

Colin Fisher

How to avoid micromanaging and inhibiting creativity

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SPEAKERS

Vaughn Tan, Theme music, Colin Fisher

Vaughn Tan 00:03

Hello and welcome to Mind Shift, a podcast about innovation from UCL School of Management.

Vaughn Tan 00:09

I'm Vaughn Tan, an innovation and strategy researcher focusing on how organisations can flourish and adapt in times of great uncertainty.

Vaughn Tan 00:16

In each episode, I'll speak to one of my colleagues from the diverse community here at the School of Management. And we'll look through the lens of their research to get insight into the rapidly shifting world of business today.

Vaughn Tan 00:27

Today, I'm joined by Dr. Colin Fisher. He's an Associate Professor of Organisations and Innovation and he's the Program Director of the MRes/PhD in Management here at UCL School of Management. Colins's research focus is on team leadership, and he seeks to understand how teams and individuals doing complex and creative work can get appropriate leadership and support. He also explores micromanagement and how best to avoid it. Colin's approach is influenced by his musical background and time spent as a professional jazz trumpet player.

Vaughn Tan 00:54

Before we get into the depths of your research Colin, can you tell us a little bit about your really quite unusual personal background in becoming an academic and also how that informs your research interests as you're currently implementing them?

Colin Fisher 01:10

You mean, everybody didn't go to music school before they became a business school professor? So like a lot of jazz musicians, after I finished my training, I moved to New York. And in New York, I discovered there was a Master's degree program where you could sort of study basically anything you wanted and I decided to study improvisation across different art forms. And as I was looking at improvisation in different art forms, I discovered the work of Teresa Amabile, who studies the social psychology of creativity and I looked her up, and it turned out that she taught in a business school. And so I wrote to her and said, hey, I'm interested in studying improvisation in small groups, and how it is that sort of group of people can come up with something new that no one of those people ever could have thought of on their own. And evidently, she thought that was a good enough idea to let me come get my

PhD at Harvard and that's really where I've focused my research over the years, is on this idea of how it is that real time interaction leads us to new thoughts, new ways of behaving, or in some cases, how leaders can support others to do this kind of interaction.

Vaughn Tan 02:19

So I think that's really interesting and there's clear connections between the kinds of questions that you explore now and, what I imagine any way are, the kinds of problems that you face, day to day as an improvisational musician, right? How do you think your approaches to music and the kinds of organisational research that you're doing now kind of overlap, how are they informing each other?

Colin Fisher 02:39

I mean, I think my experience with the extreme uncertainty that you face in music, and in jazz in particular, where you don't know exactly what's going to happen in a particular performance, has made me very comfortable with the ambiguity that's inherent in the research process and the sort of lack of structure that can be part of both careers and sort of giving structure to something that is otherwise sort of unstructured, I think has a lot in common. I always used to joke that I was the most organised jazz musician you'd ever met, and I was the least organised business academic you've ever met. Because the sort of demands on the kinds of structure we put around our time and attention are really different. But I think it's really, you know, I, I think it helps me find my place in the sort of specific kinds of things I can add to, to the conversations in Business and Management in a way that maybe if I'd had exactly the same training and background as everyone else, I wouldn't have.

Vaughn Tan 03:42

Yeah, that ability, or at least willingness to engage with the ambiguity of the work, I think is something which resonates a lot with me as well. So in terms of substantively, I know that a lot of the things that you're now working on our things that at least to my mind, I'm not a musician, at least to my mind, they feel like ideas that maybe would have been more obvious to someone who had musical training or who was a practitioner of music and so things like timing and rhythm was your interest in these kinds of research questions driven by the fact that you were a musician before?

Colin Fisher 04:15

I think my interest in timing and time definitely comes out of my interest in improvisation and my experience with it, and the idea, just that timing matters. And the difference between doing something in real time and sort of composing it in chunks where you sort of freeze a part of it and then go back and revise and work on it more and then freeze another part of it, are really very different. I think that does come very much out of my perspective, from being a jazz musician, and and working in music a lot. And so when opportunities to say, well, how does timing matter? Or how does a sort of rhythm of interaction matter? Come up, I think I am a little more sensitive to those those moments, then maybe people who didn't have musical experience, but I certainly know lots of people who study time and rhythm who don't have a musical background and and they're doing terrific work. So it's certainly not necessary, but I think it certainly helped inform my perspective on it.

Vaughn Tan 05:16

Very cool. And I think one of the areas that you focus on is leadership. Can you tell us maybe how your approach to leadership takes advantage of your unique perspective on temporality? And also, maybe whether you have an unusual perspective on what leadership is in the first place?

Colin Fisher 05:34

Yeah, I mean, I don't think of leadership as the thing that the person in the top position in the hierarchy does, so much. And when we have this, especially a sort of group or team perspective on leadership, leadership is often anything somebody is doing to help further collective goals. So we call this sort of a "functional view of leadership," meaning leadership is a characteristic of both the behaviour of what someone's doing, and it's other people in the group or team or organisation, recognising what you're doing is leadership. So it's this very attributional perspective. In other words, if everyone around you thinks what you're doing is leadership, that's what makes it leadership. And that doesn't really have to correspond to your formal position in the organisation. Now, in terms of that being something special about creative work, or improvisational work, I think there are definitely special kinds of leadership functions that are unique to creative work. I mean, I think the central value that improvisation can offer to management and organisational research, is this idea that even when we think we can plan beforehand, and then just execute that plan, reality almost never works that way, and certainly this is sometimes a gap between sort of classical management writing on strategy and the actual practice of strategy you hear from executives and entrepreneurs and people starting businesses, is that nothing ever goes as planned; and the people who recognise that, and who create strategies and plans that build into them the capacity to adapt, to improvise, and to learn as we go, are the ones that tend to succeed; and that improvisation has been a useful concept for both organisational scholars and management managers to kind of get their head around this idea.

Vaughn Tan 07:34

That's really cool, and certainly resonates a lot with me as well, because this idea that a strategy is only good until it hits reality, at which point you have to adapt and start to learn how to deal with what reality says about your strategy that definitely resonates very strongly.

Theme music 07:49

Vaughn Tan 07:59

I'm actually really interested in understanding some of your research on micromanagement. When you are doing this research. I assume that in - not just in the back of your mind, but very much foregrounded for you, is this idea that managing especially creative work is a combination of having a way to think about doing something while also leaving enough room for people who are doing the thing to adapt and respond to the situation as it emerges. I'm curious if you can tell us, first of all, like what you mean by micromanagement, and what you are finding in relation to micromanagement and how to avoid it or mitigate it.

08:38

So, by micromanagement, I don't mean a specific amount of involvement or kind of behaviour. But this is again, as I talked about with leadership, is something that is attributed or perceived by followers. Micromanagement is micromanagement when your subordinates feel like you're doing too much to control them. And so when people feel like they lack autonomy, or say over how to do their jobs, when they feel like their leader is coming in and trying to control the process in ways that are unnecessary, that feeling is what makes something micromanagement rather than the behaviour itself. And so a lot of my research on this is how to avoid people having this perception of your behaviours, rather than saying, "you need to be involved a certain amount of time, or give people this much space or that much space..."

Vaughn Tan 09:34

And just to sort of draw out this thing, which you've been saying from the beginning. A lot of how you're thinking about these processes is, it's from a particular perspective, it's the perception rather than so called objective reality, right? How do you think this affects the way

you think about doing this research, the kinds of questions you can ask, and how is it sort of affecting or how do you think it should affect the way people who normally think about the correct way to do things should think about how to do things?

10:06

One of the things that we found in our research is that managers always believe people understand the intention behind their behaviour. So a lot of managers when they come in to offer some kind of advice, or help or support, they don't think it's necessary to say, here's why I'm offering this advice or feedback or support or whatever it is. But it's much less clear to the person receiving that advice or help than it is to the person giving it. And so this idea of perspective really comes in for the leader in making that person aware of the sort of gap between what they know about their intentions and what other people know about their intentions. And likewise, for the recipient, to say, what can I do to clarify what this interaction is all about and why this person is feeling the need to intervene in my work.

Vaughn Tan 11:04

I think what it seems to me that you're saying is that exactly the same kind of advice, for instance, that a manager gives to a subordinate could be either perceived as micromanagement or not, depending on how much context the manager gives to the subordinate about why that information is being provided. Do you think that there are particularly thorny issues surrounding this issue of contextualising advice or guidance in the context of creative work that don't exist for more routine things?

11:33

Yeah, absolutely. I think creative work is tricky, because it always involves something new, something novel, that usually hasn't been done in exactly that way within that particular group or organisation. And because it involves this newness, there's going to be a kind of uncertainty that doesn't exist with work where we've done it before. And that that uncertainty creates two different problems. One is that that means you can't serve - as a manager, you can't come in and out of the process and sort of immediately figure out what's going on and what we're doing, because some of that is going to be something you've never seen before. And the second part of this is our colleagues Sarah Harvey or Jen Mueller have talked a lot about how managers tend to be somewhat risk averse when they're trying to evaluate novel things, and that they tend to prioritise something that they know is going to work over something that may be the next great new big idea.

Vaughn Tan 12:36

So in the context of creative work, which as you point out, always involves something novel where you don't necessarily know what to do, or even what the desired outcome should be. How do you, as a manager, provide enough context about the guidance or advice you're giving to a subordinate in that situation, right? Both of you presumably, are in a situation where you don't necessarily know either what to do, or what the desired outcome is. So how do you think about that from a manager's perspective? (Based on your research, I guess.)

13:07

Yeah, when we were studying Deep Help, we've identified two different strategies that managers can use to deal with the fact that it's going to be such a high burden for them to get up to speed.

Vaughn Tan 13:20

I think, before we go deeper into that, could you just define "Deep Help" really quickly?

13:24

So by Deep Help, I mean, help that is not just given within a single interaction. So it's not, I asked you for a favor and you can grant that favor right there and then to me, it's help that is

linked over multiple interactions across time. It's not just us talking about how can I help you with your work right now. It's me investing in helping you over the next several days or weeks, and really getting more enmeshed in your work. And doing that without being perceived as a micromanager is one of the big challenges that we address in this research.

Vaughn Tan 14:03

Right. So Deep Help is important because complex work needs complex help, right?

Colin Fisher 14:09

Right, exactly.

Vaughn Tan 14:10

Okay, super cool. What were your findings about how to, as a manager, provide this Deep Help without as you pointed out sounding or seeming like you're micromanaging.

14:21

So managers were faced with two choices when trying to provide effective Deep Help without being seen as a micromanager. One was to get fully up to speed on what the creative workers were thinking about. And we call that form of Deep Help "guiding," where managers have to create a lot of time in their schedules, they have to spend a lot of time asking questions and listening to understand what was going on and creators' mindset. And that allowed them to actually get involved in the creation process themselves and provide meaningful guidance through a tricky situation. Alternatively, the manager might understandably not feel like they have the bandwidth to dive in to that extent, and instead do what we call "path clearing." That means staying out of the main creative part of the project entirely and saying, "I know I'm not going to have time to get deep enough into this, this project to really provide meaningful guidance on it. So instead, I'm going to do everything else. So I'm going to try and find other tasks that create more time and attention and bandwidth for the people doing the work." And so in essence, sort of clearing the path for other people to walk it rather than trying to actually help them with the process itself.

Vaughn Tan 15:50

Very cool, and if I recall the research correctly, there's also things that you should not do. And, maybe you could say some things about what those things are.

15:58

Yeah, absolutely. The flip side of trying to provide Deep Help and not really succeeding is being seen as a micromanager, right, when somebody comes in and spends a whole bunch of time trying to get up in your business, and then isn't seen as very helpful. That's essentially when people are seen as micromanagers. In the case of guiding, we found that when managers were not effectively conveying their intentions to help, they were seen as taking over the work entirely. So a lot of people perceived a manager trying to guide them, but then not understanding why they were being guided or what that person was trying to achieve as essentially trying to take over their ownership of the project away from them and that this was perceived extremely negatively in the design firm we studied. Where taking away somebody's ownership over a design project was often one of the more negative events that somebody had had in their whole career. In the case of path clearing, they had a really great phrase for people who would come in and try and help quickly and then go away again, which they would call a "swoop and poop." So somebody will swoop in to the project, poop all over your ideas, and then leave again, without cleaning it up. And this was a pretty well known thing that could happen when managers didn't sort of make enough time to fully guide a project, but also didn't stay away from the core creative content and re devote their attention if they only had a short period of time to these other kinds of tasks, often more administrative tasks that could serve as path clearing ones. And so I mean, again, this was something that happened a lot there. And it certainly

lowered designers views of their managers when somebody was seen as somebody who's going to swoop and poop all the time.

Theme music 17:54

Vaughn Tan 18:03

Okay, so one of the things that's coming up from what you're saying is that, especially in creative work, because creative work is so sort of personally connected, there is this feeling among creative workers that there is ownership and ownership is an important thing, so as a manager of creative work and creative workers, one important thing to make sure that you're not doing is that you're not taking away ownership when you are not intending to do it, right? So if that's true, then one question that arises is, how do you know how much support a creative worker actually does need as a manager?

18:41

That's a great question. Honestly, that was part of what motivated me to get into studying this in the first place. When I first started thinking about how people were going to kind of diagnose how much and what help was needed. I imagined that there were going to be these sort of amazing people, sort of like Dr. House on the show House that could sort of come into a place and just look around and Sherlock Holmes-like use cues to go, "here's what's going on." When I really started studying this in organisations that really is not what's happening. And the both surprising and not surprising answer to how is it that leaders who are really effective helpers, figure out what help to give is they ask, and they ask very consistently, and they listen very well to the answers. And so really, the best advice to leaders, especially leaders in creative work, is to not ask just once but always ask, what do you need help with? What are you struggling with right now? To listen really carefully to the answers and to ask what can I do?

Vaughn Tan 19:49

That seems really obvious, but as it turns out, if you go inside organisations, not so obvious, right? People tend not to do

Colin Fisher 19:56

That's right.

Vaughn Tan 19:57

...the thing where they ask, they tend to instead assume, at least in my experience, that they know what help is needed and provide it without even asking whether or not it's wanted. So I think that's a that's a really good insight, because it's also really easy to implement.

20:11

Yeah, absolutely. And I think like, I want to be sympathetic to people who aren't asking those questions as well, because it's true that managers in most organisations are pressed for time, they are supervising a lot of different people on projects. And they're trying to move from one to another quite quickly. And it can feel laborious to ask a question that you think you already know the answer to, and then listen to a long answer from it. But even when managers were correct about what help was needed before they asked the questions, so they they sort of intuited what was going to be needed beforehand, there's a huge value to listening to people so that the the recipients feel heard and feel understood, because a huge differentiator in being perceived as a micromanager or being perceived as a helper is whether people feel like you understand their problems. And and this process of listening builds that understanding whether or not you actually need the actual information or not.

Vaughn Tan 21:14

I think all this is very interesting, also, from the perspective of this belief that lots of people have, that leaders have, or managers have a particular style, and that that style is what determines whether or not they're successful at doing something. It sounds like you have maybe a different view of what a "management style" is, and whether it's relevant in this kind of context. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

21:39

I'm definitely not a fan of talking about management styles, in that I'm not sure how that helps people in any in any one situation and there's actually a fair amount of evidence that the same person can behave really differently, depending on the situation and the context that they're in. In the case of helping in these kind of issues of being helpful versus micromanagement, we found, even the most helpful people in the organisation who were perceived by others as being the most helpful, always had stories of trying to provide help and actually being quite unhelpful. And so everyone has times where they feel like they've been able to be really helpful and have tried to be helpful, but have actually been ineffective at that. And that kind of speaks to this issue of how context shapes the way in which we manage and the way in which we behave with others. Yes, our personal preferences and styles can shape how we work with others, but also the work that we are given and that we're doing and the context we're doing it in shapes the way in which we work with others. And that often, it's much more powerful for managers to look at how they can reshape their context, that may be leading them to behave in a certain way, rather than to sort of reshape a style, as if that's something that's going to repeat independent of context.

Vaughn Tan 23:02

Just before we move on to thinking about sort of the impact of these things. Can you tell us about how you do the research on these kinds of issues, which if I were thinking about it, from an outsider's perspective, I would think it's quite hard to look for data about things like micromanagement and whether people perceive something as being micromanaging. So tell us more about that.

23:25

Yeah, so I've found the same thing. It's definitely hard to find data and to think about how you study these issues about helping and coaching especially over longer periods of time in more complex projects. And so I've used a lot of different methodologies to try and understand this from a lot of different angles. So we've been talking a lot about the work I did at a design firm, where we studied it using primarily qualitative methods. And we actually asked people to keep daily text diaries of what help they received, how helpful they found it, and sort of what work they were doing. And so every day we would send them a text message, they'd text us back. And then at the end of the week, we'd come in and interview them about the text diaries they had sent us, and then really going into more depth in the events that seemed like particularly interesting instances of help of one of one sort or another. And then we also did what we call critical incident interviews, where we ask people to "think of a time when..." and for us that was thinking of a time when they receive particularly helpful help or had given particularly helpful help and a time when they had given or received particularly unhelpful help. And we also spent a lot of time at this design firm, we observed a lot of their interactions, and we'd just triangulate all these things, as a lot of qualitative researchers do, into trying to understand both the daily average kinds of help that they were giving each other, through the diaries. And the more extreme helping events through the interviews to kind of get a full picture of what does it look like across this organisation to get-give and receive helpful and unhelpful help?

Theme music 25:15

Vaughn Tan 25:23

That's, that's very cool. How do you think practitioners and managers, especially in industries that rely on creativity or innovation, how do you think your research should change how they act, how they manage their teams and how they set goals for them? All those things.

25:43

At the first level, I hope that our research underscores the importance of providing opportunities for people to help each other in organisations trying to do creative work. And those opportunities come from even knowing that helping is an important part of the creative process, to creating enough slack in everyone's schedule, that they have some time to go spend on other people's work and not just their own, whether that's feedback or advice or help, that outside input is critical to doing creative work. More directly from our research, it underscores the importance of one asking questions, as I said, that if you're going to create a good helping relationship that goes beyond simple favor exchange, you need to create what we call a helping frame for the interaction, where the recipient knows that the giver is there to help. And that can be as simple as saying it explicitly saying, "I'm here to help you, I'm not here to change your project, I'm not here to check up on you, I just want to see how I can be helpful." And then asking a lot of questions about what they feel like they need and making sure you listen to the answer. Second, is what we call matching the rhythm of someone's engagement to what they're trying to achieve. And this comes back to this idea of guiding versus path clearing. So if you as a helper are intending to really impact the core content of the project, or the core work that people have been doing for for a long time, and it's complicated, you're going to have to clear your schedule enough to really understand what's going on. The important thing about rhythm is that if your visits with a particular employee or with a particular team or project get to spread out over time, you're going to lose touch with what's going on in the project, because you know, these people are working when you're not there, and then every time you come back, they're gonna have to spend time catching you up again. And that's where things get not so helpful. When you schedule your time, cluster the engagement closely in time and follow this guiding clustered rhythm, if you're going to really try and get into the details of the project. Whereas if you're gonna only be able to pop in once every once in a while, you almost have to adopt a path clearing strategy. And so adapting what you're trying to help with to the realistic rhythm of your engagement with the recipient is critical. So those are two of the biggest things I would say it's important for managers to do. And that at the organisational level, as I was saying, underscoring the importance of help, and creating enough slack for people to actually provide this help is also critical.

Vaughn Tan 28:36

Okay, cool. I think before I let you go, I have one final question, what is the next innovation you would like to see, I guess in terms of how people think about managing creative work and creative industries?

28:48

in terms of how people think, what I'm really hoping is people start to understand what it means to do creative work, and how pervasive that is, across almost all of our knowledge intensive industries. And that not to see creativity as the sort of "fuzzy front end" that we do a little bit at the beginning, but then we don't need anymore in the course of work. And that, as I alluded to earlier, when you're dealing with new ideas, you don't just have to change one thing about the process. You can't just say "oh, we're gonna have this brainstorming session at the very beginning and then we can just manage like we manage everything else." Instead, it requires really reshaping how you think about organising and the organisation. And that, what I feel like part of the barrier is, is we are not very clear about how pervasive creativity is in work that requires innovation, and how it permeates not just the beginning of the process, but also the end of the process. So actually I'm working on a

paper now with some colleagues where we're talking more explicitly about the need to better understand creative work, but also how wonderful it is that our field is moving this direction anyway, that we're not just looking at creativity as brainstorming anymore. We're actually looking at workers who need to do creative things, and what they do throughout a longer kind of process, and how different the demands and the ways in which they organise themselves are. So I think it's, you know, this is sort of a giant, not very concrete thing of understanding creative work as a real entity, and not sort of a shorthand for people who brainstorm or people who work in cultural industries, but to really think about what it means to organise around creativity more meaningfully.

Vaughn Tan 30:47

Which I think could also result in organisational structural innovation, right? If you could think about what an organisation or a company that was designed around this more holistic, I suppose idea of what creativity is, in an organisational context, what would it look like? And how cool would it be? I think it'd be quite cool. Thanks for joining us today.

Vaughn Tan 31:12

You've been listening to Mind Shift, a podcast about innovation from UCL School of Management. Today's guest was Colin Fisher and we'll put links to their research in the show notes.

Vaughn Tan 31:21

This episode was presented by myself, Vaughn Tan, edited by Cerys Bradley, and produced by UCL School of Management.

Vaughn Tan 31:29

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