



Front line managers



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About this guide

Research has shown that it is managers at the first tier of line management who have the greatest influence on the way people behave and their attitude to their organisation. This behaviour can be critical to business success (see p9 on 'discretionary behaviour').

This group of employees has often been overlooked in recent years. This guide will ask:

- Who are front line managers?
- Why are they so important?
- What problems do they face and what do they need?
- How can you help them become more effective?

This is a practical guide aimed at helping senior managers get the best out of their front line managers. Our key messages are that front line managers need to be:

- **Recruited and selected** to ensure they have the right 'people' qualities to motivate staff and deal with difficult problems
- **Trained** so that they can carry out their duties effectively and develop their own careers
- Given a **balanced workload** that recognises the need to allocate time for performance management duties
- **Coached by senior managers** so that they openly discuss problems and actively participate in decision-making.

Throughout this guide front line managers will be referred to as FLMs.



The role of *front line managers*



What is a front line manager?

FLMs are known by many names: supervisor, team leader, project leader, manager. Generally, they are at the first level of management. In smaller firms they may just manage one or two employees, in larger organisations they may have as many as 30 employees reporting to them. The employees they manage

usually have no management responsibility themselves.

FLMs guide and direct their teams in the performance of their tasks. They often perform the same tasks as their teams or have recent experience of the work. They are often regarded as the voice of management on the front line.

Front line managers: Profile 1	
Job title:	Team leader
Sector:	Retail
Responsible for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● customer care ● managing sales staff (including recruitment and performance assessment) ● team-working: planning rotas and attending management meetings ● maintaining standards on the shop floor.
Best part of job:	The buzz when the team is running smoothly and we meet our key performance indicators.
Worst part of job:	Nasty surprises. I am responsible for keeping the store neat and tidy – not always easy when staff call in sick.
One thing that would improve your job:	More time to do staff appraisals at work – I tend to take annual reports home with me which isn't ideal.

The role of the FLM typically includes managing:

- people
- budgets
- work rotas
- quality and operational performance
- customer care.

Some FLMs work in a very structured team, with rigid reporting lines, while others work in a more fluid way, accountable for projects rather than specific employees.

Why is the role of FLMs changing?

The main job of a line manager has traditionally been to 'tell and monitor' – in other words, tell people what to do and make sure they are doing it properly. There is still an element of this for many FLMs but new technology, changing working practices and an increasing focus on the individual has created a more complex picture.

FLMs are no longer merely supervisors. They also have responsibility for:

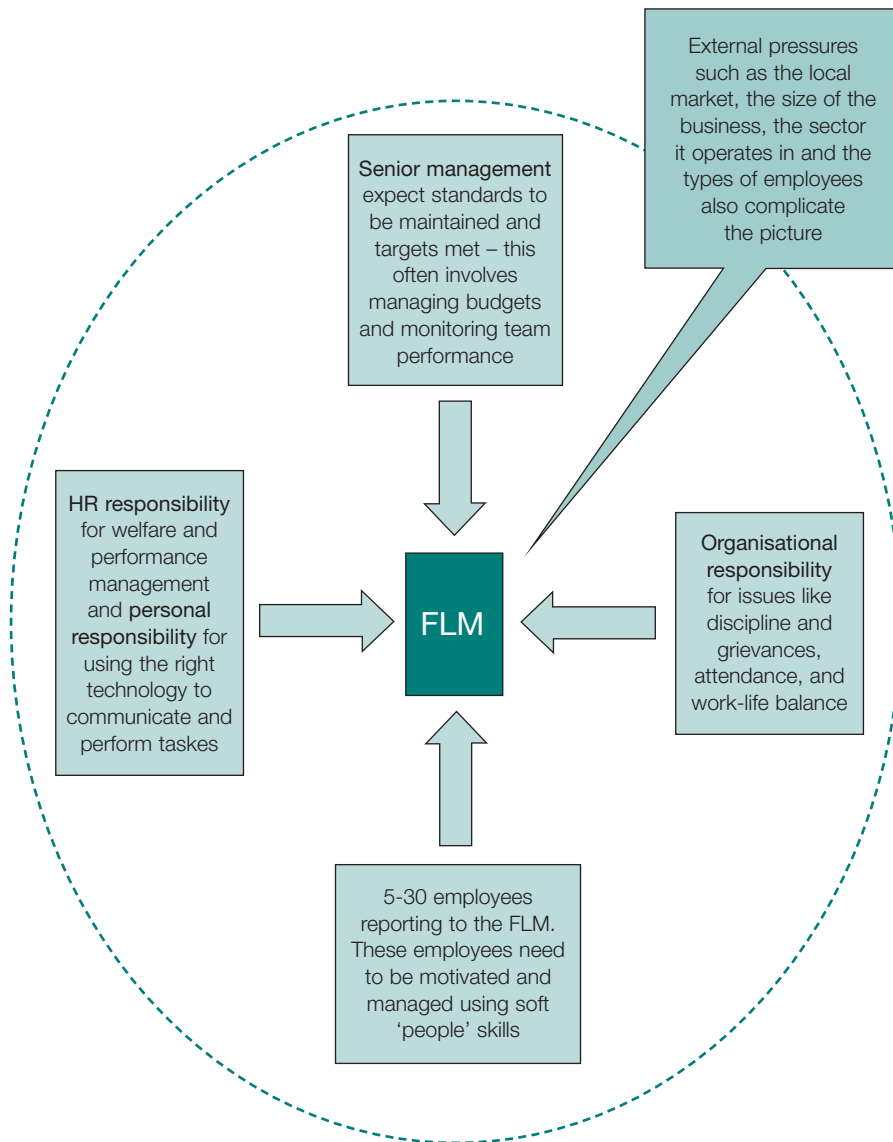
- welfare issues traditionally undertaken by HR, such as counselling

- disciplinary and attendance issues that involve having 'difficult conversations' with employees
- communication – providing the link between senior management and the shop floor in organisational structures which nowadays have fewer levels of management.

Individuals and teams are often the key to increased productivity and efficiency. The person who can get the best out of individuals and teams is usually the person who works closest to them – their front line manager.

FLMs are best placed to talk to employees, to listen to their concerns, to counsel and coach them, to check they meet their targets and to ensure they are committed to the business.

Are FLMs able to cope with all this extra pressure and what can be done to make them more effective? See 'What problems do FLMs face?' (p12) and 'What do FLMs need?' (p15).





Why is the job of FLMs *so important?*

FLMs are the people faced with finding solutions to an often bewilderingly wide range of problems every day. For example, a Team Leader in a large department store (see Profile 1, p3) or a Ward Manager in a hospital (see Profile 2, p7) might be asked to:

- find out why a member of staff is off, when they will be back and arrange cover
- sort out a disagreement between two teams
- organise a team meeting and write briefing notes for senior management
- explain why the store/ward failed the latest health and safety check
- deal with an irate patient/customer
- organise staff rotas

- take part in staff recruitment
- write staff reports
- choose someone for a training course
- decide who is going to get this month's bonus.

All of this and they are expected to know everyone's job inside out and help out on the front line from time to time.

As well as reacting to problems as they arise, FLMs need to anticipate future concerns. How well they deal with problems will often depend on how well they:

- bring organisational policies and procedures to life
- connect with individual employees and their representatives.

Front line managers: Profile 2	
Job title:	Ward Manager
Sector:	NHS
Responsible for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● patient care ● managing and coaching nurses ● purchasing equipment and managing budgets ● team-working: planning rotas and attending management meetings ● maintaining standards on the ward.
Best part of job:	Seeing patients well looked after by building good team spirit.
Worst part of job:	Paperwork. All of the policies and procedures – for patient care, health and safety, attendance and discipline etc – are very necessary but they all take time to carry through.
One thing that would improve your job:	Training. I can book myself on a course easily enough, but if we are short-staffed I have to cancel at short notice.

Bringing policies to life

Larger organisations probably have policies and procedures covering everything from equal opportunities to pay, discipline to pensions and flexible working to health and safety.

Smaller firms may not have so many policies and procedures. Things like communication and staff reporting may be done more informally.

Whatever the size of the organisation, managers need to be consistent, fair and flexible about the way they treat people.

Even the best policies and procedures won't work properly unless they are introduced and used in the right way. There may be a big gap between your policies and what actually happens. For example:

The theory	The practice
Your policy is that FLMs should meet their staff quarterly to discuss performance.	Do your FLMs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meet only when there is a problem? ● Have an ongoing dialogue with their staff that negates the need for formal meetings? ● Meet quarterly but only for five minutes?
Your attendance policy is that FLMs have 'return to work discussions' with all absent employees on the day they return.	Do your FLMs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hold return to work meetings only if they don't know why an individual is absent? ● Hold return to work meetings only if they feel the employee will be comfortable talking about personal issues? ● Insist the employee give a full account of their absence no matter what the reason?
Your policy on communication and consultation is that FLMs should talk to their staff about all changes to the way their teams are run.	Do your FLMs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give staff a chance to express their views before a decision is made? ● Present changes as a <i>fait accompli</i> but offer to be sympathetic about their concerns? ● Discuss changes with one or two people in the team and hope they'll tell their colleagues?

As well as the right kind of people management skills FLMs need the support of senior managers to make policies work in practice and to help them treat everyone equally – see 'What do FLMs need?', p15.

Relationships with employees

The way that policies and procedures are introduced and used is often down to the discretion of the individual FLM. Recent research has shown that this 'discretionary behaviour' has a strong influence on the behaviour and attitude of employees.

Bringing policies to life, published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reports that an employee's performance and attitude is often linked to:

- how well they get on with their manager
- how they see their FLM implementing policies.

Discretionary behaviour is behaviour which:

“goes beyond the requirements of the job to give that extra performance which can boost the bottom line.”

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

The FLM can encourage positive behaviour in many ways. For example, they might offer coaching and guidance to new starters or for those struggling with their performance. They should always try to be receptive to an employee's problems or concerns and give positive feedback on work well done. Employees are more likely to feel motivated and committed to an organisation if their FLM shows flexibility and empathy, rather than doing everything by the book.

The personal interaction between FLMs and the employees they manage is particularly important in the following areas:

- performance management – especially if linked to pay and reward
- work-life balance and flexible working
- training and development and coaching
- communication and involvement
- openness and conflict management
- employee representation.

How the FLM handles each of these areas will strongly influence the way an employee feels about their place of work and how well they do their job.

	Opportunity	Risk
Performance management (Pay/reward)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● make a connection between personal and organisational goals ● reward employees for their performance and innovative ideas ● motivate staff through positive feedback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● if pay or rewards do not accurately reflect performance employees may feel resentful or jealous ● hastily written reports may be seen as a reflection of the way staff are valued.
Work-life balance – see the Acas guide <i>Flexible working and work-life balance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● set a good example by taking lunch, rest breaks and annual leave ● retain valued members of staff by being flexible about working patterns ● develop empathy by recognising personal needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● working extra hours may sometimes be necessary to complete an order ● managing homeworkers or job-sharers may present new challenges ● how do you 'draw a line' between work and home life?
Training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● coach staff to improve their skills and build trust ● career development can ease some of the pressure on stretched FLMs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● offering training and development opportunities as a form of reward can alienate some employees ● employees may become frustrated by lack of training and/or promotion prospects.
Communication and involvement – see the Acas guide <i>Employee communication and consultation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● make policies more effective by involving employees and their representatives ● give FLMs a clear role to communicate with their staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● your door may be open but do you have the time to listen to your employees? ● stress levels can rise if employees feel 'cut off' from what's going on.

	Opportunity	Risk
Openness and conflict management – see the Acas guide <i>Managing conflict and work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● investigate problems so you know what's really going on ● develop trust and team-working. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● dealing with grievances informally can be very demanding and FLMS may feel out of their depth ● ignoring problems can be dangerous: they may just escalate.
Employee representation – see the Acas guide <i>Representation at work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● work closely with trade union and/or employee representatives both in consultative committees or working groups and on an informal basis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● without effective employee representation you can get out of touch with the opinions and feelings of your employees.





What problems do

FLMs face?

The main problems facing FLMs are:

- lack of **time** to deal with personal issues and staff reporting
 - too much **paperwork** as a result of the rise in the number of organisational policies and procedures
 - the need for **self-awareness**: many FLMs do not appreciate how important their jobs are
 - the high level of **interpersonal skills** needed to deal with their staff and senior management
 - an **ambiguity** in the role they play – having to be ‘all things to all people’.
- two colleagues accusing each other of bullying
 - a senior manager who repeatedly undermines their role as team leader
 - jealousy in a team over nominations for training and bonuses.

Dealing with these kinds of issues takes patience, training and judgment – for example, when is the right time to ask a manager or HR section for help? Faced with so many other conflicting priorities it can be tempting for FLMs to brush problems under the carpet or to rely on a gut reaction to resolve problems.

Having difficult conversations

Managing staff can be the most rewarding aspect of a job but it is also often the most challenging. FLMs might have to deal with:

- an employee who is regularly late for work because they have an alcohol or drug addiction

Acas runs training events to help managers deal with people management issues – such as stress, attendance and conflict – as well as publishing a range of useful guides ([visit www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)).

Front line managers: Profile 3	
Job title:	Team leader
Sector:	Manufacturing
Responsible for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● production ● managing engineering staff (including recruitment and performance assessment) ● team-working: planning rotas and attending management meetings ● maintaining standards on the shop floor.
Best part of job:	Despite all the hassle and the meetings we actually produce something that's useful to the company.
Worst part of job:	Trying to explain complex technical issues to senior management. They are often only interested in production and sales figures.
One thing that would improve your job:	More recognition of the expertise in the section and more opportunity to reward my staff for producing new ideas.



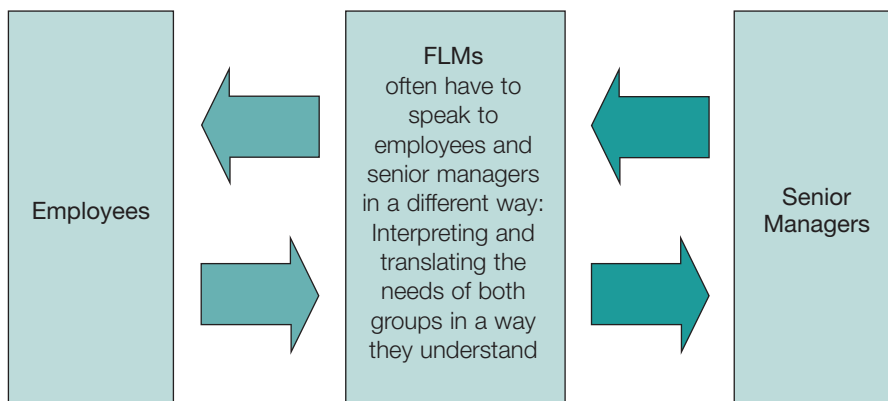
Piggy in the middle

FLMs can feel stuck between the expectations of the employees they manage and the demands of their own senior managers. The employees they manage may be looking for:

- support and encouragement
- reward for good work – this may be training and development opportunities as well as financial reward
- strong leadership
- flexibility.

Good management is partly learned by example. If the FLM is given support and encouragement they are more likely to manage their own staff in the same way.

One of the biggest problems facing FLMs is the difficulty in interpreting and translating the needs of staff and senior management so that understanding, trust and cooperation are maintained (see diagram).





What do FLMs

need?

FLMs are the same as everyone else: what they need most is to be well-managed. Specifically, FLMs need to be:

1.	Recruited and selected to ensure they have the right people qualities to motivate staff and deal with difficult problems.
2.	Trained so that they can carry out their duties effectively and develop their own careers.
3.	Given a balanced workload that recognises the need to allocate time for performance management duties.
4.	Coached by senior managers so that they openly discuss problems and actively participate in decision-making.



There is a checklist at Appendix 1 you can use to see how well you are managing your front line managers.

Recruitment and selection

Recruiting FLMs who do not have the right kind of people skills can lead to increased organisational costs and employee turnover, and lower staff morale. Such people are likely to feel the pressure of front-line management more intensely and end up leaving.

Many employers feel reasonably comfortable about identifying which candidate has the right technical skills to do the job. Judging how someone is likely to react when faced with a wide range of people issues can be much harder.

Many organisations set out the competences that individuals need to become successful front line managers. Competences can be used to help employers assess a candidate at interview.

Typical competences for a front line manager might include:

- communication skills
- people management
- team skills
- customer service skills
- problem-solving.

A competence for 'people management' might describe how an FLM is expected to 'act as a role model', 'develop trust' and 'motivate others'. FLMs might be asked to give examples of how they have demonstrated competences on their application forms and at interviews.

It may not be practicable for all small firms to use a competency framework, but the same principles apply. How do you want your FLMs to behave when they start work and how can they get the best out of your employees? Try writing down a description of the qualities you are looking for and ask candidates to explain how they have dealt in the past with the kind of situations that might occur in your business.

Training and development

Employees expect FLMs to know how your organisation works. The FLM should know what rules apply when and which forms need to be filled in by whom. They also need to be able to conduct one-to-one meetings with their staff and deal with often very sensitive or emotive issues.

FLMs need to be trained to manage:

- discipline and grievance procedures
- attendance management
- communication and consultation
- work-life balance
- health and safety
- recruitment and selection
- staff reporting and appraisal.

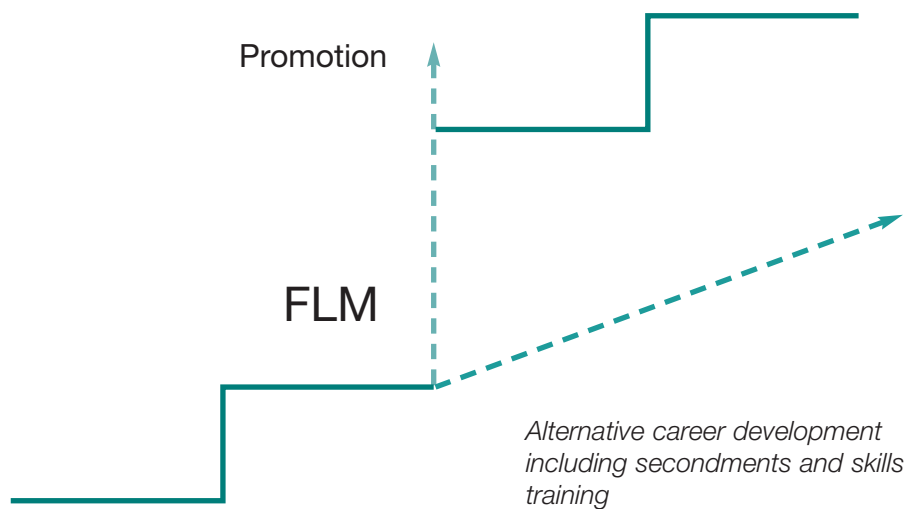
Specific training to develop interpersonal skills can also be very useful. Acas runs a course on 'handling difficult conversations' – as well as courses on stress, bullying, managing change and many others (visit www.acas.org.uk/training for more information).

Many small firms are family-run and some personnel issues may be dealt with via ongoing dialogue. Close family ties can make it harder to be objective about important issues like bullying and attendance. Formal policies, even very brief ones, can provide useful clarity.

Access to training may also be an issue – some small firms may not be able to give their employees the time off. Coaching can be a practical alternative to formal training courses (see p19).

In larger organisations, flatter structures (ie with fewer levels of management) mean that for some FLMs there is a big step between their grade and the next grade up.

This may mean that promotion opportunities are limited so it can help to provide alternative forms of career development, such as secondments and specialist skills training.



Front line managers: Profile 4	
Job title:	Project leader
Sector:	Professional services, consultancy
Responsible for:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the team ● the client relationship work flows and timetables ● the budget and meeting organisational needs.
Best part of job:	Dealing with clients directly.
Worst part of job:	Managing so many different staff: they tend to change for each project.
One thing that would improve your job:	A standard formula for assessing performance: at the moment everyone has a different idea about what's expected of them.

Balanced workload

One of the key skills expected of all managers is the ability to prioritise. Prioritising involves weighing up the importance of a range of tasks and deciding what resources – in terms of time, money and staff – will be allocated to each task and in what order.

With so many conflicting demands on their time prioritising work can be particularly difficult for FLMs. You can help them to manage their workload by:

- ensuring forms and procedures are as simple as possible and written in plain English

Prioritise:

- ✓ Set fixed time aside for development tasks, like staff annual reports, that may not be urgent but are very important.
- ✓ Be as flexible as possible about your work routine, so that you can deal with very urgent work that lands on your desk out of the blue.
- ✓ Don't neglect ongoing maintenance tasks that are not urgent but can create problems if neglected for too long.
- ✓ Deal with urgent tasks as they arise even if they seem quite routine.

- ring-fencing time to be allotted to certain key tasks – such as writing staff reports
- monitoring the volume of work – it can be worth writing a list of the jobs the FLM has to do in a typical day or week
- promoting health and wellbeing in the organisation.

FLMs can become bottlenecks where work and personnel issues get stuck due to work overload and too much pressure. Having the right tools to do the job at the right time can certainly help. For example:

- is the personnel handbook accessible online and easy to read?
- does the organisation have clear policies for dealing with absence and returning to work?

- is training delivered before and not after policies change?

Small firms may not have a personnel handbook or provide individual training courses for absence and discipline but FLMs still need clear guidance about how to deal with these issues effectively.

Coaching

There are many forms of coaching including life coaching, skills coaching and business coaching. Most coaching is motivated by a desire to change, and improve, the way things are currently done. This might mean changing the way someone interacts with their colleagues, improving levels of skill or performance or acting as a positive role model.



Type of coaching	Used for:
Business coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● organisational development ● change brought about by mergers and acquisitions ● support for employees undergoing a change of role or career.
Skills/performance coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● personal development ● improving individual performance ● focus on productivity.
Life coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● motivating individuals to change aspects of their behaviour at work.

FLMs will often benefit from business, skills or performance coaching at work because it helps them to:

- make a connection between personal and organisational goals
- take more responsibility for making decisions
- solve problems
- develop interpersonal skills.

Senior managers can act as role models by demonstrating the kind of behaviour they are trying to promote.

Coaching and mentoring help to develop bonds between colleagues at work by emphasising the importance of personnel development. One-to-one interactions will also help to nurture working relationships based on openness and understanding.

Some organisations use coaching to help employees manage specific work or life situations. For example, maternity coaching can help mothers manage the transition from work to maternity leave and back to work again.

Coaching involves:

- working with a trained coach – these can be external or trained in-house
- non-directive guidance: you work things out for yourself
- lots of feedback – an increasing number of organisations use 360 degree reporting as part of the coaching process
- focusing on goals: these can be individual, team or organisational.

Coaching does not have to be very formal or expensive. Small firms often use on-the-job coaching to build confidence and pass on organisational values.

Sometimes the best support a line manager can get is from another line manager. Employers should give line managers the opportunity to meet and share experiences.

For more information on coaching visit the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development at www.cipd.co.uk.

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Summary:

Making the connection between people, behaviour and performance

The term 'behaviour' generally has negative connotations when used to describe an employee. It is often associated with unsatisfactory conduct or issues such as bullying and harassment.

Recent research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development has shown how managers can start to think much more positively about employee behaviour.

Many employers assume that if they can improve levels of performance then they can improve output and productivity. Improving performance is increasingly about influencing the choice employees make about how well they decide to do their job.

Front line managers have the most influence over this choice. This guide has shown that triggering positive discretionary behaviour is not just about what you do as a manager, but the way you do it.

A lack of job satisfaction may be caused by many issues, such as pay, job design or workplace bullying. Front line managers cannot control

all of these issues but they can do a lot to trigger the 'feel good' factor that helps to motivate and engage staff.

Front line managers can help to encourage positive discretionary behaviour by:

- **Bringing policies and procedures to life.** This often means giving things like appraisal meetings or team briefings the time and care they deserve.
- **Making a connection with employees.** Line managers are best placed to talk to employees, to listen to their concerns and to coach and counsel them.
- **Leading by example.** Managers should take a lead on important issues like work-life balance and equality and diversity.
- **Managing performance** through praise for work well done and guiding and coaching to improve performance that is not up to standard, including holding that difficult conversation when it is needed.

5

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The role of the line manager is changing. Being able to 'tell and monitor' is no longer enough. Managers need to be able to engage their staff using highly-developed interpersonal skills. What were once considered 'soft' people skills are now being increasingly linked to very concrete things such as performance and productivity.

The research published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development has discovered that FLMs are often crucial in making the difference between low-performing and high-performing organisations. FLMs are often responsible for providing a clear link between business strategy and goals, as well as the role of the individual.

What makes an organisation effective?

Is it:

- planning?
- operational efficiency?
- sales and marketing?
- design and innovation?
- financial management?

Find the answer in the *Acas Model Workplace* – visit www.acas.org.uk.



Appendix: front line managers *Checklist*

	Yes	No
1. Front line managers are recruited and selected to ensure they have the right people qualities to motivate staff and deal with difficult problems		
- Do you use competences to identify the qualities you were looking for in your new recruits?		
- Are you clear about the kind of interpersonal skills you wanted your front line managers to have?		
- Do your line managers feel confident about having difficult conversations with employees about issues such as absence and poor performance?		
2. Front line managers are trained so that they can carry out their duties effectively and develop their own careers		
- Have your line managers received training in all the basic policies and procedures – such as handling discipline and grievance issues, health and safety and absence?		
- Do front line managers have the opportunity to develop their own skills?		
- Have you talked to your front line managers in the last year about their training needs?		
3. Front line managers are given a balanced workload that recognises the need to allocate time for performance management duties		
- Do front line managers have time allotted to do staff reports and appraisal interviews?		
- Do you review the amount of work your front line managers have to do?		
- Are policies and procedures written in plain English?		



	Yes	No
4. Front line managers are coached by senior managers so that they openly discuss problems and actively participate in decision making		
- Do you give regular feedback, both positive and negative, on your line manager's work?		
- Do your front line managers feel comfortable about discussing their concerns with you?		
- Do your front line managers feel confident about taking responsibility for the decisions they make?		



Information in this booklet has been revised up to the date of the last reprint – see date below.

Legal information is provided for guidance only and should not be regarded as an authoritative statement of the law, which can only be made by reference to the particular circumstances which apply. It may, therefore, be wise to seek legal advice.

Acas aims to improve organisations and working life through better employment relations. We provide up-to-date information, independent advice, high quality training and we work with employers and employees to solve problems and improve performance.

We are an independent, publicly-funded organisation and many of our services are free.

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