

# How to Develop the People Management Skills of Line Managers



## The Good Employment Learning Lab

We all know that the people management skills of line managers matter. How well you are line managed affects how much you enjoy your job and how well you do your job. Yet line managers are often neglected. They are under intense pressure to develop high performing teams and to support staff wellbeing yet they tend to receive little practical training in people management and are often isolated from their peers. This leads to a lack of confidence and strain. Managers also have ideas about how to manage people better but are constrained from influencing the organisations they manage within. Their role in developing productive teams and engaged, healthy workforces is too often neglected by their employers and wider society. So, there is a burgeoning need to understand how to develop the people management skills of line managers and how to create management contexts where line management can flourish.

**The Good Employment Learning Lab (GELL)** is led by researchers and HR professionals in the Centre for Decent Work and Productivity at Manchester Metropolitan University. We trialled short online interventions that aimed to develop the people management skills of line managers.

We have two Learning Labs:

- **The Greater Manchester Good Employment Learning Lab** is working with the **Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter** and local authorities to make sense of the challenge of raising people management skills in a particular place.
- **The Adult Social Care Good Employment Learning Lab** is working with **Skills for Care**, the NHS and local authorities to make sense of the challenge of raising people management skills in a particular sector.

Both Learning Labs are also supported by the CIPD, ACAS, the Federation of Small Businesses and the TUC. We are funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant ES/T014857/1].

See our short video and outputs and events here: [www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-centres/dwp/projects/good-employment-learning-lab](http://www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-centres/dwp/projects/good-employment-learning-lab)

## What we did in the Learning Lab

In total we ran 34 masterclasses (involving 386 participants), 17 flash peer learning sets (involving 69 participants) and 78 skills coaching relationships (involving 81 participants). We delivered 506 learning interventions. These sought to raise line manager capability to address five management challenges identified as timely or important by our practice partners:

Developing People Management Skills In:	
Greater Manchester Lab	Adult Social Care Lab
Agile Working and Secure Work	Values Based Recruitment
Conflict Management and Creativity	
Getting the Best Out of Your Team	

**Evidence-based management:** We built on evidence-based ways of thinking about and tackling these challenges, drawing on both research and better-practice resources.

**Learning pillars:** Our masterclasses, flash peer learning and skills coaching models drew on evidence-based management learning pillars so that managers select relevant knowledge to experiment with and, so, to change management and organisational practices. We started with 5 learning pillars: gain knowledge, reflect, make sense, experiment and learn together. Our evaluation prompted us to add: access, psychological safety and accountability. GELL learning interventions were built on a Theory of Change which is a programme logic that considers how the context of learners will relate to the learning mechanisms in the programme to generate outcomes.

The GELL Framework for Developing the People Skills of Line Managers is a revised version of our programme theory that integrates our evaluation findings.

## What We Found in the Learning Lab: The GELL Framework to Develop the People Management Skills of Line Managers

### Context



#### The Person: The Particular Line Manager

Neglected – Likely to have little access to training or peer support, isolated, under-confident.

Facing significant & changing people management challenges.

Struggling to process and manage conflict, affecting ability to tackle several management challenges.

Busy and easily distracted from developing people management skills – needs flexible and timely learning events and communities of practice.

Hungry to learn & be validated (within our programme – majority women; this may be different for other compulsory or 'hard to reach' programmes).

Often willing to experiment or even take on a change project (in our cohort; this may vary).



#### The Line Manager Role

Neglected – People management is under-valued and development is under-resourced and under-incentivised.

Tenuous power to enact practice & organisational change.



#### The Organisation/Sector

Neglects the importance of line management and of people management skills as a productive resource.

Needs to give line managers power & resources to enact practice and organisational change via projects.

Psychologically safe, learning and experimenting organisations/sectors are more likely to absorb learning & innovation.

Values message are often out of synch with resources/strategy.



#### Society

Neglects the importance of the people skills of line managers as a resource & promotes operational busyness as a sign of productivity.

## Mechanisms

### 8 Learning Pillars:



1. Access



2. Psychological safety



3. Gain knowledge



4. Reflect



5. Make sense



6. Commit to experiment/experiment



7. Accountability



8. Learn together

### Short online & evidence-based learning interventions led by HR professionals:

- Masterclass
- Flash Peer Learning
- Skills Coaching.

### Programme Design Principles:

- Learning events to garner manager attention & reduce isolation
- Masterclass as a foundation & gateway to coaching and peer learning
- Pacing to enable experimentation between learning events
- Promote experimentation as personal and organisational projects
- Target learning in contexts that enable manager development
- Extend programme design to shape context, reducing barriers to practice and organisational development and to enable innovation.

## Outcomes



• Experiment



• Improve manager practice



• Improve organisational practice



• Positive impact on staff



• Improvement to good and productive work

### Realist Design, Delivery and Evaluation

#### Design – Think about how

Context+Mechanism=Outcome at programme design, using the GELL Framework and by developing (and stress testing) a Theory of Change.

**Delivery** – Remain sensitive to context and how Context+Mechanism=Outcomes during programme delivery, continually improving programmes by being aware of what enables or constrains experimentation and practice/organisational development. Observe how the programme can capitalise on contextual enablers and overcome contextual constraints.

**Evaluation** – Observe how learning works and what experimentation and practice/organisational development is occurring and record what causes this so you become aware of how Context+Mechanism=Outcomes in your programme setting. Revise your Theory of Change in light of your evaluation findings to inform future delivery and wider reflection on 'what works' to develop the people skills of line managers.

Our interventions were carefully designed to build on best research and practice evidence and to generate knowledge, cause reflection, enable managers to make sense of their management options and to experiment with new practices. They aimed to provoke development in management practice and spill over effects in teams and organisations to create good and productive work. We recruited managers from a range of backgrounds and

in Greater Manchester and in the Adult Social Care sector organisations and with varying management experience. More women than men volunteered. Our realist evaluation sought to develop knowledge about 'what works, for whom and why' and so we explored how Context + Mechanism = Outcome. A total of 248 managers took part in our research.



#### What's Next for the Good Employment Learning Lab?

- Access our full evaluation report - including rich detail about how to design effective people management programmes for line managers - on our website.

Our next steps are to:

- Develop a toolkit that will guide programme commissioners and delivery teams to use the GELL Framework to Develop the People Management Skills of Line Managers to review existing provision and design new programmes.
- Engage with our project partners and a wider range of stakeholders to discuss the implications of our research for the tricky problem of how to develop line management practice for better work and productivity. We will host events and meetings and are keen to talk to you so please get in touch!
- Stimulate debate with policy makers about how to embed and fund training for line managers and how this will promote good work and productivity.
- We will work across sectors and also conduct some focused engagement with the Adult Social Care sector.
- Publish research papers on our Learning Lab method and our evaluation findings.

Keep in touch with latest developments and get involved by:

Signing up to the GELL Network to hear all our news: [www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-centres/dwp/projects/good-employment-learning-lab/good-employment-learning-lab-network-sign](http://www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-centres/dwp/projects/good-employment-learning-lab/good-employment-learning-lab-network-sign)

Getting in touch: [goodemploymentlab@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:goodemploymentlab@mmu.ac.uk)

Learning more about the Good Employment Lab, watch our video and access our project outputs on our website: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-centres/dwp/projects/good-employment-learning-lab>

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