

SWORD workbook:

Learning organisation



KFP 3: Learning Organisation

To be resilient, an organisation must ensure that learning and development is at the heart of everything that they do. Developing a learning organisation is the third Key Foundational Principle. A learning organisation is one in which:

There is a system of shared beliefs, goals and objectives that are communicated clearly.

Individuals, teams and the organisation itself can reflect and learn from experience.

There is an evidence-informed approach to improving practice and managing change, with input from the workforce actively encouraged.

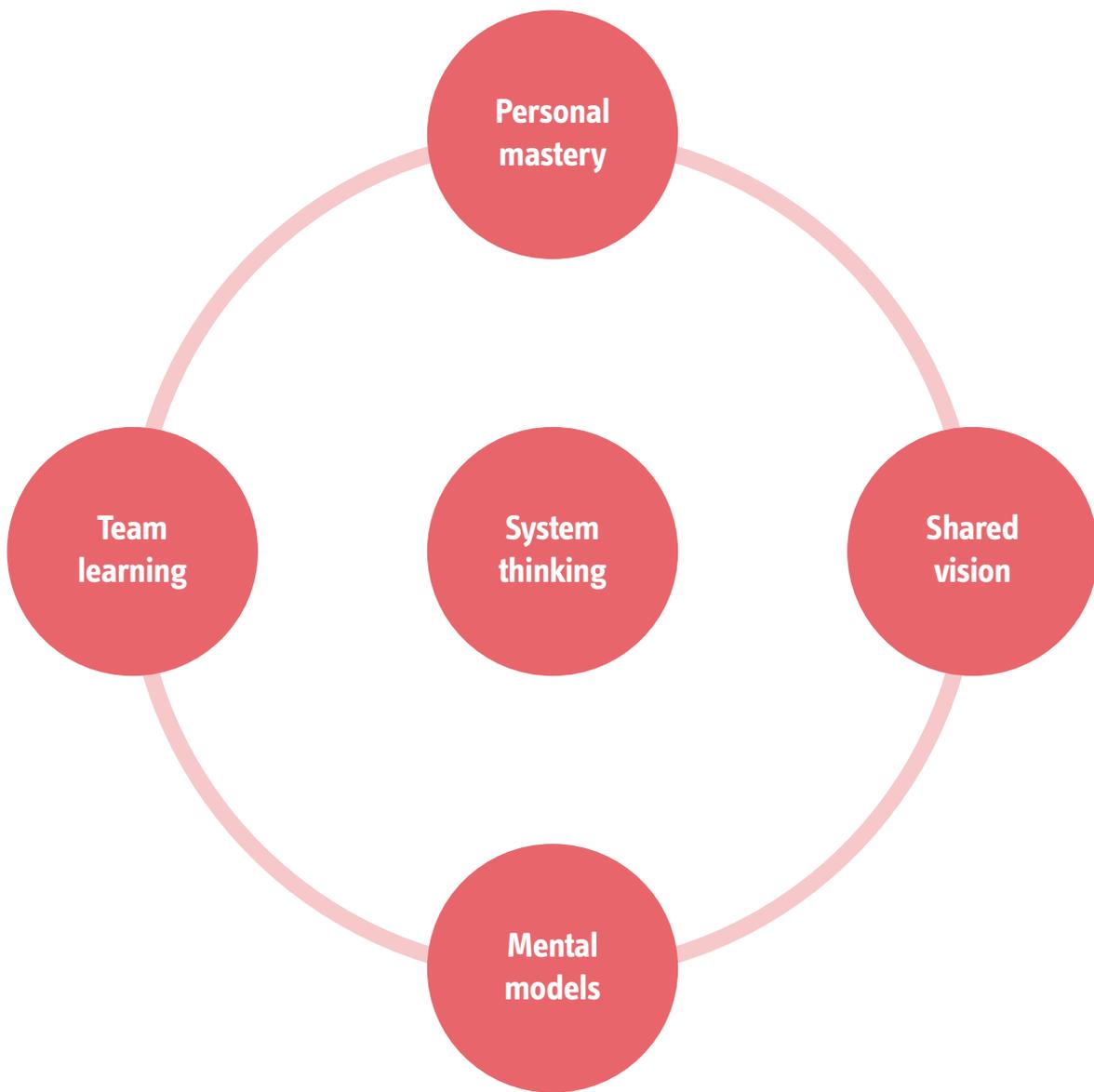
Challenges provide opportunities for learning rather than blame and individual scapegoating.

People have the freedom to speak up to raise concerns without feeling compromised, blamed or victimised.

Learning from experience and adapting to new challenges and opportunities underpin healthy and successful organisations. A learning organisation is defined as:

... a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole (reality) together. (Senge, 1992)

Figure 3.1: Dimensions of a learning organisation



According to Senge, learning organisations have five inter-related dimensions (see Figure 3.1).

1. *Systems thinking: seeing the forest as well as the trees*

People see the ‘big picture’ rather than its individual components. Awareness of the complexity of the organisation means they can identify patterns of cause and effect. People are then able to work towards long-term solutions to problems by addressing the underlying causes rather than implementing quick fixes.

2. *Personal mastery: an orientation towards personal growth and learning*

People have a strong sense of purpose that underpins their personal goals. They work with change not against it and feel they influence the change process. People feel connected to others rather than alienated from them and engage in a continual cycle of reflection and learning.

3. *Mental models: revealing our hidden assumptions and beliefs*

People are reflective and their thinking is not fixed or embedded in entrenched beliefs and assumptions. Conversely, people are sufficiently flexible to adapt their mental model through current experience, learning and reflection.

4. *Building a shared vision: being bound together by a shared aspiration.*

People have a common vision that underpins the organisation’s focus and energy for learning. Creating a shared vision and ensuring that their own vision is aligned with that of others is a key aspect of leaders’ work.

5. *Team learning: working in synchrony*

Although team learning stems from personal mastery, people use their individual talents, knowledge and experiences to work together towards a common goal. Knowledge is shared, communication is open and honest and there is a free flow of ideas, even when some may be in conflict.

Although these five dimensions highlight some of the features of a learning organisation, remember that one size does not fit all. The optimum environment for reflection and learning is one that is precisely aligned to the organisation's goals, but sufficiently flexible to accommodate change. The Social Care Institute for Excellence has produced a self-assessment resource pack for organisations to assess the extent to which they are a learning organisation (SCIE, 2008); it can be accessed [here](#).

Reflective leadership: making time to talk and space to listen

Reflective learning is fundamental to how any learning organisation operates but is particularly important in social care. Although leaders may believe they provide opportunities for people to reflect on their work, all too often these discussions are driven by task management and an agenda focused on compliance. There is evidence that the supervision social workers receive is of variable quality and does not consistently or adequately meet their emotional needs (Wilkins et al., 2017). Truly reflective organisations recognise the importance of critical thinking, learning and growth, and they provide opportunities for people to unpack the complex emotional demands of social work practice and learning.

Social care workers often attempt to cope with anxiety engendered by complex practice by focusing on tasks and targets, rather than exploring their emotional reactions. It is crucial to create 'reflective spaces' where people can discuss the emotional demands placed upon them and how best to cope with this key aspect of the work. Where support is lacking, the emotional demands of social care work can have wide-ranging, negative implications; decision-making abilities can be impaired, motivation and job satisfaction inhibited and compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion heightened, all of which can have a negative impact on people accessing services (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Kinman & Grant, 2020b). A lack of opportunity for reflection can also encourage a false sense of security: for example, a worker may be tempted to 'cover their back' before leaving for the weekend by sending a flurry of emails highlighting the tasks they have accomplished, rather than expressing an underlying concern about a person who is accessing services.

Reflective learning must be deeply embedded in social care organisations and leaders should ensure it is happening in practice, not just in theory. Opportunities for reflective learning will be enhanced in a culture where the value of learning is emphasised, blaming and scapegoating are avoided, and there is an appreciation that mistakes, near misses, and unsuccessful practice are opportunities for learning.

Reflective leadership is crucial for building resilience in social care organisations. Leaders should model reflective practice personally, as well as encourage it through supervision and conversations with workers. Only reflective leaders can foster a learning organisation, as they will draw upon the collective expertise of the teams around them to make decisions. Reflective leaders:

Are flexible.

Regularly step out of their routine and familiar environment to think, explore and learn.

Question others for alternative points of view and ensure they consider a wide range of options before acting (see the section on 'walking the floor' in KFP2 Sense of Appreciation).

You may be thinking: 'This describes me very well; I am just like that.' But we can easily become defensive or reluctant to consider different perspectives that can make us stuck or fixated on a decision or pattern of behaviour. The iceberg model (Box 3.1) is a useful analogy to help you think through why you have come to a particular decision and to check out what might 'lie beneath'.

Box 3.1: 'Using the iceberg model to support reflective leadership and practice'

Do you ever wonder why you (or others) have reached a standpoint on a key issue and become stuck? When colleagues are intransigent do you see them as inflexible or stubborn, or do you seek to understand the reasons underpinning their thought processes and behaviour? The iceberg model can help an individual or group uncover the 'mental models' and patterns of behaviour that underlie a particular interpretation of an event.

Drawing on Freud's theory of the human mind, this model recognises that the greater part of what we believe is hidden under the surface, but this is what helps us understand ourselves and those we work with more effectively. Just like an iceberg, what we see on the surface is only an event or behaviour. Identifying what lies beneath can only be accomplished when practitioners feel safe and leaders have the emotional literacy to engage in honest, reflective conversations.



Research in Practice has an excellent range of resources, and a summary of research evidence, to support critical thinking and reflective analysis in both group and one-to-one supervision sessions. These will help practitioners explore beneath the surface and help develop organisational, team and individual resilience. The tools are available [here](#).

Reflection is often seen as an individual activity, but Intervision (Staempfli & Fairclough, 2019) is a peer-led method of reflection in which participants follow a specified process to discuss professional practice issues. This technique, which encourages a learning organisational culture, is rarely found in the UK but widely used by social workers in other European countries. There is some evidence that Intervision is supportive, can enhance professional development and can also offer opportunities for emotional containment (Staempfli & Fairclough, 2019). For more information on Intervision see [here](#). The **Practice Supervisor Development Programme** (PSDP) led by Research in Practice developed a tool to support Intervision available [here](#).

As a leader, you must also ensure that you have reflective space for yourself. Leadership can be isolating, so it is crucial to create opportunities for support that meets your needs. Quick Win 3.1 describes how creating a Personal Board of Directors can enable you, as a leader, to get the support you need to create an environment for personal reflection and learning.

Quick Win 3.1: Using your support networks: creating your own Personal Board of Directors (PBOD)

A successful organisation will have an effective Board of Directors, usually comprising people from different walks of life with a range of skills and talents. They not only offer committed and ongoing support for the organisation, but also provide a critique and different perspectives on problems.

Being a leader can be lonely and opportunities for support can be limited. So, creating your own Personal Board of Directors (PBOD) can help – this is a group of individuals (from in and outside the workplace) who can act as a sounding board and help you when you face a dilemma, when you need affirmation, or to challenge you.

Your PBOD will typically need to include people with one or more of the following qualities:

Someone who is a major support for you personally and professionally	Someone who can help you be creative	Someone who is good at coming up with practical solutions	Someone who has years of experience and accumulated wisdom
Someone who you can accept criticism from	Someone who knows you better than you know yourself	Someone with relevant skills and expertise	Someone who is a role model for you.

Remember this is an honorary, unpaid role so you will need to find ways of reciprocating or showing thanks to the members of your PBOD.

Learning from what goes well: Serious Success Reviews

Learning from errors is crucial to enhancing practice and implementing change. Nonetheless, while it is natural to wish to hide any embarrassment or anxiety associated with failure, mistakes can be a stepping-stone to progress. Serious Case Reviews, Safeguarding Adults Reviews, independent investigations into homicides (mental health homicide reviews) and inquests following suicide are key mechanisms for learning how to improve social care practice, both individually and collectively. Reflective leadership is crucial to this process. Leaders must recognise that mistakes are both inevitable and a learning opportunity and should try not to react defensively or by attributing blame.

Social care work can become overly focused on what has gone wrong rather than right but developing a learning culture is not just about learning from errors. The knowledge gained from what went well also enables better outcomes for people accessing services. Organisations are more effective when they can recognise, learn from and build on good practice – see Box 3.2. We need to identify what ‘good looks like’ so it can guide us when things go wrong.

Box 3.2: Serious Success Reviews: Using positive outcomes to reflect on practice

Research by Forrester and colleagues (2019) explored the relationship between key social work skills and outcomes in child and family work. They asked social workers how they recognise what ‘good’ looks like. Responses highlighted the importance of effective authority and relationship-building skills, as well as having the space to reflect on how they might be enhanced.

Similarly, social work with adults is increasingly moving toward a strengths-based approach, which has a focus on relationship-building. Practitioners work in a person-centred way to engage people with care and support needs in identifying their personal skills and assets, which can inform the way in which care is accessed. Good practice is collaborative and facilitates maximum independence for people receiving care and support (Department of Health and Social Care, 2017). Practitioners work in a person-centred way to help people identify their individual skills and assets that can inform the way in which care is accessed.

Bexley Council have introduced the idea of Serious Success Reviews to identify the features of good social work practice (as well as what works less well) – see Stevenson (2017) available [here](#). This approach is likely to be more effective in ensuring fitness for purpose than simply ‘tweaking’ an existing process or procedure. Social work leaders and managers could use Appreciative Inquiry (see KFP2 Sense of Appreciation) and other consultative approaches to explore what constitutes good practice in their organisation.

Sharing experiences, thoughts and feelings to improve wellbeing and practice: Schwartz Rounds

Schwartz Rounds are named after Kenneth Schwartz, an American lawyer who recognised the importance of compassionate care and acts of kindness while undergoing treatment for cancer. His experiences inspired the introduction of Schwartz Rounds, which provide an opportunity for healthcare practitioners to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings on issues arising from patients' individual cases. This not only helps practitioners improve the quality of their personal connections, with both patients and colleagues, but also to gain more insight into their own responses and feelings. For practitioners, identified benefits include improved personal relationships, wellbeing and job performance (Maben et al., 2021; Robert et al., 2017). Participation in Schwartz Rounds has also been found to aid reflection, compassion and collaboration, and to increase trust, reduce isolation and foster a sense of shared purpose (Reed et al., 2015).

Schwartz Rounds are now running in many acute and community-based healthcare organisations in several countries. There is some evidence that they can be effective for social care workers by reducing the risk of stress, isolation and burnout (Minford et al. 2020). A recently published evaluation of Schwartz Rounds in children's social care services in England found some evidence that participation can reduce work-related stress and improve wellbeing, with benefits for collegiate relationships and the quality of work with children and families (Wilkins et al. 2021). Schwartz rounds can also help build a learning organisation by providing a structured forum for multi-disciplinary groups to discuss the emotional and social aspects of their work. More information on Schwartz Rounds, including resources, can be found on The Point of Care Foundation's website [here](#).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an online team-based reflective practice known as TeamTime (which is based on Schwartz Rounds) was made available to support people who are working remotely; see [here](#).

Learning from critical incidents and best practice

As highlighted earlier in this workbook, the pandemic has had a major impact on the mental health and wellbeing of workers that is likely to continue for some time (De Kock et al., 2021). But while pandemics are rare, critical incidents are not uncommon in social care organisations and they can have serious implications for workers' wellbeing and practice. However good we are at managing and learning from critical incidents, a crisis can sometimes send shock waves through an organisation. This can lead to a 'perfect storm': a combination of events or circumstances that has the potential to bring adversity to an organisation.

If not managed effectively, such situations can cause widespread damage – to individuals, the organisation and the social care sector as a whole. An organisation's initial response to shock may be paralysis or panic, neither of which is helpful. Nor will such responses help people working directly with patients or families to continue in their work. According to Mellor:

Staff at all levels can feel bewildered and overwhelmed by a genuine sense of loss, fear of change and potential loss of job security. When a shock event happens, leaders need to be able to access emergency support that provides calm and expert advice on dealing with the practicalities and emotional impact of the immediate situation and those most closely affected by it. (Mellor, undated)

Moreover, statutory and legal processes and investigations may continue for some time, possibly years. So organisational shocks may continue and it is important to acknowledge that the impact will vary. For some, the stress may be long lasting.

Leaders should be aware that, like any personally upsetting event, an organisation's reaction to a critical incident may be one, or all, of the following:

shock

fear

anger

shame and guilt

a sense of injustice.

Initially, communicating the news clearly internally and externally and making space for managing the crisis is crucial. Mellor identifies three stages for managing a major event (more information can be found [here](#)):

response

resolution

recovery.

Organisations that disregard the impact of a difficult or traumatic event and try to carry on as normal are often working on an adrenaline-fuelled stress response, instead of considering the need for an alternative approach or re-grouping. Under the *Health and Social Care Act 2008*, organisations have a duty of candour to provide specific information when things go wrong. They should have mechanisms in place to help them recognise what has happened, how to respond, how to resolve the issue, and how to ensure there is space for recovery. Treisman (2018) provides useful guidance and practical tips on helping organisations become more ‘culturally, adversity and trauma-informed’, and warns against the risks of tokenistic initiatives to promote trauma-informed and responsive practice; for more information, see [here](#). Guidance on how to recognise and manage secondary trauma among practitioners is also available [here](#). Research in Practice have resources to support trauma informed approaches in organisations such as the strategic briefing for Children’s social care **Embedding a trauma-informed approach to support staff wellbeing in children’s social care (2021)** and the Adult social care Frontline Briefing **Embedding trauma-informed approaches in adult social care: (2019)**. There is also a topic page with more resources on Trauma [here](#).

Emotionally literate leadership is crucial for a considered and effective response to a shock or crisis, so leaders must be able to recognise and manage their own emotions. There are several useful frameworks that can help leaders process and articulate their feelings. For example, the following questions (derived from Linsley & Horner, 2011) will be a useful starting point for planning a response to a crisis:

- Here is what we are facing (assessment)
- Here is what I think we should do (option appraisal)
- Here is why (evidence base).

Box 3.3 provides a framework that can be used when analysing critical incidents to enable learning and reflection.

Box 3.3: Critical incident technique

Critical incident analysis is a structured form of learning and reflection. It involves:

Describing a difficult or serious incident that was particularly challenging.

Suggesting an explanation, given the immediate context.

Asking questions to find different explanations for the dilemma, exploring theories, values, assumptions and defensive mechanisms and biases.

Considering the implication for future practice.

(adapted from Tripp, 2011)

Enhancing support: peer coaching

Social support is essential for maintaining wellbeing and can protect people from the negative impact of stressful work on mental health (Peters et al., 2018). Studies show that support from peers is particularly beneficial (Chang, 2018). Setting up a peer-coaching initiative is an effective and low-cost way to help organisations move from a problem-focused culture to a strengths-based and solution-focused orientation. Peer coaching is a relationship between two people of equal status that facilitates the achievement of specific goals. It can also be a source of professional development more generally and used to share ideas, develop skills and improve support.

Peer coaching aims to:

Provide a structured approach to helping.

Enable someone to generate specific, measurable goals that are realistic but stretching.

Help them identify how they are going to achieve those goals.

Provide objective, non-evaluative feedback about how they are progressing.

Offer support and encouragement when they need it.

Box 3.4: How does peer coaching work?

Peer coaching is a relationship where colleagues pair up as coach and 'coachee' (i.e., the person being coached). This is usually reciprocal.

It draws on intrinsic values and beliefs.

It uses the GROW model as a framework:

- > The coachee identifies the GOAL they wish to achieve.
- > The coach helps them reflect on how REALISTIC the goal is, based on their commitments and the time and resources available.
- > Both parties work together to help the coachee generate a range of creative OPTIONS for meeting the goal.
- > The coachee develops the WILL to meet the goal by making an action plan and a commitment to making changes or taking action.

It utilises SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely).

It provides non-evaluative, specific feedback based on an objective observation, or 'reflecting back' what is heard. This gives the coachee the encouragement to move forward.

Box 3.4: How does peer coaching work? (continued)

There are some practical considerations that must be considered when setting up a peer coaching relationship:

Trust between partners is essential as the process requires self-disclosure.

Partners should be well matched in their working styles and expectations.

Peer coaching can be done face to face, online, or by phone. But regular and formal contact (by any of these methods) is essential to ensure the coachee maintains focus on their goals.

Venting is important, but the coach should help the coachee move beyond this to enable them to find solutions.

The coach needs to keep the conversation on track; it is easy to drift.

Active listening and open/probing questions are required.

The benefits of solution-focused coaching include enhanced goal setting and stress management skills, as well as improved wellbeing and job satisfaction (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006). There is also evidence that peer coaching protects mental health during times of high stress (Short et al., 2010). Being a peer coach can help develop key interpersonal skills such as active listening, building rapport, trust, empathy, reflection and awareness raising, all of which can be used to enhance workers' relationships with people who access services. There is also evidence that peer coaching can improve emotional literacy and leadership development (Szeles, 2015). Peer coaching techniques can also be used effectively in supervision.

Guidance on how to move from focusing only on problems to focusing on solutions is set out in Box 3.5. This technique can also be used as an exercise, working in pairs.

Box 3.5: Moving from a problem-focus to a solution-focus in a peer coaching session

Being problem-focused

Use the questions below to talk (for about five minutes) about a recent situation that has caused you difficulty. Person A (the coachee) describes the situation. Person B (the coach) directs the conversation with the following questions.

‘So, what is the problem?’

‘What happened?’

‘What do you think is the cause of the problem?’

‘Who is to blame?’

‘What have you tried in order to fix it?’

‘Why is this still a problem?’

‘How can you stop this happening again?’

Being solution-focused

The coach should spend about five minutes supporting the coachee to discuss a problem that they have. When using a solution-focused approach, it is essential to help the coachee ‘reframe’ their ‘intractable’ problem into a more manageable one. Use the following questions:

‘So, how would you like the situation to be?’

‘What will it take to get what you want?’

‘What resources do you need?’

‘What resources do you already have?’

‘What two small steps could you take to help fix the situation?’

‘How far have you come already? Are there times when the solution is present, at least partly?’

Sparkling moments (see KFP2 Sense of Appreciation) can also be used in a peer-coaching situation very effectively. This technique can help people move to a generally more positive mindset and identify external and personal resources (such as support and skills) that can help reach a solution.

Peer coaching can also be used to generate options and goals for improving wellbeing, by managing stress more effectively and enhancing work-life balance. It is important to remember, however, that while peer coaching can be effective, it is not counselling. If a coachee has deep-seated personal problems, professional help will be required. For more information on setting up a peer coaching initiative in social work organisations, see Baker and Jones (2014) and Kinman et al. (2020a).

Unlocking potential for service improvement: working with strengths

When trying to resolve problems, we often focus on our weaknesses and think of ways to address them, which can be stressful and draining. A learning organisation will be aware of the strengths of individual workers and how they can best be used. As social care professionals, we know that working with strengths identifies the things people do well, that energise them, and that they find enjoyable. Nonetheless, we do not always apply these ideas to ourselves, focusing instead on our limitations and areas for improvement rather than the assets we have at our disposal.

Strengths are often confused with skills that people can perform well, but skills are learned behaviours that can become ingrained and automatic over time. It is easy to mistake skills for strengths, but they do not energise or engage people in the same way. Strengths are not static: a person can build, grow, adapt and develop their strengths to help themselves in different situations. People who use their strengths are more likely to achieve their goals, experience less stress, and have more self-esteem and confidence; they also tend to be happier and more resilient.

Being aware of strengths

When developing organisational resilience, it is crucial to work with strengths. As role models, leaders should be aware of their own strengths and those of other people. Three Quick Wins (3.2, 3.3 and 3.4) provide some techniques to raise awareness of personal strengths in the self and in others. As well as role-modelling 'strengths-spotting', share these exercises widely in your organisation. They can be used in various settings such as meetings and supervision.

Quick Win 3.2: Strengths-spotting

Spotting your personal strengths

Ask yourself the following questions:

Deep roots: What do you still do now that you did as a child?

Motivation: What activities do you do just because you love doing them?

Voice: When does the tone of your voice indicate enjoyment and energy?

Energy: What activities do you do that give you energy?

Rapid learning: What things do you pick up effortlessly and quickly?

Authenticity: When do you feel like 'the real me'?

Attention: Where do you naturally pay attention?

Ease: What activities come easily to you?

Spotting the strengths of others

Build a language of character strengths:

Develop an understanding of the range of personal strengths to improve your ability to spot them in others; see the list of character strengths [here](#).

Develop your observation and listening skills:

Enhance your awareness of what strengths look like in action based on: a) verbal cues (listen for a more assertive voice, improved vocabulary and clarity of speech, and use of specific strengths words); and b) nonverbal cues (look for improved posture and eye contact, smiling and laughing, and greater use of gestures signifying excitement and passion).

Label and explain character-strength behaviours:

Show people that you notice when they show their strengths by a) identifying the specific strength demonstrated; b) explaining how you spotted it; c) showing that this strength is appreciated.

Make strengths-spotting a habit: Build your skills by practising observing character strengths in people in different situations.

Quick win 3.3: Spotting character strengths in meetings

Go into meetings wearing your 'strengths goggles': a mindset that identifies strengths as they occur. After you spot strengths in people, point out what you observed, tell them the reason for your observation and show your appreciation.

Quick win 3.4: Using character strengths to improve relationships

Spotting character strengths can help us improve relationships with people who we find challenging. Focusing on things that irritate us about others can blind us to their strong points. Looking for the strengths in other people enhances feelings of empathy, enabling us to respect diversity and value and appreciate their talents.

The MORE model developed by Roarty and Toogood (2014) provides a strengths focused approach to leadership that provides strategies to identify and develop your own strengths and those of the people in your organisation. More involves:

Myself: identifying personal strengths managing weaknesses and aligning goals and objectives with strength.

Other's strengths: introducing a strengths focus to others, identifying and developing their strengths and supporting them to manage their weaknesses.

Regular Conversations: applying a strengths focus to everyday conversations, during meetings and providing strengths-focused coaching (see peer coaching in KFP Wellbeing).

Employee processes: implementing strengths focused recruitment processes, performance appraisals and development discussions.

Increasing flexibility: doing things differently

Flexibility is a key characteristic of learning organisations and those that lead them. Psychological flexibility means adapting successfully to changing situational demands; it can help people adjust their mental resources and behaviours in response to change. People who are flexible are better able to balance competing needs and life domains, while remaining committed to their goals and values. Research has established that social workers who are more flexible tend to be more resilient and, in turn protects them from work-related stress and burnout (Kinman et al., 2020b). Flexibility also enables people to think about problems and tasks in more creative ways. Our habits can undermine our ability to meet new challenges, whereas changing unproductive behaviours can help us feel less stressed, happier and more in control (Fletcher & Pine, 2012).

Although everyone has a toolkit of useful behaviours, we tend to over-use the same tools regardless of whether they are appropriate for the situation. Small actions can break habits and lead to changes in behaviour; maintaining these changes can give you the confidence to take on new challenges. Changing something about your work routine and reflecting on the outcomes can be effective. For example, eat your lunch somewhere different and see if your mind is clearer. Box 3.6 provides some examples of small actions in your personal life that can lead to behaviour changes. Also, keeping a list of things that you have accomplished through the day (and encouraging those you manage to do so too) can be particularly helpful in highlighting how you use your time and taking steps to make lasting change. KFP4 Mission and Vision offers some guidance on making 'I did' lists and how these (and other techniques) can be used to improve your productivity.

Box 3.6: Do something differently

Small actions in your work and personal life can break habits and lead to changes in behaviour, encouraging a more flexible outlook. Maintaining these changes can give you the confidence to take on new challenges. When deciding on a new course of action in your personal life, remember that using a different skill set to what you use at work will be particularly effective and will help replenish your mental and physical resources.

Do a course on something unrelated to your work.

Start a blog.

Join a choir.

Change the furniture around in your office or your home.

Learn another language.

Try a new sport.

Learn a musical instrument or create something artistic.

Join a book club.

Plant a garden.

Write a short story or a poem.

Learn a new craft.

Building tolerance to uncertainty

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant uncertainty among the public about almost every aspect of daily life. Organisations are also operating in a climate of unpredictability with little time for consolidation and stability – this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Although some uncertainty is unavoidable in life, it can be damaging when we find it difficult to decide how to act or make decisions, increasing the risk of confusion, frustration and distress.

Most people are uncomfortable with uncertainty, but some find it more challenging than others. People with perfectionist tendencies (see KFP5 Wellbeing) are likely to find uncertainty particularly difficult, as there is no clear-cut ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ action. This can be a profound source of stress and self-doubt and make people feel overwhelmed. Intolerance of uncertainty refers to a tendency to react negatively on emotional, cognitive and behavioural levels to uncertain situations and events (Buhr & Dugas, 2009, p. 216). People who find it hard to tolerate uncertainty may behave in the following ways:

Be fixated on structure

Have a need for constant reassurance and affirmation

Struggle to hold a firm opinion on things

Be risk averse

Procrastinate, obtaining multiple opinions on a decision or course of action

Do extensive research and information gathering

Make multiple lists

Worry about negative events happening, even if they are very unlikely.

To prepare for the unexpected and to thrive in ambiguous circumstances are vital skills for leaders. While we cannot control the future, we can become more resilient to future uncertainties. Work by Mason (1993) describes the importance of developing a position of 'safe uncertainty'. He argues that:

For useful change to happen we sometimes need to become less certain of the positions we hold. When we become less certain of the positions we hold, we are more likely to become receptive to other possibilities, other meanings we might put to events. If we can become more open to the possible influence of other perspectives, we open up space for other views to be stated and heard. (Mason, 1993, p. 195)

Those who lead social care organisations are facing considerable uncertainty but are nonetheless tasked with formulating policies and practices to operate effectively in a post-COVID world. Tolerance of uncertainty is the ability to accept situations that are unclear, uncertain, or novel and to work effectively in an ambiguous environment. Becoming more tolerant of uncertainty will protect leaders from being overwhelmed by change and increase their sense of control. Tolerance of uncertainty can be enhanced in several ways:

Redefining the way you see uncertainty:

this will improve your ability to tolerate it. You do not have to see uncertainty as desirable but viewing ambiguous situations as threatening or potentially dangerous will reinforce your belief that you are unable to cope with them. It is also helpful to try to remain calm if you are unable to follow routine or habits.

Creating a healthy relationship with threat:

to determine the likelihood of an event occurring, you must use your rational mind rather than your anxious mind. Remind yourself that these are challenging times, and we are all operating in a crisis, so a degree of anxiety is natural. Adopting an optimistic (but realistic) attributional style and seeing difficult situations as temporary and situational and not permanent and pervasive, will help you put uncertainty into perspective.

Fostering ambivalence:

try to hold both positive and negative feelings towards a future outcome. This involves becoming comfortable with feelings of doubt and excitement when making decisions and ensures we have a broad vision of possible futures.

Think flexibly and embrace complexity:

allow information that you know to be accurate to shift your thinking and positively influence your behaviour. Viewing situations as spectrums not dichotomies (i.e. varying across a continuum rather than good/bad, right/wrong etc.) will open new possibilities for change.

Take control

being passive and avoiding action puts you in a position of powerlessness. Make suggestions even if you do not have all the answers and use your judgement although you are unsure of the outcome. This will help you to gain a sense of mastery, competence and self-efficacy, even when circumstances are changing rapidly. At times, however, it may be more appropriate to wait a while for information and circumstances to become clearer before making decisions.

Adopt a future time perspective:

dwelling on mistakes or missed opportunities can make us fearful of change, blind us to future opportunities and discourage creativity and risk taking. More generally, people with a future orientation tend to engage in behaviours such as planning and goal setting (Henry et al. 2017).

Gather information strategically:

choose when to collect information and from where to obtain it. Consider whether information gathering is useful, or merely another way of procrastinating or seeking reassurance.

Problem solve:

when you formulate a plan, use your rational mind not your anxious mind. If you decide on a course of action when you are feeling anxious, make sure to review it before implementation.

Avoid over-relying on plans and goals:

Excessive rigidity means that we are likely to reject uncertainty or ambiguity automatically. The situation is changing rapidly and the goals that you have set yourself (or have been set by others) may not be achievable in the anticipated timeline, or in the way that was expected.

Break actions down into smaller steps

Trying out ideas on a smaller scale helps you evaluate the risks, while minimising any potential negative impact. This can reduce fear of the unknown. Test theories quickly and rigorously, evaluate the outcomes and then pursue or reject that course of action.

Embrace the inevitable

things rarely go the way we think they will. When you prepare for the worst, you are better able to deal with disaster should it arise. Negative visualisation (also known as a 'pre-mortem') can help you avoid emotional instability during stressful situations. Spending some time contemplating the worst plausible outcome will help you to identify what you are afraid of and to anticipate and navigate setbacks.

Scenario planning:

examining how they would fare under a variety of possible futures can help broaden long-term horizons and build organisations that are resilient to uncertainty.

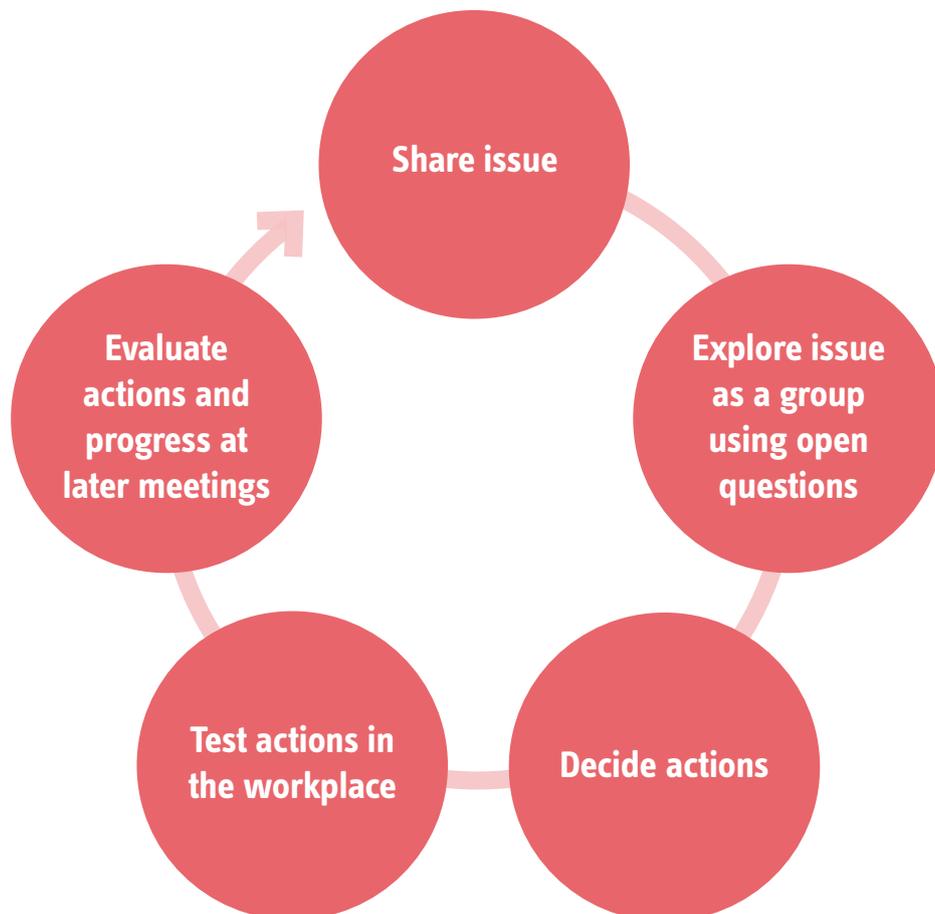
More information can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Group learning: using Action Learning Sets

Action learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning. (Pedler, 1991)

Action Learning Sets are opportunities for workers and leaders to meet regularly to explore solutions to problems and decide on the action they wish to take. They are particularly useful for helping people consider complex problems where there is no simple answer. If structured properly (see Boxes 3.7 and 3.8), an Action Learning Set will promote curiosity, inquiry, reflection and – ultimately – learning, which can be applied to action planning (as outlined in Figure 3.2; this will be familiar as it draws on the reflective learning cycle).

Figure 3.2: The action learning cycle



Box 3.7: An Action Learning Set in action

An Action Learning Set usually comprises 6-8 participants committed to meeting on a regular basis to learn from each other in a safe reflective space. The more diverse the participants are in terms of their background and experience, the better.

Participants take it in turns to be the presenter. This involves describing a situation or problem they face (around 5 minutes).

A period of open reflective questioning follows (around 5-10 minutes) in which the presenter answers openly, honestly and reflectively; no advice is given at this stage.

The group then spends some time discussing the problem, as they see it, with the presenter merely listening – as if they were a ‘fly on the wall’ (around 5-10 minutes).

Next, the presenter reflects on the insights gained and the ideas for implementation that have been generated (around 10 minutes).

For the final stage, the whole group discusses the learning gained and helps the presenter to action plan, if required (around 5-10 minutes). Actions are then tried out in the workplace and the group discusses the learning gained next time they meet, with the process repeated.

Box 3.8: Useful questions for action learning

Using reflective open questions is crucial to running a successful Action Learning Set. Here are some examples of questions that can encourage learning.

Questions to identify the issue and the desired outcome

- > What are you hoping to achieve?
- > What is the difference between how you see things now and how you would like them to be in future?
- > Who might help you accomplish change?
- > What obstacles do you anticipate?

Questions to explore below the surface

- > What happened? Can you provide an example?
- > How did you feel about that?
- > What assumptions might you be making?
- > What do you think might happen in future?
- > How might this decision affect others?

Questions to encourage learning

- > What opportunities are there in the situation?
- > What would success look like?
- > What metaphor could you use to describe the situation?
- > What have you tried in the past? Why did/didn't it work?
- > Who could you approach for advice and support?

Questions to explore options

- > What if ...?
- > What do you think about ...?
- > How do you feel about ...?
- > What would happen if you did nothing?

Questions to identify next steps

- > How do you plan to move this forward?
- > Where could you get more information?
- > What actions are you going to take before the next meeting?
- > How can we help you make progress?

Further questions can be found [here](#).

Seven-minute briefings – communicating key information clearly and concisely

Leaders are often required to impart complex information in ways that set out important issues but are quick and easy to read and digest. Research suggests that seven minutes is the optimum time span to hold our attention, enabling us to concentrate and learn. Seven-minute briefings are based on a technique used by the FBI, but they can be a particularly helpful tool to enable managers to deliver a short briefing to employees on key issues. They can also form the basis for reflective discussions.

Seven-minute briefings can have a flexible format, but usually have seven points that might include the following:

1. Background information
2. Why the issue matters
3. – 5. Key points of information
6. Things to note and remember
7. What to do

Why not send out a seven-minute briefing next time you have a new strategy to share? People are likely to find it more engaging than a dry and boring email. More information about the use of seven minute briefings can be found [here](#) and an example of how they can be used to promote professional curiosity is [here](#).