

SA crying out for more first-line managers

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Forget a lack of leadership at the top, a new survey shows that there is a huge demand for good entry-level managers in South Africa.

The level of unemployment in South Africa is one of the highest in the world, and yet at the same time it is getting harder and harder to fill those vacancies that do exist.

According to the most recent Manpower Talent Shortage survey, 31% of employers in South Africa found it hard to hire the right person for their jobs in 2015 – up 8% from the previous year – with management level staff being cited as one of the top three most difficult jobs to fill.

This contradiction suggests a lack of adequate skills training at key levels. Most significantly, training of first-time managers is often neglected, says Jenny Boxall, course convenor for The New Manager short course at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB).

“Being a manager is not something that comes naturally to most people. Often individuals are promoted to management positions without any training and this can be an overwhelming experience,” Boxall says.

The New Manager is a short course offered by the GSB and teaches the core principles of management, as well as helping first-time managers to develop their own leadership style.

The course focuses not only on key business skills like strategy, finance, operations and the management of complex projects but also the basics of good business communication. Extensive time is spent on understanding how to develop, manage and motivate a team. There is also a strong emphasis on personal mastery, which is increasingly becoming a core aspect of leading and managing effectively.

Fatima Hamdulay, senior lecturer at the GSB says one of the reasons new managers struggle is because the management landscape is changing.

“The old way of managing was being in power, exercising control and domination. But this is old school and destroys value in the long term. The new way is about really listening and collaborating and providing feedback in a constructive way. In this sense the manager is really a coach that enables others to create value,” Hamdulay explains.

Numerous studies have shown that managers who are more caring and less authoritarian in their approach have more successful teams working for them and higher productivity levels. A survey at a UK hospital in Cardiff in 2015 found that authoritarian managers resulted not only in stressed and unhappy staff but in conditions where patients were actually at a greater risk of being hurt due to the way the hospital was functioning.

Scholar and coach Nancy Kline, who developed the concept of the Thinking Environment, stresses the importance of managers listening when people talk, not only hearing them. This means allowing people to finish their thoughts, not interrupting others and allowing everyone an opportunity to speak.

She says managers need to be in tune with the unconscious, psychological forces that influence the way a team behaves and performs as well as how this affects a company or organisation.

“Leadership is about serving and leading your organisation to be bigger and better in all spheres that it touches,” comments

Hamdulay.

Boxall agrees, she says organisations should consider exposing new managers to such ideas and strategies to ensure that these key employees are able to live up to their potential and add value. The risk of not doing so means that they may actually damage the organisation. A recent Gallup poll revealed that poorly-managed work groups are 50% less productive and 44% less profitable than well-managed groups.

“Just because someone is an excellent engineer does not mean that they will be as good at managing engineers. Managing people requires unique skills that fortunately, can be learned, practiced and refined.

“And who knows, if we invest more in good managers at the lower end of an organisation – by the time they reach the top – they may just have a better chance of being good leaders – the kind we so desperately need in this country,” Boxall says.

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