HRⁿ Paper

Have organisations squeezed the 'squeezed middle' too much?

Why now is the time to take line manager wellbeing seriously

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Introduction

"Too many organisations are promoting people into these (line management) positions without ensuring that line managers have both the adequate skills and competencies to effectively manage people, and the stretch in both time and resources has led to managers feeling the squeeze."

Bajorek, 2020.

Organisational productivity and employee performance are two of the most studied topics in management research, with the focus on how both can be maximised, and operational effectiveness can be achieved (Knies, Leisink and Kraus-Hoogeveen, 2018). Much of this research has focused on organisational leaders and top management structures who are viewed as fundamental to the development of organisational priorities and the strategies to reach them. Guest (2011) noted that in doing so, however, the role of the front-line manager is frequently ignored, even though their contribution to achieving organisational goals is pivotal because they are at the sharp end of people management.

Performance management systems are used in organisations to increase an employee's performance and support their development, with of course, the ultimate aim of increasing organisational productivity (Van Waeyenburg and Decramer, 2018). Even if these systems are well designed, how effective they are depends on how well and consistently they are implemented (Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk and Looise, 2013). However, many of these performance management tasks have been devolved to front-line managers, who are now involved in recruitment and selection decisions, coaching and guidance, conducting performance appraisal, goal setting, allocating pay or bonuses and being aware of health and wellbeing issues that could be affecting the workforce (Hutchinson, 2008). Hutchinson and Purcell (2007) noted the importance that line managers have in 'bringing policies to life', reward management and learning and development without relinquishing any of their 'old-roles' (including functional specialisms) and supervisory duties. This has resulted in line managers feeling the squeeze. The Covid-19 pandemic has added to a line managers role and workload through managing flexible work requests, establishing new communication patterns to embrace remote or hybrid working and ensuring that new work practices are implemented in an inclusive and fair way.

There are a lot of expectations about what a line manager should 'do' in their role, but what has been missing from a lot of these discussions is how the health and wellbeing of line managers has an impact on the delivery of these tasks, and on the wellbeing of those they manage. Evidence suggests that there is a distinct link between worker functioning (in terms of health and performance) and organisational performance (Day, Penney and Hartling, 2019). If this is also seen in line management functioning, surely now is the time that line management wellbeing is taken seriously, and how organisations stop squeezing the squeezed.

What is the current state of line management wellbeing?

"It feels like I am going home with my own hopes and dreams, and then when line managing going home with the hopes and dreams of maybe six other people, and feeling like I am now responsible for their health and wellbeing, and this all has an impact on how I feel at work."

IES research participant and line manager

It has been recognised for some time, that line managers are high on the league table of the 'most stressed' members of the workforce (one table you don't want to be on the top of), and because of both their workload and other management responsibilities, managers need to be considered as a high-risk occupational group. (Björklund, Lohela-Karlsson, Jensen and Bergström, 2013).

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant changes in the nature of work that are still occurring as a result of it, being a line manager was viewed as a stressful role, and they were seen as an organisational group most at risk of developing mental ill-health and reduced wellbeing at work (St-Hilaire, Gilbert and Brun, 2019). Indeed, St-Hilaire et al., (2019) reported that line managers were most likely to report that their working hours were stressful (and this stress increased as the number of direct reports they managed grew and the number of tasks they were asked to undertake both widened and diversified).

Aside from the logistical and operational implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the workforce, the shift in working patterns this has necessitated and the uncertainty surrounding what happens next (that is still occurring), the evidence is accumulating on the potential physical, mental, and emotional health impact that this has had on certain workforce groups. However, one group that is often left out of this discussion is front-line managers. But recent research has suggested that this is a concern that organisations, occupational health and HR professionals should be taking more seriously. For example:

■ Nicklas Beer at the OECD has been studying 1,500 line managers in medium and small sized companies in Germany, looking at the results from self-report questionnaires about their mental and physical health. The study also looked at the health outcomes of those they manage, concluding that employees managed by line managers with poor physical and psychological health also reported having poor health.

■ The working from home wellbeing survey that IES launched at the start of the pandemic highlighted that line-managers may be feeling the 'squeeze'. The results found that employees who had more contact with their line managers when working from home reported improved organisational commitment and job satisfaction, highlighting the important role that line managers have in terms of both employee wellbeing and productivity. However, the results also suggested this could have come

at a cost to line managers, as managers reported significantly lower levels of job satisfaction and work-life balance in comparison to those without line managerial responsibilities (Bajorek, Mason and Bevan, 2020).

■ Gallup (2021) reported in their workplace survey that manager's stress remained high in comparison to those in other non-managerial positions (who reported a decrease in stress). The research also indicated that line managers reported more burnout, reduced physical wellbeing and work-life balance than the people they manage. The self-reported burnout of managers has also been tracked since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, and throughout 2021. The percentage of managers who reported being burnt-out 'always' or 'very often' was always slightly above those whom they manage, and the gap widened significantly in 2021. In addition to this, it was also found that diagnosed depression increased for managers in 2021 (and was relatively unchanged for individual contributors and project managers and declined for senior leaders). Only one in four line managers 'strongly agreed' that they were able to maintain a healthy balance between work and other personal commitments.

■ Further research by the BBC (2021) reported that middle managers were feeling the tensions between meeting demands of their supervisors, and those whom they supervise, reporting that during the pandemic middle managers found it harder than senior leaders to maintain workplace relationships, and only half felt that they could rely on their colleagues for support. The article also noted that 'younger millennial managers' in particular were feeling the squeeze, with working in a culture that 'glorifies overwork' as well as being a generation with 'sandwich caring responsibilities' offered as explanations for this.

Taken together, these findings paint a worrying picture of line manager health and wellbeing, which could have an impact on the critical role they play in organisations. It is therefore important to understand what the causes of poor line management wellbeing are, and of course, what the consequences of this could be for organisational outcomes and performance. Most crucially, it is essential that we work out how organisations can best support line manager health as they try to adapt to changes in the way work is organised and jobs evolve in a post-pandemic world.

What are the causes and consequences of poor line-management wellbeing?

"It's a necessary position, but it is a structurally difficult position."

Jacob Hirsh, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

In many organisations, recognition for good work and high performance is often provided through vertical promotion into management positions. This may be seen as a professional goal for many individuals as, if managed correctly, could lead to roles with greater organisational influence, autonomy and decision making (St-Hilaire and Gilbert, 2019). However, moving up the management chain also invariably comes with line management responsibilities. Line managers may have to undertake a level of job evaluation to systematically determine the relative importance of the number of roles that

they may have to cover. However, doing this can take time and patience and may cause anxieties, and may not mirror everyone's perceptions of what is important.

Debus, Fritz and Philipp (2019) studied how transitioning to a line managerial position could be seen as a 'double edged sword'. Although the transition usually represents an upward career transition and provides the opportunity to participate in organisational decision making and other new interesting tasks and responsibilities, the potential negative aspects of the role may be less salient, and employees may underestimate the challenges that line management can bring. For example, the increased number of responsibilities can challenge time and energy resources and create an unrelenting workload. Individuals transitioning into line managerial positions have reported increased exhaustion and reduced work-life balance, with resource losses seen as more salient than any resource gains.

Line management responsibilities have expanded beyond their 'traditional' supervisory role (Hales, 2005), and line managers are more frequently becoming known as the 'squeezed-middle' (Bajorek, 2020), on account of the extensive range of tasks and pressures they experience from a range of organisational stakeholders including:

■ Direct Reports – often requiring managers to display emotional intelligence and manage employee expectations which can be emotionally and practically draining.

■ Senior managers – ensuring that organisational standards are maintained, and policies and practices are implemented correctly and complied with.

■ HR and the implementation and delivery of HR practices (reward distribution, training and development, organisational communication).

■ The Organisation – through wider responsibilities such as discipline and grievance issues, attendance, work-life balance and budgetary responsibilities.

■ External environment – organisational clients, customers, suppliers and commercial partners in the sector in which the organisation operates etc.

These often-conflicting pressures can reduce their bandwidth for taking on new tasks (and tasks that may bring them increased motivation and satisfaction), can compromise their ability to perform tasks to their full potential and can have negative consequences for line management health and wellbeing. Being the 'squeezed middle' can lead to role conflict (Evans, 2017; St-Hilaire and Gilbert, 2019) where managers can feel that their hands are tied and they are torn between the demands of stakeholders, with the resultant inconsistencies in role expectations meaning that compliance with one stakeholder may then make it difficult to meet the expectations of another. Line managers have reported a sense of failure, or reduced wellbeing as 'they have not been good enough' when the expected results for each stakeholder have not been achieved.

For some line managers, their jobs may expose them to three of the most widely recognised risk factors for work-related stress – role overload, role ambiguity and role conflict. Navigating changes in organisational policies, practices, roles and work systems as a result of organisational restructures, or external factors (such as the Covid-19 pandemic) has an impact on the work tasks and work hours that line managers have to undertake. This can result in role overload (the incompatibility between the time available

to complete the work and the volume of work to do) (Evans, 2017). This can, ironically, reduce the level of autonomy that line managers have as senior management demands can then take priority. It may also result in more fractured relationships with their direct reports and other stakeholders as they have to accept and implement organisational changes and decisions that may not always appear beneficial or to be prioritising the engagement, consent or wellbeing of employees.

As the line management role continues to expand, this can result in role ambiguity (Evans, 2017), where there is little information provided about how to fulfil these roles, or where there is lack of clarity about what is expected of them. This is further exacerbated if line managers do not receive the required level of support for them to successfully undertake their role. St Hilaire and Gilbert (2019) in their research found that line managers often received reduced social support because of the social isolation in certain decision-making activities that can come with the position. They argued that if a manager has little social support to buffer any situational stressors they are experiencing in the workplace, then any efforts to mitigate the causes of stress will come out of their already stretched personal resources. The devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers also suggests that managers require content-related advice and coaching from HR specialists on how to perform the activities required of them to acceptable levels (Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk and Looise, 2013). If they lack a clear role definition or are asked to perform tasks which appear to conflict with each other, and lack adequate opportunities for support, then this can have negative implications for manager wellbeing.

Others have reported that line managers are now increasingly expected to manage diversity and create workplace cultures that seek respect, value, and harness difference (Richards, Sang, Marks and Gill, 2019), a new requirement for line managers as organisations realise topics around equality, diversity and inclusion should be discussed more openly in the workplace. This can include the management of staff with long-term chronic conditions, mental ill-health, and neurodiversity. Managers have reported that managing such conditions can be time-consuming, emotionally draining and that they are rarely literate in the specifics of conditions that those they manage can present with. IES research among cancer patients trying to return to work (Bevan and Wilson, 2022) found that many line managers wanted to manage sick pay, attendance policies and return to work practices with compassion and flexibility but felt that HR colleagues were often too rigid and inflexible for fear of creating a precedent. As Richards et al. (2019) reported, the hidden costs of line managers having to navigate these boundaries can increase role conflict and anxiety usually because of their frustrations with the nature and nuance of formal organisational support (eg from HR and OH). They commented that: *'In situations where line managers were less supported or trained in emotional labour (EL), the impact of such EL ranged from high levels of personal frustration through to a risk to personal health.' (page 1917).*

Byrne et al (2013) discussed how an individual's 'conservation of resources' can have an impact on line management wellbeing. The conservation of resources theory predicts that those who lack personal resources will experience increased stress and will be prone to consequent further loss. Additionally, once resource depletion has occurred, it may be difficult to 're-fill'. As the bandwidth of line managerial responsibilities increases this puts pressure on a manager's personal characteristics and resources having negative

implications on both organisational outcomes and manager burnout, job satisfaction and turnover. Thus, squeezing the already squeezed can hinder both positive line management capability and wellbeing.

However, just as line managers can have an impact of the wellbeing and behaviours of their direct reports, how employees behave and the support they provide can also influence line manager wellbeing (St-Hilaire, Gilbert and Brun, 2019). Reciprocity between line managers and their direct reports can be a key factor in line manager wellbeing, but this has also received little attention in the literature. Gooty, Connelly, Griffith and Gupta (2010) reported that a direct report's characteristics and behaviours can have an impact on the energy levels and motivation of their managers. This is an area of scant research and would benefit from further investigation.

But what are the consequences of overly squeezed line managers where they are exposed to excessive psychosocial risks and where the demands of their jobs exceed the psychological resources they have to meet them? Research has suggested that this could result in:

■ Poor mental and physical health for the manager themselves. St-Hilaire and Gilbert (2019) report that as a result of changes and diversification in line management roles it is '*now common for managers to experience work overload, lack of recognition, spill over between work and personal life, low level autonomy, ambiguous roles and low social support…this had consequences for their own physical and mental health that can lead to behavioural reactions and somatic complaints.' (page 86).* There is evidence to suggest that managers can develop heart problems, abdominal discomfort, sleep complaints and an elevated risk of depression and burnout. This can also lead to increased absenteeism and presenteeism, reduced organisational commitment, and organisational concerns for future manager retention and succession.

■ Reduced wellbeing and pro-organisational behaviours of those they manage: Byrne et al (2013) reported that when a manager is stressed, and their own resources are 'depleted', this can have an impact on how they manage others. For example, it was noted that a manager's ability to regulate their affective reactions and behaviours can become compromised, they may make less effort in management meetings, they may not be as emotionally aware of their direct report's concerns or wellbeing, and this could have implications on the management decisions that they make. Day et al. (2019) found that managers and leaders can have a substantial impact on the wellbeing of others, negatively effecting performance and other organisational outcomes such as turnover (the old adage of join an organisation, leave a manager still rings true).

■ Reduced diligence in HRM policy implementation: St-Hilaire and Gilbert (2019) discussed how managers can act as buffers or stressors for their direct report's mental health, and how any wellbeing interventions and other HRM practices (such as appraisals and performance management) are undertaken. Line managers have an important role in fostering an environment of psychological safety that facilitate the use and promotion of wellbeing initiatives. If line managers are themselves experiencing mental ill-health at work, they may feel constrained by their situation, and be less likely to undertake their roles efficiently, and the quality with which tasks are executed can be

compromised, especially if they feel that they have little time or support to undertake them (Lansbergen, 2010). This can have knock-on effects for both individual and organisational performance and productivity if not addressed.

Although the focus on the causes and consequences of over-squeezing line managers is still relatively under-researched in comparison to other line management themes, the research to date suggests that there could be negative consequences for individual and organisational outcomes that could begin to have implications for employee performance and productivity.

What can organisations do to ease the squeeze?

"The ability of line managers to cope with stress and the management of their workload is an important part of their own wellbeing and their overall success as managers."

Bevan, Brinkley, Bajorek and Cooper (2018)

With the over-burden of line managers having potential negative outcomes on them, those who they manage and the wider organisation, now is the time to focus on what HR can do to help manager wellbeing. However, to achieve this successfully, a systematic approach must be adopted, with a focus on a range of stakeholders including senior leaders, HR and learning and development professionals, Occupational Health professionals, line management peers, direct reports and trades union or employee representatives. Here we focus on HR, line managers themselves and direct reports:

There are a number of questions for **HR professionals** to consider in relation to what they can do to help line manager wellbeing:

■ How are line managers chosen? As previously alluded to, individuals are usually promoted to managerial positions as a reward for their performance in their technical roles. However, this does not necessarily mean that these individuals are suited to line management positions or have the emotional intelligence, or indeed the motivation required to undertake line management duties successfully. Now may be the time to think about what constellation of behavioural, technical, and emotional abilities line managers require and to ensure that adequate attention is given to managing how line managers are selected, trained, coached, and supported in organisations. Are there different paths of promotion that organisations can implement that do not require people to become line managers? Line management is not necessarily a career goal for everyone, especially those with aspirations to pursue specialist interests.

■ When line managers are selected how adequately are they trained to take on all the line managerial responsibilities they are asked to undertake? When recruited into a line management position, individuals may find themselves in positions that are unfamiliar to them and in situations where training is required (for example, how to have discussions about wellbeing, providing feedback, undertaking difficult conversations). Training line managers may enhance their ability and specialist knowledge and emphasise to them that the 'people management' element of the role is critical rather than optional.

- However, organisations must not fall into the training gap. Even after training, a line manager still may not have the capacity and opportunity to fulfil all the roles required of them. Line managers require clearer role boundaries about what is and isn't within their remit. Could HR better define what is expected of line managers to help them understand the importance of their roles? Is it time that some of their current responsibilities are devolved back to HR, so line managers can focus on the supervisory and developmental aspects of their role?

- The organisational culture is also important to consider. Is health and wellbeing for all staff high up on the organisational agenda? Is there a culture of psychological safety where all staff, including line managers can disclose mental ill-health without fear of what it may do to their career horizons? Organisations should be developing a culture where feeling over-squeezed is not applauded or admired and where all staff are supported to thrive. There needs to be a culture of 'shared responsibility' so staff at all levels work towards promoting better mental health.

- Is HR fully accessible and providing the support when needed, or able to signpost line managers to the right sources of support? Line managers need to know where they can go to receive the support they need, and where they do not feel guilty, or that they have 'failed' in their role when they are seeking to look after their own mental health.

There are a few actions that **line managers** can undertake to support their own physical and mental wellbeing. These include:

- Having the option to say no to a line management role. If individuals already feel pressed in their technical role or know that they will not have enough time or they recognise that they do not have the right skills or motivation to take up line management responsibilities, then they should not have to do so (and it should not be a barrier to career progression if they don't). A clearer 'role evaluation' of what the line managerial role includes could be helpful for individuals to understand what will be required of them.

- Line managers should be aware of the tasks and skills and behaviours they need to implement, and be prepared to ask for, and participate in any training or coaching for any behaviours they would like to improve. Line managers should be aware of organisational wellbeing policies and where to access support, for both their direct reports and themselves. This is especially important for line managers who have recently transitioned into the role and may be coming to terms with the new stressors and wellbeing issues associated with pressure on time and energy resources.

- It is important for managers to practice their own self-awareness and self-care. Managers should be mindful of their own physical and mental health and when need take time for rest and recovery and conserve or re-build their own wellbeing resources when needed. They may need to learn to set their own boundaries to preserve their own mental health, and the health of those they manage. Opportunities for line manager reflective practise should be encouraged.

- Line managers also need to be able to turn to others for support and know the chain of responsibility and support that exists. What is their relationship like with their own line manager, HR, and organisational management teams? Developing a forum for line

managers where they can access peer support could also be a useful vehicle for helping with line manager wellbeing.

Finally, a line manager's **direct reports** also have a role in helping to preserve line manager mental health. This includes:

- Understanding that a line management relationship is a two-way relationship. If they can see that their line manager may be stressed it is just as important for them to ask the 'how are you doing?' question. This may show the line manager that there are people concerned about their wellbeing, and provide an opportunity for reflection.

- Direct reports can also provide support by offering help and support to their line managers with their workload, or more discreet tasks if they recognise that their line manager is over-stretched with technical tasks. This may give the line manager the opportunity to prioritize what tasks they need to achieve.

Conclusions

There is no denying that line managers play an incredibly important role in organisations, bringing policies to life, allocating and managing resources, communicating clearly, motivating, consulting, and engaging staff and providing a supportive ear to those they manage. However, alongside an expansion in the scope of their roles, the burden of expectation they have to manage, and the number of stakeholders they need to please, there has been a worrying (yet under-researched) trend in poor line manager wellbeing. This not only has an impact on their health and performance but can have knock-on effects for the health and performance of those they manage, and the efficacy with which organisational policies and practices are implemented. With the potential for further line management challenges arising as many organisations transition to hybrid ways of working, now really is the time to stop over-squeezing the squeezed middle and put the wellbeing of all staff much higher on the organisational agenda.

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