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WHAT IS EFFECTIVE LINE MANAGEMENT?

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WHITE PAPER

Effective line management is central to the success of any organisation. But has it changed in our post-COVID world or are the principles of effective line management the same as ever? Using Roffey Park's network of training and development professionals, as well as its repository of prior research in this field, our white paper focuses on first level line managers in the 2020s and explores the enduring and emerging issues of effective line management.

About the author



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Her PhD explored the impact of government policy on vegetable growers in England, and she has published research on marketing networks, as well as on student choice, and student experience. Jan is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA) and a member of the Food Research Collaboration.

Executive summary of findings

Some things don't change...

Our findings highlight core challenges, the 'starter for 10' of first level line management. These are:

- Time management – because line management takes time.
- Learning how to delegate – helps empower team members and release management time.
- Assertive communication – listen, support and challenge – even when, or especially when – dealing with former teammates.
- Motivating others – and oneself – especially in balancing quotidian (everyday concerns such as pay and job tasks) and transcendent goals (meaningful work).

...and some things do

Whilst the core competencies remain the same, our research suggests that contextual changes are impacting on how first level line management is practised. Three themes in particular emerge from our research that impact on how line management is practised:

- Hybrid working
- The Societal Context of the 2020s – identity, self and mental health
- The equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda

The workplace context of the post-COVID 2020s is shaped by profound inter-connected macro-level, socio-technical disruptions. These forces play out at the micro-level as individuals grapple with the everyday reality of having to cope with the cost of living crisis, manage diverse teams, address sickness and retention issues, enhance well-being, whilst also feeling a deep need for a career that is meaningful to them – and deliver on organisation targets. Whilst the immediate threat of COVID appears to have receded for now, line managers find themselves having to perform their role without a clear sense of what's normal now. Different departments within the same organisation may have adopted different norms for home versus office working, a particular problem for large organisations such as the civil service where early-stage line managers move department frequently. Today's line managers need to be accomplished and assured across multiple technical and interpersonal domains. To manage today's diverse, multi-generational teams effectively, with authority and wisdom, first level line managers today require:

- self-awareness, reflexivity and a capacity for critical thinking and reflection – to combat the feelings of imposter syndrome and address the crisis of inner confidence and low perceived self-efficacy
- strategic awareness – even when operational challenges clamour for attention.

Unlocking potential – by rebalancing training programmes

To complete the paper, we explore a new agenda for the training and development of first level line managers that responds to the findings of this research. Training and development programmes need to balance:

- Remote and proximate modes of delivery.
- Content, context and coaching – to support the learning of procedural and tacit knowledge.
- Timing, weighting and customisation – to deliver effective training.

Training and development programmes need to be re-thought so as to creatively (and cost-effectively) combine face-to-face and online delivery; synchronous and asynchronous content; group and one-to-one sessions; classroom planned and socially spontaneous learning experiences, to support and educate as well as train and develop. This needs teams of content designers, trainers, facilitators, and coaches, working closely to leverage the tech and expertise for scaled and personalised delivery.

Rationale for our approach

This research exploits the knowledge and experience of Roffey Park Institute's network of professionals who deliver programmes such as *Stepping Into Leadership*, *Management Essentials* and *Emerging Leaders*. By talking to them, we tap into their unique perspective of line management that traces shifts in practice over time as experienced by a large number of individuals new to line management. This means we vicariously access multiple cohorts of first level line managers in a timely and efficient fashion. Supported by a review of Roffey Park's research repository of reports spanning over 20 years, we bring together current practical and theoretical insights, and we reflect on how this knowledge will shape the future direction of the training and development programmes that are needed for the line managers of the future. We hope this research stimulates dialogue and debate as well as providing a platform for more extensive research on line management.

Some key themes from previous Roffey Park Institute research publications and insights

From 1998 to 2018 Roffey Park produced its annual Roffey Park Management Agenda which aimed to 'provide an annual focus on the trends affecting people at work' (Holbeche & Glynn, 1999, p. 1). The 2018 survey captured the views of almost 700 managers across a range of industrial sectors, levels of seniority, and from large, medium and small organisations. Its themes covered productivity, the impact of technology, diversity, performance management, talent management and mental health (Lucy et al., 2018). The 2018 report authors said that people wanted "consistently confident managers who recognise day-to-day contribution and who empower colleagues' and who 'take the opportunity to provide me with more structured feedback in areas of strength and areas where I can improve.'" (Lucy et al., 2018, p. 33)

A concern for how leadership and management might change as work becomes more digital was a recurring theme, for example, a report on artificial intelligence suggested a lack of appreciation of how professional and managerial tasks could be transformed in the same way as the logistics of Amazon's fulfilment centres have been revolutionised (Roffey Park, 2018). In an early paper Smith and Sinclair (2003) explored what makes an excellent virtual manager and highlighted a number of issues that working virtually raised. These included isolation and communication issues, the difficulty of building across virtual teams, that technology can both impede and facilitate effective communication, the impact of diversity in virtual environments, and the need to close the psychological distance between virtual workers and their organisation. As a result of their research, they found that excellent virtual managers have 'well developed interpersonal skills, an ability to develop trust, be flexible users of different communication media, be results and outcome focused, be collaborative culture builders and have the ability to stand back from the action' (Smith & Sinclair, 2003, p. 2). George Kunnath, (at the time) Roffey Park's Director of Executive Education, summarised the key competencies for digital leaders that he uses in his work:

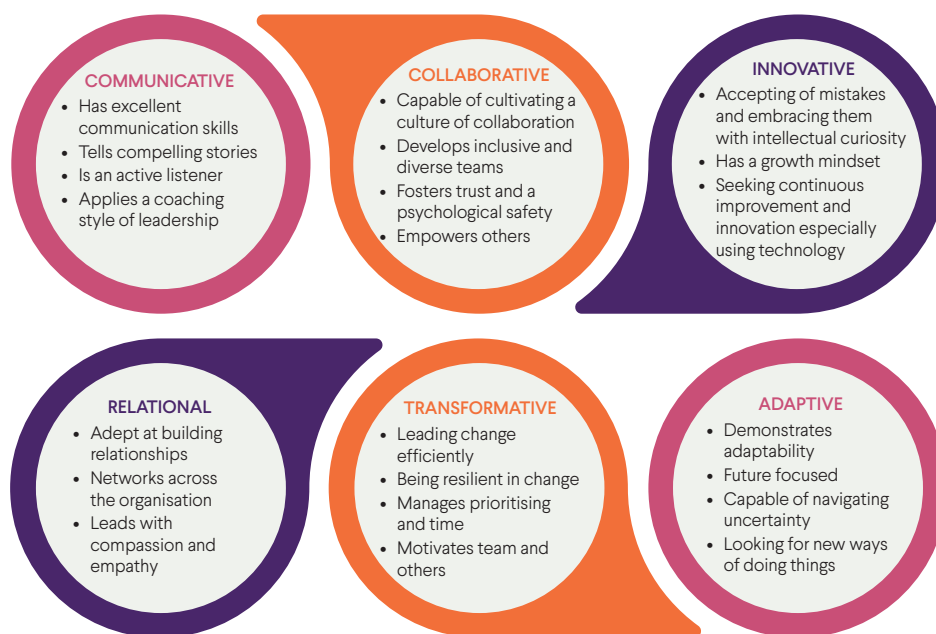


Figure 1: Key Competencies for Digital Leaders

(Created from various sources What is Digital Leadership - GDS Group; (GDS Group, 2022); Developing digital leaders | Deloitte Insights)(Deloitte Insights, 2022); Characteristics of Digital Leadership - Digital Marketing Lesson - DMI (digitalmarketinginstitute.com) (Digital Marketing Institute, 2022))

Other papers explore common management themes: performance management, talent management, productivity as well as emergent topics such as resilience, cognitive and gender diversity, and mental health; more recent papers also consider the impact of the broader economy (for example, Brexit) as well as organisational changes such as flatter structures (Roffey Park Institute, 2017, 2018a, 2018c, 2018b). In reviewing Roffey Park Institute's ideas on leadership and management it's noticeable that the fundamental categories of leadership and management competencies are strikingly similar regardless of whether the workplace is entirely face-to-face, virtual or hybrid. The challenge for managers and leaders centres on context, translating ideas into their own practice and circumstances, and the Management Agenda series attempted to capture that.

Research questions and method

To explore effective line management competencies and whether they have changed, interviews were conducted online with Roffey Park Institute's associates and faculty staff who have many years of experience working with first level line managers across the public, not for profit and private sectors. The research was focused on two themes, expressed as simply as possible following the guidance on avoiding leading questions (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022) and in the spirit of a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to permit the gathering of participants' own sense of, and experience of, working with first level line managers. We covered:

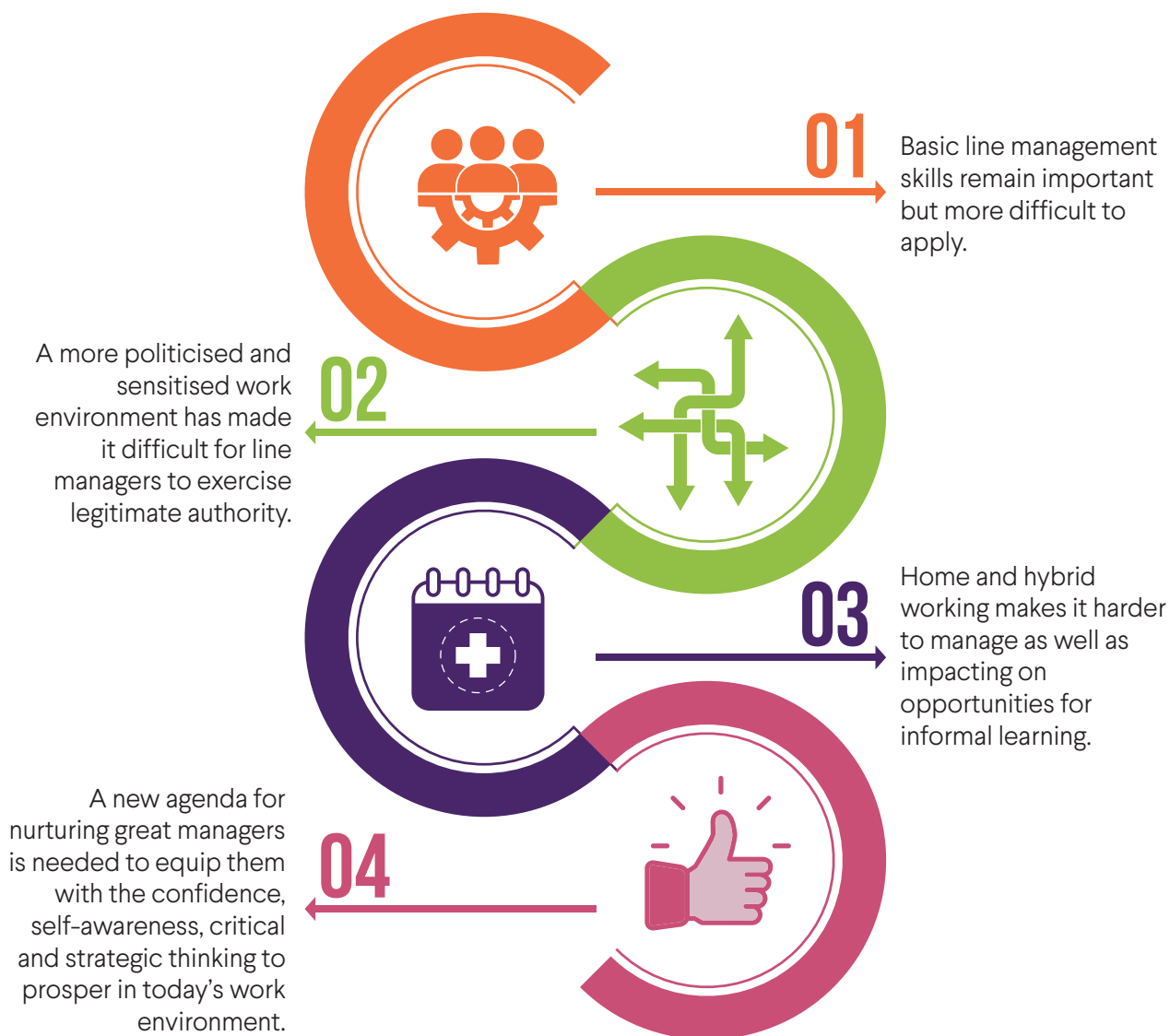
- **Issues facing first line managers:** what competencies do you notice line managers want to develop, what knowledge and skills do you think they need to learn?
- **Changes:** what do you think has changed (if anything) over the past few years?

The research began with two pilot interviews with senior faculty members, who have experience of engaging with first level line managers, as well as broader experience with those who commission management and leadership training and development programmes. These interviews proceeded well and gave us confidence that the interview structure was appropriate. The data from these interviews were included in the study findings. A list of 30 associates with experience delivering programmes aimed at first level line managers was obtained from Roffey Park internal records. From that list, 16 were regular facilitators on Stepping Into Leadership, Management Essentials and Emerging Leaders at Roffey Park, with experience of facilitation or delivery, from pre-COVID to current times, on at least one of these three introductory programmes. Each of these key informants was emailed individually to request a 30-minute online interview. The email included a participant information sheet and consent form. Of the 16 contacted, 10 were able to participate in the study in the tight timeframe of the study, making 12 interviews in all. Each interview was conducted online, recorded, and a transcript of the interview was also taken. Participants were assigned simple pseudonyms as a way of maintaining the confidentiality of their comments. A list of participants is provided in Appendix 1. Many of the associates who participated in the research drew on their work with Fast Streamers, young graduates recruited into the Civil Service, but experience of other first line manager groups was also referenced, for example, in the construction sector and other industrial sectors, finance and professional services, and other parts of the public sector such as education and the NHS.



Findings

Our findings have been organised into four themes that emerged from the interviews:



The next four sections provide a narrative of each of the themes above, expressed in the words spoken by the research participants. The paper is completed with a synopsis of what we have learnt from the research.

01 The importance of the basics of line management

Time management – line management takes time

All the participants acknowledged how important for organisational effectiveness good line management is, even if organisations do not always appreciate it in workload calculations.

'...everybody seems to underestimate how much time the management bit takes.' (Pat)

And then the other big one is prioritising and time management, especially when they're specialists as most people are - they still have a day job.' (Pat)

Time management was a theme mentioned by several participants, one noticed the increased time pressure on first level line managers,

'...it's very difficult for people to take a step out and do anything that might be important but not urgent. [...] it just feels to me that there's so much pressure to get the work done' (Jem)

Learning how to delegate helps empower team members and release management time

Coaching skills can be a useful way to help first level line managers delegate and adopt a more empowering approach.

'... there is that tendency to just get on and do and not recognise [...] the power of delegating [...] if you delegate with support and the coaching approach you can really empower your team members...' (Gia)

For professional specialists, the transition to line management raises particular challenges in delegating. The transition to line management requires them to leave behind things that they enjoyed doing, to re-cast their own sense of themselves as professionals.

'...They can often do the work of the people that they're managing. [...] And the real temptation is that they do that rather than delegate...' (Abe)

Assertive communication – listen, support and challenge – even when dealing with former teammates.

Being able to communicate in a more assertive way can help with these tricky delegation issues. Asking directly but courteously, listening, and being alive to win-win solutions are important elements in being assertive.

'An awful lot is about assertive communication, [...] to ask people to do things, to say no to people, and working with challenging members of staff. [...] (Pat)

Being assertive can be difficult if the individual was originally part of the team, as is often the case with specialists and professionals. They will:

'...need to be more directive in their style sometimes and that can be a difficult transition, to feel that they have the authority, to lead and to performance manage when they've been part of the team.' (Gia)

Motivating others – and oneself, especially in balancing quotidian and transcendent goals

Motivation and engagement are also seen as basics of first level line management. There are various theories of motivation, popular current models emphasise autonomy, intrinsic motivation and a sense of belonging, for example, one participant (Jas) referenced Deci and Ryan (2000) and their self-determination theory (SDT) that motivation is driven by innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Motivation has always been an issue, but it has a particular nuance to it now, as individuals demand meaningful and well-remunerated work. For a range of societal and economic reasons, staff retention has risen up the agenda and the levers of management are very different when you have a population of workers who can leave and find another job tomorrow. Line managers can work hard to retain staff but, for example, if there is a prevailing view that a person needs to experience different employers to progress in their career then staff will leave despite the best efforts of their line manager. Motivation was mentioned by Abe, especially related to the recent pressure of rising costs on financial rewards for their work.

'... [what I see in] the last few months [...] people are much more concerned about [...] having enough money to pay the rent and pay the bills [...]. So that's with the managers themselves. [...] But they're also managing people who [are] probably even more on the sharp end of that. So how do you keep [people] motivated and focused if [...] if they're not getting the rewards that they feel they're due? (Abe)

Line managers are dealing with the impact on their own lives of the cost of living crisis too and may experience feeling less motivated as a result. Feeling undervalued is intensified when there is a narrative of criticism of the Civil Service:

'...bashing of civil servants hasn't been very helpful for motivation and morale.' (Abe)

02 The impact of context: societal and workplace upheaval make line management more difficult

We now turn to the impact of context, the workplace itself and the broader societal context, in which line management is practised. There was a broad consensus that whilst the basics of line management have not changed, as the previous examples suggest, the context makes it more difficult for managers to be effective.

‘... it’s not so much that the issues or the skills or the competencies of has changed hugely. I think it’s just the context within which they’re having to do those things has changed.’ (Abe)

Hybrid working

It was no surprise that working in a hybrid way was a theme that came up in every interview. Younger less experienced line managers in particular do not know what is reasonable in terms of working norms, since they may have only ever known a hybrid workplace. The etiquette of online work – what’s an acceptable dress code, should cameras and mics be on – varied. Referring to one cohort of online delegates Ami said:

‘...when they are in other meetings, they don’t put their cameras on, so that’s their culture.’ (Ami)

Civil Service Fast Streamers move departments every six months or so, and so have to learn a new set of norms of where, when and how to work, often with few opportunities to meet others in a face-to-face setting. COVID accelerated change even though the participants felt that these changes were starting to emerge well before that. These experiences chime with Archer’s idea of contextual incongruity (Archer, 2012). By this she meant a social context where the tacit knowledge of society, acquired from the previous generation and one’s social milieu, does not provide effective guidance of what to do to make one’s way in the world. In her view individuals had to turn to reflexive thinking to help them navigate a context that was quite unlike that experienced by previous generations. (In particular, Archer emphasised the turn to what she referred to as meta-reflexivity, that is, ‘internal conversations [that] critically evaluate previous inner dialogues and are critical about effective action in society’ (Archer, 2012, p. 13)).

Hybrid working intensified the difficulties of delegation. Days filled with online meeting after online meeting orientates new first level line managers towards tasks, doing rather than doing the less familiar work of relationship building which is fundamental to effective line management.

‘...I suspect that also allows people, if they didn’t want to do that [line management] very much [...] it gives them an opportunity not to do the stuff that’s probably [...] harder, less immediately rewarding.’ (Jem)

Whilst many were concerned about the impact of virtual work environment, some were more optimistic:

‘...communication is still communication. And if you’ve got a portal of some sort, you can get people speaking [...] so it [online working] isn’t perhaps the barrier that people think it is. I think you can still have tough or emotional conversations remotely.’ (Sam)

The Societal Context of the 2020s – identity, self and mental health

Ways of managing emerge from the societal context. The balance between rights and responsibilities, and the impact of identity politics, coupled with an increasing problem relating to the supply of professional and skilled workers shapes what can and cannot be done by managers. In the upheaval of late modern society:

‘... the [macro] context sets the boundaries and the limits on how you can act within an organisation [...] it’s not easy to exercise legitimate power’ (Dan)

Several participants noted the change in attitudes towards work, a shift in the psychological contract between an organisation, its managers and team members. There was an increased focus on meaningful work, a rejection of alienating work, that is, work endured to provide the means to enjoy one’s time outside work. This was particularly apparent in cohorts such as Fast Streamers, bright, capable people who are choosy about the kind of work they do. People are more open about issues such as identity and mental health, and they also want work to be meaningful in a way that was not articulated so clearly in the past. This sensibility affected both team members and their line managers and was expressed by one associate as a:

‘...heightened awareness of self’ (Jas)

Whilst the increased awareness of self has some positives, there are problems:

‘...if the only lens we have is our own feelings [...] that’s rather narrow.’ (Jas)

‘...do remember that you are being employed by a particular organisation that will have certain expectations about how you work when you work, you... the quality of the work that you produce [...] And that’s not unreasonable at all.’ (Jas)

Line managing and the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda

More than one key informant was impressed with how younger first line managers were engaging with the EDI agenda, so simple 'why is EDI important' type training is less appropriate for first level line management programmes, especially those aimed at recent graduates. But there was an acknowledgement that first level line managers don't feel they have been adequately trained in how to help people struggling with the range of mental health issues that people disclose to their work organisation. Inexperienced managers don't have a clear sense of what might be reasonable adjustments that need to be made to support neurodiverse team members.

'They want to do the right thing [...] they're fearful of doing the wrong thing' (Jas)

Workplaces are now highly political and sensitised environments, and first line managers have to navigate individuals' sensitivities. For example, they may be nervous of falling foul of claims of bullying that may undermine their confidence to exercise legitimate authority. The progress made in terms of addressing issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion is very welcome, but it does make line management, especially for first level line managers, more complicated.

'We need to recognise that [the impact of the EDI agenda] and work on understanding the skill set that's needed to navigate this tricky terrain. We need to do a lot more training around the EDI agenda including neurodiversity, [...] managers need an appreciation of that.' (Jas)

Pat acknowledged that the young first level line managers he encounters are very aware and supportive of a more inclusive workplace, but they do need space to practice balancing individuals' and organisation needs.

'... you need to be in a room with people really to practice [management skills] [...] there's a difference between knowing it intellectually and actually turn it into an action...' (Pat)

A welcome development in the workplace is the acceptance that managers have a greater responsibility to care for their team, but participants report that many first line managers do not feel they have sufficient training in how to support them. The EDI agenda has rightly brought important issues to the fore but the burden for dealing with it falls on the shoulders of line managers.

'I don't think that we acknowledge that, talk about that, engage with that in the training room' (Dan)

Today's first level line managers also find that their own managers are not as visible as in the past – they are often very busy, not on site, vacancy rates are high and sickness remains an issue too. The result is that first level line managers:

'... not getting as much coaching and development stuff [from their managers] as maybe they would have got in the past...' (Abe)

03 The crisis of inner confidence, and the need for critical thinking, and strategic awareness

Leadership

If management is the exercising of legitimate authority, then leadership may be seen as the exercising of personal authority. Managers today will find it difficult to exercise legitimate authority without also exercising personal authority. Once an individual is put in charge of a group of people there is a skill set that is required, a skill set based on self, an ability to read situations, and a degree of emotional intelligence, these are leadership skills. In this section, we explore the more elusive, higher order competencies of the (leader) manager relating to their personal presence and self-confidence in the role, and their ability to think strategically and reflect critically.

'We separate leadership and management out and it's the leader-manager all the way – they need both [...] leadership is a behaviour not a position.' (Sue)

Imposter syndrome and the crisis of inner confidence

References to imposter syndrome were made by several participants.

'I find myself often talking so much about things like impostor syndrome far more than skills, I think they probably got the skills. Actually, it's just they don't really believe it [...] with Fast Streamers, they're often kind of put into a fairly senior grade quite early on in their careers and that then promotes the impostor syndrome...' (Jem)

Lockdown only exacerbated the mental health challenges, particularly for those who went through a whole line management training programme without ever meeting anyone face to face in the workplace. One participant noted a recent alarming rise in individuals talking about mental health issues. One participant stressed the impact on confidence because opportunities for vicarious learning – watching what others do – were diminished during lockdown.

'...it's trying to get the breadth of experience in dealing with people [that] they struggle with mostly. Because they're fiercely bright, most of them, but lack confidence. [...] They haven't had the experience of being around and seeing how it's done and are often thrown in at the deep end and worry about [...] how to motivate people.' (Jem)

'It's not just about who you might directly line manage. It's much broader [...] how you can impact on the culture of the organisation [...] being mindful of the impact that could have on all of those around you even if [...] you don't directly line manage. So there's something about confidence and in them seeing themselves as leaders.' (Gen)

The ability to think and reflect critically was seen as essential for line managers. The term critical reflection was used to refer to a combination of higher order skills: the capacity to stop and notice, being aware of self, of other, and being aware of the context. A sense of self is all the more important for line managers engaging with multigenerational and diverse teams, so line managers experience the loss of confidence whilst needing it more. Self-assured managers were better equipped to engage in nuanced 'sensible conversations' (Jas) between individuals and their line managers to balance the task and wellbeing outcomes of work, as well as respecting organisation's responsibilities to customers, taxpayers and others dependant on their value creating activities. Fortunately, as more training returns to the classroom, people seem to thrive and recover their sense of self:

'... people seem to be just grateful to be in a room and to be able to talk to people face to face. [...] I think that probably goes some way to alleviating the mental health thing...' (Bri)

An impactful presence is based on self-awareness and self-understanding. The term 'the self as instrument' was used by a number of participants in the study (for example Dan and Bri). Today's line managers need to be comfortable with unpredictability and resilient, to feel comfortable in how they present to the world:

'...better management and better leadership comes from people being their genuine selves rather than trying to conform to some type that they've seen in other people or that they've read in books...' (Bri)

Strategic awareness

Some participants thought a wider knowledge of an organisation, a strategic awareness, helped line managers feel more confident and most participants felt it was part of the role of first level line managers:

'Even as a first line manager, you're expected to contribute to that wider strategic aim...' (Sam)

'It's trying to balance the tensions of organisations and their teams in a coherent way. [...] that bit between being strategic and forward-looking while also being part of the group and rolling up sleeves ...' (Jem)

For first level line managers there is a tendency to focus on operations, to help and protect their team but they will need to realise that they may be hindering their team by not empowering them. First level line managers need to be able to step away from the operations and be more strategic. If they don't master this, they can become time stretched as they get pulled into the day to day, as well as dealing with more strategic matters. Particularly when setting team members' goals, first level line managers have a pivotal role to play in linking team-level goals to the organisation's strategy.

04 A new agenda for training and development of first level line managers

Given the complex, political, sensitised workplace environment in which first line managers operate, there is an argument for drawing down some of the more advanced leadership skills that are usually kept back to more senior leadership programmes. So first level line management training needs to begin to develop the higher order leadership capabilities as well as the more prosaic management skills we normally associate with that level of line management. In this section we consider what sort of training and development might be appropriate for first level line managers.

Developing an awareness of self and to engage in reflexive thinking are generally not acquired through encoded, explicit knowledge. It requires a different approach, but one that may be difficult for commissioning organisations to embrace:

'... coaching is really important for skills development [...] The ability to choose the appropriate style for the context and the situation that you're in.' (Abe)

'...semi structured sessions would be a real benefit and would look to alleviate some other things around imposter syndrome and mental health issues. [...] I wonder whether some organisations could be braver [...] I think organisations would be very nervous about saying let's just bring people together because it's good to bring them together [...] they have to be seen to be... not waste [money] particularly public sector.' (Bri)

Remote and proximate (in person) management training

Although many participants reported on the benefits of in person or proximate sessions, online training remains popular:

'At the moment I'm still doing [...] say 80% online [...] [it was] less than 5% online pre-COVID...' (Abe)

'... lots of my clients haven't gone back to face-to-face training. [...] So whereas in the past I might have run a day or two day course, now maybe I'll run two 2 hour sessions [...] people don't have to travel, [...] you don't have all the costs of booking rooms or providing coffee or paying travel expenses or food expenses. [...] from an employer's point of view there's a lot of economic advantage to doing stuff remote, more remotely.' (Abe)

There was a difference of opinion on whether online sessions were suitable for delivering line management training and development, with some participants highlighting the benefits of face-to-face training and development sessions and the downsides of online:

'It's not just the learning, it's the social capital that is built [...] which is so beneficial to the organisation and actually benefits the individuals as well because they build a much more effective network within the organisation.' (Pat)

'... [They] get a richer experience in terms of the sharing of stuff, building the rapport with the rest of group and therefore feeling more comfortable to raise issues and admit to where you can't do stuff and all those sorts of things. [...] Less so online [where] [...] it tends to be a bit more transactional in terms of content focus...' (Abe)

'...working face to face with people is so much better. Organisations are saying they want face-to-face training now. We tried a blended approach [...] and 100% of them said the best stuff was when we were at Roffey Park...' (Pat)

'...it's also about not being interrupted. The attendance levels at the online modules dropped. When you do them residentially in Roffey Park, 100% people turn up unless there's a funeral or an illness.' (Pat)

'[Online]... we don't know how engaged they are [...] they've got so used to not putting their cameras on...' (Ami)

But another participant said of engagement with delegates online:

'...it's down to the facilitator [...] I always contract in all of my [online] sessions [...] so "how are we going to get the best out of this session?"' (Sue)

Sam saw some benefits of online-based training:

'... what I like from the virtual world is that it can be a lot more inclusive. So particularly when you think about standard meeting group dynamics versus what you can do virtually, it can be a lot more divergent. You can use polls and get instant kind of feedback on an idea rather than hearing three people out of 20 speaking loud, do you think, Oh well, that's it. The motion carried and that you know, you haven't really tapped into the audience...' (Sam)

Content, Context and Coaching

One participant felt that the balance of theory and practice was awry on some programmes, with a focus on a priori, domain, expert, encoded and explicit knowledge rather than procedural (how to) and tacit knowledge which is typically context specific.

'It doesn't mean you can't introduce quite different and interesting ideas, but you have to be doing it in a way that is, say, quite linked pragmatically to stuff they can see [that] they can do something with rather than just it being: Oh, that's an interesting management concept or theory, but so what? [...] I think people [...] haven't got much time, so when they do commit time they want to feel they're getting value for money. I mean, not just their organisations, but the individuals as well. [...] in terms of the time they're giving up.' (Abe)

'... let's start with context rather than content. Let's start with [...] what's troubling you this week? [...] And then we bring the content in.' (Bri)

The pivotal role of coaching, the importance of early face-to-face elements, supported by online learning on relevant topics/skills was also mentioned:

'I think it requires facilitators over trainers [...] less of a didactic approach, less of a teaching approach and more how agile is the facilitator in responding to what the group and the individual needs at the time.' (Bri)

Sam felt that first level line managers would benefit from coaching and peer learning but often training and development budgets would not stretch to cover coaching and action learning sets at relatively junior levels in an organisation.

'But I think a lot of them would benefit from coaching or action learning sets where they get a little bit more chance to reflect on what they're doing [...] but also maybe to challenge their own mindset...' (Sam)

'I think it would be a courageous move for organisations to bring people together for just for action learning sets...' (Bri)

Timing, weighting and customisation

Another issue is that line management training may not be provided at the point at which it's really needed. For example, Civil Service Fast Streamers will often not have a team until they have completed the programme, and only then be plunged into a fairly senior Grade 7 role with a team to manage. So although they encounter some extremely useful ideas and frameworks, they may be short of timely opportunities to try out newly learned techniques in a workplace context. One solution may be to explore how large-scale training and development programmes can be tailored to individuals' needs and circumstances.

'...we need to go much further with the idea of being learner centred.' (Bri)

So the challenge is to use the resources available for line management training and development differently, using cost effective technology-based training alongside coaching or learning sets.



What do the findings tell us?

The findings from our research suggest that the fundamental competencies of first level line management have not changed very much and include: time management, delegation, assertive and sensitive communication, and an ability to motivate. However, recent changes in the workplace context have raised problems in terms of putting the basics of line management in practice. The workplaces of the 2020s reflect broader disruptions brought about by macro-level changes across culture, social groups, economics, politics and of course technology. They include identity politics and culture wars, a rising awareness of environmental crises as well as the ubiquity of the virtual technology. Macro-level changes impact on meso-level change, that is, the level of the organisation, and manifest themselves as various challenges - managing diverse teams, recruitment, and retention. These challenges have to be navigated within the fluid and uncertain norms of a hybrid workplace. Macro- and meso-level changes in turn impact on the micro-level, the level of individual managers, their teams, and how they work together effectively.

Our research identified a crisis of inner confidence and low perceived self-efficacy experienced by first level line managers. First level line managers are required to exercise their authority in a highly politicised and sensitised working environment, transformed by innovations in the technology of work whose implementation was accelerated by the pandemic. In such a challenging context what seem to be simple management actions present difficulties for line managers with only patchy experience of working with diverse teams. At a time when a self-assured approach is required more than ever first level line managers are experiencing a crisis of inner confidence, 'low perceived self-efficacy' (Wood & Bandura, 1989) exacerbated by remote and hybrid working. Being able to think critically, being able to reflect on one's own behaviour, noticing how one thinks, as well as having a strategic awareness, help to develop a sense of judgement that enables managers to develop a practical wisdom of how to apply line management theory in their context.

How can the resources available for training and development be used wisely? First level line managers need both the basic skills and higher order competencies to exercise legitimate authority. They need to be able to deliver performance targets whilst caring and developing the diverse individuals in their teams, ensuring their own and others' good mental health. Despite the challenges, there is optimism that training and development for practical and higher order competencies, within cost constraints and at scale, for first level line managers is possible. For example, conventional coaching may be too expensive at the scale required for first line managers, but online, group or peer coaching may go some way to addressing the support gap that has undermined first line managers in recent times. Creatively combining face to face and online with synchronous (live) and asynchronous (recorded) content; group and one-to-one sessions; classroom planned and socially spontaneous learning experiences, all developed and delivered by teams of content designers, trainers, facilitators, and coaches, the challenge of delivering basic and higher order competencies of effective line management may be achieved.

Appendix A:

List of participants and pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Associate or faculty member	Gender	Main role
Tom	Faculty	Male	Consultant
Sam	Faculty	Male	Facilitator
Joe	Faculty	Male	Client Relationship Manager
Abe	Associate	Male	Consultant
Ami	Associate	Female	Consultant
Pat	Associate	Male	Consultant
Jas	Associate	Male	Consultant
Sue	Associate	Female	Consultant and Facilitator
Gia	Associate	Female	Facilitator and coach
Jem	Associate	Male	Consultant
Dan	Associate	Male	Consultant and Coach
Bri	Associate	Male	Consultant and Facilitator

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Roffey Park Institute enables people and organisations to fulfil their potential by developing the skills, behaviours and culture for sustainable, high-performing and inclusive workplaces.

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