

What was the situation? What was the complex & messy problem?

From Covid emerged multiple unfamiliar and unknown issues which tested our team at The Place. As a result, we could see the value of building our resilience and ability to navigate unknowns. Building our capacity in this area would help The Place with problems we hadn't even imagined yet. Many cultural institutions were historically created by one visionary individual. Ambitions like this can naturally create a parental culture with a drive to protect and take care of artists. Whilst positively intended, a parental culture can have unintended consequences of slowing down the organisation's ability to cope with unknowns. With the intention of being helpful, it can inadvertently take away responsibility from managers and undermine the people working for them and their capacity to resolve problems for themselves. This culture encourages guidance giving, and focuses on keeping teams happy. For employees there is a 'pay off'; you do as you are 'told' and hence don't have to waste time thinking for yourself and can then blame those above when things go wrong, rather than having to look at yourself. The Place could see the opportunity to modernise how we managed our teams, enabling teams to be more resilient and to cope with unknowns.

What we did?

Typically in cultural organisations, managers pick up their management skills on the job, having previously been successful as teachers, performers, researchers or producers. We decided to focus on building management skills that enabled learning, giving feedback, inviting responsibility in others and asking questions to get others thinking. All of these enabled a shift in culture towards an "adult to adult" environment where staff are invited to think for themselves, see opportunities for improvement and are open and honest about their ideas. Working with Carrie, we created a tailored management skills programme which was rolled out across The Place. We conducted Diagnostic interviews with a handful of managers and this allowed us to both understand their experience of managing, the barriers they faced and hence what they needed. Aligned with the Arts Council investment principles, we used the management programme to explore what quality management looks like for The Place. Rather than a top down definition, we invited the managers to create this for themselves. We ran learning in small peer groups, focused on live management challenges rather than abstract problems. The peer groups met for short, monthly circles allowing managers to practice their skills with each other and get live feedback, as well as exploring what they had been learning and how they could apply it with their teams. This was complemented by an online platform providing pre- and post-circle materials to stimulate ideas and learning.

What was the result?

Having rolled out the programme, we have been able to see positive signs of change, with increases across the board when managers rated ten of their own skills before and after the programme. We are pleased to see the highest increase being in our manager's ability to, "reflect on how they are managing, in order that you can experiment with opportunities and access support when you need it". This element was important as it highlights our managers' ability to keep learning as the future unfolds. We achieved 81% attendance over six months, indicating they prioritised the development as they found it helpful.