



Developing Line Managers To Lead Agile Teams



The Good Employment **Learning Lab**

Greater
Manchester
Learning Lab



Engaged
Scholarship
Learning Lab



Adult
Social Care
Learning Lab



Leading Agile Teams

Agile work is more important than ever before and line managers are fundamental in developing new agile work practices with their teams. We know there's a skills gap for line managers who need support to develop the good management practices that create good work for all. Here at the Good Employment Learning Lab we've been exploring 'what works' when developing line managers and suggest how to do that for managing agile teams.

Agile work is concerned with where and when work is done (flexibility with hours and location), who is employed (permanent staff, agency workers, contractors), and what people are doing (e.g. multi-skilling). Research suggests that managing agile teams effectively can lead to improvements in good and productive work, such as productivity, workforce stability and wellbeing.

Managing agile teams is something that line managers are grappling with constantly in the current context. They face challenging situations navigating the needs of the business with differing team and personal needs. As one line manager told us:

There is a lot of change and uncertainty with Covid that I am trying to manage without knowledge of what the long-term effects will be on the business. Different personalities to deal with and how they each adapt to change. It is all unknown for management and the employees, so the challenge is to navigate it sensitively whilst protecting the viability of the business for the good of all.

Evidence from the project showed:

1. Line managers need support to navigate conflicting and emerging agile work organisational and policy changes when putting them into practice with their teams, and benefit from gaining new knowledge on agile work approaches.
2. Line managers value collaborating with external peers and a one-to-one coach when solving problems in well-designed, facilitated management learning sessions that are relevant to live workplace challenges.
3. Following the training many managers made changes to their practice or management style, such as how they communicate, involve and empower their teams, and often reported positive outcomes, such as in team performance.

How Did We Develop Line Managers To Manage Agile Teams?

Our participants were line managers from the public, private and third sector in Greater Manchester, including small organisations. They had varied experience, knowledge, skills and confidence. In our content design, we were flexible and sensitive to the evolving context of the pandemic, including rapidly changing government guidelines and organisational policies. As one line manager explained:

Sometimes managers at the coal face are taking the brunt of all the changes without the necessary tools and understanding to ensure that changes are fully embedded, particularly when they are unsure of the purpose of the change and for whose benefit.

We know line managers are busy, so we adapted well-established, evidence-based learning techniques for online learning. We offered three online interactive development options to suit differing needs, delivered by qualified HR professionals:

- **Online Masterclasses:** One-off interactive sessions featuring evidence-based content with interactive discussions and practical case studies with around 15 line managers.
- **Online Peer Learning:** Three 90 minute structured and facilitated 'flash peer learning' sessions where around six line managers from different organisations share agile work challenges and listen 'off camera' as they get solutions and support.
- **Online Skills Coaching:** Three 60 minute one-to-one sessions on agile work that blend coaching and mentoring, flexible to the skills and confidence of the line manager.

Line managers could do any combination of these sessions. We also provided an online resource bank for self-directed and deeper learning.

Our online masterclasses covered:

- Developing understanding of the benefits and challenges of agile and secure work.
- Identifying personal and organisational challenges.
- Sharing newly-established remote and hybrid working practices with each other.
- Cultivating trusting working environments.
- Adapting management styles to new ways of working.

The content of our online peer learning and online coaching sessions was driven by line managers' live agile work challenges and opportunities.

What Did Line Managers Learn About Managing Agile Teams?

Line managers reported learning a range of different things that included:

- Different organisational approaches to agile work.
- An 'official' definition of agile work, alongside academic theory, that helped them understand that agile work is more than remote working.

It's just good to know. I liked knowing what was in an official definition, so we can then see if we've got all of those things in there. Because we'll probably have things in our policy about high trust. I'm just seeing, I've written here, and it's about being flexible about work, location and hours.

- The need to flex their management style: there is no 'one size fits all' approach to managing agile teams due to varied individual preferences and organisational needs.
- Tips and ideas about good practices when managing an agile team and how to manage their teams effectively.
- New insights about how to lead in an agile way.
- The importance of setting clear time boundaries around their work.
- The importance of holding regular 'check-ins' with remote teams about their wellbeing.



They also recognised the rapidly changing environment and what they still needed to learn:

I feel like I have more confidence in how I execute and deal with agile and secure working, but as a business we are in an ever-changing environment so there is still a lot to develop and work on within this area.

How Did Line Managers Learn About Managing Agile Teams?

Building on well-established learning theory we found that line managers learn from:

- Learning whilst addressing live challenges in managing agile teams, enabling them to experiment with new techniques and practices after training sessions. Timeliness is powerful in motivating line manager learning.
- Learning together in online breakout rooms in masterclasses and peer learning groups, discussing challenges, and tapping into others' experiences and practices.
- Being vulnerable and honest in psychologically safe online spaces, with peers from outside their organisation, facilitated by an empathic expert, gaining reassurance that 'I am not alone'.
- Reflecting and thinking through new ways of implementing agile practices and management styles, and the practical implications, with the expertise, input and support of a coach.
- Reporting back progress to their coach or peer learning group, creating accountability and motivation.

I am going to try out a variety of ideas that were expressed today to see which work for my team. This includes more virtual social interaction opportunities and more informal check-ins.

What Did Line Managers Experiment With And What Changed As A Result Of The Training?

Line managers experimented with agile practices and management approaches such as:

- Developing confidence to adapt their management style to new agile work practices.
- Delegating more effectively and sharing responsibility with colleagues.

- Finding new ways to support team members and achieve common aims.
- Introducing and valuing weekly 'check-ins' with colleagues.
- Being clearer with their own manager about *how* they want to be managed.
- Spending more time reflecting on their professional development and taking responsibility for it.

Line managers reported various changes to agile work practices, such as creating opportunities for staff to raise remote/hybrid working issues and 'checking in' with their teams regularly. This led to a more collaborative management style:

I previously had the tendency to be... quite prescriptive... but now I'm... more asking them the question around what you think you should do in this situation... Trying to empower staff to make their own decisions rather than me telling them what I think they should do.

A number of line managers reported improvements in staff motivation resulting from implementation of stronger and more two-way communication channels, and also better opportunities to work with under-performing staff:

I now have regular one-to-ones with him every four weeks and then in between I call him... So yeah, it has improved a lot, I know that person better, and then I can put things in that are more suitable for him.

What Does This Mean For You?

To support line managers to lead agile teams, consider the following:

- Commission well-designed training that encourages line managers to experiment and implement changes to practice that are timely to the challenges of managing agile work.
- Provide line managers with time and opportunities to learn, reflect and share their challenges with peers from outside their own organisations when learning how to better manage agile work.
- Design structured learning sessions with expert external facilitators to enable online learning, where peers hold each other to account.
- Recognise that building understanding about agile work can lead to both changes in how line managers communicate, involve, and empower their teams.

Where Can I Find Out More?

You'll find our VBR masterclass slides, articles, websites, toolkits and podcasts on our Wakelet Resource Bank. Read more in our full evaluation report and reports on other management topics when published on the Good Employment Learning Lab (GELL) website. See below for details on how to access the Wakelet Resource Bank and GELL website.

What Is The Good Employment Learning Lab?

The Good Employment Learning Lab at Manchester Metropolitan University is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to develop and test the most effective ways of supporting line managers to manage people to create good employment. It is a collaboration between researchers, policy makers, practitioners and managers to find out 'what works, for whom, when, where and why' so that organisations and training bodies can target investment to effectively develop line managers. Here we report specifically from the Greater Manchester Good Employment Learning Lab.

The Good Employment Learning Lab: What Works To Develop Line Managers?

- Research and Practice Working Together
- Designing and Testing Online Masterclasses, Peer-Learning and Coaching to Address Common Management Challenges
- Designed On Five Management Learning Principles



Gain Knowledge



Reflect



Make Sense



Intend to Experiment



Learning Together

Learning What Works Via Realist Evaluation
Helping Evidence To Land Where You Work

How Can I Get Involved With The Good Employment Learning Lab?

Contact Us:

Email: goodemploymentlab@mmu.ac.uk

GELL Website

Resource Bank:
wakelet.com/wake/dpuXSU9rXB_1_Lp1jJuD



@EmploymentLab



The Good Employment Learning Lab