



Building Change Capability – defining change capability

Context

At a workshop in March 2026, with invited guests from multiple organisations who are senior leaders from HR; Learning and Development and Change Management, we debated what is required to build the change capability for organisations coping with high volumes of change.

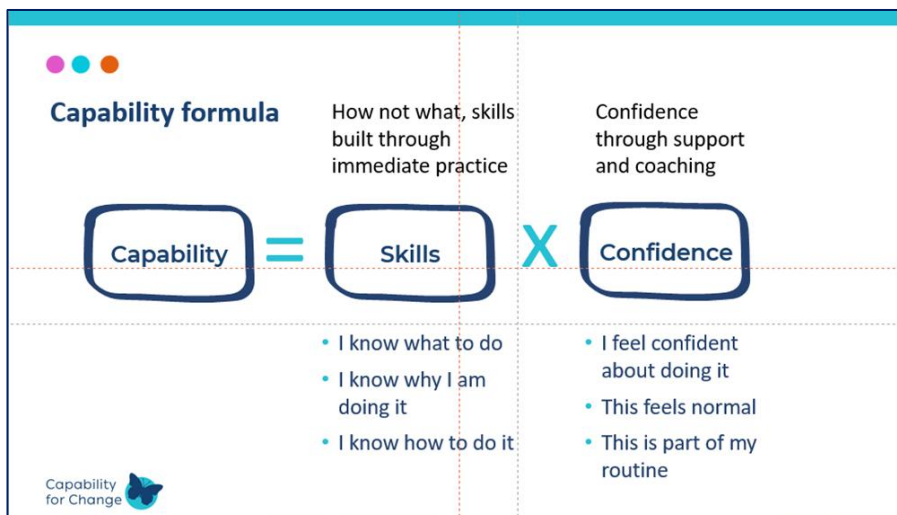
We began our session on building the capability for change with a discussion on what capability means to us. Melanie put forward some ideas and then the group added their own perspectives, examples and observations. The following notes have been transcribed from this session.

Initial presentation

Melanie put forward some ideas to get the conversation flowing. As a group, it was agreed that we would focus on building the capability for line managers and team leaders, rather than trying to create a capability for change professionals (as this is already addressed by the professional bodies for change management and the many change management certifications available). We also agreed to exclude the specific change capabilities needed by senior leaders who commission and authorise change for their organisations.

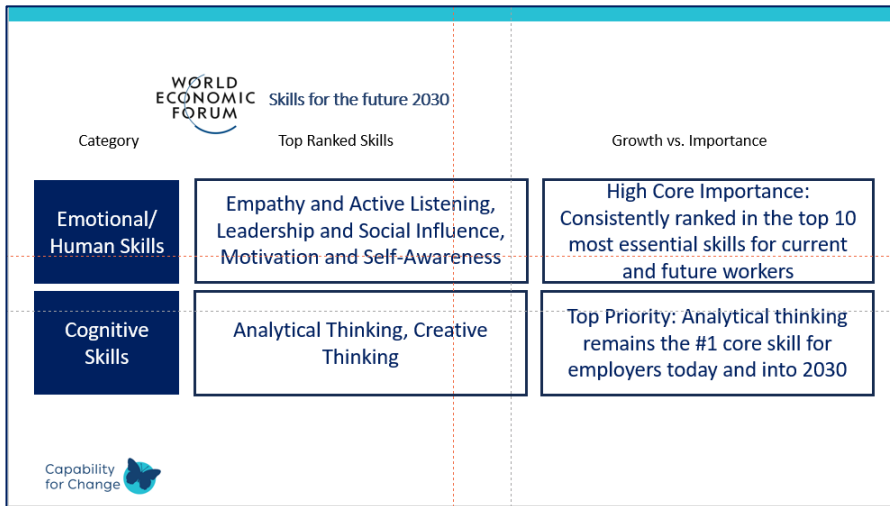
Capability Formula

Melanie showed a “capability formula” which explained that capability is more than having the skills to do something, but without confidence those skills would remain unused.



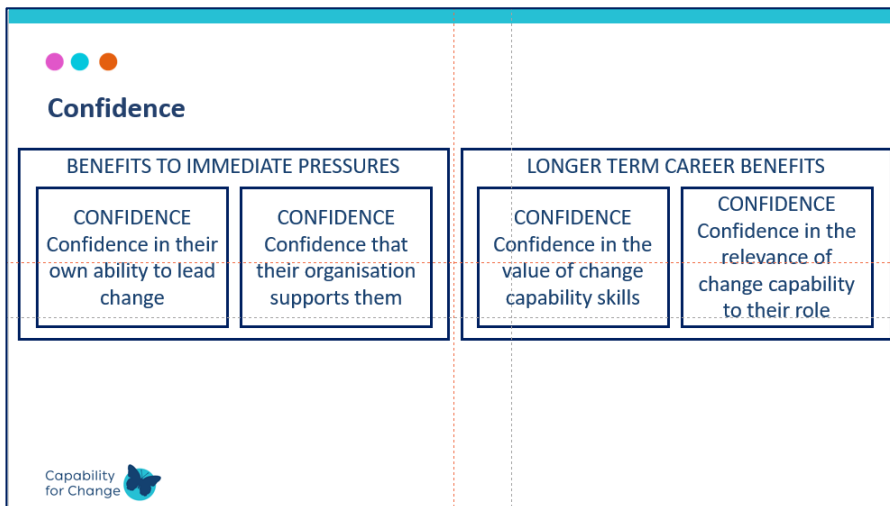
Skills

To provide examples of skills associated with the capability for change, Melanie used the categories of emotional/human skills and cognitive skills from the World Economic Forum Skills for the Future research.



Confidence

For confidence, Melanie showed her own model of confidence which shows the confidence having an immediate impact on the pressures at work and the longer term career benefits of being confidence in leading change.



Definition of capability for change

Following this short presentation from Melanie, attendees were broken into groups to allow for free-flowing conversation and debate and then came back together to share their views. Towards the end of this full group discussion, a working definition of capability was created:



Capability, for a line manager or team leader, is the consistent ability to draw on relevant skills, in real situations, with real people with enough confidence to act, enough judgement to adapt, and enough resilience to learn from what does not go as planned. It is built through practice, sustained by psychological safety, and only becomes real when the organisation creates the conditions to allow it.

Elements of capability

Following the creation of a working definition, the groups fed back on a number of different elements associated with capability, all of which are valuable additions to the understanding of the subject:

- Capability is not the same as knowing
- The three part model: Skill; Will; Confidence
- Lack of confidence
- Over-confidence
- Psychological safety is essential for confidence

Capability Is Not the Same as Knowing

When we talk about building capability in line managers and team leaders, we are not talking about training people to know more things. Capability is not a body of knowledge. You cannot acquire it by reading a book, watching a video or sitting through a presentation.

Capability is demonstrated through action and specifically, through action that involves other people. It is the difference between understanding a concept and being able to use it, in the moment, with a real person, when the situation does not unfold as planned. You can't just read the book. You can't just watch the video. You've almost got to have a go and work it out the hard way.

This distinction matters enormously when we are designing development for line managers. The skills we are building including leading through change, having difficult conversations, coaching team members, making sense of ambiguity and communicating it clearly are skills that can only be developed through practice with others. Unlike technical skills, which can be rehearsed privately, these human skills require an audience. They require the willingness to be seen trying, and sometimes failing.

This changes everything about how we approach capability building. It means that time, space and permission are not nice-to-haves, they are structural requirements. The problem is that people at work have never been busier, so we are left with the challenge of finding the time for the necessary practice for change management skills building.

The Three-Part Model: Skill, Will and Confidence

Genuine capability in a line manager or team leader rests on three interdependent elements. All three must be present for capability to translate into consistent performance.

Element	What It Means	Why It's Not Enough Alone
Skill	The manager has learned techniques, frameworks or approaches that are relevant to the situation	A skill that is never used because the person lacks confidence or organisational permission has no practical value
Will	The manager is intrinsically motivated, and they find meaning in the work and want to develop	Willingness without skill leads to well-intentioned but ineffective action; motivation fades without visible progress
Confidence	The manager trusts their own judgement and is willing to act, adapt and try again when things go wrong	Confidence without genuine skill becomes overconfidence; confidence without psychological safety remains hidden

These three elements are not a simple hierarchy. They interact with and reinforce one another. A manager who develops a new skill through guided practice will grow in confidence. A manager who is given genuine permission to experiment will become more willing. A manager who feels psychologically safe will try things they would otherwise avoid and that practice builds skill.

Conversely, when one element is missing, the others are undermined. A highly skilled manager who has no confidence in their organisation's commitment to the direction of travel will hold back. A willing manager who has never been given the chance to practise will remain in a state of good intentions, rather than genuine capability.

Lack of confidence

A common and costly pattern in organisations is the manager or team leader who demonstrably has skill. They are technically capable, they have relevant experience, others can see they are good at this but they do not see it in themselves. They step back from situations they are well equipped to handle. They defer when they should lead. They wait for permission that has, in fact, already been granted.

This is not a minor inefficiency. When a capable manager consistently under-uses their skills, the team around them receives less support, less clarity and less development than they need. The manager themselves becomes frustrated and increasingly invisible. Over time, under-confidence compounds the longer a skill goes unpractised, the further away fluency feels.

Capability development must therefore address not just skill acquisition but the beliefs that managers hold about themselves. Development that only fills knowledge gaps will miss the people who most need to grow.

Over-confidence

The opposite pattern is where the manager believes they are already expert creates a different challenge. Many line managers have been in post for a considerable time. They have developed their own ways of working, often without the benefit of feedback or challenge. Their confidence is real; the question is whether the underlying capability matches it.

In organisations with low turnover or stable teams, this pattern is particularly common. The social dynamics of a long-established group can make it difficult to introduce new approaches or challenge existing ones. Stability, which might seem like a foundation for development, can instead become a barrier to it: what looks like experience is sometimes simply familiarity with one way of working.

Psychological safety is essential for confidence

Beneath both under- and over-confidence lies a more fundamental issue: whether the environment feels safe enough to try. Psychological safety — the genuine belief that it is acceptable to experiment, to fail, to ask for help, to say “I don’t know how to do this yet” — is the precondition for capability development.

Without psychological safety, development activity produces compliance rather than genuine learning. Managers will attend, participate and perform competence in the room — and then return to what they know. The hill of risk is simply too steep when careers feel precarious, when restructures are in the air, and when looking capable matters more than being honest about where you are still learning.

Building psychological safety is not a soft precondition that can be assumed. It is an active responsibility of the organisation and specifically for those who commission and design development, and of the line managers’ own leaders.

The Conditions That Allow Capability to Develop

Capability does not grow in a vacuum. Even where skill, will and confidence are all present in an individual, development requires conditions that organisations must deliberately create. In our discussions, the group identified four conditions that we feel are particularly important for line managers and team leaders.

1. Mandate: the organisational permission to practise

Managers need to know that their organisation is asking them to develop in this direction. Without a clear mandate, even motivated managers will hesitate to use new approaches, particularly when those approaches involve uncertainty or risk. Mandate is not the same as instruction. It is the visible, sustained backing of senior leaders that tells managers: it is safe to try this here, and we will support you when it does not go perfectly.

Mandate also requires credibility. If managers are being asked to lead change, but the rationale for that change is unclear or the senior leaders commissioning it are seen to be doing different things themselves, confidence will not hold.

2. Time: the resource that development always costs

Every human skill we are asking line managers to develop requires practice with others. That is not something that can be done privately, in spare moments, or at the margins of an already full working day.

The typical line manager is simultaneously managing an operational role, leading a team, supporting external clients or stakeholders, and absorbing multiple concurrent change programmes. They frequently end the day with less done from their own list than they started with, having spent their time enabling others. The sense of overwhelm this produces is not a personal failing, it is a structural reality.

Development that does not take this reality seriously will not work. Time for practice, for reflection and for learning from experience must be protected, not left to individuals to find.

3. A range of techniques: the ability to choose

Capability is not the same as having one good approach. Real-world situations rarely conform to a single model. A capable manager has a repertoire of techniques and, crucially, the judgement to choose the right one for the situation in front of them.

This matters because the skills we are building are interpersonal. How you approach a team member who is resistant to change is different from how you approach one who is anxious, or one who is genuinely disengaged. AI can provide one answer; experienced practitioners know there are many. Development must therefore build breadth, not just fluency in a single technique.

4. Meaning: the intrinsic motivation to develop

Not everyone will want to build these skills, and it would be a mistake to assume otherwise. The human skills of line management: coaching; storytelling; navigating ambiguity; taking others with you through change require a degree of intrinsic motivation that cannot be manufactured from the outside.

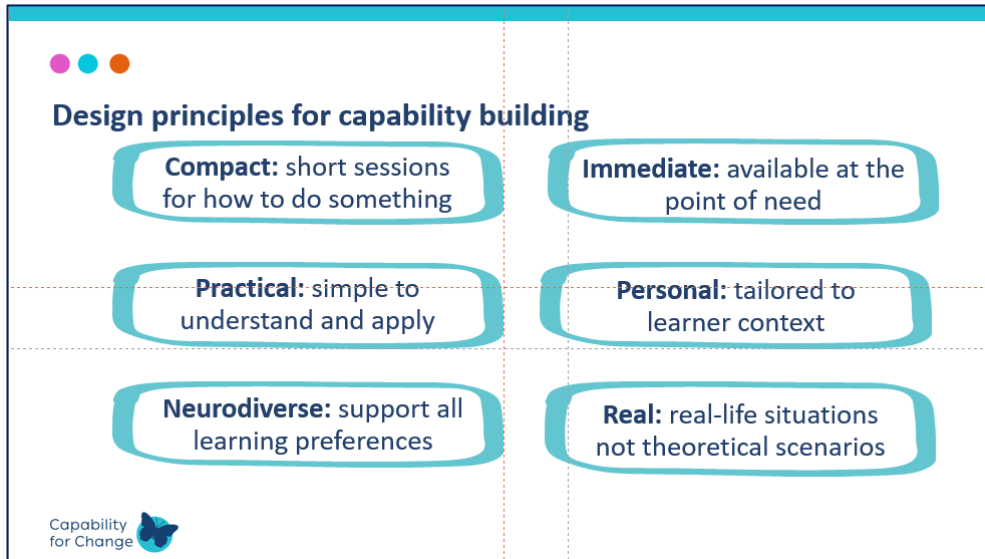
Intrinsic motivation rests on three things: the autonomy to approach the work in one's own way, the sense of mastery that comes from growing in something, and most critically a sense of meaning and value. Unless a manager can see why this matters, why it is worth the effort, why it connects to something larger than a development framework, the motivation to practise in the face of difficulty will not hold.

Development design must therefore begin by connecting to what managers already care about which includes the well-being and performance of their team, their impact, the quality of what they deliver.

Conclusion: Approach to Capability Building

Taken together, this understanding of capability points to a development approach that looks quite different from conventional training.

Melanie put forward some design principles to help generate conversation on building capability:



As a result of the group discussion we were able to add more detail to these and identify further principles:

Design for practice, not just content

Development must create structured opportunities to practise human skills with others — in realistic situations, with support and feedback. Knowledge transfer is a starting point, not an end point.

Address confidence explicitly

Capability development that only works with skill will miss those who have the ability but not the belief. Surfacing and working with self-perception is as important as any technical content.

Create psychological safety deliberately

The conditions in which managers learn matter as much as the content. Development must be designed so that it is genuinely safe to try, to be uncertain, and to grow in public without career risk.

Secure visible mandate from above



Managers will not develop these skills without backing from their own leaders. Development commissioned from above must be visibly championed, modelled and sustained — not just announced.

Protect time as a structural requirement

Practice cannot happen in the margins of a pressurised role. Time for development must be treated as a non-negotiable resource, not a discretionary one.

Build team capability alongside individual capability

Because these skills are inherently interpersonal, the team is both the context and the beneficiary of development. Building capability at the team level — not just in individuals — creates more durable and self-sustaining growth.

Next steps

For more information about building the capability for change, become a member of the free, global [Change Capability Community](#) and contribute your ideas via the annual, global [Change Capability Survey](#).