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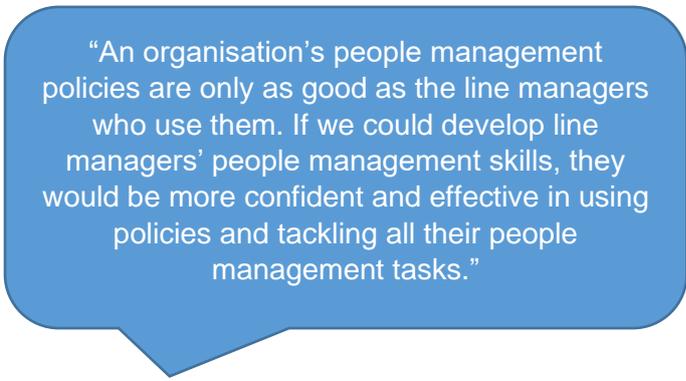
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Online skills coaching: A realist evaluation of 'what works' for line managers

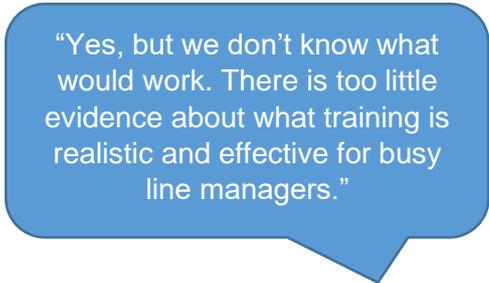
Dr Liz Rivers and Sarah Acton

Ever wondered what skills coaching is, and why it's an effective component of line manager development? This article explains how online skills coaching was used in the context of a broader research project and management development programme.

The spark for The Good Employment Learning Lab (GELL) was a conversation:



"An organisation's people management policies are only as good as the line managers who use them. If we could develop line managers' people management skills, they would be more confident and effective in using policies and tackling all their people management tasks."



"Yes, but we don't know what would work. There is too little evidence about what training is realistic and effective for busy line managers."

And so, this spark kick-started a two-year ESRC-funded project which sought to understand exactly that - **what works**. Our video explains GELL in more detail: <https://youtu.be/1BIYVI2B-CA>

What did we do?

We offered interactive online masterclasses, peer learning and skills coaching to managers of all levels and sectors across Greater Manchester, UK. We offered the same to adult social care managers in the wider geographical area of North West England. Managers could pick and choose which interventions to get involved with. This article focusses on skills coaching, and you can hear more about our other interventions on our [website](#).

What is skills coaching?

Skills coaching typically is concerned with developing discrete skills, requiring the coach to hone their attention to those specific skills, often going into great detail during the session (Grant and Hartley, 2013). Our coaching sessions were focused on management skills that included: values-based recruitment, managing agile teams, conflict handling, creativity, and developing careers. Our approach to skills coaching is a blend of coaching and mentoring where the coach provides topic expertise tailored to the coachees' needs and retains the curious questioning of

traditional coaching. This requires the coach to have both coaching and topic expertise and our trained coaches were also qualified HR professionals.

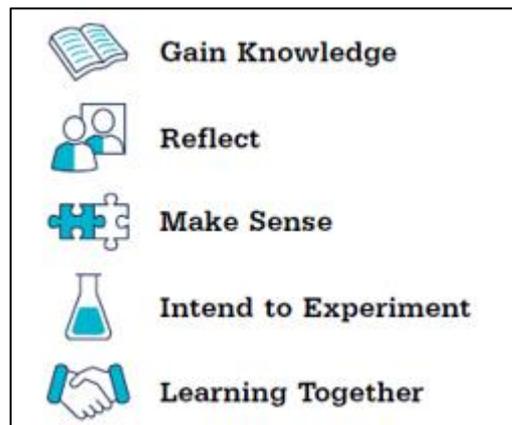
Why skills coaching?

We chose to test this intervention because we were looking for interventions that are **realistic** and **effective**. Skills coaching is accessible and cost-effective, and helps solve tricky context-specific management problems. We intentionally chose a blend of coaching and mentoring given the diverse individual backgrounds and contexts of our coachees. These varied between coachees such as: new line managers, technical experts who lacked confidence in people management, and experienced line managers facing into tricky organizational problems who sought external input and perspectives.

How did it work?

Each participant had a contracting meeting plus three one-hour online coaching sessions. Our one-page [“how to” guide](#) provides more detail.

We used a set of evidence-based learning pillars to shape both the design of our interventions, and the way we collected data from both our participants and our coaches.



We asked our participants to complete a portfolio between sessions which was structured around each of the learning pillars and explored the outcomes and impact of the sessions on their practice. This had a dual purpose of providing coachees additional reflection opportunities before and after each session, as well as providing rich research data. Participants were also invited to a research interview several months after their final skills coaching session. The coaches observed and noted whether each of the management learning pillars were triggered during or in-between sessions, for example, noting statements that illustrated reflection or making sense of a situation, and what progress they made on articulated commitments to experiment with new or different practices.

What did we learn?

We were interested in both how participants learned from the skills coaching e.g., did they gain knowledge and experiment with new practices and what was the impact on themselves, their teams and/or their organisations? We explored the learning journeys of 81 managers who engaged in skills coaching and completed 243 coaching hours to find out.

Our findings arose from three levels of analysis: the identification of common themes across all participants, a deeper exploration into selected cases and a cross-case analysis, and a quantitative rapid estimation of learning journeys and outcomes. We illustrate an example of one such case, Lewis, a senior manager in a small business. We show in brackets where we saw evidence of his learning against our management learning pillars.

Lewis' experience

Attends a masterclass and skills coaching

Though Lewis signs up for creativity coaching, some of his challenges merge across both conflict and creativity topics. For example, he discusses issues with the coach such as: finding time to do line management and encourage team voice, a difficult relationship with a team member, managing underperformance, balancing creativity with sustainable organisational growth, and the speed of organisational expansion.

He reports that bouncing ideas off the coach helps him develop better ideas about what he should do and how to apply his learning to a range of problems **[Gain knowledge] [Learning together] [Reflect] [Make sense]**.

His coach notes that he has a 'lightbulb' moment where through their joint discussions and his reflections he surfaces his personal concerns about the speed of company growth **[Reflect] [Make sense]**.

He assimilates learning from the creativity masterclass and considers how to spend time thinking creatively with the management team **[Make sense] [Intend to experiment]**. He commits to experiment by sharing responsibility for coaching sessions that involve his team, to create action plans relating to recruitment activity, and to be more purposeful about some of the tools the organisation is using to create a positive culture **[Intend to experiment]**. He also intends to talk to the management team about the speed of the company expansion and whether it is appropriate.

Lewis reports that in comparison to the masterclasses the coaching has been 'more beneficial' as 'I find it easier to process things when I'm having an informal one to one discussion' **[Learning together]**. He states that the coaching helps him consider what he needs to do in specific situations and how to overcome different problems **[Make sense] [Intend to experiment]**. His coach reports him commenting during the sessions 'that's a good question, I hadn't thought of that' **[Reflect]**.

Outcomes

Lewis reported having more open and purposeful conversations with his team and began acting on their views. He also begins to trust his staff more, giving them more responsibility and rewards proactive behaviour. We therefore observed

improvements to manager practice, to good work, and evidence of a positive impact on staff. Overall, our data suggests that skills coaching enabled Lewis to experiment with numerous new practices that he learned from first attending a masterclass and explored further with his coach. Skills coaching supported him to tackle specific contextual challenges resulting in increased levels of staff involvement.

Our conclusions

We drew several conclusions about skills coaching from our research, which explain when skills coaching is likely to be **realistic** and **effective**:

- **TIMELINESS:** Coachees develop capability and confidence through timely, context-relevant support with their management challenges.
- **EXPERTISE:** Coachees value learning together with a coach who is skilled and experienced in both coaching and the topic explored.
- **DEPTH OF LEARNING:** Skills coaching enables good opportunities for reflection and sense-making. Many managers developed better practice as a result.
- **SCAFFOLDING:** For coachees with low baseline knowledge in the topic explored, skills coaching may be more effective when supported by a masterclass to provide knowledge on key concepts, scaffolding learning for in-depth exploration and application to coachee context.
- **EXPERIMENTATION:** Skills coaching encourages coachees to experiment, identify new actions and reflect on existing practices that are working well, thus building confidence.

References

Grant, A.M. and Hartley, M. (2013) Developing the leader as coach: insights, strategies and tips for embedding coaching skills in the workplace. *Coaching: An international Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. 6(2), 102-115.