
1. Line managers in human resource management: theory, analysis and new developments

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Line managers have played a role in organisations for as long as organisations have existed; in fact, it is commonly accepted that ‘management’ has been around for centuries prior to the ‘industrialised era’. Davidson and Griffin (2000) argue that many ancient and medieval civilisations applied management functions in constructions such as, for example, the building of pyramids. While this may be the case, the largely slave-style labour used in the making of the pyramids holds limited transferability to the modern human resource management (HRM) driven organisations of the twenty-first century. According to Wren (1972: 36), the industrial revolution ‘heralded a new age for man and society’, and we would argue, along with many others, that the post-1980s era of HRM heralded a new age for all working people and society. Within this HRM era is an increasing level of importance for the line managers, with a growing body of academic research focusing on the significant role they play as implementers of human resources (HR) policy and practice.

In addition to the academic focus, throughout the world both practitioners and public policy are paying increasing attention to this body of managers with the publication of national reports and professional advice, highlighting the cruciality of their role in the workplace and need for support (ACAS, 2014; CIPD, 2015; ILM, 2009; Macleod and Clarke, 2009). Integrating HRM into the line, by devolution and empowerment, was a central ambition of models of HRM (Storey, 2007: 33). If human resources were critical to business success, then line managers should both drive and deliver HR policies because they are responsible for ‘co-ordinating and directing *all* resources in the business unit in the pursuit of bottom line results’ (Legge, 1995: 113; see also Guest, 1991; Storey, 1992). With effective line managers, the HR professional is freed up to undertake more strategic roles within the organisation (Ulrich, 1997), resulting in an effective HR–line partnership (Bos-Nehles, 2010).

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s we began to see evidence that HRM was being returned to the line, where researchers noted a shift from production management to performance-focused activities that involved ‘people responsibilities rather than purely technical responsibilities’ (Lowe, 1992: 148). Throughout this time, a movement towards delayering, decentralisation of decision-making, new production processes, and pressure on costs and accountability (Hall and Torrington, 1998; Lowe, 1993) further intensified the focus on the role of the line manager. A recent review of the HR devolution literature presented a selection of 108 articles published between 1982 and 2020 that highlighted the increasingly important role of line managers in HRM research (Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021). Based on this review the authors developed future research directions for research on line managers. In this book we respond to some of those suggestions for research directions, and present some more relevant line management roles in organisations.

Studies of line managers use a range of theoretical frameworks (although in some articles the theoretical underpinning was not obvious), which can be broadly categorised into two domains: theories of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and the HRM and strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature. Theories of social exchange, based on norms of reciprocity within social relationships, such as leader–member exchange (e.g. Farndale et al., 2011), perceived supervisor support (Kuvaas et al., 2014), the psychological contract (McDermott et al., 2013), signalling theory (e.g. Townsend et al., 2012) and attachment theory (Crawshaw and Game, 2015) provide a framework in studies conducted at the micro level exploring the line manager–employee relationship and its effect on employee attitudes and behaviours. Predominantly, however, studies draw on the HRM/SHRM literature, either to frame discussions on devolution trends and influences (e.g. Brewster et al., 2015; Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002; Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Gennard and Kelly, 1997), or to theorise how HRM links to performance and the role of line managers in this process. In this category are articles drawing on the resource-based view of the firm (e.g. Bondarouk and Ruël, 2013), HR strength theory such as Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) concept of a ‘strong’ HR system (e.g. Björkman et al., 2011; De Winne et al., 2013; Ryu and Kim, 2013), models of the HR casual chain such as by Nishii and Wright (2008) (e.g. Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Vermeeren, 2014), and the ability–motivation–opportunity (AMO) theory of performance (e.g. Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). Other theories applied include role theory (e.g. Evans, 2015), utilised in studies examining the impact on line managers on HRM; stakeholder theory, which recognises that organisational units have multiple constituents and informs research exploring multiple HR agents (e.g. Kulik and Perry, 2008), agency theory (Caza, 2011); and social capital theory (Truss and Gill, 2009). There is clearly a vast array of theoretical frames that can be used which indicates the importance of the line manager role and the various perspectives that can be taken to understand the role.

Yet, while research on line managers has developed significantly throughout the last decades, there remain some problems with line manager research, certainly. For example, for a long time much of the research failed to engage in a detailed discussion on who or what exactly is a ‘line manager’, referring to an all-encompassing line manager, thus conflating many levels. A middle manager of a 60 000-strong organisation is not performing many, if indeed any, of the same tasks as a frontline manager of a team of ten employees in an organisation of only 120 employees. While there are many researchers aiming to disaggregate the line manager confusion, it remains persistent. Throughout this book we have encouraged authors to be explicit and to explain who their line managers are specifically, and only when the various different line manager roles are combined should the generic term be used.

LINE MANAGERS: WHO ARE THEY?

Inspired by the 81st meeting of the Academy of Management in 2021 and the paper by Steffensen et al. (2019), we aim to bring the manager back to management, specifically to human resource management through a focus on line managers. Line managers are situated ‘between the strategic apex and operating core of the organisation’ and thus they are the ones who ‘mediate, negotiate, and interpret connections between the organisation’s institutional (strategic) and technical (operational) levels’ (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997: 466). ‘Line managers’ is a container term for managers at different hierarchical positions ranging from

first-line managers to senior managers. The expression ‘first-line manager’ or ‘frontline manager’ traditionally stands for the position representing the lowest level of management at the operational level, who manages a team of operational (non-managerial) employees on a day-to-day basis (Bos-Nehles, 2010; Hales, 2005). As Currie (2006: 6) points out, there is no ‘well-defined homogenous group that can be differentiated easily from executive managers or from frontline managers’. Drawing on earlier work from Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) and Staehle and Schirmer (1992: 70), Currie continues that middle managers are ‘employees who have at least two hierarchical levels under them’. Importantly, these levels of line managers, be they frontline managers or middle managers, remain employees of the organisations with the responsibility of managing other employees.

In their responsibility as managers of employees, line managers are responsible for management of the people in their teams (Evans, 2015; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). This role usually contains an HRM responsibility, which means that line managers are in the position to select, motivate, train, develop, appraise, commit, compensate and dismiss employees. Line managers thus clearly play an important role in operational HRM by managing the people in their team, department or unit.

LINE MANAGERS’ ROLE IN HRM IMPLEMENTATION

Although scholars agree on the crucial HRM role that line managers play (Gilbert et al., 2015; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Op de Beeck et al., 2017; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Townsend et al., 2012), HRM scholars do not agree about the details. According to many, line managers have a passive role in implementing HRM practices ‘by the book’ (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013: 873), which means that they follow guidelines and rules set by the HRM department. This linear implementation of HRM practices (Trullen et al., 2020; Van Mierlo et al., 2018) does not allow line managers any discretion from the intended HRM practices. Instead, they need to closely follow HRM directives to diminish an HRM variability (Bos-Nehles et al., 2020). The aim of this approach is to minimise the gaps between intended HRM practices (those HRM practices that are espoused by HRM based on strategic goals), actual HRM practices (those HRM practices that are implemented by line managers at the operational level) and perceived HRM practices (the experienced HRM practices by employees) (Makhecha et al., 2018; Nishii and Wright, 2008). According to Bos-Nehles et al. (2021), by deviating from intended courses line managers threaten the distinctiveness, consistency and consensus of HRM systems and thus prevent the HRM system from becoming strong (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Such a ‘mechanistic view of organisations, where line managers should ideally act as both (neutral) receivers and senders of HRM messages decided elsewhere’ (Bos-Nehles et al., 2021: 111), is imposed to help organisations reach strategic goals in the way designed and to develop a shared understanding of realised HRM experiences. To do so, line managers should enforce intended messages to employees and ‘act as a deliverer and advocate of the espoused HR policies’ to make sure that individual and organisational outcomes are reached (Pak and Kim, 2018: 2708). Although Bowen and Ostroff (2004) acknowledge that line managers play an active role as ‘interpretive filters of HRM practices’ (ibid.: 216), they need to act as messengers who translate strategic policies into their work units (Townsend et al., 2012) to affect employees’ understanding of the quality of HRM systems in their organisations and thus introduce a common interpretation of among employees. The aim of this approach is to reach

standardisation and consistency of implemented HRM practices in the organisation to shape a strong climate of shared employee behaviours.

There are many different ways presented in the literature for us to understand the role of line managers in the implementation of HRM. Most recently, Townsend et al. (2022) present the FLM specifically as an individual facing a conundrum: that they can be a master of their domain, and/or a victim of policies introduced by other departments, specifically the HR department. Proposing a more active and engaged role, Kehoe and Han (2020: 112) suggest that the line manager can be seen as a 'wilful and agentic human actor' who may proactively pursue autonomous initiatives at the operational level. Casting our gaze back further, Marchington and Grugulis (2000) remind us that line managers rarely act as 'robotic conformists', simply implementing policy without placing their own 'stamp' on the process. While these perspectives are presented differently, they all share a view that – to some extent – line managers would get the freedom to deviate from the intended course and 'adjust practices to reflect their needs' in a given situation with the aim of 'making HRM implementation more effective' (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017: 531). By locally modifying HRM practices, line managers can shape the horizontal and vertical fit of these practices to improve employee satisfaction, fulfilment and well-being (Kehoe and Han, 2020). As direct managers of operational employees, line managers are in a position to recognise employees' needs, and can give sense to HRM messages by translating them to the local situation and framing them as solutions in a way that employees are able to understand (Bondarouk et al., 2016). Such an approach may lead to within-organisation variability in the implementation of HRM (Pak and Kim, 2018), and to workforce differentiation (Kehoe and Han, 2020). Line managers may negotiate idiosyncratic deals (or 'i-deals') with employees in their teams, or engage in psychological contracts in which they employ a more customised approach to managing employees. As such, line managers may feel accountable for a fair implementation of HRM practices and agree on uncommon, non-standard applications of HRM practices that deviate from standard employment practices, such as extra developmental opportunities, extra salary beyond set pay levels, or on flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, virtual work or working from home, based on individual requests and needs (Kehoe and Han, 2020). Although local variability and differentiation may have positive consequences for employees, such as strategically segmenting the workforce (Lepak and Snell, 2002), meeting equity needs by appreciating individual efforts (Zhang et al., 2015), or fit with local requirements and needs (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017), it may also have negative consequences.

Kehoe and Han (2020) warn of legal issues because line managers may disregard labour and employment laws or apply biased practices, and of perceptions of unfairness of employees because of the customized approach and applying i-deals. Marescaux et al. (2013) also report perceptions of inequity among employees, and Nishii and Paluch (2018) indicate possible decreases or deterioration of HRM system strength. Recently, however, Bos-Nehles et al. (2021) have expressed opportunities to improve HRM system strength through line managers with discretion to locally modify HRM practices. HRM messages may also be perceived as distinctive, consistent and consensual in a less directive and mechanistic implementation model that grants line managers the freedom to take decision based on regional needs and fit.

Preferably HRM practices should be implemented in a more negotiated way in which organizational stakeholders have reached consensus on the best way to implement HRM practices for all involved agents and users. In such a solution espoused HRM practices fit the climate of the organisation and the values of the strategic and the operational business; that is, they are

vertically and horizontally aligned, but operational goals and user needs are also considered from the beginning. To increase the chance of an effective implementation of HRM practices in which the HRM practices become routinised and institutionalised, we propose a more negotiated and consensus-driven adoption of HRM practices. In such a scenario, more organisational stakeholders would be involved in the design and development of HRM policies and practices. In fact, we suggest that line managers should also be consulted in this process, since they know what they need in order to develop employees at the operational level and secure a sustainable implementation of HRM practices. Once intended practices are developed, considering short- and long-term plans and the interests of a variety of stakeholders from various levels in the organisation, the chance of reducing the gap between intended and actual HRM practices becomes smaller. If this is the case, actual HRM practices have a higher chance of accomplishing the objectives for which the organisation adopted them (Trullen et al., 2020). This does not mean that line managers would not need to modify and shape HRM practices in the process of their implementation. However, once the intended practices are effective in content and process (Woodrow and Guest, 2014), and developed in cooperation and interaction, the chances are higher that adapting the practice during its implementation does not ‘diminish the quality of implementation as long as the final practice can still fulfil its original purpose’ (Trullen et al., 2020: 159).

In this book we present various ways in which line managers can implement HRM practices in the organisation. We consider the implementation of a variety of HRM policies and practices (content), a variety of implementation processes (process), and a variety of line management actors.

To do so, we have divided this book into three parts. Part I encompasses theories used in line management research. While we do not have a ‘theory of line management’ per se, we would argue that such an accomplishment is beyond reach, given the context-specific nature of what any line manager does, who a line manager might be, and how various different line manager roles are diverse both within organisations and between organisations. As such, we have contributions from a number of theoretical perspectives, including role theory, systems theory, social exchange theory, person–environment fit theory, attribution theory and paradox theory. Part I begins with Harney and Lee (Chapter 2), who consider the important role of agency of frontline managers through a systems theory lens to demonstrate the complex, yet interrelated aspects of frontline managers within organisations. Taking a more generic approach to line managers, Chapter 3 (Robertson and Veres) uses person–environment fit to explore the differences between the managed and the managers within the organisational context. Narrowing focus even further in Chapter 4, Evans considers the complexity of the various different line managers through using role theory, and the various tensions between role overload, role ambiguity and role conflict in the HRM system. We mentioned earlier in this introduction that the Blau influence over social exchange theory has influenced a great deal of line manager research. This history is reviewed by Bannya and Bainbridge in Chapter 5. Brandl, Keegan and Aust (Chapter 6) draw in a recognition that the requirement for line managers to be increasingly involved in HRM presents a situation of competing demands. Their chapter brings a relational approach to this paradox, to understand how individuals’ responses to competing demands can either enable or hinder the dynamics before them. Finally in Part I, Hewett and Shantz take on attribution theory in Chapter 7, to discuss the role of line managers in the implementation of HRM practices.

Given the context-driven nature of both HRM and, more specifically, line managers in practice, it is no surprise that there is a diversity of research on the topic. This is explored and illustrated through Part II, the largest part of this book, titled ‘Topics in Line Management Research’. This part begins with Kim and Kehoe (Chapter 8), who reconsider the traditional view of line managers as HRM implementors and place a focus on their individual agency. Equally, the authors continue, the HRM implementation role is usually only a relatively small part of the line manager’s day-to-day workload. This leads neatly to the next chapter, by Sikora (Chapter 9), who considers the capabilities of line managers within the organisational system. Chapter 10 is our first chapter with empirical data, with Brookes and Brewster using the long-standing Cranet data to draw out the important role of national context in line manager experiences. Ironically, they find that the organisations with the most strategic HRM assign the least HRM responsibilities to line managers. Further demonstrating that context is very important, Knies, Decramer and Audenaert (Chapter 11) explore the experience of line managers within the public sector. The authors find that while there is an increasing likelihood that public sector organisations are looking more like those in the private sector, there remain differences, particularly for line managers.

Atkinson, Lupton and Dahwa provide an unusual contribution in Chapter 12, because they recognise that much of the line manager research relates to large firms. Their focus on small firms illuminates the complexity of HRM implementation by line managers when there is no internal HRM department in small firms. This chapter is followed by Townsend, Troth, and Loudoun (Chapter 13) who draw on a qualitative study of frontline managers (FLMs) to better understand how they see the leadership required in their role. This chapter demonstrates the context-specific nature of FLMs, while drawing patterns of expectations within the work of FLMs, and presents the ‘pillars of frontline leadership’. Continuing the leadership theme in this part, in Chapter 14, Marescaux, Van den Broeck and De Winne argue that when line managers empower their employees this leads to a range of positive outcomes, including higher levels of autonomy, competence, satisfaction and negotiating i-deals.

By this stage, our authors have painted quite a picture of the line managers and their experiences within organisations. King (Chapter 15) progresses these ideas with a chapter on talent management, arguing that this is not a senior management responsibility: that in fact, all levels of managers within organisations play an important role in the policies and practices that shape and implement talent management. Surely all these pressures on line managers will lead to some negative outcomes? Saundry, Fisher and Kinsey consider this in Chapter 16 with their multimethod study of workplace conflict in the United Kingdom. These authors argue that the ability of managers to prevent, contain, manage and resolve conflict has important implications for organisations and the individuals within them. Our topic focus continues for the remaining four chapters of Part I, with Mirfakhar, Trullen and Valverde (Chapter 17) taking us to an area that is largely neglected in line manager research: senior managers. Certainly, senior managers are considered heavily in leadership research and general management research, but the specific area of human resource management is mostly silent on the topic of senior managers, the uppermost authority in organisations and the people who determine much of what HRM systems and their implementation will look like. Prolifi, Sammarra, Innocenti and Bos-Nehles (Chapter 18) examine the way in which line managers implement a very specific part of a HR system: that of work adjustment practices for chronically ill employees. This study demonstrates the complexity of line managers and their work to support not only healthy workers, but also those who have diseases that can be long in duration, and diverse in nature. Our final

two chapters (Chapters 19 and 20) in this section are closely related. Hastuti and Timming (Chapter 19) consider line managers and the disclosure of mental illness in the workplace; a particularly timely contribution as we are – at the time of writing in 2021 – almost two years in to the COVID-19 pandemic. With a focus on a profession vital to the smooth operation of a modern society, Mildenhall and McCann (Chapter 20) consider the emergency services, specifically in relation to paramedics, and how important the support of line managers is for employees in a hierarchical, uniformed work culture.

Finally, we turn our attention to the future in Part III, which is driven by current practical and research trends, but as is all ‘future-focused’ research, contains some speculative musings of what may lie ahead for us. In Chapter 21, Monks and Conway focus on the influence of new technologies and COVID-19 on how future work is organized and experienced. They discuss frontline managers’ role in managing the interaction between the technical, the social and the environmental consequences of these new changes. They also discuss how frontline management itself is changing as a result of technological advances. Their contribution is followed by Khoreva, Bos-Nehles and Salojärvi’s Chapter 22 on the implementation of digitalisation. By identifying digitalisation as one of the major trends influencing future business, Khoreva and colleagues conducted an explorative inductive qualitative study to reveal the implementation process of digitalisation in organisations and to explore the role of line managers in digitalization implementation. They conclude their chapter by calling for more future research from different theoretical lenses to understand the implementation of digitalisation and the role of line managers in this.

Drent, Renkema and Bos-Nehles (Chapter 23) focus their attention on the role of line managers in the age of artificial intelligence. By conducting semi-structured interviews with HRM software vendors, they explore the new responsibilities of line managers due to the introduction of artificial intelligence in work processes, and discuss how organizations may pass over HRM responsibilities to artificial intelligence in the next phase of HRM devolution. In the final chapter (Chapter 24), Meijerink, Rogiers and Keegan discuss the implications of platform-enabled gig work for line managers. They first define the characteristics of platform-enabled gig work and introduce different types of online labor platforms. They then discuss the HRM-related paradoxes faced by line managers under different types of online labor platform models.

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