

# Raising the living dead

Today's offices are overrun by unmotivated, unproductive drones, according to management author David Bolchover. **Ross Bentley** asks: are line managers to blame?

**W**e're told we live in an age of endemic workplace stress. And that achieving the right work-life balance is becoming increasingly difficult as we struggle to deal with the excessive demands of our jobs.

Not true, says management writer David Bolchover. He believes we have all been taken in by countless articles on the evils of stress over the past few years, and his latest book, *The Living Dead*, uses an array of research to expose the myth that we are all suffering from overwork.

Surveys that show high levels of personal e-mail use at work, relentless surfing of non-work-related websites, and a culture where employees regularly turn up for work with a hangover have convinced Bolchover that many disengaged office workers spend an unhealthy quota of their contracted hours under-performing and wasting time.

All over the country, he says, there is a substantial stratum of the workforce, the "Living Dead" as he calls them, who "go to their desk at the same time, leave at the same time and in between they do pretty much nothing".

With the latest figures from the government's National Statistics agency showing workers in the US are 27% more productive than their UK counterparts, Bolchover may just have a point.

At the heart of this depressing picture, he says, is "a crisis of middle management".

Things will only get better, according to Bolchover, if the quality of line managers is drastically improved. It is they, after all, who directly oversee staff and attempt to engage them in the work they are doing.

Office jobs have the potential to be boring or rewarding, depending on how supervisors energise their staff. "The selection of middle managers is key," he says.

It is an area where new approaches are needed, agrees Kate Davies, HR adviser at housing association, the LHA-ASRA Group.

## Think long term

She says a common mistake when appointing line managers is to choose those who have excelled in the functional aspects of their job rather than demonstrated any aptitude for managing people.

Sales teams, for example, often see those who deliver the best results being promoted into a management position as a reward. Such people may not be equipped with the best management skills and, because they are usually expected to continue their sales work alongside managing the team, they dedicate little time to overseeing their colleagues.

"We are trying to approach the situation differently and think long term about how people become line managers by taking on those with the best management skills," says Davies.

But all too often, says Helen Kalyan, HR manager at the Novotel London West hotel, organisations with the best intentions end up

# staff motivation



## WHAT HR NEEDS TO KNOW

A 2005 report from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development offers this advice for HR practitioners working with line managers:

- Ensure all managers in a supervisory role are effective in terms of people management activities. Ultimately, this can impact on recruitment and retention and organisational performance.
- Review and clarify the role of all line managers.
- Ensure managers understand and buy into the people management policies they are expected to deliver.
- Provide managers with time to carry out their people management activities – often the more traditional management activities take precedence over these 'softer' activities.
- Ensure line managers receive sufficient training to enable them to perform these duties well.
- Carefully select line managers, paying particular attention to their people management competencies and interpersonal skills.

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Helen Kalyan, HR manager, Novotel London West hotel

panic recruiting. "As soon as a manager leaves, there's a tendency to find an immediate replacement," she says. "People get the promotion but don't get the training. A lot of basic management skills don't come naturally and need to be developed."

Novotel tries to pre-empt such issues by identifying employees with management potential, and training them in areas such as appraisal skills, basic customer service, coaching techniques and employment law prior to placing them in a management role. This also helps eliminate another common problem among new line managers, who often shy away from giving meaningful feedback to people with whom they previously worked shoulder-to-shoulder.

"One minute they are one of the gang, the next they are promoted and faced with having to be critical of a team member's performance. In most cases, they don't want to rock the boat," she says.

To avoid this issue, Kalyan suggests an approach similar to that of a former company she worked at. "Where possible, they had a policy of not promoting internally within the same unit so that managers were less prone to peer pressure," she says.

But it seems giving any kind of feedback is a problem for UK line managers. Almost a quarter of employees interviewed for a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) report last year said they never or rarely received indications of how they were doing, or received praise and recognition from their boss (see box).

With employers getting little or no positive feedback from line managers, it is only natural they will stop trying to impress, says Robert Myatt, a director at business psychologists Kaisen Consulting

"It may simply be a case of saying 'thank

you' or 'well done' or rewarding good work with new opportunities or interesting projects to ensure productive employees keep producing," he says.

Myatt says an increasing number of companies are waking up to the importance of good management skills, and starting to judge their managers not only by the financial results their team deliver, but by the manner in which these results are achieved.

### Soft skills

Kaisen recently worked with bookmakers William Hill using a balanced scorecard approach to evaluating managers' performance. It also drew on employee surveys and 360-degree feedback to get a more rounded view of some of the soft skills held by their managers.

The consultancy has also worked with insurance company Royal & SunAlliance, drawing on the principles of neuro-linguistic programming to assess people's motivation for wanting to become managers.

When studying the interviews of candidates for management positions in a customer service-orientated environment, Myatt found the most suitable applicants tended to talk about the role from the customers' point of view.

Those who instinctively approached things from their own standpoint were more likely to be chasing a promotion for selfish, personal reasons rather than a desire to be a good manager. "Both types of people talked enthusiastically but were driven by different forces," Kaisen says.

But recognition that line management represents a distinct skill will only filter through into good practice if reward structures are modified to encourage good management, says Davies.

She says her organisation is considering ways to link managers' pay to team performance. But introducing performance-related pay for managers can be controversial. A recent study from Hay Group found that less than half of employees believe their organisation has a fair system for evaluating staff performance.

Bolchover himself acknowledges that introducing a culture of performance-related pay for managers can be "hugely disruptive" and will only happen with buy-in from the boardroom.

"Unfortunately, in the vast majority of organisations, senior management is still to be persuaded of the power of personnel management," he says.

Perhaps then it is senior management, not the employees, who need to wake up. ■

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### READER OFFER

Personnel Today readers can buy a copy of David Bolchover's *The Living Dead* (Capstone Publishing Ltd, ISBN 184112656X) at the reduced price of £7.99, including P&P (RRP £12.99). To order a copy, contact Capstone on freephone 0800 243407, quoting promotion code ETX or e-mail: [cs-books@wiley.co.uk](mailto:cs-books@wiley.co.uk) (please quote the promotion code and include your postal delivery address). The promotion is open until 2 June 2006.

