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Developing a collective agile mindset while developing agile line managers

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Abstract

The ESRC-funded Good Employment Learning Lab tests the most effective way of supporting line managers to manage people, a key contributor to good work. While the online learning programme developed line managers to manage agile work, delivering online masterclasses, peer learning groups, and one-to-one coaching interventions, the remote learning lab delivery team developed a 'collective agile mindset'. Agile work practices emerged as design and delivery was adapted due to the pandemic. In this short paper we focus on peer learning groups, one of our training interventions, to illustrate. Our contribution is to highlight the practices teams can adopt to foster a 'collective agile mindset' when facing uncertainty and challenges, which in turn will help teams to experience good work. This is novel because the agile mindset is usually conceptualised as an individual rather than team characteristic.

Research context

Developing line managers to become better people managers is a key contributor to good work (CIPD, 2020; Dodd et al, 2019), and the ESRC-funded Good Employment Learning Lab (GELL) aims to develop practical insight into 'what works' to develop line managers. To do so, we utilise the broad method of a learning laboratory. Learning laboratories are spaces where researchers, policy-makers and practitioners collaborate to understand shared problems. They support long-term, trusting and creative relationships and use learning from experiments to think about how to address 'tricky' problems. In collaboration with our project partners, we identified three key line management challenges:

1   recruiting and managing a secure and agile team
2   fostering teamwork for innovation
3   harnessing skills and potential.

We provided training to line managers on these topics in three phases to support them with their practice in managing their teams through the unprecedented pressure faced under COVID-19. Our fully-funded training offer comprised one-off masterclasses, a series of three peer learning groups, and a series of three one-to-one coaching sessions. Participants could choose to attend one, two, or all of these interventions. The focus of this paper is our first management challenge, 'recruiting and managing a secure and agile team', where we turn the lens on ourselves as a project team and our responses, rather than addressing the project's core research question, 'what works, for whom, when, where and why?'

The core project team of eight comprised three professors (including a project director), a project manager, two project fellows responsible for intervention design and delivery, a research associate, and a project co-ordinator. There was a mix of human resource (HR) and organisational development practitioners, professional services, knowledge exchange and academic staff. The team's working patterns were agile: some were part-time on the project, others worked compressed hours. All worked on the project remotely.

We unintentionally found ourselves needing to implement the agile practices that we trained our line managers on, to meet operational challenges arising from project delivery in uncertain times. We recruited participants, scoped, designed and delivered training to line managers to develop agile teams and practices online. The session content reflected the latest research and best practice on agile working. This included developing understanding of workforce and operational agility and helping managers to develop an agile mindset to enable them to keep their organisation moving, changing and adapting. In addition, we

covered key agile principles and practices, including a high degree of autonomy, fostering staff involvement, agile work processes, and high-trust working relationships.

Training delivery ran from March to May 2021, a time when line manager participants were struggling to manage their teams in new ways while navigating their feelings about the broader context of the pandemic, and 'hybrid' working was starting to gain momentum as a term and new way of working (Appel-Meulenbroek et al, 2022). A context of constantly shifting national, local and organisational restrictions relating to COVID-19 resulted in us shifting our programme design from in-person to online delivery. We noticed ourselves mirroring some of the characteristics of an agile mindset on which we trained our participants: trust; adaptability; willingness to reflect, learn and be curious; and collective problem-solving responsibility (Mordi and Schoop, 2020). We therefore explored this realisation further and posed the following research questions:

- What challenges do learning teams face when developing line managers online, and why?

- What tools do learning teams use to collectively overcome these challenges?

Research methods and findings

Our research takes a mixed-methods qualitative approach. By the end of the project, the learning laboratory delivered 35 masterclasses, 18 peer learning groups and 77 coaching opportunities for line managers of varying seniority and sector in the north-west of England. In this paper, we utilise observational data collected during peer learning, masterclasses and coaching sessions with line manager participants, and notes from facilitator reflections, learning laboratory team meetings, and a project team focus group. The data was thematically analysed by the paper's authors and broad generic themes identified relating to the research questions outlined above (Braun and Clark, 2006).

We found that at each project stage the team faced unanticipated challenges and structural tensions, including:

- recruiting and retaining diverse eligible participants

- inexperienced but enthusiastic participants enrolling on 'free' training which is not relevant to their needs

- learner-led peer learning and coaching sessions losing focus on agile work as participants were preoccupied with other management issues

- the ongoing uncertainty of COVID-19 restrictions requiring incremental adaptation to online delivery.

These challenges necessitated agile practice, which was achieved through reflection, discussions and collective problem-solving. External partner relationships were advanced and marketing strategies adapted. Facilitators established introduction meetings with learners before peer learning and coaching to clarify aims and expectations. Peer learning sessions were adapted for online delivery and unpredictable attendance. Facilitators recapped content to keep participants on topic but remained adaptable to 'topic creep'. A cycle of piloting, learning, and adapting enabled incremental change. The team were transparent about the issues, despite being remote and newly formed. Facilitators and observers held informal evaluation and reflection discussions in psychologically safe spaces (Edmondson, 1999).

We use peer learning as an example to illustrate the incremental development of our collective agile mindset. Our approach to peer learning is based on action learning, which is designed to encourage reflection, experimentation and action on participants' challenges (Vince, 2012). Though participants are the experts in terms of their individual challenge, context, feelings and knowledge, other group members may offer insights as they are not as close to the issue (McGill and Brockbank, 2004). Our initial design was based on action learning best practice, involving a series of three, three-hour online sessions attended by four to six participants from different organisations, united by a line management challenge relating to the topic of 'managing secure and agile work'. The process involved each member of the group sharing their challenge followed by other group members then offering curious questions, critique and insights into the challenge presented. As participants reflected on the issue through the group discussion, they gained ideas and actions to experiment with and put into practice before the next session. A written learning portfolio was used to capture individual participant actions, reflections and learnings before and after the series of sessions.

In testing our design at the pilot sessions, we realised that some managers were deterred by the three-hour sessions, and others signed up for the sessions but later realised they were unable to commit the time in practice, leading to a high drop-out rate. Unlike an in-house learning programme, participants had no shared commitment to each other. Participants' understanding of peer learning differed, as some joined the first session expecting a 'taught' session, rather than what peer learning is, defined in our recruitment material as:

> *Peer learning is based on action learning, a well-established process of learning and reflection, intended to help people 'get things done' by working on real-life challenges. You'll discuss a live issue with peers (other line managers) and will take away ideas and actions to experiment with – the 'action' part of action learning.*

Line managers had different motivations for attending:

- having no access to training because in-house learning and development was paused due to the pandemic

- being encouraged to attend by their organisation to address development needs

- attending to tick a continuing professional development box

- fulfilling personal or private learning and development ambitions through 'free' fully-funded training.

Ultimately, we were concerned about the viability of sessions running, and whether we would gather sufficient research data to enable us to learn about our participants' experiences of learning.

The pilot sessions were attended by two facilitators and an observer from the research team. Both facilitators and the observer shared their concerns, in informal conversations, that recruitment and design needed to change. Participants began to feed back that the three hours online was intense and that they struggled to maintain concentration towards the end of the sessions.

We kept the project team informed of the challenges and were transparent about the frustrations, as well as floating potential alternative ideas. We researched practice-based alternatives to action learning that emerged in response to the pandemic and online working. The facilitators shared and critiqued ideas with each other and the project team and identified a viable alternative method that required less time investment and was more

resilient to changing participants. These informal conversations between team members led to us pulling together a proposal for the full project team. We did a piece of analytical work to identify and summarise all of the challenges we were facing, as well as mitigations and alternative solutions. We discussed the proposal with the project team and our external project partners, who listened carefully to the challenges, offered ideas and support, and ultimately agreed with the changes we proposed. They also offered ongoing support, should the changes not work as expected.

In terms of participant recruitment, two incremental changes were made. First, the facilitators held introductory meetings with participants before session one to explain the process, assess suitability, and test commitment to the series of sessions. Second, sessions were oversubscribed with up to eight participants to account for the previously experienced high dropout rate. This required the two programme facilitators to work in an agile way, adopting three potential roles:

- to facilitate a sub-team by dividing the group into two teams using breakout rooms if everyone who was recruited attended

- for one facilitator to actively participate in the session if only two or three participants attended by asking inquisitive questions and offering potential solutions

- to be a non-participant observer for research purposes if an optimal number of participants attended (we determined this as four to five participants).

The sessions were redesigned based on the 'gossip method' of peer learning, delivered as three, 90-minute sessions, where the presenting participant listens in to the group discussing their challenge (De Haan, 2005). This approach lent itself well to online delivery.

Enabling the collective agile mindset

Through our analysis we identified these practices as characteristic of a 'collective agile mindset'. Agile practices were spontaneously developed in the flow of everyday practice, rather than the converse, where agile work practices shape the behaviours of teams and individuals (Junker et al, 2021).

Numerous factors enabled this. First, the learning lab methodology gave us permission to experiment, learn and adapt along the way. Second, we were helped by our openness as a team, acknowledging quickly what did and didn't work, despite our 'newness', having only worked together online for several months. Third, we had the autonomy to find an alternative solution, and were not constrained by hierarchy. Fourth, these incremental changes were made through informal discussions, in online spaces, both as part of our project meeting structure and outside of it. These discussions were psychologically safe, enabling us to challenge the status quo (Clark, 2020; Edmondson, 1999), and set in a broader context of continuous shifting government and organisational guidance on remote working. Trust was a key enabler of the agile mindset. For us, this meant our expertise was valued, the team had confidence in each others' abilities, and we had creative freedom to develop and implement our ideas.

The collective agile mindset was unintentional, and we did not recognise our practice until we turned the lens on ourselves through a reflexive questioning of what we might be taking for granted (Cunliffe, 2003). Our study, therefore, shows how a collective agile mindset can emerge in response to challenges. In other words, the challenges themselves afford the opportunity for a collective agile mindset to develop.

Practical importance and implications of the research

In the 2020s, the world was turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations and employees turned to professions like HR and academia for evidence-based expertise to develop fast-paced, impactful strategies to advance line manager competence in navigating this new territory. This paper recognises that these professions have, themselves, had to adapt quickly and learn on the job, while providing expertise to others on agile working.

We describe our journey as a remote-working project team, needing to adapt rapidly to challenges and enduring uncertainty. We position agile behaviours, the concept of having an 'agile mindset', at a collective rather than an individual level (Avery, 2004; Mordi and Schoop, 2020) and illustrate the practices teams can adopt to foster a 'collective agile mindset' when facing uncertainty and challenges, and in doing so individually experience good work.

We highlight four practical implications for management development practitioners:

- be open, curious and honest about what is working, what is not, and why

- create space for informal interactions, debriefs and in-the-moment reflection, despite the structural formality of online/remote working

- to not underestimate the impact of incremental change and iterative developments as feedback is gathered en route

- the importance of feeling trusted, which is an enabler of the agile mindset.

These techniques are relevant to HR and learning and development professionals, research teams, and those responsible for line manager development. Our practical approach means busy professionals can digest, interpret, modify, and apply our techniques. Additionally, our conscious reflection will help those evaluating their own experience of agile working and of delivering online learning.

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