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How are frontline managers supported in the performance management process?

Purpose

Existing research has ignored the perspectives of frontline managers in relation to the support they receive. This study aims to understand the extent to which and how other organisational actors support frontline managers in their implementation of performance.

Design/methodology/approach

This article used a qualitative method (57 semi-structured interviews) in two Singapore public sector organisations to understand the types of support provided to frontline managers. The interviewees came from various levels and the hierarchical sampling frame allowed for comparisons to be made across the cases.

Findings

The authors found that the HR department, superiors, and peers signalled to frontline managers the custom and practice of performance management that led to the frontline managers not prioritising their performance management responsibilities. Notably, the focus of the frontline managers was on meeting operational needs rather than the PM process.

Originality

The authors add to the literature by examining the how the support from other organisational actors signalled to frontline managers the importance of performance management within their work group. This paper also explores how frontline managers seek support and the type of support they want in their role.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years there has been a consistent stream of HRM implementation literature revealing frontline managers (FLMs) have become increasingly responsible for, recruitment and redundancy, training and development, performance evaluations, and rewards and compensation in addition to their regular operational work (Trullen, Bos-Nehles & Valverde, 2020). A successful performance management (PM) system lies in the hands of these managers who serve as “a key linking mechanism” between the formal and informal processes in organisations (Schleicher et al., 2018, p. 17). With HR and senior management designing the

system then cascading the implementation responsibility down the organisation to FLMs (Perry & Kulik, 2008), the experience of FLMs in carrying out PM has been neglected in previous research and this is the focus of the article. In Brown, O’Kane, Mazmdar and McCracken’s (2019) review of the performance management literature review, showed how PM research involved a variety of stakeholders (employees, managers, students, HR practitioners, and union representatives) and out of 230 articles, 69 of them used managers as participants. However, there was no segregation between the various levels of management.

Signals are sent to organisational actors through HR practices and how they interpret those signals will affect the implementation process (Guest, Sanders, Rodrigues & Oliveira, 2021). A number of HRM and PM studies have discussed the importance of support given by organisation actors to FLMs (e.g., Evans, 2016) but we have little detailed understanding of how this support takes place. More importantly, we do not know how FLMs interpret the signals sent by other organisational actors through their support. Therefore, this article aims to provide an understanding of how FLMs are supported in the PM process based on the signals that are sent to them by other organisation actors.

Using data from two Singaporean public sector organisations, this article uses the broader PM process to better understand how FLMs perceive support from their superiors, peers and the HR department through the signals sent via PM. Our primary contribution is to unpack the concept of organisational support where we show that several organisational actors are involved in this process: the HR department, supervisors and peers, where they provide different types of support to FLMs in PM that affects how FLMs prioritise their work responsibilities

The article first explores the context of the FLM and PM, namely, HRM decentralisation and the FLM’s role in PM, and the support of other organisational actors. The research methodology then follows, outlining the research approach, sampling method, and process of data collection and analysis. Our research findings will then be presented. Lastly, we conclude by explaining how FLMs seek support and what support they are looking for.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT ENACTMENT BY FRONTLINE MANAGERS

In relation to our context, Tessema et al. (2009) have shown that Singapore's civil service has experienced gradual decentralisation of the HR function, providing FLMs more authority in the implementation of HR policies including recruitment and redundancy, training and development, performance evaluations, and rewards and compensation (Trullen et al., 2020). Our focus is Performance management systems which are "a set of management control mechanisms used by executives and employees with the overall purpose of facilitating the delivery of organisational goals by influencing people's behaviour and performance" (Franco-Santos & Otley, 2018, p. 698). Consistent formal and informal performance conversations are key to linking together the various component of the PM process and help generate high performance in the workplace (Blackman, Buick, O'Flynn, O'Donnell & West, 2019). As O'Kane, McCracker and Brown (2022, p. 1590) commented performance conversations are at the centre of the PM system, "grounding the entire PM system design and implementation". Reciprocity and relationship are the foundation of these conversations (O'Kane et al., 2022). As such, it is important for us to understand the relationships between the various levels of organisational actors in the workplace and whether and how the support provided affects how the FLMs approach their PM responsibilities.

Senior managers and the HR department are generally responsible for defining the objectives and the technical aspects of PM, respectively; while FLMs conduct the day-to-day PM with the frontline employees (Biron, Farndale, & Paauwe, 2011). FLMs are critical to the PM process because they are typically responsible for evaluating performance and providing feedback (Brown & Lim, 2019) and engage in PM activities "as soon as an employee joins the organisation by way of induction and socialisation" (Hutchinson, 2013, p. 75). The HR function is important in supporting the implementation of HR practices such as PM (Huselid et al., 1997). The effort that the HR department takes to promote the PM system affects how well performance is supported and rewarded (John & Björkman, 2015). The promotion and support of the PM system by the HR function is essential in influencing how well organisational actors understand the aims of the overarching system and practices (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Brooks, 2016). However, the goals of FLMs and the HR department can be disparate, affecting the delivery and acceptance of such practices (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Brooks, 2016).

Limited time and heavy workloads can lead to FLMs focusing on operational aspects of their job rather than HR policies (Lee et al., 2020; Link & Müller, 2015). As such, the involvement

and support of higher levels of management is important to the success of PM (Biron et al., 2011). Such support can help facilitate “a strong implementation climate” and can help to remove obstacles that prevent FLMs from implementing HR practices (Mirfakhar et al., 2018, p. 3013). Although support from higher levels of management might not reduce the workloads of FLMs, it can affect the ability, motivation, and opportunity of FLMs (Mirfakhar et al., 2018). Support from superiors and peers can assist FLMs to navigate any role ambiguity or overload balancing operational and PM responsibilities (Hunter & Renwick, 2009).

SIGNALLING THEORY AND SUPPORT OF ORGANISATIONAL ACTORS

Without careful communication and delivery, one of the problems of HR implementation is that the message can be vague or misinterpreted (Guest et al., 2021). Haggerty and Wright (2009) have previously suggested that instead of merely thinking of HR in terms of policies and practices in organisations, it is useful to think of management sending signals to employees through HRM; and employee interpretation of the signals from management are crucial to success. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) first developed a framework to understand how a strong HR system contributed to firm performance. The argument was that a strong HR system had distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus, enabling HR practices to signal to organisational actors the intended effects through effective HRM implementation, contributing to broader organisational performance (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). However, over a decade later the authors recognised that there was limited examination of the HRM system strength as the focus tended to be on individual perception of HRM strength (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016).

Signalling theory can be used to understand how organisations sends critical signals to their members (Connelly et al., 2011). The focus of signalling theory is on determining the characteristics of the signaller(s) (who is/are sending the message), the signal (the message) and the receiver(s) (who is/are receiving the message) to understand what makes an effective signal (Connelly et al., 2011). The HRM process is complex because of the multiple participants involved, asymmetries in information and differing priorities (Connelly et al., 2011; Guest et al., 2021). Therefore, the roles of the signaller, signal, and receiver are essential within the HRM process as they have a flow on effect and can help determine “the characteristics of effective signals” (as can be seen in Figure 1 below) (Guest et al., 2021, p. 799).

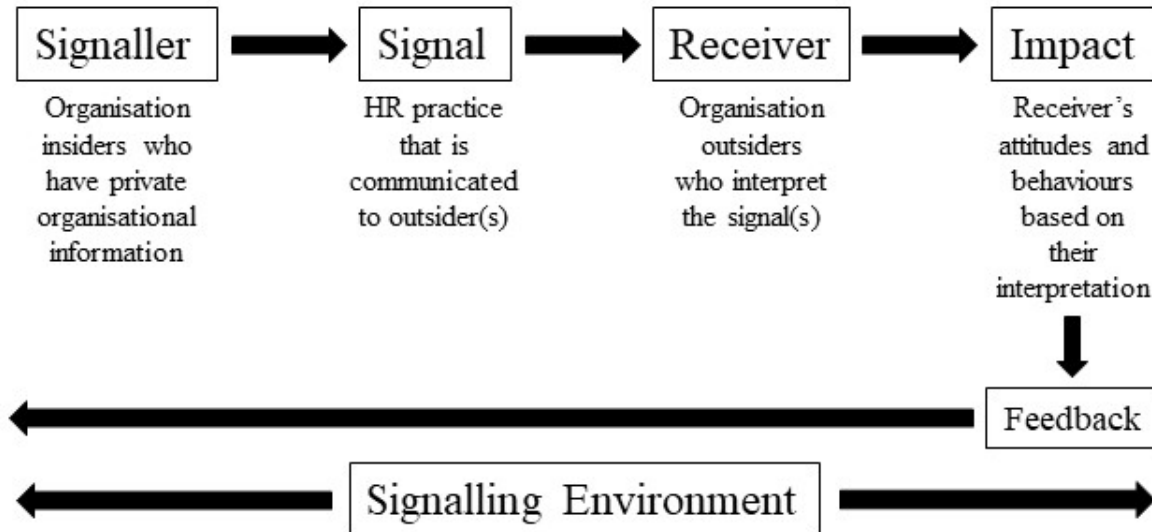


Figure 1. Signalling framework (adapted from Connelly et al., 2011 and Guest et al., 2021)

Previous research has shown that HR messages were more impactful if HR managers demonstrated their HR competency or worked closely with line managers in the message delivery (e.g. Kim, Su & Wright, 2018; Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper & Brooks, 2014). Employees interpret signals that are sent via other organisational members through information or actions to gain a better understanding of the organisation's goals and objectives (Biron, Farndale & Paauwe, 2011). Individuals can have idiosyncratic perceptions based on how they interpret the signals that they receive (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). As such, instead of the actual organisational practices, individual employees' reactions and responses to the organisational practices are influenced by their perceptions of the practices, which they interpret from the organisation's actions (Rynes, 1991).

Signals can be sent via formal and informal channels (Biron et al., 2011). However, compared to job-related messages from higher levels of management, job-related messages from direct managers affected the perception of fairness and adherence to psychological contract (Guest & Conway, 2002). We focus on signalling to the FLM from other organisational actors in this study but we acknowledge that all levels of employees receive signals within the organisation. FLMs have been found to navigate their PM responsibilities and the demands of their superiors and expectations of subordinates with signals from other organisational actors showing them what is actually expected in practice (Lee et al. 2020). In this article, we consider the mixed messages or 'mixed signals' (Townsend et al., 2012) that other organisational actors send to the FLMs about PM and how that is received by FLMs.

HR implementation literature has discussed the importance of management and HR support to ensure the success and quality of the implementation of HR practices (e.g. Mirfakhar et al., 2018; Trullen et al., 2016). As such, the person and medium through which the signal is sent is also very important. For example, Chako and Conway (2019) found that there is a tendency to relate on-to-one direct communication and direct supervisors to positive HR information; emails, the HR department and senior management are then more likely to be associated with negative HR information. By providing support within the HR implementation process, supervisors are signalling that “it is expected and desirable to participate, and that there will be no negative consequences if they do so.” (Straub et al., 2018, p. 3118). In particular, organisational support given to FLMs signals the prioritisation of the implementation of HR responsibilities – a supportive organisation can lead to FLMs reciprocating through performing their HR responsibilities effectively (Op de Beeck et al., 2018). Bos-Nehles et al. (2006) found that FLMs received support from the HR department, their superiors and peers; indeed but support from superiors and peers was preferred. FLMs approached their superiors and peers for advice on managing HR challenges (Bos-Nehles et al., 2006) and their direct supervisors’ behaviours during PM implementation impacted the FLMs’ perception and behaviour regarding PM (den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2004).

In order to better understand how FLMs interpret signals from other organisational actors based on how they are supported in the PM process, this study aims to address the following research question: *How do organisational actors support FLMs in their implementation of performance management?*

This question can be further broken down into two sub-questions:

What type of support do FLMs receive?

How is support provided to FLMs?

METHODOLOGY

The data for this research were obtained from two Singapore government organisations, PublicWorks and AdminInc (both pseudonyms). The Singapore Government Directory (Ministry of Communications and Information, 2016) was used to identify ministries, statutory boards, organs of state, and public services before the various gatekeepers were contacted for access via email. Only PublicWorks’ gatekeeper responded to the access email and access was

limited to only one division of the organisation. AdminInc’s director was recruited through the recommendation of the PublicWork’s gatekeeper and access was limited to the two departments that she was leading. Table 1 depicts the differences between the organisations.

PublicWorks	AdminInc
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • > 5000 employees in organisation • Infrastructure and environment sector • Participants recruitment from 4 different departments with about 160 employees under the construction division led by the director (#1.24) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • > 500 employees in the organization • Central administration sector • Participants recruited from 2 different departments led by the director (#2.29)

Table 1. Organisational contexts of PublicWorks and AdminInc

Both PublicWorks and AdminInc are multi-divisional organisations. The study was completed in four departments within one division at PublicWorks and two departments within one division at AdminInc. At PublicWorks, we interviewed 27 participants from one division including one senior manager, six middle managers – one from the HR department, 15 FLMS – one from the HR department and five frontline employees. With a headcount of around 160 staff; employees there either worked in the headquarters of the organisation or on various work sites, allowing for a cross sample of participants. The director of AdminInc agreed to be interviewed in addition to 29 of her staff including two senior managers, two middle managers (who also had FLM responsibilities), 6 FLMS and 20 frontline employees interviews) who were available within the two departments (with a headcount of around 50 staff). Participants in both organisations were selected by the respective directors. The total of 57 interview participants is at the high end of recommendations for qualitative research by Saunders and Townsend (2016). Please refer to the appendix for detailed information on the interview participants.

The selection of two organisations allowed for comparisons to be made within and between the cases. Face to face semi-structured interviews were carried out over a 22-week period at both organisations (12 weeks at PublicWorks and 10 weeks at AdminInc) by one interviewer. Most of the interviews lasted around 45 minutes. The semi-structured interviews were performed in private meeting rooms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality as most of the participants, worked in common working spaces.

During the analysis stage of the data, we combed data units, generating meaning of data, and

inductive thematic analysis. As this study was part of a larger study examining the complex nature of PM in practice, we focused on all data that was coded under the themes of *support*, *management by example*, and *managers* in Nvivo. Table 2 shows the codes and description of them from which the findings were analysed.

<u>Codes</u>	<u>Description</u>
Support	Assistance/support given by other organisational actors (e.g., superiors/HR etc.) to facilitate the PM of staff
Management by example	Managers managing based on how they have been managed in the past
Managers <u>Sub-codes</u>	Specifically relating to management in organisations <u>Sub-codes</u>
- Frontline management (FLM)	- FLM – specific reference to first-level management
- Middle management (MM)	- MM – specific reference to middle-level management
- Senior management (SM)	- SM – specific reference to senior-level management

Table 2. Codes and descriptions

For the larger study, the research teams started with the combination of data units was done by grouping responses from interviews together under the same topic, regardless of whether they came from the same interviewee or not (Klenke, 2016).

In the coding stage, relevant interview responses to PM implementation were assigned codes by one member of the research team based on the literature review. Those responses addressing the same issues were categorised together, allowing for meaning to be generated “selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 7). Using Nvivo, meaning from the data was compiled by isolating impactful statements from the interviews and coding them appropriately to be used in the analysis and in the generation of themes. O’Kane, Smith and Lerman (2021) explained that computer-aided/assisted qualitative data analysis software techniques can be presented in a clear, trustworthy, and transparent manner. After all the data was coded, we utilised the techniques of *code frequency* and *code retrieval* for this study. Code frequency was done by looking at the data coded to *support*, *management by example*, and *managers*. Here, the focus was on examining the similarities and/or differences with and between the two case organisations. Code retrieval was done by studying all the relevant codes to ensure consistency in what was being assigned to each code.

Lastly, inductive thematic analysis was performed through the iterative re-reading of the interviews to revise the codes, and by comparing the information against the codes. “Themes emerge from and are grounded in the data” and it was through this that overarching patterns were seen (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926). The remaining members of the research team then independently reviewed the themes generated and disagreement in interpretation were discussed and resolved. The research team then further grouped the relevant data into these three overarching themes – HR support, supervisor support, peer support.

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed two forms of support that the FLMs received in their performance management implementation role – we categorise these as content and process support. Figure 1 below illustrates the types of support that FLMs were found to receive from other organisational actors.

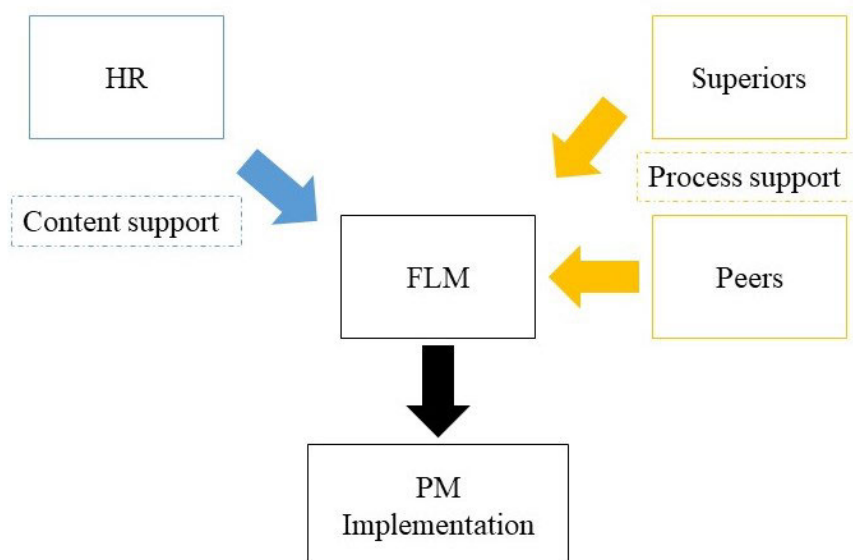


Figure 2. Types of support FLMs receive in the PM process

The HR department was found to provide largely content support, which the FLMs interpret as setting rules. Content support refers to the support provided to FLMs around providing information about the PM policy. Superiors and peers were seen as providing process support, which helped FLMs understand what they should actually do. The different definitions and expectations of support will also be analysed.

THE HR DEPARTMENT

The HR department is central to the PM system because they follow PM through formulation, adoption, and implementation (John & Björkman, 2015). Even though HR serves as an important source of PM support for FLMs, the different operational goals of FLMs and the HR department impact the implementation of PM (Sheehan et al., 2016). FLMs interviewed in both organisations generally reported a lack of support in the PM process from the HR department, aside from providing policy documents signalling to the FLMs that the organisation was only interested in the completion of specific components of the PM system; the common position held by the FLMs was that HR only sent out email reminders during pre-determined periods in the year to inform other organisational actors of the specific components and processes that should be completed:

Frankly speaking, we only receive emails from them – “this is the brand new phase” and “this is the mid-year review phase”... we don’t really touch base... – FLM (#1.12)

At the start, mid-year, and the end of the year, they [HR] will be the ones sending emails out to remind the whole company to do performance management... at the start of the year, they will tell everyone “you need to go and complete this thing, you should discuss [this] with your boss, you should sit down with your boss”... – FLM (#2.08)

In contrast to the perceptions of the FLMs, the HR interviewees from PublicWorks believed they supported FLMs in PM through the provision of training programs and working closely with FLMs to facilitate PM; support was also given outside the PM system, especially when FLMs faced problems with their employees:

Every year HR provides a performance management course that they can attend... we will also brief the directors on how to conduct the appraisal... what are [the] things to look out for, what are the promotion criteria... for the business partners, they’ll be briefed in a two-hour long briefing. After that, they will go down to the line and share with the business line management staff one more time... When we go down to the line, it’s more related to their business, including their staff. So we will sit down with them, go through with them the ranking again, the process, then after that, during their own ranking session, we will sit down with them to facilitate [that] as well. – HR Senior Manager (#1.01)

I think one way would be training them, providing them with the tools and the guidelines... we do meet up with them together when there are certain situations or cases that they struggle with... there are cases whereby they are not going to renew their

contract due to performance issues and things like that, they will get HR to be involved in such situations. If it's really a case of a wrong job fit, we try to help them to source for alternative arrangements... – HR FLM (#1.27)

In both organisations we saw the provision of training and PM guides for all employees provided by HR departments. However, we can see that the FLMs desire for HR support was very much based on their own immediate needs, not the organisation's intent. FLMs generally did not consider being provided with guidelines and reminders to be supportive. It is evident that FLMs and the HR department had different expectations of support and indeed the role of the HR department.

Specific to PublicWorks, most of the FLMs felt that HR department provided instruction rather than supportive collaboration and it was also apparent that FLMs had limited ownership in the PM system:

HR, of course, is the main one who pushes all those programs and we are the ones who have to keep implementing. – FLM (#1.09)

Occasionally, you will see HR starting to come out with something new, and then if you look at it closely, it's just the packaging [that] has changed, but the interior is all the same. – FLM (#1.17)

From HR, the perspective was different, the HR senior manager from PublicWorks complained that that FLMs struggle with or are not willing to performance manage their employees appropriately and push the blame onto HR to maintain the relationship with their employees:

I guess the difficulty for frontline managers is that they always find it very difficult to convey poor scores or average scores. They are not willing to tackle the situation head on and they usually try to avoid it. Sometimes they will just simply say "oh it's HR's decision". It's very, very easy for them to say that... they are very unwilling to give a poor score because they don't want to manage their employees...because we want to be nice people.

In contrast, four of the 20 FLMs interviewed from both organisations who were new to their role (and PM) were more positive regarding the role of the HR department in the PM process.

New FLMs appreciated the guidelines and training that HR provided to understand the formal expectation of the organisation regarding their responsibilities:

HR provides briefings and lessons to us, including how the appraisals should be done, how should we manage our teams, etc. They are useful because they set the framework for us to follow in our jobs. – FLM (#2.17)

Unlike new FLMs, experienced FLMs have a better understanding of what to do in PM to prevent their superiors and HR from chastising them. Experienced FLMs at both organisations tend to focus on their operational instead of their HR responsibilities and given this, the HR department's instructions was perceived by many FLMs to a distraction from their key tasks. Additionally, it should be noted that some FLMs choose not to approach the HR department for support because they are confident in their abilities or feel they can get support from other managers. One FLM explains:

... if you've got nobody to turn to and then you go and talk to them [HR]... I haven't tried talking to them. So it's kind of an unfair statement saying that they won't support us because I didn't [approach HR]... I believe that if you have a problem [with PM] you will go to the countersigning officer [referring to direct supervisor] and the countersigning officer might have some solutions for you... because at our level we try to manage the problems at our level [sic]. If we are unable to, then we will go to our [direct supervisor] or even higher up. (#1.12)

There was not a uniform perspective in both PublicWorks and AdminInc – as we noted above, newer FLMs saw HR's role as supportive in the PM process as they received information and assistance managing the performance of their employees; experienced FLMs saw things differently as they did not need support to understand policies and procedures, and involving HR meant additional work for them. Consequently, superiors and peers are more influential actors for FLMS in the PM process.

SUPERIORS

The support of superiors was important. At AdminInc, a middle manager (#2.22) explained that even he saw himself as a “role model” and he was always open for them to approach him. This approach was viewed as continuous support through mentoring, expressed by a middle manager from PublicWorks (#1.26):

I [will] give him the example of what I've been through, the process that I've been through; let him realize how this process is being materialised and then I go with him to see how he manages the staff. At times when we chat, I will just bring up a topic and let him see how he handles the situation ... I will guide him, let him do the actual talking, so, I'm sort of in that way ... a mentor ... and guide them.

Thus, FLMs can learn about the custom and practice in the PM system by seeing the signals of superiors. And indeed observe how more experienced actors bypass HR practices that they believe are unnecessary (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010). AdminInc's FLMs were supported in such workarounds by their superiors:

...how is he guiding me, how is he giving me opportunities, how is he managing my duties and things like that – then that's what I've learnt. – FLM (#2.08)

... training will provide some background because when you move on from [being] staff to management, you definitely need some background or some basic training to bring you up to speed. After that, it's really on the job. I guess how your previous supervisor was will make a difference... So, it depends on whether you want to adopt that [previous superior's management style] or do you not want to. – Middle Manager/FLM (#2.22)

Unlike the HR department, superiors are perceived to be more directly supportive, providing practical examples to the FLMs on how to manage the performance of their employees based on experience. Notably, AdminInc interviewees have suggested that the behaviours and approach of their superiors provided them with a model:

If you follow someone for [a] long [time], you may adopt their practice, their style and all that. So, some people said, "Oh, actually some of them, during their processing officer days they were not like that, but they changed. They changed when they moved up to the mid-management role" and all that, which could be explained by the reason that they have been following the big boss for a long time. What the big boss is doing, they will have to align [with] – you have to do it this way to suit her style, in terms of presentation, and all that. Along the way, they may also get influenced by her culture, her attitude, and then it just gets absorbed, learned, and passed down. It manifests downwards. – Frontline Employee (#2.15)

My RO [reporting officer], she does the same for all the staff under her as well. So, we don't only meet staff at the pre-determined slot; we do give feedback throughout the

whole of the year and so on... I think in a way, largely that will be the trend, where you follow or imitate your boss. – Middle Manager/FLM (#2.18)

By looking to their superiors, FLMs learn what is deemed acceptable by the organisation. At PublicWorks, middle management interviewees demonstrated that the support in PM was stronger in negative situations (when things did not go as planned or smoothly) and worked very closely with the FLM to handle such cases or employees. For example, a middle manager (#1.13) said that in the situation of dealing with poorly performing or problem employees, he would sit in with the FLM and the employee in question to manage the situation; not just leaving it to the FLM to handle alone.

Middle managers in both organisations wanted to ensure that they were supporting the FLMs in potentially problematic situations. In both organisations, middle managers also supported FLMs in PM by discussing the performance of the frontline employees before working with senior management in assessing performance for the year of the FLMs and their frontline employees:

With the appraisal, my boss will go and “fight” for us [referring to the FLM and the frontline employees] with other colleagues also... When we do the year-end appraisal, we will sit with our boss and discuss. We will discuss how their [referring to frontline employees] progress is like and then from there we will gauge them – what are the points or marks that they are entitled to – FLM (#1.02)

I will also discuss [the performance of frontline employees] with him. I mean as and when, for example, if the staff is doing well, performing in certain areas, he will also have sight of it. He has to know because he’s the one who helps talk to the senior management about their [referring to frontline employees] ranking and things like that so he will also have sight of whatever that’s going on the ground. – FLM (#2.08)

The findings showed that superiors were considered supportive by 1) providing examples for FLMs to follow ; 2) giving guidance on the expectations of FLM in the PM system; 3) helping the FLM and employees negotiate their relative performance which determines their reward and development.

PEERS

Another source of support came from other FLMs. Peer support was more popular at PublicWorks, where FLMs explained that their colleagues and superiors helped them in adapting to their role, the way the organisation operated and how they went about managing the performance of their employees:

When I first came in, my colleague also told me that you have to phrase it in a nicer way when telling employees anything negative or if their performance is not up to mark – you have to rephrase the whole thing. – FLM (#1.02)

When you are new to a company, how do you know what are the things you can or cannot do? I closely follow what my manager will do and I'll quickly bring down the information and then follow. It may not be the best, but it is a guide, then after that, when I've been in the organisation for a longer period of time, then I [will] start to think about what I can improve on; maybe I don't need this anymore. – FLM (#1.20)

From the data, it is evident that the HR department provides information on the intended PM system but new FLMs learn about the custom and practice of PM from peers and superiors, which can deviate from the intended system, reflecting the Townsend *et al.* (2012) finding of FLMs receiving 'mixed signals' in HRM. The actions of peers signal to FLMs what is acceptable practice. Although superiors are more impactful in their influence on FLMs (as they serve as examples of the expectations within the organisation as more senior members), peers provide problem solving support. Many FLMs avoided directly approaching their superiors first as their superiors' perception of their ability to manage problem or poorly performing employees can be affected. In both organisations, experienced FLMs explained that they approached their superiors with potential solutions in mind or alternatively, they were keeping their superiors informed of episodes of concern:

Normally, we will solve it by ourselves first. We cannot just go to him [referring to superior] for everything. I will check with my other colleagues [about] whether they have faced the same issue before and what they would do; after that I would go to my boss and update him on the issue. Then he will advise me whether to go by the usual way or if there is a new way that we can approach it. – FLM (#1.09)

I go to my boss first if there're major issues – if I know that those are really huge issues that maybe my colleagues won't be able to handle as well, then I will go to my boss directly... if it's normal things or problems on lower level issues... if I know that at the

staff level, me and [my] colleagues, we can handle the problem, we will just get it done... we can probably tell him after that, but it's telling him that it's done, we've already resolved it, rather than asking him for a solution. – FLM (#2.08)

A PublicWorks FLM (#1.10) explained that they “don’t go to the bosses with problems” but “with the solutions”. Specific to PM, FLMs avoided going to their supervisors with poor performing employees as it could be seen as reflecting poorly on them.

There are a small number of FLMs in PublicWorks who do not approach their peers for PM support and tend to solve any performance issues within their work group:

So peers, actually we seldom talk about [PM]. We don’t talk about appraisals because we think that it’s confidential, it’s just between our bosses, me, and our staff, that’s all. – FLM (#1.09)

Normally we will try to find solutions together. For example, if there’re certain issues with one of our technical staff, the project officers and myself would discuss [the issues] – how do we undertake the issue, how do we try to resolve it. There are also instances where some staff cannot get along... So normally we will discuss it. – FLM (#1.10)

While FLMs found that both superiors and peers provided process support; in particular, other FLMs provided support when managing poor performance. Peers helped the FLM understand the practical aspects of managing underperforming employees.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the practice of PM is best seen as a system with several important actors. Even though the key actor is the FLM, they do not carry out PM in isolation; we find that they draw support from several sources. Figure 3 below shows that the HR department, superiors, and peers of FLMs signal to the FLMs that PM is a box-ticking exercise they must go through as part of their role. As such, the focus tends to be on simply going through the motions to keep HR off their backs but the FLMs see their key focus on their operational responsibilities.

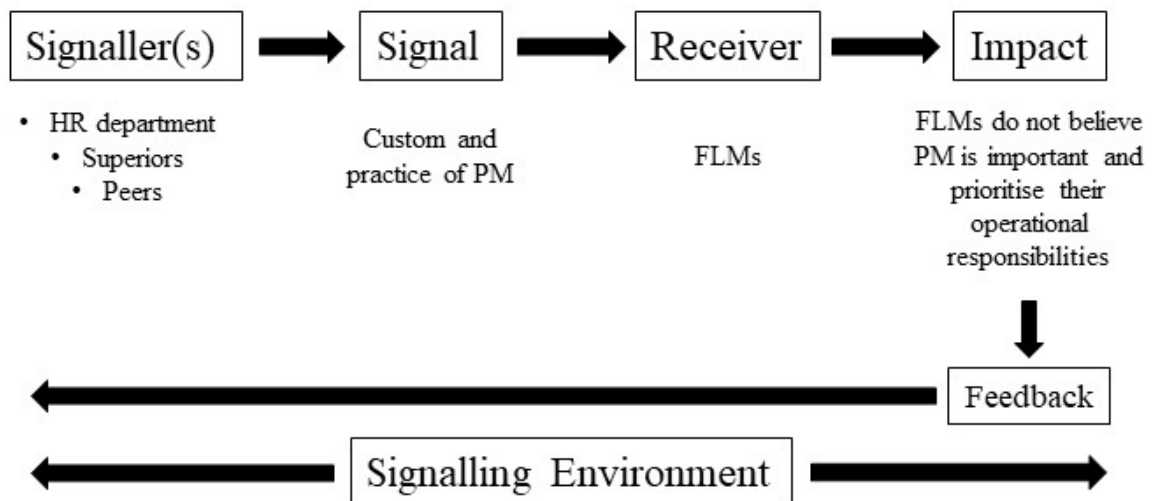


Figure 3. The signalling framework for FLMs in PM

The HR department provided administrative assistance in PM, but this was generally perceived by FLMs as a bureaucratic burden rather than the active support they sought. In comparison, the collaborative nature of the FLMs' working relationship with their supervisors and peers, facilitated more active support. Connelly et al., (2011) previously explained that signalling theory can help to explain how critical signals are sent to individuals in the workplace. Signals are sent by organisational actors through actions or information which then is interpreted by the employees (Biron et al., 2011). More than the intended practice or policy, the way individual employees behave or respond shows their perception of the practice or policy (Rynes, 1991). In this study, we found that supervisors specifically served as guides or role models that signalled to FLMs what was expected in PM; FLMs had the opportunity to approach their peers for help in difficult situations that could help them maintain the image of performance to their supervisors. This supports the research from Townsend *et al.*, (2012) who found that FLMs would receive 'mixed signals' within the organisation over the way to implement aspects of HRM. In this instance, even though the HR department conveys the importance of the intended PM process and provides support to the FLMs, the FLMs themselves do not receive that message. The FLMs feel like the HR department pushes policy to them but based on what they see their superiors and more experienced peers doing, they are less concerned with full implementation of policy than acceptable practice.

In line with the findings from Bos-Nehles et al. (2006), we found that FLMs prefer the collaborative process support provided by their superiors and peer. In AdminInc, superiors serve as ‘role models’ for FLMs in their implementation of PM. More importantly, superiors send signals through their actions, which allows the FLMs to better understand the organisation’s operational expectations and what workarounds are acceptable. The signals were sent through informal channels (in this instance based on what more experienced peers and superiors are doing) where the FLMs were able to see what the norms and expectations – or custom and practice – in the workplace were (Biron et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2020). Peer support is preferred when FLMs are trying to solve problems without drawing attention of higher levels of management.

We add to our understanding of FLM implementation literature and signalling theory by showing that the support provided to FLMs by various organisational actors is important in understanding the consistency of the messaging about PM being delivered and how PM is implemented. FLMs are overloaded with operational responsibilities and as such many of them resented the imposition of PM requirements. The signals that other organisational actors sent FLMs also showed them that their operational responsibilities took priority over their PM ones. As such, the preference of FLMs was to do minimalist implementation as they could balance their responsibilities. Superiors and peers play an essential role as the signallers of HR policies and practices (Guest et al., 2021), In addition, when facing challenging or problematic employees or situations, FLMs prefer not to approach HR as they perceive that HR may make judgments about their capability. Instead, their peers’ advice is seen as less encumbered by an ideal view of policy.

Our article contributes to our knowledge in two ways. Firstly, we contribute to our understanding of performance management systems through an investigation into the role of FLMs; secondly, we contribute to our understanding of FLMs through demonstrating that there are a range of ways they receive support for their role in this particular HR practice. By examining the support through the lens of the FLM this article provides important new findings on the types and different sources of support that allowed FLMs to navigate the complexities within their role. The signalling environment starts with other organisational actors who signal the custom and practice of PM to the FLMs. Higher levels of management mainly signalled to FLMs formal expectations. Peers, on the other hand, were more approachable and mostly likely to provide pragmatic advice. The HR department provided policy and administrative support

but was generally not seen as supportive (with the exception of new managers) in the context of day-to-day management of their employees. The signals that FLMs receive from these organisational actors impacts how they approach their PM responsibilities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides valuable insight into the importance of organisational support available to FLMs in the implementation of HR practices through PM. However, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the findings were developed from the sample from two divisions of two Singapore public sector organisations, limiting generalisability. Future studies may attempt to examine whether the results regarding the importance of superior and peer support in PM implementation can be generalised to fit organisations in other sectors. Moreover, future results can help to determine if FLMs avoid approaching their superiors for support when possible, to maintain an impression of performance. This article focused on organisational support that FLMs had from other organisational actors specifically through the implementation of PM. Future research could study organisational support given to FLMs through the implementation of other HR practices to determine if superior and peer support are still significant.

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Appendix

PublicWorks Participant Demographic Information

Interview #	Code	Position	Department
1	1.01	Middle Manager	HR
2	1.02	Frontline Manager	C
3	1.03	Frontline Employee	C
4	1.04	Frontline Manager	C
5	1.05	Frontline Employee	3
6	1.06	Middle Manager	3
7	1.07	Frontline Employee/Frontline Manager	3
8	1.08	Frontline Employee	3
9	1.09	Frontline Manager	C
10	1.1	Frontline Manager	3
11	1.11	Frontline Employee/Frontline Manager	3
12	1.12	Frontline Manager	C
13	1.13	Middle Manager	1
14	1.14	Middle Manager	1
15	1.15	Frontline Manager	1
16	1.16	Frontline Manager	1
17	1.17	Frontline Manager	1
18	1.18	Frontline Manager	1
19	1.19	Frontline Manager	1
20	1.2	Frontline Manager	1
21	1.21	Middle Manager	1
22	1.22	Frontline Manager	1
23	1.23	Frontline Manager	1
24	1.24	Senior Manager	Overall Head
25	1.25	Frontline Manager	2
26	1.26	Middle Manager	1
27	1.27	Frontline Manager	HR

Participant #1.07 and #1.11 have the position of Frontline Employee/Frontline Manager as they only have some official managerial responsibilities for their subordinates.

AdminInc Participant Demographic Information

Interview #	Code	Position	Department
28	2.01	Frontline Employee	A
29	2.02	Frontline Employee	A
30	2.03	Frontline Employee	A
31	2.04	Frontline Employee	A
32	2.05	Frontline Employee	A
33	2.06	Frontline Employee	A
34	2.07	Frontline Manager	A
35	2.08	Frontline Manager	A
36	2.09	Frontline Employee	A
37	2.1	Frontline Employee	A
38	2.11	Frontline Employee	A
39	2.12	Frontline Employee	S
40	2.13	Frontline Manager	A
41	2.14	Frontline Employee	S
42	2.15	Frontline Employee	S
43	2.16	Frontline Employee	S
44	2.17	Frontline Manager	S
45	2.18	Middle Manager/Frontline Manager	S
46	2.19	Frontline Employee	S
47	2.2	Frontline Manager	S
48	2.21	Frontline Employee	S
49	2.22	Middle Manager/Frontline Manager	A
50	2.23	Frontline Employee	S
51	2.24	Frontline Employee	S
52	2.25	Frontline Employee	S
53	2.26	Frontline Employee	S
54	2.27	Frontline Manager	S
55	2.28	Frontline Employee	S
56	2.29	Senior Manager	Overall Head
57	2.3	Senior Manager	A

Participant #2.18 and #2.22 have the position of Middle Manager/Frontline Manager as they are middle managers but also have to take on frontline managerial responsibilities.