



GRS Group

Aggregate Supplier

grsroadstone.co.uk

Nationwide

At a glance

116

current learners on programme

72%

projected achievement rate

66%

national average achievement rate

Challenges

- Rapid growth
- People management capability
- Previous experience with apprenticeships

Supported by National Apprenticeship Service

Case study

Mel Milazzo, GRS Group

Mel Milazzo of GRS Group explains why a company like hers, which has a varied skills base and yet is somewhat technical, will always be at heart ‘a people business’ and why ‘accidental managers’ can be a problem because of the effect they have on others.

Mel Milazzo is no stranger to accidental managers. The Group People Director at aggregates business GRS says throughout her career, she has witnessed several cases of people who end up in senior roles but haven’t had the training to always carry them out effectively.

“It’s a huge issue in construction overall as well as in aggregates, which is a smaller subset of the sector. It’s mainly because in many places promotion to senior managerial levels is dependent on technical ability and long service” she says. “And if you’re a company that has been growing rapidly from a relatively small base, as GRS has in recent years, then the problem of developing management talent becomes even more pressing.”

Mel – who leads on “all things people” at GRS – says her company is tackling that skills gap with an extensive management apprenticeship programme taught by Paragon Skills – approximately three-quarters of the 200 management trainees at GRS are on apprenticeships. However, she says management training elsewhere in the sector isn’t as common as it could be. “I’ve spent most of my career in the construction industry – and in many places, the problem of ‘the accidental manager’ hasn’t improved in 20 years.” Those who have been doing the job for 20 or 30 years can be particularly resistant to training, she says.

The main problem with untrained managers is the effect they have on others. “They don’t have the people management capability. They tend to instruct rather than persuade. If you put some of them on the spot and ask them what they would do differently, they will always say ‘I could delegate more’, which is really revealing. The only answer they can imagine is ‘I need to give my work away to someone else’, rather than thinking around the issue by using teamwork, better organisation, more creative problem-solving and so on.”

She suspects the reason why the accidental manager problem persists and why people aren’t getting the training they need is historical. “They’re not being trained because they, in turn, are often managed by people who are themselves accidental managers. It’s a legacy issue.”

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Mel says that it's not unknown for highly trained and academically qualified employees to be especially wary of management training. "In some instances, if people have attained their seniority through technical expertise, rather than through their people skills, they can struggle with things like management training, not least because it tends to be delivered in a different way from a degree. It typically involves more interactive and group work, for instance, which can be a challenge for people who are used to a more formal academic way of learning."

However, she thinks that attitudes among those who have recently joined the industry are different. "New recruits coming into the industry expect to be trained and businesses are realising that if they want to retain these people, they will have to offer them development and training and to provide clear career pathways. I'd imagine that in a few years there will be a lot fewer accidental managers simply because recent recruits don't resent training – they expect it."

GRS is tackling any skills gap by focusing firstly on training junior managers. "We targeted the junior management and recently promoted managers first because they have more direct reports, therefore the impact of the learning will be greater due to it being spread more widely. We also teach exactly the same People Management module to every manager within our business, regardless of the level they are at, because we want to be sure everyone in our business manages people in the same way."

The management training programme is delivered by Paragon Skills, who Mel says came to the rescue after GRS had been let down by a previous provider. "We sent the training contract out for tender because we had such a bad experience with our previous provider. We didn't want anyone too big – we wanted the personal touch, a partnership not a client/provider relationship – but equally, we wanted a provider that was big enough to have sufficient capacity and who knew what they were providing. Paragon Skills fitted the bill exactly, and they have been excellent – they respond immediately if we have an issue, they are very approachable and also upfront about what they can and can't deliver. They were also very accommodating – transferring over apprentices who had started with the previous provider but hadn't completed."

Mel says companies should consider using apprenticeship programmes to deliver management training, but has a word of caution. "They should concentrate on developing what management content they need in a training course first, and then match it to an apprenticeship rather than the other way around. Start with your business and learning needs and then choose an apprenticeship qualification that suits – otherwise you will be led down a path that may not be addressing the needs of your business in the right way."

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She has no doubts about the main benefits of having properly trained managers. "It's all about people. If our managers don't put their people at the heart of what they do, if they don't realise that it is our people that deliver for the customer, then we aren't going to sustain our business."

"Even a business like ours – which is varied and somewhat technical – is, at heart, a people business. Our people create customer satisfaction through the customer experience, that creates profitability, which in turn goes back to our people – through development, the tools they use, the environment they work in. So our managers have to manage their people effectively as well as managing their area of responsibility. They have to understand that people drive our business. If our people don't make it right for the customer then we won't get repeat business or new business or make a profit."

Nor does she believe you are ever too old or too senior to benefit from more training. "At GRS, we always offer training and learning development to anyone who wants it. Even when an employee says something like 'Oh, I don't need more training – I'm retiring in five years or so', then we turn it around. We ask them to share their knowledge – so they become a mentor in some way. After all, they have a lot of experience and untapped knowledge stored in their heads – so we try to help them share it."

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