

Building Change Capability – line manager perspective

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.

In this session we focused on the current pressures, concerns and priorities for line managers and team leaders who are “accidental” change managers, expected to lead themselves and their teams through high volumes of constant change.


We felt it was important to build an honest account of what line managers and team leaders are navigating, reflecting that the role has never been more demanding

Initial presentation

Melanie put forward some ideas to get the conversation flowing.

Vital nature of the Line Manager role


Melanie showed a quote from a recent paper by McKinsey, highlighting the essential work that this role contributes to organisations:



Importance of line managers

- Line managers as critical "connective tissue" and motivators, essential for driving transformation success by bridging the gap between strategic goals and frontline execution.
- Effective change requires these managers to adopt role-modelling behaviours, provide "human" empathetic leadership, and transition from administrative tasks to active, daily coaching on the floor.

• McKinsey – A new operating model for people management 2025

Capability
for Change 

Melanie showed some “collective wisdom” from workshops she has run this year, which captured the feelings from managers, team leaders and supervisors who are balancing the objectives of team performance with designing and adopting new ways of working.



Context for line managers and team leaders

- You have a full-time operational role, involving the management of internal resources and/or the need to satisfy external clients.
- You are under pressure to meet targets for performance, productivity and financial efficiency.
- You are expected to change how your team works in response to change.

A Role That Has Been Quietly Transformed

The line manager role has changed beyond recognition over the past two decades, and it continues to change. What was once a relatively straightforward position involving performance management of team members and reporting upwards to senior leaders about this performance has developed into a strategically significant and demanding role, not always reflected in the role description.

The shift from top-down to multi-directional change

Change used to arrive from above. Line managers received it, interpreted it and communicated it to their teams. That model has not disappeared, but it now represents only one strand of what managers must handle. Change is also arriving from below: teams experimenting with new tools, new ways of working, new approaches to tasks sometimes before any formal direction has come from the centre. It is arriving from adjacent teams whose decisions affect how this team works. And it is arriving from outside the organisation entirely, as technology, regulation and market conditions shift faster than any internal planning cycle can track.

The explosion of hybrid and remote working

Hybrid working has not simply changed where people work. It has personalised the work experience in ways that create entirely new management demands. Each team member may now have a materially different experience of their working day, different physical environments, different rhythms, different degrees of visibility and connection. The manager who once led a team sat at adjacent desks in the same building at the same times must now hold together a set of individuals whose working realities are genuinely different from one another. Maintaining team cohesion, spotting who is struggling, and reading the room when there is no room to read are now core requirements of the role.

Global and cross-cultural leadership becoming the norm

Hybrid working has extended the geography of teams. Many line managers who would previously have led a locally based team now find themselves responsible for people across multiple countries, time zones and cultural contexts. Language differences, different professional norms, different relationships with hierarchy and authority all add layers of complexity to the basic act of communication and leadership. The expectation that managers will develop these global leadership skills is rarely matched by the support offered to do so.

Rapid organisational growth and frequent restructuring

Organisations that have grown quickly, particularly those that have expanded through acquisition, often present their line managers with teams that carry very different cultural inheritances, different technical backgrounds and different assumptions about how work should be done. The line manager in this context is not simply managing people; they are actively bridging cultures, aligning different professional identities, and trying to build a coherent team from components that were never originally designed to fit together.

The Emerging Challenge of AI in the Team

Of all the contextual shifts currently affecting line managers, the integration of artificial intelligence into daily working life may be the most disorienting because it is happening fast, it is unevenly distributed across teams, and it changes the fundamental nature of what managing a team means.

AI is moving beyond information retrieval and generation (generative AI). It is beginning to make decisions, to take actions, to function as something closer to a working colleague than a research tool (agentic AI).

Within the next few years, many individuals in organisations are likely to be working alongside AI agents that operate with a degree of autonomy handling tasks, generating outputs and contributing to decisions in ways that are not always fully visible.

Some of the participants described how they were already creating organisation structures for teams formed of humans and AI agents. The dynamics of these teams including how work is allocated, how outputs are evaluated, how accountability is maintained are different in kind from those of an entirely human team.

There is a further complexity. Managing AI and managing people require different modes of working. When working with AI tools, a manager can be direct, demanding and unconcerned with tone. When working with people, those same qualities would be damaging. The ability to move between these modes fluently and to bring the right quality of attention to each is itself a new skill that has not previously been asked of managers.

One of the participants shared an example from her own work: “When I work with my AI colleagues, I’m dictatorial. But then I have to have a cup of tea and a break to come back and start being human again. Being able to switch between those styles — it’s not something that just happens in the moment.”

There is also a question of technical literacy. Managers need enough understanding of what AI can and cannot do to supervise its outputs sensibly, to judge when to trust it and when to check, and to

help their teams do the same. This is not the same as being a technical expert. It is a specific form of critical judgement that must be developed deliberately.

The Identity and Status Problem

Behind many of the practical pressures facing line managers lies a more fundamental question about the purpose of the role, especially given the quiet transformation described earlier in this document. The purpose of the role has direct consequences for how managers understand their own identity, what they believe they are being judged on, and what behaviours they are incentivised to demonstrate.

Promoted for the wrong reasons

A significant proportion of line managers reach their position because they were excellent individual contributors. The best engineer, the best analyst, the best consultant who are then promoted into a role that requires a completely different set of skills. The technical competence that earned them their position is no longer what the role requires. But it may still be what they are measured on, what their compensation reflects, and what their identity is built around.

They rose through the ranks because of their profession — but they're not necessarily being judged on how happy their team is, or how well they're developing their people. They're being judged on delivery. Now we are asking them to switch and it's almost an ego thing which drives them to think 'I'm at the top of my profession. Why would I want to change?'

This misalignment between the skills that got someone promoted and the skills the role now requires is not a new problem. But it is sharpening. As organisations ask line managers to do more coaching, more facilitation, more sense-making and less technical doing, the distance between where managers started and where they are being asked to go is growing.

Unclear about what success looks like

Many line managers are not measured on the things that most directly reflect the quality of their leadership. Team engagement, development of people, the health of team dynamics, the quality of how change is embedded are rarely the metrics on which a manager's performance is formally assessed, and they are rarely what drives compensation decisions.

If managers are measured primarily on short-term delivery, it is entirely rational for them to invest their time and energy in delivery even at the cost of the slower, harder work of developing their people and leading change well. The problem is not the manager. The problem is the incentive structure.

Overwhelm As Standard

Taken together, the contextual pressures described above produce a daily experience for many line managers that is characterised by a persistent sense of overwhelm. This deserves to be named directly, because it has consequences both for individual wellbeing and for organisational performance.



The typical line manager is holding all of the following simultaneously:

- An operational role with its own deliverables, targets and performance expectations
- Responsibility for a team whose members have different needs, different contexts and different levels of readiness for change
- Accountability for cascading and embedding multiple concurrent change programmes
- The task of making sense of those changes for their team — translating strategy into something that feels meaningful and manageable at ground level
- An increasing volume of bottom-up change arriving from within the team itself, much of it technology-driven
- Lateral coordination with peer managers to ensure that changes in one area do not create unintended problems in another
- An expectation of global or cross-cultural leadership competence, often without commensurate support
- The emerging challenge of managing teams that include AI as well as human contributors

One of the participants shared an example of how this overwhelm occurs in their own work: “I have spent my day on what you might call enablers, every single thing I did was to stop other people being blocked. I’m aware that if I don’t do it, I become a blocker. But I haven’t done any of my own work. I can’t see when I’m going to fit it in.”

The cumulative effect of holding all of this is a working week that ends not with the satisfaction of tasks completed, but with a growing sense that the list of things undone is longer than the list of things done. The manager who ends the week feeling overwhelmed, behind and unclear about what they achieved is not unusual. It is, for many, the norm.

This matters because overwhelm is not simply unpleasant. It actively undermines the quality of leadership. A manager running at the edge of their capacity has very little left over for the slower, more deliberate work of coaching, developing, listening carefully or leading change with skill. The cognitive load of an unfinished to-do list of twenty-five items — many of them interrelated, many of them ongoing change programmes — leaves no headspace for the reflective practice that capability development requires.

Development Priorities

The context described here has direct implications for how we design the development of change capability for line managers. Any approach that does not take this context seriously will fail, not because the content is wrong, but because the conditions in which it lands make it impossible to apply.

Development that meets this context must:

- Acknowledge and name the reality of the role before asking anything of those in it, being seen and understood is a precondition for engagement
- Respect the scarcity of time as a structural fact, not a personal failing or an inconvenience to be managed around
- Build the specific skills of sense-making, storytelling, facilitation and upward and lateral influence which are the skills the role now most demands



- Address the confusion about role identity directly, helping managers to understand what the role is now, not what it used to be
- Equip managers for the AI dimension of their role, including both the technical literacy to supervise AI outputs and the emotional agility to move between managing AI and managing people
- Recognise that the line manager's most significant contribution is as the connective tissue of the organisation, the person who joins the dots between strategy and lived experience, between what is being changed and what that means for this team, in this place, at this moment

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](#).