

Management Development: full speed ahead

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In the end, four months was all it took. Four months to design and launch a major managerial development programme and bring on board the first handful of learners. Four months of intense work on learning content and behind-the-scenes processes, laying the initial groundwork for a programme that over 10,000 HMRC managers will eventually participate in.

“January 28th; a Thursday,” recalls Debbie Maitland, HMRC Deputy Director of Leadership and Talent. “I remember it clearly because we’d committed to a January launch and, realistically, that was the last possible date we could go with. There was some nervousness about our ambitious plans now becoming real but it all worked. We set our first 48 learners on their way. Then we remembered we only had another 10,000 to go! But that was ok; we were confident by then in our ability to scale it up.”

The programme in question is HMRC’s new Management Development Programme (MDP). Detailed design work on the MDP only started in autumn 2020. Yet as the summer of 2021 enters its final weeks, 1400 managers are now enrolled on the programme with a further 900 set to start in the next six months. By November, ‘graduates’ from the first three cohorts will have completed the MDP’s three-module line-up, having covered everything from managerial self-awareness and emotional intelligence, right through to creating a positive work culture and owning and initiating change.

Hugely important

The MDP is a hugely important undertaking for HMRC; a programme designed to demonstrate its commitment to empower, support and develop the skills of its managers. These are people who had previously said that the expectations of their role weren’t clear or that their role wasn’t sufficiently valued within the department. With a mounting to-do list (including initiatives such as Making Tax Digital, Respect@Work and the Government Covid Support Schemes, to name but a few), they felt unable to spare the time to develop their managerial capabilities.

The MDP was one of HMRC’s ways of building the capability and the confidence of their managers. It would help plug the gaps that managers had highlighted in their own managerial skillsets, ensuring that they could play a leading role in the department’s ongoing transformation and improving the employee experience for them and the people in their teams. It would also need to equip managers with practical skills they could deploy immediately, rather than relying on theoretical management models that might prove challenging to apply in practice. Understandably, it was a programme that HMRC wanted to implement sooner rather than later – and it gave rise to a highly ambitious plan.

Debbie continues, “Thinking back to when I first spoke to Eoghan [Thompson, from KPMG’s Learning Team] about putting such a programme in place, that was the end of June, 2020 - and we both thought, yes, of course we can do this by January! And then everyone else just got behind us, which was fabulous. I’m so proud of the way that KPMG and the teams across HMRC have come together since then, especially as we had to take some brave decisions to be ready in time. But we knew that we had great people on the project and great partners. We were also confident in the insights we had that told us what we needed to do – and we stuck with it. Less than a year after the detailed design work began, here we are, with 1400 learners enrolled. That’s amazing.”



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HMRC Deputy Director of Leadership and Talent



Brave decisions

One of those brave decisions was to operationalise the programme and to then keep tweaking and improving it in real time, rather than waiting for something more polished that everyone could pore over and review before launch. To do that, the design team – which comprised people from across HMRC with management development and design expertise, who were working feverishly to get everything ready in time – would need to be fiercely protected.

“It was a conscious decision to protect the design team, not letting other people – who don’t do this as their day job – to intervene,” Debbie explains. “Alongside KPMG, we worked really hard to make sure all the relevant stakeholders still felt connected to the programme – but they weren’t designing it. Without layers and layers of governance and approvals to contend with, the right people were able to make the necessary design decisions at pace.”

There were a lot of those design decisions to be made. One of the programme’s first major challenges was establishing a line-up of learning activities that met its needs. The starting point was drawing down from existing Civil Service Learning (CSL)¹ content and identifying where new content would need to be developed. It quickly became apparent that there was a lot of work to do.

“With hindsight, we underestimated the amount of work needed to develop the formal learning elements of the programme,” says Debbie. “On closer examination, we found activities that were ideal for three or four years ago but which now needed refining, contextualising or even rewriting in places. That led to lots of conversations about creating new versions that met our needs – both current and future – but that also worked for the wider Civil Service. That created a lot of pressure, but it was a challenge that everyone embraced.”

As a result of that intervention, over the ensuing months, several of the CSL learning activities were updated and improved from their original form. This ensured that every element of the MDP would be ideally suited to helping learners become even more rounded and successful managers, preparing them for the specific challenge of being a leader in today’s Civil Service.

Real-time feedback

As well as getting the programme design right, a huge amount of work also went into establishing the practicalities for handling a programme of this scale. That work continued even as the pilot cohorts embarked on their opening modules, with the team using their real-time feedback to further refine the programme.

“The first three cohorts – those 48 learners – were specifically chosen to be our critical friends,” explains Jac Jacobson, MDP Project Lead. “We wanted to make sure they’d be confident in giving us that real-time feedback on the programme’s content and background logistics. We even went as far as setting up instant message groups so we could connect with them immediately. This helped us catch a few teething problems – around the learning platform or the supporting comms, for example, or how some of the workshops needed more time for all the learner conversations they generated. We were then able to fix those issues before the next learner intake in March.”

As well as amending some of the learning content, the project team worked with CSL to change the learner evaluation, making it more reflective of HMRC’s approach to learning. Early results have been encouraging, with managers indicating that the learning is very relevant to their role and that they feel confident to apply what they have learned back in the workplace.



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1) Civil Service Learning is now part of the Government Campus. The Government Campus unites all government training, whether provided centrally, or designed and delivered by professions, functions, and departments. More information can be found on www.gov.uk/gscu.



An early success

There's also specific evidence that the MDP's Peer Learning Groups (PLGs) have been well received. These bring together very diverse groups of managers – of various grades and from different parts of the organisation – so they can learn from and support one another during the programme. The fact that a PLG is the first major activity that learners engage with on the MDP helps set the tone for what's to follow.

Jac continues, "What's really pleased me about the MDP is the way we've been able to shape the content to make it so authentic and relevant to HMRC. That's continued into the operational phase. We keep the session facilitators updated, for example, on things that are happening across HMRC, in case this is relevant to what they're delivering, or it comes up in conversations with learners. There's so much going on right now, so much change, but if the facilitators are up to speed on this, they can facilitate more realistic, credible conversations."

Over 2000 learners are expected to engage with the MDP per year. As well as overseeing their smooth progress through the programme, there are two further challenges facing the project team. One is managing the inevitable – but healthy – tension between an organisation wanting the MDP to go as fast as it can (or even scale up further) versus making sure that every learner has the time and space to develop their capabilities. The second is ensuring that learners' line managers are fully engaged with what the MDP is trying to achieve and can support them appropriately, both during the programme and afterwards.

Meeting the challenge

On that latter point, the team again had to make a quick decision to change tack once the MDP was up and running. "Line managers who properly support their learners are so important to any learning programme," explains Debbie. "We'd initially

aimed the MDP at new-ish managers with under two years' experience. But obviously, their own managers had no real appreciation of what the MDP was - so we changed things to include some more experienced managers of managers in the early cohorts. Having experienced the programme first-hand, they'll hopefully then become advocates of the programme and be better placed to support their own learners in future. We're continuing to engage all our line managers though; it's not something we'll ever take for granted or ease back on."

"As for the other challenge, we're working closely with the business to try to build the capability of our managers even quicker. But we're also trying to help people understand the importance of creating the necessary space and time for that to happen properly; for the learning to really stick. If we don't protect that space and time for learning, both in the programme but also back in the workplace, then this won't be a successful development programme. It will simply be a process where we put people through a series of events – and that won't serve anyone well."

For all the challenges that still lie ahead, it's clear there's a huge amount of pride in what's already been achieved, as Jac concludes. "I'm proud of all the HMRC context we've been able to incorporate within the programme and also the pace we've been able to work at. There was design work still ongoing when the first few learning activities were going live so we were effectively still building the bridge when we'd already started crossing it! But the pace and our iterative ways of working allowed us to do that."

"Having, in some cases, just two days to turn activities around, that's incredibly tight - but we did it, without cutting corners and without compromising the quality of the product. We have to be happy with that."



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