

Developing first-line managers within their shared operational challenges

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Keywords: Leadership development, operational leadership, action learning, LEAN

1. Introduction

First-line managers are the key to business success. But in the development of leaders, we must design programs that are based on the specific operating challenges that managers encounter every day.

First-line managers hold the all-important responsibilities of implementing an organization's strategy all the way to the product or service, continuously developing more efficient workflows, while naturally ensuring high quality. These are crucial tasks for productivity, competitiveness, as well as job satisfaction. Since first-line managers are often the least experienced managers, it is understandable that many organizations look for management training targeted to this group specifically. However, we have found traditional leadership training based on courses or theory to be less effective with this group. Partly because first-line managers are a large thus very expensive group to train in this manner, and partly because they tend not to appreciate this training or succeed in making it clearly impact daily operations.

Operational leadership (OPL) is a well proven concept in the Scandinavian countries offering an interesting alternative to traditional leadership training (Harald Innbjør and Jostein Kleiveland 2007). It is based on perspectives of D. A. Kolb et al. (1976) and C. Argyris (1999) and many of the principles in LEAN. At the core of it is a focus on both developing the individual manager and strengthening the way the organization's managers cooperate and combine their efforts. They train and develop their skills within their team of first-line managers in their organization. They analyze the situation, challenges and tasks and through several trials they have to reflect on their difficulties and succeed in finding best practice. We have found this to lead to first-line managers developing their leadership as well as more efficient workflows and immediately better results.

2. Methods

We have conducted a case study of a program held at a Danish veterinary institution. The OPL program consisted of 10-12 seminars and was completed after 1½ years. At the first seminar the entire management team decided on three main operational challenges to be worked on during the program. The three operational challenges defined the content of the training. The three challenges they decided on were: 1) Reduce absence, 2) delegate tasks to employees and develop employees' skills and 3) lay down clear framework and expectations and to employees. Between seminars the teams of first-line managers agreed on how they would work with the operational challenge. Both the first-line manager and his team reflected on their efforts and how to proceed next. They discussed their accomplishments, their difficulties and were coached on how to handle various issues. The

leaders' reflections on their actions were of great importance. At each seminar every team presented what they have learned and best practices were written down. When the OPL program ended the company thus had its own management manual containing operational guidelines of best practice.

During the program the leaders trained basic skills such as communication, motivating employees, handling conflicts, train and educate the employees and facilitate changes.

3. Results

We have found OPL to be an effective leadership training program in this case, as we have in several others. The leaders made important results during the program because of the focus on the operational challenges. This gave the whole group of leaders the opportunity to celebrate and recognize their combined efforts. The OPL programs have resulted in improved economic outcome, implementation of new delegation of tasks and responsibilities to optimize the use of resources. Another important result is that because they know their own leader's expectations they take on more responsibility.

	Before	After
Jobsatisfaction: (index 0-100)	65	70
Management Evaluation, first line manager	64	69
Companys reputation	62	70
Average days of absence per employee	16,33	10,6

Because of the focus on the operational challenges, first-line leaders and their leaders discussed and evaluated the efforts and were highly motivated to create results. The first-line leader experienced support and understanding from his team. They shared the same challenges. The teams got a deeper understanding of team's task and role. The team strengthened their cooperation and build up trust. The meeting structure was changed so that flow of information was improved and gave their bosses feedback on initiatives. This contributed greatly to closer cooperation between the first line managers and their bosses and contributed to the first line managers manage change more efficiently.

Our conclusion is that we need to keep on developing this kind of programs focused on first-line managers and their concrete shared operational challenges. It is crucial to management training and to organizations' productivity, competitiveness, as well as employee job satisfaction.