

THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLTON

BUSINESS SCHOOL

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PATHWAY

SEMESTER I EXAMINATION 2008/2009

STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

MODULE NO: HRM 3001

Date: Tuesday 20th January 2009

Time: 14:00 – 16:00

INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES:

1. There are **TWO** questions on this paper related to “Line manager involvement in learning and development”.
 2. Attached is a clean copy of the examination case study.
 3. Students are allowed **ONE** sheet of notes on A4 paper in their own handwriting or typed. This **MUST** be submitted with the examination books. **NO** other books or materials will be allowed.
 4. Answer **BOTH** questions in essay format.
 5. Both questions carry equal marks.
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Bolton Business School
Human Resource Management Pathway
Semester I Examination 2008/2009
Strategic Human Resource Management
Module No. HRM3001

Answer **BOTH** questions in essay format

1. Gibb (2003:p281) concludes “the issue of line manager involvement in L & D at work will continue to be an important part of the corporate and critical agendas”. Discuss why these conclusions were reached drawing on examples from the case study.
2. Evaluate critically the advantages and disadvantages of line manager involvement in Learning and Development. You will be expected to provide a balanced analysis of both advantages and disadvantages.

END OF QUESTIONS



Line manager involvement in learning and development

Small beer or big deal?

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Abstract Increasing line manager involvement in learning and development (L&D) at work is one important part of the broader changing relations between line managers and human resource management (HRM). The advantages of increasing line manager involvement in L&D at work are frequently highlighted. However, the disadvantages raise questions about the overall impact on L&D at work. Evidence about the practice of L&D at work depending on line manager involvement is limited. Instead of having an evidence base to evaluate it there is only scope to reflect more critically on the significance of the trend to line manager involvement in L&D at work in context. Two principal interpretations are possible; one that the trend is of minimal significance, the other that it is of much greater significance. Increasing line manager involvement in L&D at work is both part of the means of attaining, and one of the ends of, broader changes in work, organisation and HRM. The conclusion here is that there are legitimate concerns about shifting to increasing line manager involvement in L&D at work, where that prejudices the provision and use of specialist L&D at work resources. However, these concerns are outweighed by the greater concern to re-align work, organisation and management for an era where knowledge management is predominant. The issue of line manager involvement in L&D at work will continue to be an important part of the corporate and critical review agendas.

Line manager involvement in L&D at work

Recent mapping of clusters of research themes in human resource development (HRD) in Europe highlighted ten key themes (Manning, 2002):

- (1) National employment and training patterns shaping HRD.
- (2) Tackling the problem of skill shortage in the work force.
- (3) Specific HRD strategies in medium/small organisations.
- (4) Adjusting continuing training to organisational flexibility.
- (5) Notion of "flexible worker" challenging "professional identity".
- (6) Changing role of HRD professionals (from trainer to consultant).
- (7) Sharing responsibility for HRD between professionals, managers and employees.
- (8) Shift from skill building to performance improvement and competence development.
- (9) Integrating work and learning in organisations.
- (10) Knowledge sharing as both managerial and participatory approach.



While one of these explicitly identifies the role of line managers in learning and development (L&D) at work, suggesting the issue is of some importance, most of the others also have implications for line managers' involvement with L&D at work; the concern with integrating learning and work, for example, must have implications for the role of line managers. This mapping of research clusters emphasises the specific and general interest in the role of line managers in L&D at work, in contrast with past perceptions where the focus was on L&D specialists.

In the UK this emphasis on the role of line managers in L&D at work has for some time been acknowledged as an important aspect of L&D at work. Harrison (2002) emphasises the need to include line managers in planning for L&D, and to "hand over primary responsibility to the line". But it is the more general way that, in the name of changes in work, management, organisation, and human resource management (HRM), greater involvement of managers with L&D has been proposed that sparks most contemporary interest. Hay (2002), for example, argues that the reason most people leave their jobs and move is not related to a lack of satisfaction with pay, but a lack of satisfaction with how a person's skills and talents are being developed. The term HRM is used here in a neutral sense; to mean the whole of people management, the combination of employee resourcing, employee relations, employee reward and L&D concerns in business and management that together constitute the field of HRM. L&D at work is always an aspect of the whole HRM of an organisation, not an isolated, stand alone activity. The strategies and policies organisations have for attracting and retaining staff, and the ways that stakeholders define their different and common interests at work can have a great impact on how L&D at work is managed. However, the scope of this article is to consider L&D at work and the involvement of line managers in it.

L&D systems and roles have been adapted or changed to include greater line management involvement in L&D at work. Some examples would be:

- devolution of training responsibilities such as induction (IRS, 1996);
- the growth of performance management and developmental appraisal systems (Redman and Snape, 1992);
- the use of cellular working and team leader-based forms of working (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993);
- the growth of formal mentoring systems (Gibb, 1999);
- workplace-based assessment and verification of competence (Beaumont, 1996; Whitemar, 1993);
- the development of "corporate universities" (Stumpf, 1998); and
- re-conceptualisations of senior management strategic roles in terms of leadership in learning organisations (Senge, 1992) and knowledge management (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Newell *et al.*, 2002).

Evidently many conceptualisations of changes in work, organisation and HRM in theory, and in many companies in practice, there are perceived to be advantages in making greater use of line managers as developers of people, as a part of one or a combination of these kinds of initiatives. The advantages of greater line management involvement in helping others to learn can be related to four main areas; the quantity of L&D at work, the quality of L&D at work, the value for management in the organisation, and the re-alignment of L&D activities with human relations changes in an organisation as a whole.

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Advantages of greater line manager involvement in L&D

First is the belief that there will be more development for a wide range of people if line managers are more involved in L&D at work. Long-standing criticisms of what have been called the “sheep-dip” and “injection” models of L&D at work have existed (Lynton and Pareek, 2000). The idea that employees would, at regular intervals, be given doses of L&D had become institutionalised in organisational systems and workplace training practices. But the workplace now requires the promotion of positive attitudes towards continuous and lifelong learning. L&D at work is not something that happens periodically in formal classroom-based settings. It needs to be an integral feature of working life. To get a job, to retain a job or to develop a career people need to become more involved more often with L&D. This prescription applies to people in all situations. It applies to those who have no qualifications, and who may lack basic skills. It applies to those who have either academic or vocational qualifications, but not a balanced skill/knowledge base. It also applies to those who are highly trained professionals in occupations where keeping pace with new knowledge and skills has always been desirable but is now even more essential. To help promote such lifelong learning those in the workforce currently in work rather than those in formal education need to be reached and changed. There would seem to be a key role here for line managers to become more proactive about development. Line managers should expect and help to support the efforts of employees to learn and develop.

The second argument is that there will be a better quality of L&D at work for organisations and individuals if line managers are more directly involved. Criticisms of the quality of organisational learning interventions, such as classroom-based courses and traditional instructions/facilitation have stressed problems with the operation of the systematic training cycle (Allen, 1994). The gap between organisational performance needs and individual performance can be closed where those who are familiar with both the organisational need and the individual play a greater role; that means line managers rather than training specialists who may neither understand the organisational need or the individuals needs; or, indeed, fail to understand them both.

The third argument is that requiring line managers to be more involved in the L&D of employees will lead to a transformation of managers themselves.

The need for such a transformation is justified by a critical estimation of line manager's generic people management skills. The belief is that by taking developmental responsibilities on board line managers will have to change more generally, ultimately becoming more competent in interpersonal interactions in work teams. There are then benefits to line managers as they become more competent at managing people because they have to take responsibility for their development. These benefits help to enhance management in the organisation as a whole.

The final advantage often identified is that enlisting line managers as developers of people can contribute to broader organisational change and transformation of human relations at work. Broader change and transformation of human relations at work can be characterised at many levels. It may be focused on human relations being aligned with being more quality oriented, or with being more innovative, or with being more efficient and giving greater value for money. However, it has characterised the contribution of HRM skilled line managers, and the enhanced interpersonal relationships that are thought to develop with L&D partnerships, is considered to be significant. People will be more inclined to and more able to talk to each other, to trust each other and to work together in periods of change.

Disadvantages of greater line manager involvement in L&D

The criticisms of greater line management involvement in helping others to learn at work can also be considered in relation to each of these claimed benefits. First there is a belief that there will be less development for many if line managers are made more responsible for staff development. Current learning at work systems are based in some way on systematically enabling people to participate in learning, despite pressures in the working environment to just keep on working. If this element of the system is weakened, or indeed is done away with, then L&D might be neglected. Other pressures in the workplace, principally the need to deal with immediate tasks, will take precedence. Without the option of taking time out to go and learn, learning will suffer. Even if time is still set aside for learning it may be that, in the absence of well structured training plans and courses, employees will not get a complete and coherent package of L&D at work.

Second, there is no reason to believe that line managers can be better skilled developers than specialists trained in L&D at work, no matter how much development they receive as "teachers" or "trainers". Inevitably most line managers will not be able to organise and evaluate as high quality L&D processes and practices as specialists. Line managers will not be as accurate as others can be in objectively determining L&D needs. Line managers will not be as good at instructing, coaching or facilitating development as specialists. And line managers will not be as adept at evaluating L&D in order to validate it, and/or highlight further L&D needs.

Third, depending on line managers to fulfil these roles may mean marginalising specialists in L&D at work. Some argue that the specialist role will become transformed as line managers take more responsibility, rather than being marginalised; with specialists evolving to act in roles like an internal consultant or change agent, and being advisors to the line manager. In practice others fear it will often mean the actual or practical exclusion of specialists from the L&D process; as they and their facilities, whether those be humble training rooms or grand training centres, disappear from the scene. If relatively powerful L&D specialists are an important factor in ensuring that L&D is taken seriously then making managers more responsible may be a backward step. Outsourcing L&D facilities, requiring the use of the buying in of consultants to provide L&D products and services, may prejudice effective L&D support.

Finally, many would argue it is naïve to assume that relationships between line managers and staff can be the key relationship to guide an employee's development (Lynton and Pareek, 2000). While managers need to evaluate performance and help out where they can, the responsibility for an employee's development should lie in part with a neutral third party. This is because the line manager-employee relationship may involve clashes of interests that the manager may not be in a position to resolve effectively. Lynton and Pareek (2000) characterise part of the range of line managers' responses to being "learning partners" as ranging from hostility and reluctance, through to being critical and sceptical, to being supportive, but little involved. That range of responses can be mirrored on the part of employees. In many organisations the traditional problems of managing career and personal development are compounded by the pace and scale of change, workforce restructuring and harsher internal labour market regimes. Surviving in such a tough climate is a problem for everyone. What happens to the line manager as developer when, for example, the managers are asked to make decisions about the development needs of staff who might in a few months be competing for that line manager's job?

To simplify, in the absence of substantive evidence, a balanced view about these questions would be that there are clear links between using line managers for L&D and broader changes in HRM on the one hand, while on the other there are justifiable reservations about a greater role for line managers in this area of HRM. In that case the question is perhaps better conceived as being about evaluating the implications of increasing the line manager role in L&D at work, rather than just contrasting it as a displacement or takeover of the conventional L&D specialist's role. Different views of the significance, systems, emphasis, changes and concerns involved in increasing line manager responsibilities for L&D at work can be outlined on a continuum (Figure 1).

At one end of the continuum is the "minimal" significance view. This is associated with the view that greater line management involvement in L&D is

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managers as developers there have been many sources cited here who have explicitly highlighted this (CIPD, 2000; Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Lynton and Pareek, 2000; Seely-Brown and Duguid, 2000). Alternatively review and analysis can regress down into being about the elaboration of how “trainer/teacher” competencies are needed by modern managers (Beattie, 2002). The tendency either to escalate up or regress down can mean that the actual subject is, for a host of good reasons, lost sight of.

The second difficulty is that those who are sceptical about developments and those who would champion them seem destined to form adversarial embraces, with dialogue about current and future trends displaced by mutual misunderstanding. So, in the case of line managers as developers, on the one hand there is the example of *The Economist's* (1996, p. 96) analysis of the failure of the AT&T takeover of NCR in the 1990s:

... The company's real problems began then. Mr Stead's arrival represented the end of the stand alone NCR. He was an AT&T man and he was going to run the company in the AT&T way. But the full gravity – and the levity – of what that meant did not sink in until NCR's employees got new business cards. Employees were “associates”; managers became “coaches”; Mr Stead was “head coach”. Embarrassed executives had to print up a second batch of business cards with more traditional titles, for use outside the company.

The story of the failure of AT&T's takeover of NCR is one that appears to illustrate a number of basic business mistakes. The issue of line managers being developers of people was a feature of the problem; perhaps not the cause of the failure, but certainly a candidate for appearing in the roll call of contributory factors. It has a symbolic significance, representing the cultural differences between the two companies. On the one hand there was a company that thought nothing of designating its managers as “coaches”. Coaches can be defined as people whose primary role is to help others learn and improve their performance. On the other hand there was a company that saw such a designation as fanciful and laughable.

Such a sceptical view is, however, countered by those with an enthusiasm for championing the idea of managers as developers and coaches. Tulgan (2001) provides a recent example of such championing. The context for him is that there is a “war for talent”. Every term of employment is open to negotiation in this war, as talent has the balance of negotiating power. The best people are most likely to leave if their interests are not accommodated; and the main reason people cite for leaving their jobs to move on is dissatisfaction with how their skills and talents are being developed, usually due to poor quality of their relations with their direct line manager (Hay, 2002). In such an era, where the free agent mind set prevails, employers in theory, and line managers in practice, have to deal with providing for individuals, not administering standard packages. They can only do this by being flexible, and in effect negotiating with the talent every day. This solution to the problems of

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attracting and retaining talent are subversive of conventional management control systems and practices.

So, for example, while many organisations have re-engineered the workforce and reformed inflexible practices an “old mentality” still prevails; that full time, on-site, uninterrupted and exclusive patterns of working are what people want. But in the future the key to performance will be having effective networks of talent, or what others call communities of practice and relations with them; this rather than the old deal terms of employment sets the challenge for managers. An integral part of adapting to these circumstances well is that line managers become coaches. Managers cannot lead anymore by fear; rather they need to inspire their talent to perform through coaching. Good leaders are good coaches. Being a good personal coach, an executive coach, means being observant and honest, helping with practice, providing tools and helping people help themselves.

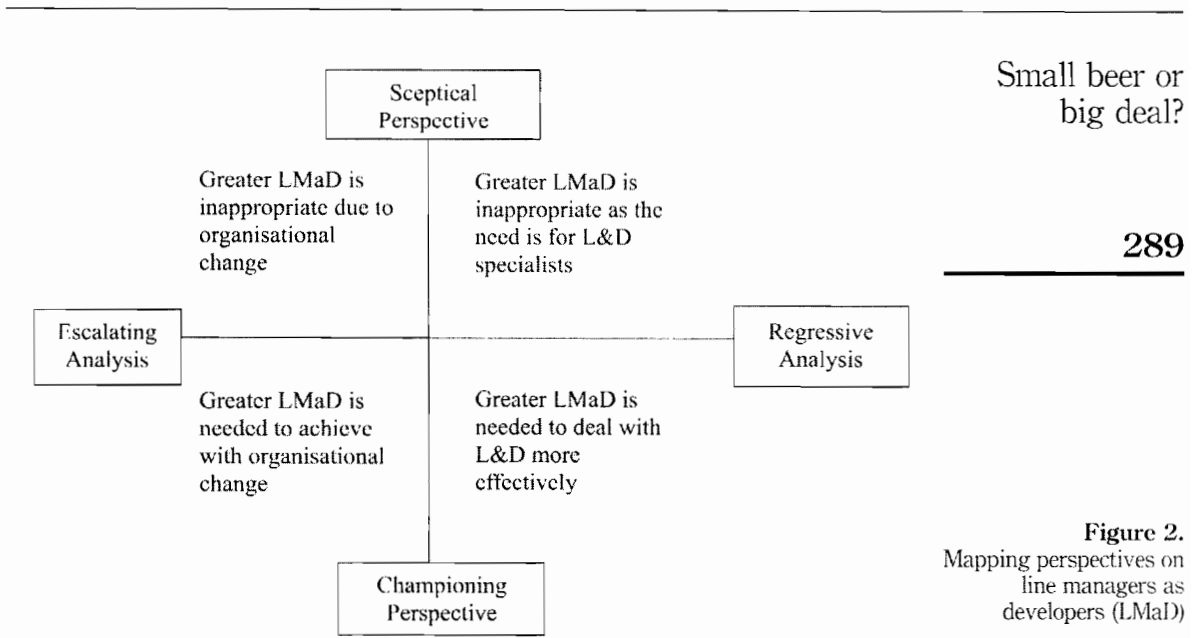
Line manager roles in L&D at work also matters in the context of boundary-less careers. There are five non-financial factors relevant to the boundary-less career, where the career paths people follow are no longer restricted to old pathways in one area of work or one organisation (Tulgan, 2001):

- (1) When they work – offer relief from gruelling schedules.
- (2) Where they work – the options of elements of home working.
- (3) What they do – downshifting as well as career advancement.
- (4) Who they work with – the quality of networks and teams.
- (5) What they are learning – not just for performance, but also for employability.

One of these is specifically related to L&D at work, but the others are also implicated in increasing line managers’ role in L&D at work.

These champions of adapting to a new era where line managers do have greater roles are aware of the counter critiques. They argue that these critiques reflect a critical conservatism, and that resistance to ideas as line managers being re-designated “coaches” is one manifestation of this bigger problem. Such critical conservatism is often found not only in resistance within practical management itself, but also in academic research; where developments in HRM are approached as phenomena to deconstruct for ideological dimensions rather than evaluated in the context of alternatives for practice. Whereas the proponents of line managers in L&D seek dialogues about the problems of linking theory and practice, critical conservatives will seek to highlight a gap between rhetoric and reality. Figure 2 maps the different frames of analysis, or perspectives, that can be used to interpret this structure of debate.

There are then also number of levels at which reflections on the current state and future of subject can be approached, bearing in mind these different perspectives. There is the level of the relationship between the employer and line manager, as definitions of roles in and careers for management change



with changing organisational contexts. There is the level of relations between those previously responsible for providing L&D at work, trainers and developers and line managers as the new providers. And there is the level of the relations between managers and learners, between those providing L&D and those seeking L&D. The question is whether these new relations are all ones that can provide mutual satisfaction to all parties, and support performance, or whether they entail an adversarial embrace that brings discontent, and which may undermine performance.

Conclusions

In the context of increasing line manager involvement in HRM the question raised in this sub area, of L&D at work, is to evaluate whether the increasing role of line managers in L&D at work is of minimal import, it is small beer, or whether it is of great significance and is a big deal. Reflections on the current state and future direction of trends to increasing line manager roles in L&D at work suggest that there is little hard data available, although multiple perspectives on the subject exist. In these circumstances any conclusions are bound to be tentative. There are suggestions it is a big deal. It certainly represents a link in the chain of current L&D trends, a link highlighted by the European HRD research clusters, within the broader field of change in HRM and other changes related to work and the management role. And if organisations cannot make line managers better developers of employees then they have to question whether the other developments it is associated with,

such as better integrating learning and work and attaining improved knowledge management, have any sustainable foundation in practice.

There are also grounds for concluding it is small beer; that frames of analysis that seek to escalate the significance of line managers being learning partners are misleading and exaggerated. There are other reservations. Given all the other changes affecting L&D at work, organisations and management it is perhaps both unwise and unnecessary to promote another change process, one that displaces traditional L&D systems and roles. Further, it requires a substantial investment in management development itself; to ensure that line managers are capable of being developers in the first place, to make it work. If it is done merely as a “bolt on” to the back of other changes, which may in any event be both under-resourced and ill thought through, then it is likely to fail too add value. As much resource is already devoted to management development, is there a case for more of it? The bulk of L&D should remain firmly based on the use of specialists, and be better directed at a range of employee groups.

So greater line management involvement in HRM may be a central part of the way forward for many organisations, but not in the field of L&D. This is not to conclude that the promotion of line manager’s greater involvement with L&D is either just more “rhetoric” or an aspect of work intensification for line managers. It is simply to emphasise that the allocation and use of specialist HRM resources should be a necessary part of implementing improvements in L&D at work. Those resources include specialist L&D staff; technology-based learning resources and partnerships with the wealth of educational knowledge and experience in teaching and learning institutions.

But a middle way, concluding that there is a case for seeing the trend as having advantages and disadvantages, means that there is a case both for seeing greater line management involvement with L&D as both a phenomena of minimal significance and an important area of change; it depends on the organisation, the context and the broader HRM issues involved in these. As a trend playing out over a long term the greater involvement of line managers in L&D at work seems bound to be a key part of the future, because of its fit with the onset of the knowledge management era. It is generally accepted that work is changing; from the physical to the knowledge based, that knowledge matters most, and that the workplace is above all a learning environment. Organisations need to provide conditions for people to operate as part of a good learning environment. They need people to accumulate, to have and retain subject matter expertise. They need people to support problem solving. They need people with meta cognitions, or reflective skills. They need people with communication skills, who can facilitate networking. They require people with high degrees of self-regulation of motivation. They need people to produce and benefit from creative turmoil.

That much is often common ground. Analysis can divide when it comes to thinking about what then needs to be done in relations between line managers and their staff, and how L&D fits into that. In one version, the escalation version, the analysis proceeds by arguing that it is complexity, competition, and change that set the agenda; and that access to big knowledge, big “K”, derived from science and research, is essential. Managers need to include in their vision and strategy a gap analysis of big K, and how to bridge that gap. They need big K informed workers, supported by big K informed line managers. Local line managers are teachers who facilitate continuous learning at work, to align employees with the big K strategy. The role of information and communications technology (ICT) and human networks is to share and use the big K that is extracted from individuals; line managers organise this and pass it on. They help set new goals, aspirations and efforts. They provide leadership through supporting learning in these ways.

In another version, the regression version, the factors of complexity, competition and change are taken to imply that the concern is to adapt and innovate. This in turn depends on more than “science” and research for identifying and using “big K”. What it means is that people need to learn how to deal with the day-to-day realities of working in such conditions; using good reasoning, using small knowledge, or small K. This is the path to overcoming barriers to adaptation and innovation. Organisations need people with “small K”, able to create and share meaning and purpose. People are seen as being agents driven by their own identities, personal and occupational, and with self-realisation; with how to remain talented and attractive in the knowledge marketplace. There is then a culture of alertness to new and relevant information; there is an explicit economy of expertise with small K. People at work seek to make connections among groups of the like minded; they ask themselves “What am I interested in, and what can I do to make myself attractive?” In such circumstances line managers need to create, above all else, a non-threatening environment in which such people are sharing what they know. It is not the content of knowledge that matters as such, but establishing a context; a context of trust and openness, so that people can feel that they are doing what they want and like, that what they do is extraordinary and fun, and is in pursuit of their passions. And, for a line manager, if people are not contributing to this kind of environment then they are an obstacle to effective performance. So it is that new roles for line managers arise. Line management itself, indeed, becomes an old and outdated expression. Vision and strategy comes from those with passions at the heart of the organisation, aligned with local passions in the outlying work teams who form the organisation. It is this alignment that gives economic value and advantage to an organisation. But even such advantage is perishable, it does not last long. The outcomes of any successful environment built around having “small K” may not last long, but the capacity for generating “small K” environments can abide.

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This review and analysis suggests that the greater involvement of line managers as developers can provide mutual satisfactions for organisations, for managers and for learners; with both the big K, and big deal, or small K, and small beer, interpretations correct. Greater line manager involvement in L&D is appropriate for both creating and sharing knowledge and creating environments for effective performance. It is only necessary to emphasise, finally, that further reviews and analyses, empirically based, which explore both the big deal and small beer aspects, adopting both a sceptical and a championing perspective, are needed if this important and complex aspect of line managers involvement in HRM is to be better analysed as an element of effective organizational performance in the future.

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