McKinsey Survey results:

How companies manage the front line today

Most companies don't offer sufficient training for frontline managers or structure their roles to create the most value. Aggravating the problem, senior leaders are often unaware of the issues that hinder frontline performance. Companies with effective frontline managers take a different approach.

Senior executives and nonexecutive managers are unhappy with the performance of their companies' frontline managers, according to a McKinsey survey.[1] The low level of satisfaction, the results indicate, stems from the way frontline managers' jobs are structured and from inadequate training, not merely a lack of skills on the part of frontline managers.

Other McKinsey work has shown that empowering frontline managers to make decisions, anticipate problems, and coach their direct reports (rather than simply following and giving orders and solving crises) generates higher productivity and other benefits.[2] However, the results of this survey indicate that most companies do not enable frontline management to focus on the right priorities and become more productive. Respondents say the most common role for frontline managers consists merely of performing assigned tasks, identifying and fixing problems, and successfully confronting unexpected, everyday challenges or crises as they arise (Exhibit 1). Only 11 percent say their companies' frontline-management roles are structured so that managers focus on coaching and developing their direct reports.

Further, while frontline employees receive extensive training and development, their managers—who may have had no previous experience leading others—do not. At all levels, executives believe that the little training they do receive fails to prepare them to take on leadership roles successfully.

[1] *McKinsey Quarterly* conducted the survey in August 2009 and received 1,674 responses, with 46 percent representing senior leaders, 36 percent nonexecutive managers and employees, and the rest a mix of academics and consultants.

[2] See Aaron De Smet, Monica McGurk, and Marc Vinson, "Unlocking the potential of frontline managers," mckinseyquarterly.com, August 2009.

Exhibit 1

Frontline management's role

% of respondents,[1] n = 1,590

Closest description of frontline manager's role

Firefighter	Perform assigned tasks, identify and fix problems, confront everyday challenges	36
Auditor	Assign, oversee completion of work by others	27
Micromanager	Perform assigned tasks, gain leverage from direct reports	23
Coach	Spend time directing, coaching, managing others	11
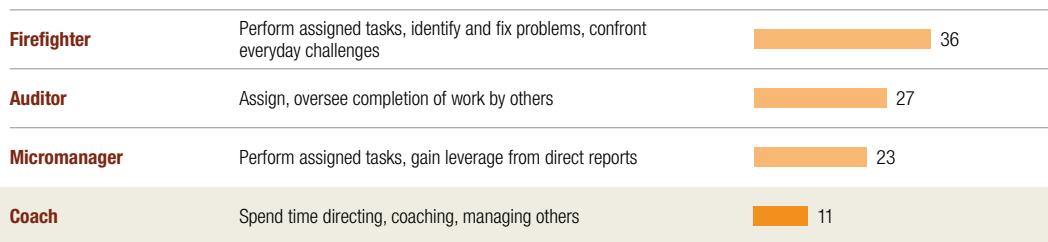
[1] Respondents who answered "don't know" are not shown.
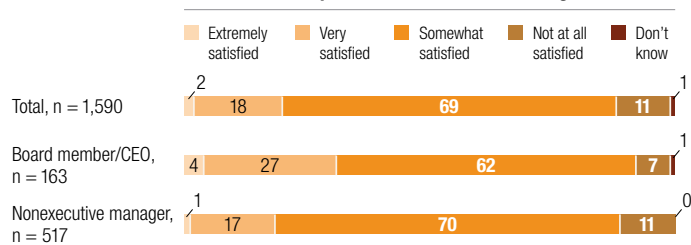
Inadequate training

Nearly 70 percent of senior executives are only "somewhat satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" with the performance of their companies' frontline managers (Exhibit 2). More worrisome still, the vast majority of frontline managers (81 percent) say they are not satisfied with their own performance. One of the main reasons for the lack of satisfaction is that companies' training programs are not designed to help frontline managers, despite the potential impact their jobs can have. Only 10 percent of respondents say their companies' frontline manager training is effective in preparing managers to lead. At this minority of companies, training emphasizes leadership and interpersonal skills (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 2

Unimpressed with frontline managers

% of respondents[1]

Satisfaction with performance of frontline managers

	Extremely satisfied	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Not at all satisfied	Don't know
Total, n = 1,590	2	18	69	11	1
Board member/CEO, n = 163	4	27	62	7	1
Nonexecutive manager, n = 517	1	17	70	11	0

[1] Figures do not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

Exhibit 3

Mixed results of training

Effectiveness of programs in training frontline managers for leadership responsibilities,
% of respondents who have conducted given program in past year

■ Extremely/very effective
■ Slightly/not at all effective

Types of frontline-management-training programs conducted in past year, % of respondents, n = 1,521

	Types conducted	Extremely/very effective	Slightly/not at all effective
General leadership	53	76	37
Technical/functional skills	49	58	48
Interpersonal skills	44	69	30
Customer service skills	35	42	27
Problem-solving skills	27	51	15
Business acumen	21	38	15

While frontline employees are provided with extensive training, managers are not (Exhibit 4)—even though for many, their present jobs may represent their first experiences leading others. Perhaps frontline managers receive less training because of the way their jobs are designed at most companies: managers are expected to ensure that their direct reports do the things that the managers themselves excelled at to begin with.

Exhibit 4

Modest training for frontline managers

% of respondents who ranked given group no. 1, n = 1,471

Employee groups that receive the most training and development

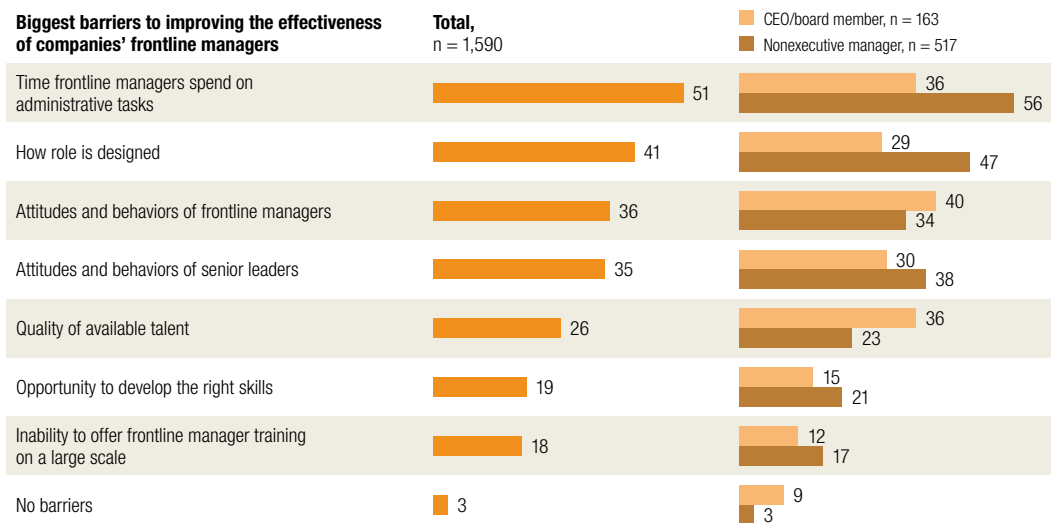|	
Frontline employees	27
Technical specialists	25
Executive leadership team	23
Midlevel management	16
Frontline managers	9

Barriers to improving effectiveness

Executives say the biggest barriers to improving the effectiveness of frontline management involve how the jobs themselves are structured (Exhibit 5). Managers spend too much time on administrative tasks, and their responsibilities are limited to fixing problems as they arise and following and giving orders. Constantly solving unexpected problems and being rewarded for doing so may also create negative unintended consequences, as managers will likely lack the motivation to anticipate problems in the first place.

Exhibit 5

Red tape and fuzzy responsibilities

% of respondents[1]

Biggest barriers to improving the effectiveness of companies' frontline managers	Total, n = 1,590	CEO/board member, n = 163	Nonexecutive manager, n = 517
Time frontline managers spend on administrative tasks	51	36	56
How role is designed	41	29	47
Attitudes and behaviors of frontline managers	36	40	34
Attitudes and behaviors of senior leaders	35	30	38
Quality of available talent	26	36	23
Opportunity to develop the right skills	19	15	21
Inability to offer frontline manager training on a large scale	18	12	17
No barriers	3	9	3

[1]Respondents who answered "don't know" are not shown.

Perhaps even more significantly, senior leadership doesn't seem to recognize the real burdens of the jobs. While 56 percent of nonexecutive managers view time spent on administrative tasks as the biggest barrier to improving their own effectiveness, only 36 percent of senior executives concur. Nor are senior executives aware of how their companies' frontline managers spend their time (Exhibit 6). Thirteen percent of nonexecutive employees estimate that frontline management spends no time at all coaching direct reports; only 3 percent of senior executives recognize this issue.

Respondents in manufacturing say senior leaders' attitudes and behaviors
are as significant a barrier to effectiveness as is the time frontline managers
spend on administrative tasks.

Interestingly, barriers do not vary much in relation to the structure of frontline managers' roles. A
possible explanation is that regardless of how their jobs are structured, managers still have to fix
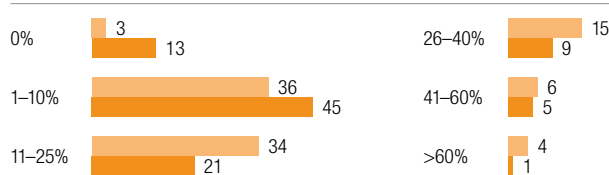unexpected problems and complete paperwork.

Exhibit 6

Little time for coaching

% of respondents[1]

■ CEO/board member, n = 163
■ Nonexecutive employees, n = 85

*What percentage of your company's frontline managers' time, if
any, do you estimate is spent coaching their direct reports?*

0%	3 / 13
1–10%	36 / 45
11–25%	34 / 21
26–40%	15 / 9
41–60%	6 / 5
>60%	4 / 1

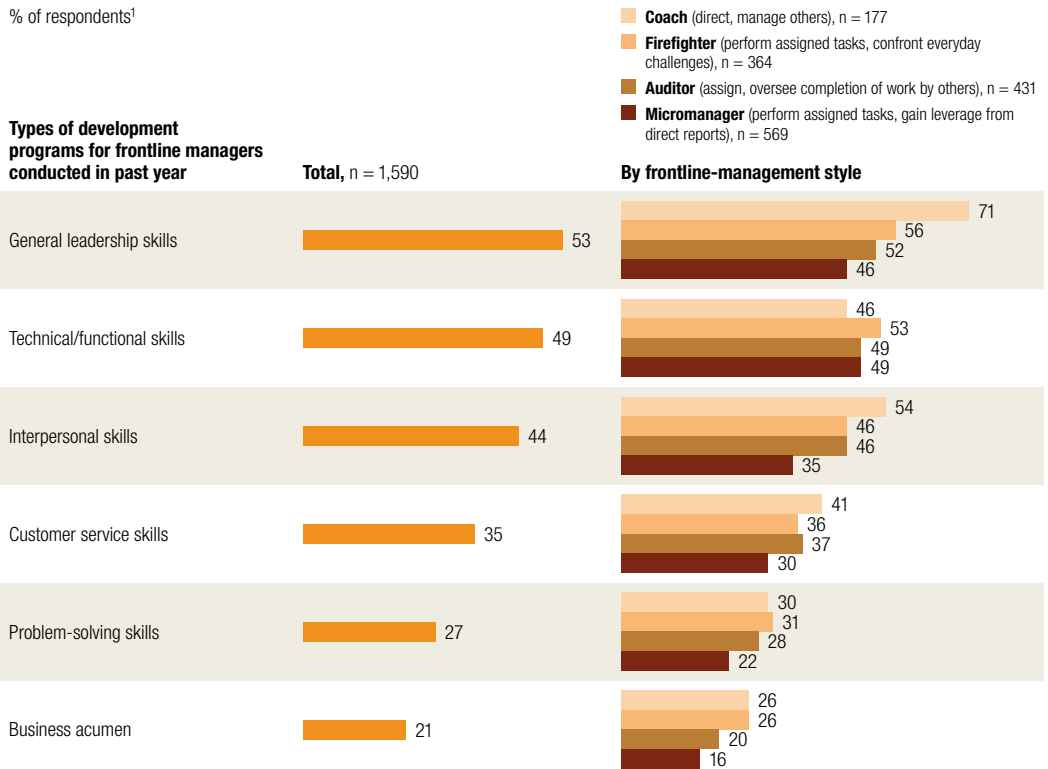[1] Respondents who answered "don't know" are not shown.

The few that get it right

At the 11 percent of companies where frontline management spends most of their time directing and
managing others, emphasizing coaching, and developing their direct reports, executives are much
more likely to be satisfied (39 percent, compared with 20 percent overall) with the performance
of frontline managers. At these companies, training is more likely to focus on developing leadership
skills, so managers are better prepared to take on those responsibilities (Exhibit 7). Indeed,
71 percent of respondents at companies where frontline managers' jobs emphasize coaching say

Exhibit 7

What frontline managers are taught

% of respondents[1]

Coach (direct, manage others), n = 177

Firefighter (perform assigned tasks, confront everyday challenges), n = 364

Auditor (assign, oversee completion of work by others), n = 431

Micromanager (perform assigned tasks, gain leverage from direct reports), n = 569

Types of development programs for frontline managers conducted in past year	Total, n = 1,590	By frontline-management style
General leadership skills	53	71 / 56 / 52 / 46
Technical/functional skills	49	46 / 53 / 49 / 49
Interpersonal skills	44	54 / 46 / 46 / 35
Customer service skills	35	41 / 36 / 37 / 30
Problem-solving skills	27	30 / 31 / 28 / 22
Business acumen	21	26 / 26 / 20 / 16

[1] Respondents who answered "other" or "don't know" are not shown.

training programs focus on developing leadership skills, versus 53 percent overall. Further, these companies are more likely to conduct training that develops interpersonal and customer service skills and least likely to conduct programs that focus on the development of technical skills. Nonetheless, even executives at these companies say that time spent on administrative tasks presents the biggest barrier to improving the effectiveness of the front line.

Looking ahead

• Frontline managers receive little training, and the little they do receive does not prepare them for leadership responsibilities. Increasing the total number of hours dedicated to training and providing training programs that develop leadership and interpersonal skills could help managers improve their performance.

• Lack of satisfaction with the performance of frontline management is tied to the way frontline managers' jobs are designed. By redefining the responsibilities and expectations of frontline management, companies can improve the front line's performance. Rather than focusing on fixing problems and auditing the work of others, these managers could focus on anticipating problems and coaching their direct reports.

• Senior leaders and frontline managers have different perceptions of what hinders the performance of the front line. They must set aside the belief that frontline employees lack the necessary skills to coach their direct reports or make quality decisions. Further, leaders could actively model the behavior they expect from frontline management. ◻