

Retail People – Area Management

Managing at a Distance

Moving from branch manager to area manager is a challenging transition. The role requires a new set of skills and it is vital that companies manage the transition well. So what are the skills of area management and how can companies support a newly appointed area manager? Anthony Dance of OutlookRetail explains.

Moving from a branch manager role into an area manager position for the first time is certainly challenging. One moment they are managing a team of about 10 to 20 people, the next moment they are managing an area team of over 200 employees.

As a branch manager they were able to see their team every day but seeing people periodically and having to manage at a distance is certainly a shock for many newly appointed area managers.

So what are the skills of area management and what training should be arranged early on, to ensure a newly appointed area manager becomes effective as quickly as possible?

Management by Objectives - is the critical skill of area management. Being able to set clear measurable objectives is a key requirement of the role as objectives cut across every aspect of area management. From day one, area managers will be given area objectives to achieve by the boss and they must be able to set improvement and development objectives for their managers from the beginning. Management by objectives is critical because it is the only performance and development tool that 'works at a distance'. Area managers will never be fully successful without this critical skill.

Management Development - Newly appointed area managers immediately become responsible for the development of the area management team. Up to the time they were appointed they will have had little experience of deliberate management development so the skills of training, coaching and mentoring need to be learnt and learnt quickly. Area managers not only need to be able to develop managers they need to be able to develop their branch manager's skills in coaching, training and mentoring also, no easy task.

Performance Management – Newly appointed area managers have probably been appointed with little real experience of performance management. So when he/she has to deal with manager underperformance, they find it extremely difficult going. Newly appointed area managers need a thorough understanding and be skilled in the use of the performance management 'tools'. They need comprehensive training in; performance appraisals, objective reviewing, performance improvement planning and disciplinary skills. Area managers also need thorough training in assertiveness as this is a skill that needs to be learnt. Very few organisations recognise this and give little or no training in these critical skill areas. There is another important reason why area managers need to be fully competent in performance management – they have to develop the performance management skills of their

branch managers. Many branch managers fail to address performance issues today because their area managers have never shown them how to do it properly. This is because they themselves have never been developed in this critical skill area.

Influencing Behaviour – Area managers need to be able to effectively address negative, business or team damaging behavior at branch manager level. There are many branches that statistically indicate good performance but could perform even better if the manager behaved more professionally. Newly appointed area managers will often have to address unproductive (lazy), unsupportive, unmotivated branch managers. They may also have to overcome resentment and other negative attitudes because the newly appointed area manager got the job and they didn't.

Many newly appointed area managers try to win over these managers by trying to be liked rather than respected, This results in real problems when the area manager has to become more 'formal' at a later date. Getting too close or too familiar with branch managers is a mistake which many more seasoned area managers admit to making.

Self Development and Learning

Once a newly appointed area manager has been given their initial training everything will depend on their ability to learn and develop from doing the job. Many senior retail execs think that throwing newly appointed area managers in at the deep end will result in them either sinking or swimming (developing) but what often happens is non-self-developers tread water and become experts in doing so.

Newly appointed area managers have to be set SMART self development objectives and held to account for the achievement of them. This is the only effective way of measuring a newly appointed area managers self development and self learning ability.

Area Managers are exceptionally important to every retail business, they influence many and are often the difference between profit or loss over a huge part of the business. This means they need to be given the right training and support right from the beginning of their appointment.

Anthony Dance is Programme Director of OutlookRetail's area manager development Programme for newly appointed retail area managers. Details of which can be found on their website www.outlookretail.com

Area Manager Competencies

- Setting objectives and following through to completion
- Management Development
- Performance Management
- Influencing behaviors
- Self development and learning
- Ability to think clearly
- A strong commercial focus
- Desire for continuous improvement
- Decision-making
- Understanding the need to empower
- Innovation and creativity
- Intellectual capacity
- Managing change
- Delight in diversity
- Managing uncertainty
- Personal effectiveness
- Understanding the culture