

Personneltoday interviews... Penny de Valk, chief executive, ILM

Continuing our series of interviews with influential figures from business and industry.

The Institute of Leadership and Management's new boss believes taking an uncompromising approach to leadership will help breed success.

by Gareth Vorster

The saying that people leave managers, not companies, is something that Penny de Valk, newly appointed chief executive of the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM), takes firmly to heart.

Born in a country famous for the All Blacks rugby team, nursery to the world's best players but starved of World Cup triumph for 20 years, De Valk is convinced that quality of management and leadership is the most powerful catalyst to drive success in any organisation.

The ILM is the largest qualification-awarding and professional membership body in Europe for managers. With 20,000 professional members, the organisation works in partnership with more than 2,000 employers and training providers, operating in 34 countries.

Prior to her current role, De Valk worked as strategy director at HR services firm Ceridian, following a move to the UK 10 years ago from New Zealand, where she led the Auckland-based Institute of Management.

Starting her career in marketing services, she said it became absolutely clear that people were an organisation's most valuable asset.

"How can you be a really good marketer of services without understanding the heart of what delivers this service, staff engagement, capability and flexibility? So suddenly I became intensely interested in HR, because [people] were my product."

Having taken up her post at the ILM at the end of October last year, De Valk was quick to identify management capability as the Achilles heel within the outsourcing, consulting, and other fields she had been involved in.



ROAR TALENT... But the best players won't succeed without strong leadership – the All Blacks have failed to win the Rugby World Cup for 20 years.

Kick mediocrity into touch



- CV**
- Penny de Valk**
Chief executive,
Institute of
Leadership and
Management
- **2007 to present**
Chief executive,
Institute of Leadership
and Management
 - **1998 to 2007**
Director roles, Ceridian
 - **1997 to 1998**
General manager,
Consulting Group, WFD
 - **1992 to 1997**
Chief executive,
Institute of
Management, Auckland
 - **1991 to 1992**
Management
consultant,
Cording Young

"You could have the most fantastic policies, but if your managers aren't doing with them what they should, they will fail," she said.

Increasingly, management capability has been at the heart of organisational success, according to De Valk. And despite some progress from UK companies in this area, she is convinced there is still work to be done.

"It's probably the most sensitive area," she stressed,

adding that organisations she had worked with in the past had all struggled with recruitment and retention, employee engagement, diversity and work-life balance.

"For me, investing in the quality of your managers is probably the best retention investment you could have," she said. "We know that people who are managed well, working with people they can learn from, and that they trust and respect, is the best bit of stickiness an organisation can have."

Having worked in the UK HR profession for a decade, De Valk is well aware of the questions most commonly asked by practitioners in the sector: "Why aren't we at the table? Why aren't we on the board?" Her belief is that most HR professionals would answer: "We would be able to step away from the detail and the micro-managing if managers were actually up for doing the job that they depend on HR to do."

De Valk believes this is what has kept the HR profession stuck in the transactional 'doing' work.

"It's not saying managers are rubbish. They are absolutely not," she stressed. "Expectations have never been higher. They have to get more from less, they have

never been under more pressure, they have change initiatives bearing down on them, their scope of control has been extended, they have many more people to manage, and they have employment legislation raining down on them. Many of them are actually scared of doing anything because they think they are going to do everything wrong."

De Valk said that return on investment (RoI), and its increasing importance to the HR function, was also a reason why HR often failed to get a seat at the top table.

"It's because [the function] cannot have those conversations," she said.

"RoI on HR spend is still a very weak discipline, and the return organisations are making on their human capital is probably the weakest – even though it's an enormous amount of expenditure.

"What we invest in our people and what the business output will be – the links there are very tenuous," she said. "In the past 10 to 15 years, HR hasn't really stepped up to making those links and building those business cases," she added.

De Valk was also critical of the state of RoI in management development.

"There is so much money invested in management development. You send people on a course, but then it's not integrated into workplace projects – sometimes even an individual's manager won't talk to them about what they learned. So how much of it is sticking?"

"This would be an issue that most HR professionals would admit to, that really they just don't know what is really working, and the hard part there is integrating it back into the workforce," she said.

Professional membership growth, building the brand, and looking at its international offering top the list of priorities for ILM in 2008. "I want to build ILM's voice about what good management looks like," said De Valk. → gareth.vorster@rbi.co.uk

'You could have the most fantastic policies, but if your managers aren't doing with them what they should, they will fail'

➔ Poor managers lead to talent loss
personneltoday.com/37507.article