Managerial Fitness: Making First-Level Leaders Great

Authored by
Tom Rose, Ph.D

Fit to Succeed

"Fit" means having the flexibility, strength, and stamina needed to meet challenges. To meet the shifting challenges in today's organisations, first-level leaders need what we can call managerial fitness. In this paper we outline the critical dimensions of managerial fitness that are required for success in the evolving work environments in which today's first-level leaders perform.

Recent Trends in First-Level Leader Development

In ongoing conversations with first-level leaders and those that serve them, we have detected important shifts in what makes first-level leaders successful in today's work environment. To document these emerging challenges, we recently conducted a survey of the leadership development industry that focused on first-level, middle-level, and senior-level leaders.[4]

In our survey we asked respondents to answer four basic questions to help us provide our clients with insight they can use to optimise support the cadre of leaders in their organisations. Some of our results may confirm what you already know and others may surprise you.

We asked four main questions in order to draw a link from an organisation's strategic priorities through to the types of development that should be provided to first-level leaders. Our ongoing research and client interactions show that making these linkages is vital to designing and implementing high-impact leadership development.

1. **What strategy is your organisation pursuing?**

   This information helps us align first-level leadership development with C Suite leadership priorities.

2. **What leadership level is your highest priority?**

   This data target illuminates which of three levels of leadership our respondents are prioritising: first, middle, or senior.

3. **What are your top five competency-development priorities?**

   These analytics reveal which competencies are the highest priority for development.

4. **What are the elements of an effective solution?**

   What aspects of first-level leadership solutions are most important?

First-Level Leaders' Fitness: A Vital Part of an Organisation's Leadership Capital

Forum's assertion is reinforced by a chorus of luminaries—from Professor Linda Hill and her colleagues at Harvard Business School,[1] to consultants like Alan Horowitz and David Ringel,[2] to executives at such organisations as British Petroleum[3]—all of whom recognise the special importance of first-level leaders to the effectiveness of an organisation's leadership.

> "Day-to-day, hour-by-hour First-Level Leaders are there to interact with the workforce and make decisions, remove obstacles, and provide solutions for those things adversely impacting production output, speed, quality, and cost; and do it in a way that strengthens employee relations, desire to do a great job, and, ultimately, retention."
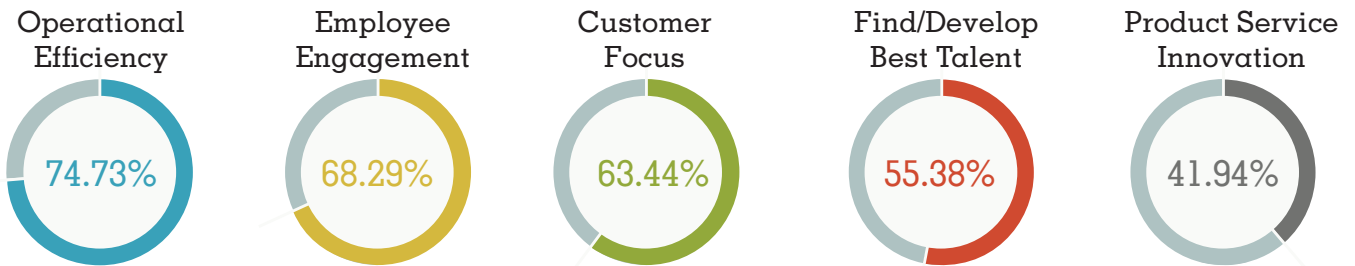>
> —Horowitz and Ringel

Forum
A TWENTYEIGHTY COMPANY

1. Top Strategic Priorities

One of most persistent gaps we've found in our research is the lack of alignment between strategy and leadership development programmes.[5] Only 23 percent of development programmes are linked to strategic priorities. A key success factor for high-impact leadership development is too often absent. So we asked respondents to identify which of a dozen strategies were most important for their organisations in the upcoming 18 months.

We learned that driving efficiencies in how an organisation does its work is the top priority for most organisations in our sample. We also found that engagement and customer focus are very highly rated strategic priorities.

Top Five Strategic Focal Points

Operational Efficiency	Employee Engagement	Customer Focus	Find/Develop Best Talent	Product Service Innovation
74.73%	68.29%	63.44%	55.38%	41.94%

2. Top Leadership-Level Priority

We then asked respondents to identify which of three levels of leadership represent the top priority for the next 18 months. Respondents indicated that first-level leadership development is the top priority with middle-level leadership following close behind in the No. 2 position.

Top Focus Areas

First-level Leaders	Mid-level Leaders	Senior-level Leaders
43.18%	39.20%	17.61%
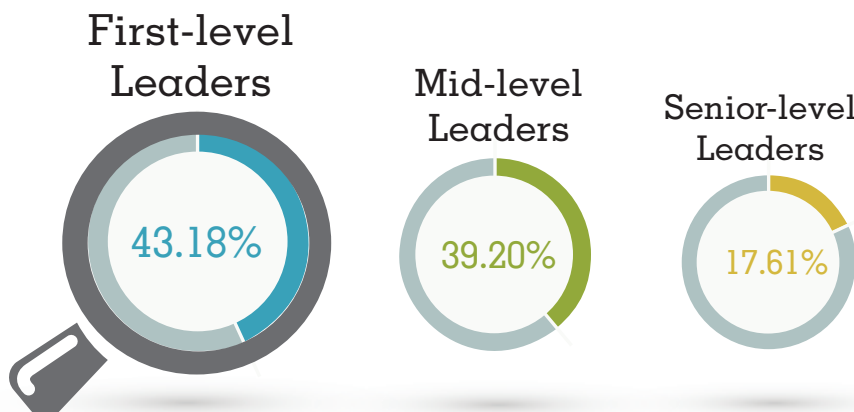
Budgets are up for first-level leader development!

We anchor the recommendations we extracted from the data we analysed in what first-level leaders do. The three priorities below represent a synthesis of themes from of a number of studies.

What Great First-Level Leaders Do

- Organise and focus departmental work and the work of the employees they lead
  - Assign priorities, coordinate activities, schedule tasks, and monitor and correct performance so that departmental objectives are achieved
  - Optimise motivation, promote retention, and moderate team member stress
- Use relationship skills—especially communication skills—to get work done through others
  - Direct work with staff in a way that motivates even when they are not deeply dedicated to the work they do
  - Work with staff in a way that addresses wide differences in motivation among them
- Guide the work of the team based on technical competence in the area they supervise
  - Are able to perform the tasks their direct reports do so they are able to provide needed instruction and direction

Jamie's Story

Jamie had been a top performer on the team. Fellow team members knew Jamie as a quick study and friendly team player who took great pride in getting things done efficiently. When things got crazy Jamie got focused. While Jamie was a professional, Jamie also had a reputation as a person with a unique, casual personal style: "I want to be effective but not too corporate-y!"

The day came when Jamie got a promotion. "Welcome to people management," said the boss. "Congrats!" Jamie felt great pride. "They must think I am good—pretty darned good," thought Jamie in a moment of deserved self-congratulation. But then a pulse of anxiety surged through Jamie's body: "I was just responsible for me and now I am now responsible for others. Where do I start? "How will I know if I am succeeding? I have worked with good managers and bad ones. How do I make sure I am one of the good ones?"

Forum's goal is to help leaders like Jamie transition into first-level roles and to achieve high performance. We look at the survey results that shed light on this area next.

3. Top Competence-Level Priorities

We asked respondents about the top competencies they considered critical priorities for the next 18 months for the three leadership levels.

We selected 27 competencies to strike a balance between being comprehensive and focused:

Competencies

- √ Selection and Staffing
- √ Influence
- √ Coaching Others
- √ Cross-Boundary Collaboration
- √ Managing a Diverse Workforce
- √ Conflict Management and Negotiation
- √ Innovation Management
- √ Developing Talent
- √ Leading Change
- √ Problem Solving
- √ Planning and Organising Work
- √ Strategic Thinking
- √ Delegating
- √ Communications
- √ Directing Others
- √ Building Effective Teams
- √ Managing Vision and Purpose
- √ Presentation Skills
- √ Performance Management
- √ Leading Customer Focus
- √ Business Acumen
- √ Agility
- √ Managing Continuous Improvement
- √ Managing Ambiguity
- √ Creating Strategic Alignment
- √ Emotional Intelligence
- √ Cross-Cultural Acumen

The following table shows the five top priorities out of the 27 competencies we asked about. It is not surprising that results pinpointed coaching, performance management, and leading teams as top priorities. These activities are fundamental to the role of any people manager, including first-level leaders.

Our results parallel others who have detected development priorities that shared by levels of leadership and are unique to each level.

What are top coaching skill needs? We wanted to clarify the coaching challenges that talent management and L&D leaders see must be addressed in the immediate future.

First-Level	Middle-Level	Senior-Level
Coaching Others (54.30)	Leading Change (58.23)	Leading Change (66.12)
Performance Management (52.69)	Coaching Others (52.97)	Creating Strategic Alignment (62.30)
Leading Change (48.92)	Strategic Thinking (42.70)	Strategic Thinking (61.75)
Building Effective Teams (47.31)	Performance Management (41.26)	Managing Vision and Purpose (60.11)
Developing Talent (40.32)	Building Effective Teams (39.46)	Developing Talent (44.81)

In a poll we conducted in a recent webinar on first-level leadership, we asked participants to help us clarify the coaching priorities.

Participants gave the following rating to coaching competency development priorities for first-level leaders.

Interestingly, as we have found in an earlier industry survey, accountability is a top priority for people and organisations involved in change.[6] A talent management leader in a large global financial service organisation explained how coaching and accountability come together:

> We de-layered our organisation to get as lean as possible. We have recently launched service and efficiency initiatives. More responsibility and discretion lies with individual contributors now. They have to work things out to implement our plans. First-level leaders find themselves helping people working and together work out their differences—to be accountable to their part in change initiatives.

Performance management is the second highest priority following closely behind coaching. At Forum we have noticed that many of our clients have begun to move away from traditional performance management processes reduce focus on forms and formal processes to ongoing focus on activities like maintaining goal alignment, achieving task clarity and encouragement.

Despite the insight we just reviewed, it is surprising that leading change received such a high rating for first-level development. While we know that high performance first-level leaders pursue continuous improvement,[7] we also wanted to learn about change leadership challenges of first-level leaders. We asked participants in a recent webinar to identify the types of changes that first-level leaders were implementing.

The results reflect on earlier results on strategic priorities. Like a majority of organisations, achieving improvements in operational efficiency appear to be a big priority for first-level leaders:

Strategic Priorities

Implementing organisational operation efficiency initiatives — 45%

Implementing organisational service initiatives — 22%

Implementing organisational quality initiatives — 18%

Implementing first-level leader initiated change — 13%

Implementing organisation lean manufacturing/service — 2%*

Coaching Priorities

51% — Increasing accountability of team members to others

16% — Refocus misdirected effort of team members

12% — Increase discretionary effort

12% — Address insufficient effort

9% — Focus effort on new tasks

*This is surprising: 61 percent of organisations report that they are implementing either lean service or lean manufacturing and 70 percent of manufacturing organisations report they are involved in lean manufacturing. Could it be that as a community, talent management professionals are effectively linking first-level development to the operational priorities of the business they serve?

We also asked about which change leadership skills were most important. Three skills received the highest rating:

- **Painting a picture of the future that inspires others**
- **Helping people implement changes in work successfully**
- **Helping people overcome obstacles that limit their support for new ideas**
- Stimulating others to think about old problems in new ways
- Leading by doing rather than simply by telling
- Getting others to see the goals they have in common
- Effectively tailoring change communications to others

As we know, leading change is about aligning people behind a vision of a new positive future. It is also largely about overcoming obstacles that stand between us and making vision a reality. In a survey we completed last year, we asked about resistance to change. While each of these sources of resistance that appear below received the equivalent endorsements from participants, no source was rated significantly greater than the others. The list of common sources of resistance reminds us of:

- Disbelief that the problem exists as leaders have defined it
- Disagreement that the targeted change is the right solution for the problem
- Lack of confidence in the organisation's ability to be successful because people lack needed tools, resources, or key skills
- Suspicion that the new direction will be abandoned because key stakeholders lack the needed commitment to see the change through
- Fear by individuals that they will not be successful with new tasks associated with the change because of a lack of skills, knowledge, or ability

4. Most Important Elements of an Effective Solution

To focus the design of effective solutions, it is vital to keep the top design priorities top of mind. What did our respondents indicate top on the list? The ranking appears below:

Element	Score
Quality Facilitators	56.07
Cost Effective	55.49
Linked to the Business	47.40
Customised	40.46
Innovative	37.57

Pat's Story

Pat was focused on career advancement. From Pat's first days on the job, Pat "had a plan and worked the plan." In record time, Pat got a promotion (and the money that came with it) to a people management job.

Pat had six direct reports. Pat quickly sized up the team and its operations and then Pat laid out the plan and began to implement it. Some team members resisted early on but Pat persisted and the team began to move in the new direction … mostly.

Then, leadership initiated a new operational effectiveness programme as part of the company's strategy. Pat's manager assigned the goals for Pat's team. Pat communicated the new goals to the team.

Things did not go well: Squabbles erupted between team members; handoffs of work between one team member and another did not always go efficiently; people were suspicious of each other and the company's goals. Pat could not seem to get at and resolve the personal conflicts that were slowing down progress. Pressure was increasing and "driving the bus" was not working.

Respondents identified quality facilitators and cost effectiveness as top priorities. Implementation success requires a focus on great facilitation and its finance. Interestingly, less than half of respondents saw that linking developing to business priorities were important. This is an interesting result in that other surveys like the one referenced earlier in this paper suggest that less than one-third of development priorities are effectively linked to strategic priorities. We wonder whether the talent management community is focusing enough on strategic priorities/programme alignment?

The Bottom Line of What We Learned: A Prescription for First-Level Leader Managerial Fitness

First-level leaders do three things:

- Organise and focus departmental work and the work of the employees they lead
  - Assign priorities, coordinate activities, schedule tasks, and monitor and correct performance so that departmental objectives are achieved
  - Optimise motivation, promote retention, and moderate team member stress
- Use relationship and communication skills to get work done through others
  - Direct work with frontline staff in a way that motivates even when staff is not deeply dedicated to the work they do
  - Address wide differences in motivation among direct report staff
- Guide the work of the team based on technical competence in the area they supervise
  - Able to perform the tasks their direct reports do to provide needed instruction and direction

Our recent research sharpens priorities for this vital part of the leadership we support. This research tells us that:

- First-level leadership is a top priority for leadership development for the next 18 months.
- In coaching programmes focus on a few priority topics:
  - Promoting accountability among team members
  - Refocusing the effort of team members
  - Increase discretionary effort
- Leading change is a top priority:
  - First-level leaders are driving the implementation of organisational operational efficiency, service initiatives, and quality initiatives to a far lesser extent

- There are three highly important skill development priorities:
  › Painting a picture of the future that inspires others
  › Helping people implement changes in work successfully
  › Helping people overcome obstacles that limit their support for new ideas

References

1. Neal, P.J., R. McKinney, & E. Bailey (2014). Ready. Set. Lead. Preparing your new managers to lead. Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning.

2. Horowitz, A., and Ringel, D. (2015). Increase Performance with a Focus on First-Level Leaders and Job Relations. POV

3. John Browne, former executive at British Petroleum, gave one of the company's highest awards to a programme devoted to optimising the performance of its first-level leaders.

4. D. Guangrong, K. Yang, & K. De Meuse (2011) Leadership competencies across organisational levels: a test of the pipeline model, *Journal of Management Development,* 30, pp. 366-380.

5. 530 responses collected in Winter 2015.

6. Bersin Industry Report (2015).

7. Rose, T. (2015). Creating a Culture of Engagement and Accountability. Forum POV.

8. Are Supervisors Your Biggest Barrier to Lean? *Industry Week*, July 2012.

Forum is a recognised global leader in linking learning to strategic business objectives. Our tailored learning solutions help organisations effectively execute business strategies by focusing on their most important asset: people. We provide clients with practical and research-based sales and leadership development training programmes that mobilise employees, accelerate business-initiative implementation, and improve agility.

For more information, visit www.forum.com.