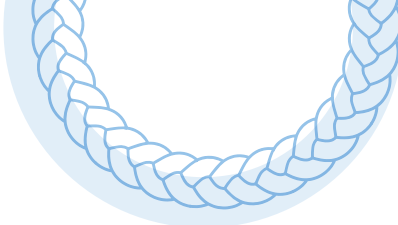
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What is a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)?

Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs) use a specific research methodology to comprehensively identify the most relevant studies on a given topic, and select appropriate studies based on explicit criteria. In addition, two independent reviewers assess the methodological quality of the studies. In contrast to a conventional literature review, REAs are transparent, verifiable, and reproducible, and as a result, the likelihood of bias is considerably smaller.

Background

The National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, acknowledge the important interface their line and/or middle managers have with nurses, doctors and top management. However, their roles and responsibilities as well as their impact on workplace performance was unclear. For this reason, the NHS commissioned the Center for Evidence Based Management (CEBMa) to undertake a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) to understand what is known in scientific literature about the roles, practices and impact of line and/or middle managers on workplace performance.

What this REA assesses

In answering the main question, this REA also considers answers to the following questions:

1. **What are line and middle managers?**

2. **What are the roles and practices of line/middle managers?**

3. **What is known about the impact of these roles and practices on workplace performance?**

4. **What roles and practices have the biggest impact on performance?**

Main findings

1. What are line and/or middle managers?

While the review identified many research articles using the term 'line manager', it was not clearly defined. Some studies referred to line managers as 'the managerial position closest to employees (Lundmark, 2017). For this reason, line managers are referred to as 'frontline' or 'first line managers.' Whilst other studies refer to line managers as part of the vertical chain of command within an organisations hierarchical system, different from 'functional' managers, for example, HR managers or project managers.

In management practice, 'line manager' is used interchangeably with the term 'middle manager' – those who supervise frontline managers and are supervised by senior managers. The term 'middle manager' is understood more broadly, extending to manager located below top managers and above first-level supervisors.

The distinguishing feature of both line and middle managers is not where they sit in the organisational chart, but their access to top management plus their knowledge of operations (Wooldridge, 2008).

2. What are the roles and practices of line/middle managers?

The roles and practices of both line and middle managers are diverse. They not only communicate information and coordinate activities (Schlesinger, 1984; Floyd, 1997) but also implement strategies and policies (Jackson, 1995), act as change agents, and oversee the day-to-day running of the business (Barton, 2013; O'Shannassy, 2014).

Other roles include supporting, coaching, supervising and evaluating employees. In the case of implementing health care policies, guidelines, or innovations, line and middle managers diffuse information, mediate between implementation of strategies and day-to-day activities, 'sell' innovations, suggest and develop alternatives and shape the implementation climate (Birken, 2016; Chen, 2017).
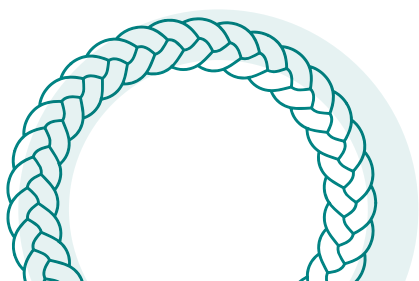
3. What is known about the impact of these roles and practices on workplace performance?

Several findings were discovered in answering this question:

» **The roles and practices of line and middle managers have a substantial impact on a wide range of organisational outcomes.** These organisational outcomes include, strategy development and implementation, innovation, support for change, compliance, performance, employee satisfaction, absenteeism, commitment, and workplace climate.

» **The roles and practices of line and middle managers have a small to moderate impact on a wide range of HR outcomes.** HR outcomes impacted by line and middle managers includes, employee commitment, involvement (Alhaqbani, 2016) engagement and innovative performance (Alfes, 2013), and task performance. Additionally, these managers play an important role in conflict management, that in turn affect staff turnover, absence rates and workplace climate (Teague, 2013).

» **The roles and practices of line and middle managers have a small to moderate impact on the outcome of workplace interventions and employees support for change initiatives.** A high-quality study found that middle managers' support for workplace interventions affects staff support and influences how the intervention is perceived. In addition, middle managers' support has a positive effect on learning climate (Henderson, 2014). Further, a cross-sectional study undertaken by Hayden in 2017, showed that change interventions initiated by middle managers are positively related to employee support for change.

» **The roles and practices of line and middle managers have a moderate impact on implementation effectiveness.** A systematic review undertaken by Birken in 2018, showed that middle managers in healthcare organisations play an important role in facilitating the implementation of new evidence-based practices. This outcome is consistent with findings from other studies that line managers' involvement and 'upward'

» activities like developing or suggesting alternatives, increases implementation success (Birken, 2013; Chen, 2017; Fryer, 2018).

» **The roles and practices of line and middle managers have a moderate impact on organisational performance.** A longitudinal study suggests that middle managers' who set clear goals, provide clear communication, are participative managers, use their resources and HR practices effectively, have a positive effect on objective performance measures. This finding is consistent with other results from other studies that indicate middle managers' behaviours and activities are positively linked with organisational performance (Ahearne, 2014; Mair, 2005).

» **The roles and practices of line and middle managers have a small impact on innovation.** A longitudinal study of more than 2,000 organisations showed that start-up companies with middle managers are more likely to introduce innovative products and services. One possible reason is that having a middle management level to look after issues of coordination frees up time and attention for innovators in the company to introduce new products and services (Grimpe, 2019).

» **The involvement of line and middle managers in strategy development has a moderate impact on strategy implementation and consequently organisational capabilities.** Studies have revealed that line managers knowledge of internal resources and capabilities, the organisation's competitive environment, and their position in the social network of managers contribute to strategic consensus (Pappas, 2003).

» **The effect of the roles and practices of line and middle managers on organisational outcomes is most likely moderated by several factors.** These factors include the work experience and education of the line and middle managers (Mair, 2005). However, a recent systematic review revealed that most studies offer little understanding regarding the relative impact of these factors (Birken, 2018).

4. What roles and practices have the biggest impact on performance?

Most of the topics studied in the review focused on strategy, change and implementation. All of which involved multiple variables that affect each other and that high quality (controlled) studies were often not available. Other topics that can be influenced by line and middle managers, including HR related activities, are absent from this review.

Due to the limitations observed in the primary studies that this REA identified, the following are further insights from other recent CEBMa reviews. These reviews identified the five following factors that are relevant to middle management and have a large impact on organisational outcomes:

Factor 1   Social cohesion

Social cohesion refers to a shared liking or attraction to the group, emotional bonds of friendship, caring and closeness among group members, and enjoyment of each other's company (Chiocchio, 2009). It can and does change over time due to processes of group formation, development, maintenance and dissolution (Carron & Chelladurai, 1981). It is unlikely to change moment to moment and is influenced by the kind of support and directional clarity managers provide.

How does social cohesion enhance performance?

High levels of social cohesion among team members creates a psychologically safe environment in which team members feel free to explore new ways of doing things (Hulsheger , Anderson, & Salgado, 2009). The notion that a person is more willing to take risks in a situation in which they have a reliable bond with an important other has been confirmed in other areas of psychology, including developmental psychology. Knowledge workers with strong feelings of belongingness and attachment to their colleagues are more likely to cooperate and interact with each other, and therefore are more likely to exchange ideas and share information (Hulsheger et al., 2009). For example, operating room nurses are more likely to share innovative ideas to improve patient safety with surgeons when there is a high level of social cohesion between these two professional groups.

Factor 2   Perceived supervisory support

Feedback supervisors to knowledge workers allows them to perceive how their manager supports them. This perception is obtained from how the manager helps them in times of need, the level of praise they receive and recognition for extra effort. This is known as 'perceived supervisory support' (PSS).

Why does PSS enhance performance?

This terms stems from the 'norm of reciprocity' that when people treat others as they would like to be treated, they will repay kindness with kindness and retaliate against those who inflict harm (Brunell et al., 2013; Gouldner, 1960). If a manager helps their employees in times of need and recognises them for their efforts, then the employees will act in a way of value to the manager, such as meeting goals and objectives, and to the organisation as a whole (Edmondson, 2013; Eisenberger, 1986).

Factor 3　Team empowerment

Refers to the shared perceptions among team members regarding the team's collective level of empowerment. Teams that are empowered feel that they perform intrinsically meaningful work and, as a group, have a higher degree of choice or discretion in deciding how to complete team tasks (Seibert, 2011). Managers contribute to team empowerment through support, such as skills development and information, they give to their teams and the respect they provide for the team decisions made.

How does team empowerment enhance performance ?

Psychological empowerment enhances team performance by increasing: the amount of information and control workers have over their work; the level of work-related knowledge, skills and abilities of workers; and the motivation of team members to achieve organisational goals (Seibert, 2011).

Factor 4　Psychological safety

In 1999 Amy Edmondson defined the term as a group-level phenomenon that refers to the shared belief held by members that the group is safe for 'interpersonal risk taking' – a sense of confidence that others will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up. It includes respect for each other's competence, caring about each other as people and trust in each other's intentions. Managers can influence psychological safety through the consideration they show for team wellbeing and their respect for the input team provide and the decisions they make.

How does psychological safety enhance the level of performance?

Psychological safety is a pre-requisite for group learning. If group members feel psychologically safe, they will, be more willing to ask for help, admit an error and seek feedback. These actions will foster greater learning in the group and improve their overall performance.

Factor 5　Group goals

In management a goal is defined as an observational or measureable organisational outcome to be achieved within a specified time limit (Locke & Latham, 2002). Organisational goal setting can refer to desired work or business outcomes, as well as the intention or plan to act towards these outcomes. Goal setting is one of the most researched topics in the field of industrial and organisational psychology. Several studies suggest that setting goals at the group level may yield higher performance than individual goals (Kleingeld, 2011). Managers contribute to appropriate group goals by promoting two-way information sharing and their own efforts to support team performance.

How do group goals enhance the level of performance?

According to goal setting theory, goals affect performance through four causal mechanisms (Latham, 2004):

» Goals serve a directive function – focus an employee's attention and effort towards goal-oriented activities and away from goal-irrelevant activities.

» Goals have an energising function – high goals lead to greater effort than low goals.

» Goals affect persistence – when employees can control the time spent on tasks, hard goals prolong effort.

» Goals affect action indirectly – generates arousal, discovery and use of task-relevant knowledge and strategies that increase the odds of success (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Conclusion

The roles and practices of line and middle managers and their effect on organisational outcomes are widely studied. However, the available evidence is rich in quantity, but not in quality. Yet, based on the evidence, the roles and practices of line and middle managers substantially affect a wide range of organisational outcomes, and are an indispensable link between the organisation's top management and its frontline employees.
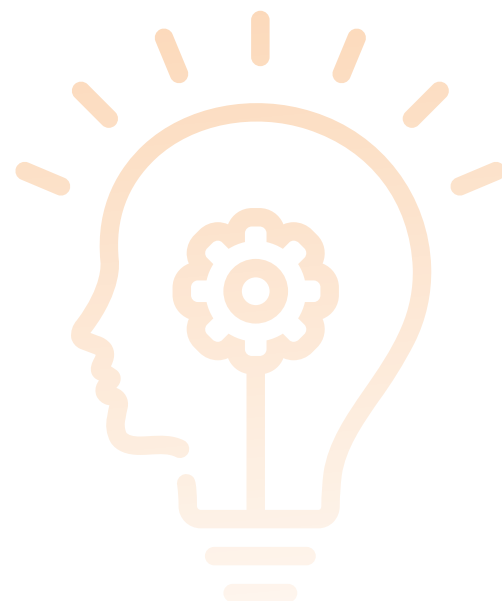
More information

You can access more information in the *Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) – The Impact of Line and/or Middle Managers on Workplace Performance – a summary of research literature, October 2019.*

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