Square Peg

Square Peg, Round Hole? Maybe It’s Not the Peg.

Why fit at work isn’t found, but built, and what leaders can do about it

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We all know the phrase. When someone doesn’t fit their role, their team or their organisation, they’re a square peg in a round hole.

It’s a vivid image, and it carries a quiet assumption: that the peg and the hole are fixed shapes. If they don’t match, there are only two options. Find a different peg, or find a different hole. Hire better, or move people on.

Most organisations work this way. Fit is treated as something you find, usually at hiring, and then either have or don’t. We screen for it, interview for it, and talk about “culture fit” as if it were a property a person carries in with them.

But that isn’t how fit actually works.

Fit changes, all the time

Think about the people who fit best in your organisation today. Many of them probably weren’t obvious fits when they started. They grew into their roles, and quite often their roles grew to fit them. Now think about the people who were perfect fits at hiring and drifted away after a restructure, a new manager or a change in strategy.

Research backs this up. Fit between people and their work matters: people who fit tend to be more satisfied, more committed and less likely to leave. But fit isn’t stable. It moves as people and organisations change. And people don’t just slot into their work. They reshape it, crafting their tasks and relationships, negotiating how they work, and speaking up to change how things are done.

So fit isn’t found. **It’s built.** The peg changes, and so does the space.

How fit gets built

In the 1930s the psychologist Kurt Lewin argued that behaviour comes from the person and their environment together. Neither explains it alone.

Put that in square-peg terms. The peg is what a person brings: their skills and experience, and just as importantly, what they believe about themselves. Is it safe to be me? Does what I do matter? Can I make a difference? The space is the conditions around them: how safe it is to speak up, whether the work feels worthwhile, how much room there is to decide.

The peg and the space meet in behaviour, in what people actually do every day. And behaviour, over time, either builds fit or wears it away.

Fit-building starts when something doesn't fit. A new role, a new leader, a new way of working. That gap isn't a problem. It's where growth begins, because people only learn when their old ways no longer quite work.

What matters is what happens next. People can meet a gap in three ways:

- **Absorb it,** taking it in without changing. Fine for small gaps, but for big ones it becomes denial.
- **Learn from it,** making sense of what it is and what it asks of them.
- **Defend against it,** digging in, disengaging or leaving.

Learning is the hinge. Once people understand a gap, they can close it in two directions: by adjusting themselves (a new skill, a new habit, a new belief about what they can do) and by shaping the space (changing the role, the process or the conditions). The best fit comes from both. People who only ever adjust themselves eventually wear out. Organisations that expect people to adapt but never adapt in return lose them.

Safety decides which way it goes

The same gap can lead to learning or to defence. The difference is safety.

When it feels safe to ask questions, try things and admit mistakes, a gap becomes a challenge, and people learn. When it doesn't, the gap becomes a threat. Under threat, people narrow their thinking and cling to what they know, exactly when they need to do something new.

But safety on its own isn't the goal. A team that is safe and never stretched is comfortable, and comfortable teams rarely grow. The place to be is real challenge with enough safety to meet it.

Two more things matter. Meaning gives people a reason to put in the effort to adapt rather than leave. Agency, the room to decide and act, is what lets people shape the space as well as themselves. Without it, fit is a one-way street.

Your behaviour is someone else's conditions

Here's the part leaders most often miss. Every person's behaviour becomes part of the space for everyone around them.

When a leader responds to a raised problem with curiosity, the whole team learns it's safe to raise problems. When a leader responds with blame, the whole team learns the opposite. One person defending raises the temperature for everyone. One person learning openly makes it easier for others to learn.

That's why fit isn't just individual. Teams build it, or fail to, together. A team can lift its members, achieving more together than any of them could alone, or drag them down.

What leaders can do

If fit is built, then leaders are builders. Some practical starting points:

- **Stop treating fit as a hiring decision.** Ask instead whether your conditions help people grow into their roles, and let roles grow to fit people.
- **Expect gaps, and make them safe.** Change will always create them. Your job is to make it safe to learn from them.
- **Don't aim for comfort.** Aim for challenge with enough safety to meet it.
- **Give people room to shape their work.** Fit that only runs one way doesn't last.
- **Watch your own behaviour.** It's part of everyone else's conditions.
- **When it all feels too much, take one small step and see what happens.** Feedback beats a perfect plan.

So next time someone looks like a square peg in a round hole, pause before reaching for a different peg. Ask what's happening where the peg and the space meet. Ask whether either of them has room to change.

Because fit isn't found. **It's built.**

> ### Want the research behind this?
>
> Read Square Peg White Paper 1, *Fit Isn't Found. It's Built.*, for the full Adaptive Fit model and the evidence it draws on.
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