

The “Under-Management Epidemic” – Are You Suffering From It?

By Kevin Obermuller

According to US HR consultancy RainMaker Thinking, the US is suffering from an “under-management epidemic” which is leading to poor productivity and low staff morale.

The research claims that:

- Under-management is a workplace disease of epidemic proportions
- The impact of under-management is harmful and costly
- There are four leading causes of individual infection
- Eight environmental factors support the spread of the disease
- Hands-on managers tend to follow the same practices

Is the same disease prevalent in Australia?

Most managers and leaders we talk with in Australia, the UK and many parts of Asia, believe that they are under more pressure than ever to “get things done”. Whilst espoused by their organisation, the reality is that providing feedback, praise and recognition for good performance and coaching for under-performers, is way down the priority chain on a day to day basis. These managers feel that they lack the opportunity to spend as much time with their people as they would like. This can mean that they don’t know what their team members are doing, making it difficult to offer clear direction and support.

The RainMaker study concurs with our anecdotal findings and has identified four main causes of what it calls “the under-management epidemic”:

- **Lack of time and/or resources:** managers, often struggle to balance the responsibilities of their own job with managing their employees.
- **Inappropriate “nice person” syndrome:** some managers misunderstand ‘empowerment’ and refuse to accept responsibility for the authority and influence that comes with their position. This leads them to resist being clear about performance requirements, operating procedures, direction, feedback on performance and so forth.
- **Lack of skill or experience:** most managers do not receive sufficient training in the most effective supervision techniques. As a result they tend to use their own management styles which become ingrained as strong habits over time.
- **Fear:** many managers are afraid of the consequences of high engagement with direct reports which could lead to difficult conversations or reports which express negative feelings or observations which then need to be addressed.

The study also highlighted eight environmental factors which exacerbated the “under-management epidemic”. The majority of these factors are probably as relevant for Australia as they are for the US:

- The impact of technology and globalisation on the workplace since the early 1990s.
- Organisations are expected to be leaner and more flexible. Aggressive HR policies mean organisations demand more and better work from fewer employees.
- Lack of long-term security for employees.
- The employer-employee bond has been turned into a short-term transactional relationship.
- Managers are frustrated by employee attitudes and behaviour.
- Organisational structures have become flatter with the traditional rules of seniority, age, rank and rules becoming less important. Therefore managers are losing their long-term hierarchical power.
- Line managers are increasingly the primary point of contact for most employees for access to resources, rewards and work conditions.
- Employees are relying more on line managers for meeting their basic needs and expectations at work – requiring time, dedication, skill and courage from managers.

The findings of the US research also seems to be backed up by a U.K. CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) report which highlights that managers are required to do more than ever, through less layers of management and a target driven culture. The net result is that many managers are spending more time on figures and targets than they are on working in developing their people, causing staff to be under-managed with resultant poor productivity and lowering of staff morale.

Sending managers on training programs on coaching, time management, leadership and so on is not enough to halt this “epidemic” suggested by RainMaker. It is the relationships, the informal systems and mutual cooperation that hold things together.