# A systems theory perspective on the front-line manager role

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## Introduction

The role of agency and the dynamics of systems are critical to understanding how people are managed. Ironically, while this is well understood in practice (e.g. Buckingham & Coffman, 1999) such understanding has not made a sufficient impact in HRM research. This chapter explores the critical role and agency of front-line managers through a systems lens. In so doing we note the limitations of existing understanding which tends to treat gaps between intended and experienced HRM as something to be avoided and mitigated versus acknowledged and embraced. By contrast, the classic lens of systems theory provides a rich intellectual heritage which captures the dynamics of front-line manager agency as grounded by contextually oriented concepts including emergence, informality, self-organizing and entropy. The latter half of the chapter animates these principles in action using the example of the front-line manager role in performance management. The chapter concludes by highlighting how the dynamics of system theory can help advance understanding of front-line manager roles, including that which treats informal practice and deviance from established rules as a practical reality versus a detrimental fault-line in HRM implementation.

## The role of front-line managers in HRM: Gradually, but poorly, incorporated

The role of both managerial and employee agency and the broader social systems in which they operated were critical to early scholarship in industrial relations and employment relations. Classic studies recognized the complexities and indeterminacies of the employment relationship and moved to explore organisations as adaptive social systems embedded in differing environmental contexts (Gouldner, 1954). In her classic study of manufacturing and technology Joan Woodward argued that "industrial firms would have to be studied as complex social systems and line-staff relationships looked as part of the whole not in isolation" (1965: 6). While early work differentiating HRM from its predecessor, personnel management, did focus more on the dynamics of management and delegation of HRM to the line, in recent times this type of emphasis is much less evidenced. From the mid-1990s HRM's normative performance agenda and penchant for prescription left little room for agency or factors that might deviate from the predetermined productivity pathway to success. Consequently, there is widespread acknowledgement, not without some irony, that actual managers have appeared as a ghost like figures in much HRM research (Harney & Collings, 2021; Nishii & Paluch, 2018; Steffensen, Ellen, Wang, & Ferris, 2019). In part this can be explained by the presumed alignment of managerial intent and agency central to achieving vertical and horizontal fit in strategic HRM and/or ensuring successful implementation of HRM in its high-performance

work system variant (Harney, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2018). Early HRM-performance oriented research retained a focus on 'intended HR' founded on the assumption "that simply having the appropriate HRM policies inevitably means that they will be effectively implemented and will produce the intended results in terms of individual behaviour and, at one remove, firm performance" (Truss, 2001: 1126).

In more recent times a steady stream of research exploring the so called 'black-box' of HRM-performance relationships has directed attention towards line managers. However, while recognizing line managers as 'key intermediaries' in HRM, the focus of much of this research has been on minimising or (re)directing discretionary effort to enable a greater line of sight in the implementation of HRM (Harney & Cafferkey, 2014). This research is also characterised by a failure to draw upon a clear and consistent definition of line managers, including front-line managers. Line managers can be understood as those who work "between the strategic apex and the operating core of the organisation" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996: 3) and typically consist of three distinct levels: senior line managers, middle line managers, and front-line managers (Lewis, Goodman, Fandt, & Michlitsch: 9; Zhu, Cooper, De Cieri, & Thomson, 2013: 72). Existing studies are limited by a tendency to take an aggregated view on the various levels of line managers (Evans, 2015: 460; Townsend, 2014: 164). As a distinct level of line manager, front line managers play a critical role in organisations, but yet tend to be especially neglected (Hutchinson, 2008: 4; Hutchinson & Purcell, 2010: 357). Notably, front-line managers are the link between higher management and employees, with senior and middle line managers implementing policies and practices through them (Saville & Higgins, 1994: 25). Despite this significance, there is a tendency to reduce front-line managers to a weak link to be corrected or further aligned in a fixed system as part of a quest for optimal performance. Typically neglected is the context in which each and every front-line manager and their respective organisations operates (Farndale & Paauwe, 2018). In essence, the work of front-line manager is reduced to law like patterns without significant powers of metamorphosis (Connolly, 2013). Yet these assumption jar with what we already know about the role of front-line managers.

Research on HR in the leading consortium of companies identified a number of constraints impacting the delivery of HR by front-line managers, not least short-term pressures for performance, limited institutional support, and pragmatic limits on time and resources (McGovern, Gratton, Hope Hailey, Stiles, & Truss, 1997). We know that line managers generally can have differing perspectives to HR executives as to the strategic contribution and value add of HR (Wright, McMahan, Snell, & Gerhart, 2001). In terms of impact, perceptions of front-line manager behaviour is linked to employee engagement (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2013), while it is recognized that individual managers can have a differential performance impact, over and above organizational factors (Mollick, 2012). Harney and Jordan (2008) showed that front-line managers served as critical intermediaries in a call centre context, ameliorating the negative consequences of HRM practices. The focus here was less on creating and fostering organisational performance but on protecting against intended HRM. Front-line managers are often restricted in the amount of autonomy they have in decision making, controlled in part by the expectations and instructions of their superiors. As a result, front-line managers frequently exercise discretion to prioritize their work when they are unable to achieve all their targets, thereby leading to inconsistencies in their approach to people management (Child & Partridge, 1982: 83). A study by Evans (2015) illuminates how FLMs actually have

very limited autonomy in the tasks that are handed to them. However, what they do have is a lot of discretion in how to execute those tasks as long as they keep within the pre-set boundaries and get the job done. All this highlights the significance of the front-line manager in HRM, and the importance of providing a more contextual and holistic understanding of their role and impact, including as a strategic deviation from formal policy. As Boxall and Macky observe "Line managers, including supervisors and team leaders, are responsible for converting much of management's intentions for HRM into actual HR practice, given the resources they have to work with, and their judgments about what will work and what serves their interests. It is useful therefore to think of HR practice as a wide range of actual managerial behaviour centred around a notional standard" (2007: 267).

**Capturing the role of Front-line managers: Insights from systems theory**

In this section we propose that systems theory is an appropriate lens to accommodate the wide range of actual front-line management behaviour, while also recognizing the complexities of the context in which such behaviour is embedded. It is long acknowledged that the activities of HRM are embedded in open systems so that HRM "should not be treated in isolation but in conjunction with the processes by which the policies, practices, and systems are implemented" (Steffensen et al., 2019: 2391). While the evolution of HRM has certainly been characterized by a reference to system-based logic (e.g. the terminology and assumptions of high-performance work systems (HPWS) or the logic of social exchange), there is a continued assumption that any gaps and or failures in implementation can be easily identified and remedied. As Harney argues "absent are more broader considerations of context, emergence or a sense of the inherent tensions of the employment relationship" (2019: 117). It is informative that studies of managerial work depict a task characterized by fragmentation, variety and brevity as opposed to a rational, linear and fixed contribution (Mintzberg, 1973). Indeed the front-line manager role has been highlighted as 'problematic' (Renwick, 2003) and underpinned by structural conflicts and contradictions (Hales, 2007). Unsurprising, that there have been calls to move beyond narrow conceptions of existing line manager roles to embrace their 'multifaceted influence' in the HR process (Kehoe & Han, 2020: 112) and management of competing demands as paradox navigators (Fu, Flood, Rousseau, & Morris, 2020). We argue that a systems informed understanding offers important contributions in this task.

Systems theory highlights the interdependence of organisational elements and the reality that all organisation functions and activities are conducted in the context of broader systems which can inform, shape, and sometimes even determine, behaviour (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Despite the lack of explicit reference to the concept of systems theory, it has long influenced organisational research, including HR research (Boxall & Macky, 2009; Guest, 1997; Harney & Dundon, 2006; Townsend, Lawrence, & Wilkinson, 2013b). Organisations operate under both external and internal constraints, and there are multiple social systems within the organisation's internal environment (Heffernan, Cafferkey, Harney, Townsend, & Dundon, 2021). Systems theory is useful in examining the role of organisational HRM as HR plays an integral role as "the carriers of effort and motivation necessary to maintain the social system" while "the social structures of human behaviour are largely responsible for the throughput transformation process" (Wright & Snell, 1991: 208). The logic of systems theory underpins the evolution of HR, including its recognition that HR systems rather than individual practices

are more appropriate in explaining the contributions to organisational performance (Delaney & Huselid, 1996). A myriad of HRM research has explored the link between HR systems or specific sub-systems within the HR system and organisational performance (e.g. Boland & Fowler, 2000; Roh, 2018; Shin & Konrad, 2014). Just as the HR system is a sub-system of the organisation, the HR system is also composed of multiple subsystems (Severance, 2001). Sub-systems are also an important consideration because they can "work together and use system processes to transform organisational inputs into performance outcomes" (Townsend et al., 2013b: 3064). Reflecting this appreciation for system and sub-system dynamics a number of commonly articulated general systems theory conceptual components (see Cummings, 2015a; Garavan et al., 2021; Harney, 2019; Scott, 1995) have direct relevance for exploring the front-line manager role and experience.

- **Complexity** General systems theory was first used in organisational studies based on an open system understanding that organisations would try to create order through strategies and processes that were unique to them based on the environment in which they operated (Clegg, 1990). A system has interrelated elements and within open systems interactions with and feedback from the various elements affect the other elements within the system (Katz & Kahn, 1966). The simplicity or complexity of a system is dependent on the number of interactions between the elements. Organisations are continuously striving to reach a relatively stable equilibrium in open systems because the context they operate in influences what their *steady state* is, which contrasts with the assumed definite equilibrium in closed systems (Koehler, 1969). While systems theory stresses the interdependence between organizational actions and the broader environment in which it is embedded, this does not imply smoothness and continuity in these relations. Central to open systems accounts is an emphasis on uncertainty, indeterminacy and hence an ability to capture complexity (Thompson & McHugh, 1995). Stated differently, an organisation and its environment compose a complex interactive system (Bedian, 1990). One consequence is that system theorists caution against claiming determinate, law-like relationships of the kind found in mainstream HR-performance research, but instead speak of conditions of possibility and general tendencies (Harney, 2009). Even research of top performing has found an undercurrent of emergence, highlighting an entangled nature of formal policy and informal dynamics on the shopfloor (Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles, & Truss, 1999). The pragmatic nature of every day realities in the workplace highlights the flaw of relying on rational assumptions and pre-determined action. In practice, front-line manager behaviour is more likely to reflect tactical optimums and 'muddling through' to secure on-going, temporal commitment and the semblance of consensus (Lindblom, 1959).
- **Context** System informed approaches are sensitive to local conditions and change (Dawkins & Barker, 2018). From the perspective of an open system, organisations are seen as one part of a series of social and economic networks (Edwards, Gilman, Ram, & Arrowsmith, 2002). Context is an important part of these networks, whereby the interdependence between an organisation's internal and external environment affects how it operates due to varying flows of people, resources, and information (Harney & Dundon, 2006; Scott, 2003). In exploring the roles and activities of front-line managers, systems theory foregrounds contextual considerations. As Sikora and Ferris

(2014) illuminate, the effective use of HR by line manager's will be informed by a wide variety of contextual factors including organisational culture, political considerations and broader social factors. For example, research has shown that the challenges confronted by front-line managers are likely to vary substantially based on based on different multi-national business unit contexts within the same business (Nehles, van Riemsdijk, Kok, & Looise, 2006). Similarly, key events and changes are likely to be internalised by organisational members who imbue them with their own interpretation and meaning (Wilkinson, Dundon, & Grugulis, 2007). Just as front-line managers can facilitate effective HR, they can equally fracture policy and intentions, especially if any prospective change challenges an established identity or social order of production (cf. Ezzamel, Wilmott, & Worthington, 2001).

- **Equifinality** Stemming from an emphasis on complexity and context, a further important open systems concept is that of equifinality. This holds that organisations can obtain the same end state from differing initial conditions and through different means. This concept might go some way in explaining the inconsistency in studies attempting to define the precise nature of desirable HRM practices (Harney, 2019). While some research has suggested the necessity to move beyond reductionist contingency theorizing, few studies have explicitly embraced the logic that there are multiple, equally effective ways of meeting the same desired outcome. Exceptions include configurational theory, typologies and ideal types (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993), although these tend to abstract away the role of management or employees as agents explaining variance. Important in understanding front-line manager interventions is the role of immediate and proximal relationships, including local commitment with employees (Harney & Jordan, 2008). There is growing recognition of prospective variance in the front-line manager role (Bruno & Jordan, 2002; Kehoe & Han, 2020), with equifinality providing a means to avoid the assumption of "omniscience of management and the uniformity of its approach to labour" (Marchington & Parker, 1990: 48).

- **Feedback loops** Research which examines and seeks law-like relationship, rarely allows for significant change. There is an implicit underlying assumption that organisations and their HR systems are something of an absorbent system that automatically reflects and returns the shocks and dissenting pressures applied to it. By contrast, the logic of open systems highlights that an organizational can only function because of on-going engagement and adaptation to environmental forces (both external and internal). It follows that HR activities are not once off, fixed and invariant structural interventions but instead strive for a constant steady state (Koehler, 1969). From a systems logic, change is a function of feedback loops that operate at multiple levels which can serve to reinforce the current dynamic or rupture its assumptions or operations. From a macro perspective, the relevance of such understanding is evidenced in an era of 'financialisation', where financial transactions and relationships external to the organisation (and independent of physical products or services), are deemed to continuously frame the employment relationship, frequently leaving front-line managers in inherently contradictory positions (Applebaum, Batt, & Clark, 2013; Cushen & Harney, 2014). This broader political economy is itself "a moving assemblage of interconnected sub-systems" (Connolly, 2013: 13). At a micro-level, research has shown that the nature and dynamic of front-line manager voice and

involvement in the HRM process shapes the critical relationships and opportunities to collaborate with senior management, ultimately determining the effectiveness of HRM (Alfes et al., 2013) . This aligns with a general understanding that HRM "comes live in social interactions among organizational members, including those involved in formulating, communicating, and responding to elements of the HRM system" (Jackson, Schuler, & Jiang, 2014: 4). Importantly, open systems theory promotes time irreversibility, acknowledging that a system can never precisely return to a previous state. In systems terms this is depicted by the term entropy. The Covid-19 global pandemic and its dramatic consequences illuminate the fragility of organisations and their underlying assumptions and ways of doing HR to the dynamics of change and challenge from the surrounding environment (Harney & Collings, 2021).

- **Sub-systems** Organisations operate under both external and internal constraints, and there are multiple social systems within the organisation's internal environment. According to Burns and Stalker (1961) sub-systems can be grouped into either mechanistic (i.e. formal) or organic (i.e. informal) systems. The formal systems are structured based on the formalised rules and procedures in the organisation; the informal systems are implicit and fluid, based on informal practices and procedures that develop over time in the organisation (Nadler & Tushman, 1980). Research in the airline industry has shown how cross-functional accountability can be used to diffuse blame highlighting the role of front-line managers in providing coaching and feedback (Gittel, 2000). Just as the HR system is a sub-system of the organisation, the HR system is also composed of multiple subsystems which can operate in tandem or as deadly combinations (McClean & Collins, 2019). Front-line managers are therefore at the interface of practice and serve as conduits of multiple functional managers and agendas (e.g. IT, HR and customers) (Burgelman, 1983).

- **Dynamic nature of formality and informality** A concern with systems also allows for the informality of practice that substitutes for, or fills, the silences of formal policy. This nexus between formal and informal organization is something that cannot be captured within the High Performance Work Systems literature, with its exclusive focus on formal policy (Truss, 2001). System theory accommodates both formality and informality and does not privilege one over the other. Research shows how formal and informal systems can complement each other, working together to support individuals (Marchington & Suter, 2013; Townsend et al., 2013b). However, formal and informal systems can also compete with each other, working separately in the workplace. The presence of a formal system does not guarantee that all levels of the organisation will adhere to it as agents such as front-line managers may have varying individual needs that are different from the organisation's (Selznick, 1981). Front-line managers who use discretion within their roles during the implementation of formal HR systems contribute to the development of informal systems. Nadler and Tushman's (1980) argument for formal and informal processes existing in an organisation concurrently was used in the development of their systems theory framework – formal processes are structured procedures developed explicitly for employees to perform for the achievement of organisational goals and are usually recorded in writing; while informal processes are implicit, tending to develop and emerge over time. This distinction is frequently absent from traditional HR accounts, where informality is either ignored or stigmatised.

Overall it is clear that systems theory provides a means to move beyond the deficiencies of current understanding of the front-line manager role. Systems informed concepts allow for a contextualized activity level analysis of the dynamics of front-line manager discretion, competing priorities and expectations, the dynamics of relations and (in)formality and an appreciation of the complex nature of tasks (Finkelstein & Peteraf, 2007). The outcomes emphasized are not purely financial or rationally determined, but include broader aspects of organizational survival, including table stakes, relative advantages and the maintenance of relationships. In order to further explicate the argument in the next section we provide an application of systems informed logic to the critical domain of performance management and front-line manager's role therein.

**Systems theory applied: Front-line managers in performance systems**

Systems theory is frequently conceptually invoked in HRM research or used as a conceptual architecture to structure reviews (e.g. Jackson et al., 2014). Exploring performance management research Schleicher and colleagues argued that "a systems approach is essential for distilling knowledge about the effectiveness of PM from the extant literature (as such questions ultimately rely on an examination of multiple components and how they interrelate)" (2018: 2211). Indeed, a systems approach has been particularly influential in the development of performance management (Iwu, Kapondoro, Twum-Darko, & Lose, 2016). In this section we use performance management as an example to explore the application of systems theory to understand the dynamics of the front-line manager role. In so doing we argue that a systems lens provides a more contextual and holistic means to capture the 'wide range of actual management behaviour' (Boxall & Macky, 2007). Going back to the classic work of Thompson it is clear that front-line managers serve intermediary roles between the technical, managerial and institutional. Thompson argued that "complex organization is a set of interdependent parts which together make up a whole in that each contributes something and receives something from the whole, which in turn is interdependent with some larger environment" (Thompson, 1967 [2005]: 6 ).

Using a specific HR practice helps animate the role of the front-line managers and the value of systems informed understanding of same. This focus also enables an exploration of open and closed systems dynamics. As per Thompson "open systems theory holds that the processes going on within an organisation are significantly affected by the complexity of an organisation's environment. But this tradition also touches on matters important in the closed-system strategy: performance and deliberate decisions" (1967 [2005]: 9). According to Brown and Lim (2019), line managers are involved in both formal and informal performance management activities as they are in a position where they are responsible for evaluating performance and providing feedback. Exploration of front-line manager enacted HR illuminates how organisational actors can approach workplace issues like performance feedback though either a formal and/or informal system. Notably, front-line managers are a critical link between higher levels of management and employees, as higher levels of management are more likely to design rather than implement performance systems and processes (Liang, Saraf, Hu, & Xue, 2007; Saville & Higgins, 1994). A front-line manager's authority originates from his or her position in the workplace (Leonard & Trusty, 2016). As such, front-line managers are involved in the implementation of HR practices such as performance management related responsibilities as

part of their supervisory responsibilities. The expansion of the front-line managers' role has led to them facing conflicting pressures in their job; while they lack the corresponding authority within the organisation, front-line managers are tasked with bridging the gap between the intended and actual performance management systems (Child & Partridge, 1982; Hales, 2005; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Consistency within the implementation of the performance management systems affects how employees use innovation to reach their work goals (Audenaert, Decramer, George, Verschuere, & Van Waeyenberg, 2019); how front-line managers choose to implement performance management affects the consistency experiences by frontline employees. Just as organisations work toward reaching a steady state within the open systems they operate within (Koehler, 1981), the front-line managers work within the performance management system to reach their idea of equilibrium based on the demands of their role and other organisational actors (Lee, Townsend, & Wilkinson, 2020).

In order to further unpack the systems informed dynamic of the front-line manager role, it is useful to draw on Floyd & Wooldridge (1997) who explored the multiple mechanisms by which middle management affect the strategy process. Their fourfold typology draws attention to the multiple roles that front-line manager must navigate (Fu et al., 2020). This enables us to capture the influence and agency of front-line managers as an intermediary between the institutional, managerial and technical (Thompson, 1967). It also illuminates the complexities of the front-line manager's role in realising the intended performance of the organization, while sustaining the local commitment and social order to allow the organisation to function on a day to day basis. Specifically, for each role we draw out those aspects that are more official and formally designated while also detailing those that are more unofficial and/or informal. it is clear that systems based logic enables an in-depth analysis and dynamic understanding of how front-line managers continuously strive for homeostasis, or a 'steady state' rather than the assuming a form of definitive equilibrium as per closed systems accounts (Cummings, 2015b; Koehler, 1969) of the kind found in much HRM research (Harley, 2015).


**1) FLM as performance management implementers: Conduit and translator**

In the implementation role, front-line managers engage in an ongoing set of interventions to bring organizational action in line with deliberate or intended strategy. While allowing for some flexibility at the perimeters, in the main this emphasis reflects traditional understanding in HRM research whereby the front-line manager role is to ensure that performance management strategy is realised exactly as intended. A key emphasis here is on uniformity and consistency which are typically associated with enhanced organisational performance. Being consistent in the implementation of performance management is important in demonstrating to employees that it is a continuous process (Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2012) that clarifies work goals for them, motivating them to display the ideal behaviours to achieve these work goals within their role (DeNisi & Smith, 2014). Typically assumed is that there is initial clarity and consensus on strategy which is communicated and cascaded without change. From this textbook understanding, failure to adhere to intended strategy is not sufficiently appreciated as a reality.

As per systems theory logic it is of course dangerous to imbue strategy as pre-determined as opposed to an empirical concept to be determined in particular circumstances (Harney & Collings, 2021; Wood, 1979). Front-line managers are not simple conduits, they are also

translators. Front-line managers' action or inaction is often responsible for the difference between espoused HR policies and their enactment. Variance in this sense is not a reflection of an implementation gap which can be easily bridged, but instead reflects the political and social context in which front-line managers must exist on a day to day basis. In studying the application of performance related pay schemes, Harris (2001) reported a lack of incentives, time and ownership framing the nature of front-line manager engagement with the performance management system. Notably, front-line managers were also conscious that the top-down performance management system included "the potential for decisions that decreased rather than increased levels of employee trust" so that "perceptions of fairness among the managers were frequently more closely related to those of the employees they supervised than the principles reflected in the systems they had to apply" (p. 1191). Unsurprising therefore that even high performing work organisations exhibit an on-going gap between the espoused or intended theory of performance management and what is experienced in practice (Stiles, Gratton, Truss, Hope Hailey, & McGovern, 1997). In this way the necessity of securing the local compliance of employees and balancing conflicting and emerging priorities are at the heart of the front-line manager role. Equally however, front-line managers are agents of management so that, on paper at least, they need to be seen to be adhering to and implementing formal policy (see Gouldner, 1954). Research on the impact of financialization or changes in production systems reveals that front line managers frequently find themselves as the walking contradiction between formally articulated organisational policy and what everyone on the ground knows to be true (Bruno & Jordan, 2002; Cushen & Harney, 2014). The dynamic nature of these official and unofficial roles are captured in Table 1.

**Table X The Dynamics of Front Line Manager Roles**

| Line Manager role | Official role | Unofficial role |
|---|---|---|
| 1) Implementer of Intended PM Strategy | **Conduit**<br><br>Activities<br>- Monitor activities to support top management objectives<br>- Translate goals into action plans<br>- Translate goals into individual objectives<br>- Sell top management initiatives to subordinates<br><br>Objective: Implement HR- uniformity, compliance, consistency | **Translator**<br><br>Activities<br>- Navigate the micro dynamics of inclusion (Westley 1990)<br>- maintenance of relations<br>- perceptions of fairness<br>- daily interaction, coaching, feedback (Gittell, 2000)<br><br>Objective: Translate HR (Kehoe and Ha, 2020) |
| 2) Synthesize information | **Aggregator**<br><br>Activities<br>- Formal metrics<br>- objective measurement of performance<br>- closed system<br><br>Objective: Collect and collate- rational | **Satisficer**<br><br>Activities<br>- politicised measures<br>- secure co-operation<br>- protection of territory<br>- open system<br><br>Objective: Interpret |

| 3) Champion alternatives | **Strategic provision**<br><br>Activities<br>- upward communication<br>- knowledge of activities<br>- promote innovations<br><br>Focus: Continuous improvement | **Strategic filtering**<br><br>Activities<br>- sustain relationships and leverage<br>- normative/peer pressure<br>- visibility and network<br><br>Focus: Careerism and<br>and power relations |
|---|---|---|
| 3) Facilitating adaptability- | **Leeway**<br><br>Activities<br>- sponsor experimentation<br>- capture learning<br>- relax regulation<br><br><br>Focus: Pro-active adaptability | **Custom and practice**<br><br>Activities<br>- emergent leadership<br>- Political manoeuvring<br>- negotiated orders<br>- commission and omission<br><br>Focus: Negotiated orders |

**2) FLM as information synthesizers: Aggregator and satisficer**

In their official role of implementing performance management systems, front-line managers are also tasked with collating and aggregating of key performance data to be fed back up to management. Relationships with management and HR can be critical in facilitating this process (Alfes et al., 2013), although in many instances front-line managers have little or no involvement in the design and development of the performance management system they are tasked with implementing. It follows that the official designated role as a performance management aggregator is often subtly re-interpreted or de-politicized. This is most obviously manifest in ranked performance ratings where front-line managers have been found to group employees as average performers as opposed to providing distinctions which might risk fracturing their relationship with front-line employees thereby "keeping their own trustworthiness intact" (Harris, 2001: 1188). Front-line managers play a key role in enacting and interpreting appraisal policy reflecting the reality that an individual's experience the company policy is that carried out by front-line management (Truss, 2001). Middle management and HR are one step removed from the reactions and sentiment of front-line employees whereas front-line managers experience direct employee reactions, positive or negative. Appreciating the (in)action of front-line managers is best done with an appreciation of their role, not simply in an official capacity of maximizing rational information flows, but being mindful of pressure to secure future co-operation and in satisficing key stakeholders; both management and employees. Conway and Monks (2008) provide an interesting example from the healthcare context where HR was devolving HR activities but retaining control of information systems. This led managers to create their own datasets as a means to circumvent control and retain autonomy.

**3) FLMs role in championing alternatives: Strategic provision and strategic filtering**

A third role Floyd and Woolbridge (1997) detail is that of championing alternatives. Here in an official capacity front-line managers can promote innovations and suggest changes which might improve company processes and performance. A likely undercurrent is a form of

careerism and effort to get recognition and kudos from higher management. Again critical here is the opportunity for, and maintenance of, a positive relationship with higher level managers and HR (Alfes et al., 2013). This may also involve political reading of a situation to promote and push-upwards those ideas which are in line with broader zeitgeist of the time versus those that are most objectively efficient. At the same time, front-line managers are likely to experience normative or peer pressure for conformity. As Pech notes "normative influence is an instinctive survival mechanism serving to establish and maintain uniformity and stability" (2001: 599). Thus while front-line managers may publically articulate the merits of innovation and change in how performance is managed, it is often the case that they will strive to reinforce predictable routines and maintain the status quo. Forms of subtle resistance can be linked to attempts to sustain workplace identities that have been built up over time, with employees who they supervise providing continuous reminders of same (see Ezzamel et al., 2001). Accompanying formal performance management systems and policy is also the reality that informal influence and visibility can be a critical factor informing subsequent evaluations and recommendations for advancement. Using the informal performance management system can help front-line managers to maintain the perception of performance of their employees and themselves to higher levels of management (Lee et al., 2020). In her detailed study of Hewlett-Packard Truss found that "although the formal policies turned strongly around the notion of measuring and rewarding individuals' work performance against targets that were closely related to the company's objectives, informally what counted was visibility and networking if people wanted to further their careers" (2001: 1144). Front-line managers are inevitably at the core of shaping and being shaped by how informal practices and norms of behaviour interact with formal HR policies.

## 4) FLM and adaptability: Leeway and custom

Traditional HRM understanding of front-line manager's roles provides little sense of agency (Steffensen et al., 2019). Absent therefore is any appreciation that fruitful initiatives and understanding about managing people are likely to come from those with direct responsibility for this task. In exploring the role of adaptability, Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) stress the impact of downward influence including relaxing regulation to get projects started and providing time, scope and a safe environment for experimentation and innovation. They also stress the significance of informal discussion and knowledge exchange. This emphasis aligns very much with what we know about front-line manager roles. Harney and Jordan's (2008) research in a call centre context finds front-line managers as key intermediaries, but not in the traditional linear sense of cascading strategy as intended. Instead, frontline manager's efforts focused on ameliorating the negative consequences of the hard HR of the call centre environment. This was achieved via an 'emergent' leadership role which saw them introduce interventions akin to what might be subscribed by best practice HR e.g. improving morale and creating a sense of 'involvement' and 'a better atmosphere' among call centre employees. Interestingly this significant front-line manager role was implicitly recognized with HR at the call centre only recruiting front-line managers with extensive experience in a similar role.

Kehoe and Ha (2020) frame the downward autonomous line manager role as one of resisting, adapting or renewing intended or espoused strategic goals. As a result of their employee facing role, front-line managers must frequently demonstrate leeway in interpreting and enacting intended HR so as to achieve the consent and commitment of employees. This form of on-going negotiation is long understood. In his classic in-depth study of a gypsum plant Gouldner

observed that "by a strange paradox, formal rules gave supervisors something with which they could 'bargain' in order to secure informal cooperation from the workers" (1954: 173). Brown's classic study of piece-work bargaining found that the patterns of 'indulgency' formed overtime can morph into a form of customer and practice understood as "a transactional rule of job regulation that arises from informal processes" (Brown, 1972: 48). Formed as a result of pro-active initiative (commission) or low-level management error (omission), custom and practice can become accepted as a binding precedent by employees so that it does not simply augment formally negotiated rules it, moves to replace them (Brown, 1973). Assumptions of simplistic front-line manager compliance to intended performance management is therefore problematic. Moreover, it is not simply that front line manager actions bends existing rules, but that the alternatives they operate by can become significant and imprinting. This adds an important employment relations understanding to Floyd and Woolbridge's argument. This is an area where front line managers are rarely provided with organisational support or guidance (Teague & Roche, 2011).

Systems theory provides a framework which accommodates the diversity and on-going tensions inherent to the front line manager role. In HR terms it allows for the lower level system components and activities which interact with formal HR policy and shape how it is experienced and enacted. As our extension of Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) illustrates, this can encompass closed system, top down official intent, but equally open system, bottom-up activities. In reality, managers in all organisations navigate between rationality, formality, personal preference and idiosyncrasy as the occasion demands. A long heritage of workplace studies provides a wealth of concepts related to the "leeway function of rules" (Gouldner, 1954) or the role of custom and practice (Brown, 1972). Notable insights from this literature is that informal practices go much further than providing a lubricant to the formal system, rather they are inevitable; "the conclusion must be that informal practices are likely to be a permanent feature of industrial relations" (Terry, 1977: 88). A key consideration therefore becomes how front-line managers navigate a formal HR system that is bound by rules and expectations, but also operate within an informal system that allows them to get things done and work around the difficulties of the formal system. Our illustration of systems informed understanding animates the various means by which this can occur in the context of front-line manager roles in performance management. At a minimum, this highlights the limits of narrow, formal and top down understanding of the front line manager role of the type assumed by much black-box studies which target bridging and resolving the intended-enacted HRM gap.

**Conclusion**

The exposition of systems theory presented in this chapter suggest a number of implications for future research. This includes the need for more in-depth and contextually embedded considerations of the front-line manager role. This line of research could draw from and extend research founded on HR process and signalling theory (Guest, Sanders, Rodrigues, & Oliveira, 2021), and equally recent work which acknowledges the dynamic nature of HRM implementation (Trullen, Bos-Nehles, & Valverde, 2020). Particularly rich insights are likely to come from studies that explore variance within similar industries or within specific organisations. Second, line manager research would benefit from more ethnographic studies and detailed observation of the practices, tensions and constraints that shape the day to day realities of the role. Finally, systems theory informed understanding should not be reduced to a conceptual framing. There is much to learn from classic (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Katz &

Kahn, 1966) and contemporary systems informed research (Harney & Dundon, 2006; Townsend, Lawrence, & Wilkinson, 2013a). As per Stacey (1995), systems logic posits that simple functions can give rise to very intricate and unpredictable behavior that still exhibits underlying order. The application presented here also highlights how unofficial and informal front line manager activities should not be reduced to second class citizens of analysis surfaced merely to explain deficiencies or anomalies (Kehoe & Han, 2020). By stressing emergence, self-organized systems and acknowledging agency, we gain a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of the front-line manager role than one of a narrow, deterministic implementer. Paying due attention to the nuances, agency and re-interpretation characteristic of the front-line manager role provides a platform for renewed understanding challenging conventional 'mind or close the gap' wisdom and engaging with the complexities of formal and informal, deliberate and emergent dynamics. Ultimately systems theory puts analysis in tune with the fragilities at the heart of every organisation and relationship. As Katz and Kahn remind us "the fact organisation structure is created and maintained only as the members of the organisation interact in an ordered way suggests a high degree of openness, a persistent and inherent vulnerability to forces in the organisation's environment" (1966: 454).

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