



Developing teams in the moment

Quick article preview

As teams are asked to deliver at greater pace and with today's virtual workplace, the luxury of time for off-the-job team development is challenging. In the full article below, we follow the story as told by our Managing Partner, Mike Vessey, about his experience of providing in-the-moment team development with a team of software developers as they go about their daily interactions.

Mike observed team meetings in German and provided interventions and nudges at opportune moments. The key insights from this experience are expanded in the full article but in summary consisted of:

1. An overwhelming focus on immediate tasks risked losing the larger picture within which the team was operating.
2. Reflection practices can be introduced with minimal impact on time.
3. High performing teams require a balance between the task to be achieved, building the team and supporting individual members.
4. Asking for and offering help to each other is most effective in a spirit of inquiry and real listening, rather than trying to 'fix' the perceived problem.
5. An overreliance on the team leader for information flows and to resolve issues between members creates bottlenecks in a fast-moving situation. Interdependence aids agility.
6. The predominance of linear and analytical thinking hinders being able to see complex issues, and the system at play.
7. Managing self and navigating relationships with others are equally as important as tools to help get the work done.

And Mike looks at some of the outcomes, six months after his intervention started, as noticed by the Project Lead and the CEO.

The journey as told by Mike

One of the experiments I conducted on behalf of MDV during lockdown was to see how, as a development professional, I could work with teams and team development in new ways. The pandemic's impact on virtual working presents many additional challenges to the effectiveness of a team's work. This against a backdrop of a growing prevalence of dynamic 'teaming' to respond to today's business climates. This challenge to team effectiveness is also exacerbated by the increasing pressures on teams to deliver faster and greater outcomes with less resource.

With all this in mind, in this experiment I set out to:

- Work with a more junior team that wouldn't ordinarily have access to the kind of budget spent on senior team development, to democratise the ideas of development beyond the usual recipients.
- To work in a Just in Time manner, proposing short interventions as issues emerged during the day-to-day work, and not taking participants off the job for formal training - the usual paradigm.
- I was also keen to determine which of our development tools were the most useful for supporting team development, with the view to digitalising these and making them more accessible.

Here, I highlight some of the insights and learnings for both the participating team and for MDV from this experiment. You can read more about this in my blogs by following me on LinkedIn

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/mike-vessey-90a7182/> .

Without the luxury of time for specific team building activities outside their day-to-day work, the plan was to work alongside a software development team delivering on their remit. The team in question are young software developers, engineers and product managers whose task was to rework their company's core product. They were grappling with many different stakeholder requirements and a rapidly changing environment for their business.

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Based in Germany, their interactions were all in German, even if my interventions could be in English. Observing a team at work and proposing interventions while you're also learning German proved stretching for me – but you can read about that aspect and living through lockdown in my blog series, mentioned earlier.

So, here's my take on the key insights.

Insight 1 – An overwhelming focus on immediate issues

Observing the team's interactions showed an overwhelming focus on a narrow range of immediate tasks, with little attention given to the wider context within which they were working. This is perhaps typical of many junior knowledge workers who might be described as at an 'Expert' action logic – "I use know-how to solve immediate problems and issues, often looking for 'right/wrong' solutions." As a result, much of the early intervention was helping the team understand the wider connections and flows of information and to see their task as part of a wider system.

Insight 2 – Encourage intentionality

The task orientation and work ethic of the team gave no time or space for reflection. Introducing a quick reflective check-out at the end of each meeting along the lines of 'What were you hoping for from this meeting? What went well? What would have made it better?' introduced a learning process that quickly saw benefits. Extending this further to include a check-in at the start allowed people to be clearer about intentions, bring themselves and their thoughts and feelings into the meetings, build interpersonal connection and take a fruitful step back from the immediate.

Insight 3 - Balance is needed between attention on task, the team and the members

High performing teamwork is best achieved when balancing achieving the task, developing the team, and supporting and developing individual members – my contention is that there's only so long any of us can sustain task slog if other needs aren't being met. Insight from existing, and possibly perceived as old-fashioned, leadership models can still be very useful to help teams take a view on aspects of how they work. In this case, I

drew upon John Adair's Action-Centred Leadership model to help the team realise a better balance was to be had between their task, the group and the individual. Pointing out that the team dialogue focussed overwhelmingly on task, with little dialogue around team, and with individual needs largely absent, saw the team take action to respond to this, sharing priorities, goals and where they wished for support from others.

The team leader's style and focus set the tone of the team dialogue and in this case contributed to their strong task emphasis. With my support, our Project Lead recognised his orientation for task, reflecting that his style needed to shift to also focus attention on building the entire team as well as supporting its members. This awareness brought some simple experimental changes, such as varying how he asked questions and balancing challenge with support.

Insight 4 – Inquiry-based listening

In helping the team to find ways to better connect with each other and to offer genuinely useful help to each other, I encouraged individuals to move to an inquiry-based approach. We talked about asking different questions to understand different perspectives and to really listen to learn. Too often I see the listening of team members as shallow, to where they think 'I have the answer!' and / or 'I have a better idea.' Listening to learn is about getting to the heart of an issue and why it's a personal challenge. Jennifer Garvey Berger's Listening to Learn video was a valuable resource here, moving the group away from listening to fix or win.

Insight 5 - From dependence to interdependence

Teams that rely heavily on their leader for communication with other stakeholders, and to resolve issues within the team, create bottlenecks. This old-style pattern of the hierarchical first industrial era is ill-suited to today's fast moving complex situations. This was similarly the case in this team. To create greater bandwidth for the leader and resolve issues between members, I nudged team members to develop their own interdependent networks and channels of information, to share their priorities, seek alternative perspectives by asking each other questions and to request and offer help.

Insight 6 – The world was never straightforward; it's now even less so

In complexity, with many moving parts, customers, users, multiple stakeholders, etc, the paradigm of seeing things like cogs in a machine breaks down. For engineers and people used to thinking in linear ways, it was helpful to use tools, for example, a Multiple Cause Diagram, to unpack issues of causality and things that aren't so straightforward in a system. A more current way of thinking and seeing more of the system was quite revelatory for some, with reactions such as "this has lots of possibility."

Insight 7 – Managing self and navigating relationships are as important as attending to task

In simple well-defined tasks, there's not a lot of strain on one's identity, and relationships with other people and processes tend to be well-defined. In complexity, not so much. Having nudged the group to see more of their wider system, it became apparent that they started to experience overwhelm. This was a moment when I had concerns as to whether development was helping or hindering. Faced with seeing what seemed larger and more problematic issues, they experienced cognitive and emotional overload – as someone said, "my head is swimming." In helping to navigate this wider system and engage more proactively with each other, I had not yet given similar priority to building the capacity of members to manage their own emotional states. In subsequent interventions we pivoted to discuss practices to build individual self-governance, such as journaling, calming breathing and mindfulness techniques. Noticing and working with the underlying meaning-making system of the group majority was also helpful – 'I want to be right, there is a right / wrong.'

Outcomes

Six months on, for the Project Lead there is a sense that the team are resolving more issues between themselves with less reliance on him, freeing up bandwidth. And a realisation that his style / shadow contributed to task focus that could not be explained away as some external force – such as the view "we're German Calvinists".

Interestingly, the CEO has noticed how a series of nudges changed the way the team showed up in the wider system, showing them to have sought a greater range of perspectives on issues and responded to feedback they received. Ultimately, the team is developing a better product that transcended a wider range of perspectives, as opposed to compromising by trading off different variables against each other.

While still confronting no less of the issues and complexity facing them, something gratifying was happening – there was a clear shift in the climate and how team members were feeling and acting.

And finally, my German improved!

I hope that by sharing these learnings, I've kindled some useful thinking to help build the capability of your own teams.

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