

Research shows senior leaders should not leave the heroics to the shopfloor supervisor, argues Peter Langford

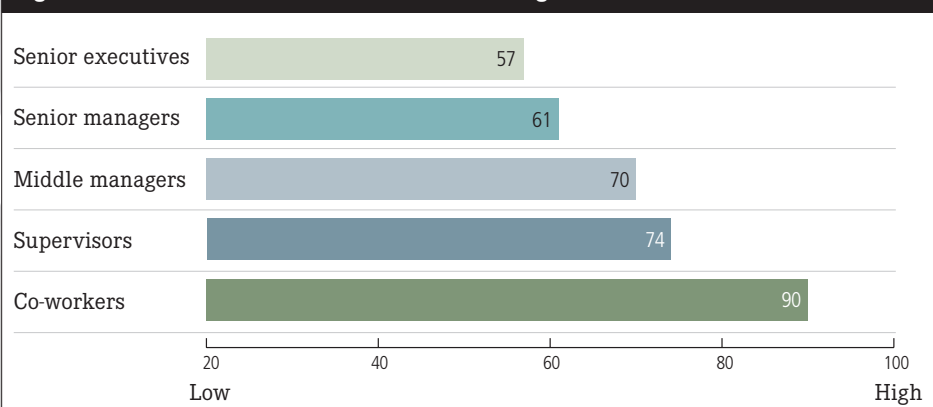
Demystifying the heroic supervisor

Once upon a time a band of well-intentioned consultants travelled to a land far, far away. On their return they told of a mythical hero, who they named 'Supervisor'. This hero would overcome the weakness of the evil 'Senior Executive', and bring engagement and change to all employees. Despite some naysayers, the consultants built a strong following. But alas, the passing of years brought insight, and the realisation that Senior Executive could not be dismissed so easily.

As with all fables, there are lessons for the enlightened reader. The ideal of the heroic supervisor has arisen in part from a *Harvard Business Review* article published in May 1996. Many managers and HR professionals hold a misleading, but surprisingly persistent, belief that supervisors are the primary source of influence in organisations. In the article, two communications consultants, Larkin and Larkin, wrote that "frontline supervisors – not senior managers – are the opinion leaders in your organisation". Research by Voice Project at Macquarie University, however, presents a very different story. Using research and consulting data from over 100,000 employees across over 2000 organisations, we have found an extremely consistent pattern of results showing that senior leaders hold far more sway over employee engagement than supervisors. We firmly believe that senior leaders are neglecting a critical component of their jobs if they do not recognise the profound impact they personally have upon the engagement of their employees.

Much of the belief in the power of supervisors stems from the level of distrust between staff and senior leaders, as emphasised in the article. On this point, we agree entirely. Figure 1 shows results from one specific client of ours that assessed the levels of trust between staff and four levels of managers, as well as with co-workers. Unsurprisingly, trust in co-workers (the

Figure 1. Levels of trust in co-workers and management.



immediate staff in one's own work unit) was by far the highest at 90 per cent favourable. There follows a clear downward trend in trust as the levels of management became further removed. Trust in senior executives only reached 57 per cent favourable. The results in Figure 1 are typical of most organisations, with this particular client scoring at around the 50th percentile of all organisations in our benchmarking database.

The other primary argument in favour of supervisors is that they are in more immediate and regular contact with most staff than are senior leaders. In some ways this closeness of relationship appears to provide a convenient 'out-clause' for senior leaders, with many CEOs and general managers happily delegating to team leaders the role of managing relationships with staff.

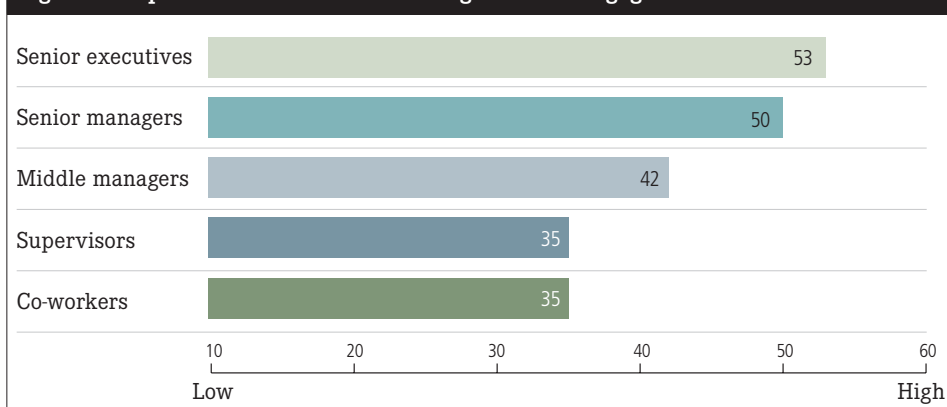
Such a decision, is dangerously misguided. In contrast to the poverty of trust in senior executives shown in Figure 1, Figure 2 shows the strong influence of senior executives upon employee engagement, in comparison to the far lower (but still significant and practically important) influence of supervisors.

The pattern of results in Figure 2 demonstrate that it is the trust between staff and senior leaders that most impacts staff

satisfaction, commitment and intention to stay. While by no means ideal, staff can put up with a poor relationship with an immediate supervisor if they trust that senior leaders are looking out for the little guys and gals throughout the organisation.

Comparing the results in Figures 1 and 2, we can see that the biggest gap and priority for most organisations is to build trust between staff and senior leaders. The quality of relationship between most staff and their immediate co-workers and supervisors is already of a reasonable quality, and the impact of these relationships is comparatively low. In contrast, the quality of relationship with senior leaders is worse despite the impact of this relationship being much greater.

These results speak to a need for CEOs, general managers and senior executives to acknowledge and embrace the critical role of relationship manager. Time in their busy diaries must be found for regularly meeting and communicating with staff. To give credit where credit is due, Larkin and Larkin emphasised the superiority of face-to-face communication over memos and emails. We have repeatedly observed the influence that is achieved through in-person visits to factory floors, toolbox sessions and 'town hall'

Figure 2. Impact of co-workers and management on engagement.

meetings. A CEO of an aged care client of ours recently commented on the power of sending personally signed Christmas cards to all staff - despite the substantial investment in time, employees greatly appreciated the care and sacrifice shown by the CEO. Of course, if such behaviour is irregular and seen to be insincere and manipulative, staff will pull further away. But if the behaviour is repeated and genuine, staff will wholeheartedly lend

their bodies and souls to the CEO's cause.

Voice Project recently investigated the leadership competencies most strongly associated with employee satisfaction. Surveying staff opinions of nearly 3000 leaders, the top three drivers of satisfaction with leaders were:

- 1) leaders openly involving staff in cooperative decision-making
- 2) leaders demonstrating empathy with the experiences of employees

- 3) leaders managing stress well and minimising the impact of their own stress levels upon employees.

Of course, other more task-oriented behaviours have a significant impact upon the productivity of employees and the strategic positioning of organisations. Nevertheless, these three behaviours highlight some of the ways senior leaders can most effectively build trust among their staff.

It is human nature to want to trust, but it is also human nature to not hand out our trust too quickly or lightly. If our supervisors have earned our trust, that's comforting. But if our senior leaders have earned our trust, that is profound. We shouldn't dismiss the important role played by frontline supervisors, but the true heroes are the senior leaders who are able to balance an abundance of priorities and still build trust with all employees. ●

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