



Sustainable Leadership

Purposeful. Intentional. Adaptable.

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About the authors



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The Founder and Managing Director of WorkLifePsych, Richard is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, a Chartered Coaching Psychologist and a Chartered Scientist. He spends the majority of his time coaching individuals through key stages in their career, helping employees deal with workplace stress and wellbeing challenges, and facilitating the development of senior teams.

He is particularly interested in employee wellbeing, boosting productivity and helping clients develop their psychological flexibility to better cope with challenges. Richard has coached leaders worldwide for more than a decade, across Europe, North America and Asia. He hosts our fortnightly podcast, '[My Pocket Psych](#)' and creates videos about workplace psychology for our [YouTube channel](#).



Dr. Rachael Skews **Chartered Psychologist & Coach**

Rachael is an experienced and accredited occupational and coaching psychologist, whose passions lie in an evidence-based approach to developing people at work. Her PhD explored the mechanisms through which coaching can be used to boost [Psychological Flexibility](#) in the workplace.

A frequent keynote speaker and recognised leader in the field of Acceptance and Commitment Coaching, Rachael is a Fellow of the Centre for Evidence-based Management and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Rachael regularly contributes to 'My Pocket Psych', especially when the focus is on coaching, psychological flexibility and evidence-based practice.



Dr. Wayne Mullen **Organisational Psychologist & Coach**

Wayne has extensive experience in leadership and executive development as well engagement, culture and ED&I, and has delivered leadership programmes globally. Wayne's corporate experience includes Chief People Officer and Executive Advisor to the Board at Sentiem, a London-based investor and venture builder, Chief People Officer at Xapo Bank, Chief People Officer and Chief of Staff at Quartz Enterprises, Global Head of Leadership

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Wayne has contributed chapters to two books: The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations' 'Dynamics at Boardroom Level' and Springer Nature's 'Management for Professionals: Global Diversity Management'. Wayne is a Visiting Professor of Leadership, Diversity, and Organisational Development at Middlesex University.



Introduction and overview

Why 'sustainable leadership'?

Understanding what really good leadership looks like is complicated. Partly because effective leadership needs to look different in different organisations, at different times, and within different contexts. Sustainable leadership describes a set of skills and behaviours that leaders can develop that allow them to be purposeful, intentional, and adapt their leadership behaviours to any organisational situation.

Simply put, leaders can create the right environment for sustainable high performance at work. By developing sustainability in leaders' decisions and behaviour, we help them positively impact the performance and wellbeing of their employees, and the effectiveness and impact of the organisation as a whole.

Conversely, leaders have the potential to make work more difficult for those around them, to negatively impact the culture of teams and the organisation as a whole. Their decisions carry enormous weight and their role-modelling (whether intentional or not) sends a message to everyone.

Who we are and what we do

We are WorkLifePsych, a team of experienced workplace psychologists, whose expertise lies in bringing scientific evidence to life in ways that equip employees to succeed at work. We support individuals to develop, grow and maintain their impact, their wellbeing, their productivity, and their interpersonal skills.

As scientist-practitioners, we use evidence to ground our recommendations, and use methods we know work. That's what makes all the difference to the impact we have. So, we avoid fads and fashions, and expose truisms and misconceptions about human performance at work.

We've coached newly-minted graduate trainees, middle managers, 'high potential' cohorts and members of C-suites all over the world. We've designed and deployed management and leadership development programmes, and supported leadership teams through change. We've created and run wellbeing programmes to improve resilience and sustainable behaviour at work. We've helped leaders cultivate psychological safety in their organisations and cultivate a coaching and high performance culture.

You can find out all about us by visiting WorkLifePsych.com

What we'd like to leave you with

If you're considering launching a leadership development initiative

We'd like this document to give you inspiration for crafting and delivering an impactful and evidence-based leadership development programme. Even more, we'd love it if it gave you pause for reflection, so you can avoid some of the most common pitfalls associated with leadership development.

If you're responsible for coordinating leadership development

With some leadership development experience under your belt, you may be wondering what you can learn from this. Perhaps you'll be inspired to broaden your definition of 'leadership', consider the alignment of your leadership development activities against your organisational strategy, or look again at the skills and personal qualities you're including in your programme.

If you're an existing or aspiring leader

We acknowledge that leadership is tough! Leadership represents a set of skills you can learn and develop, not an all-or-nothing attribute. We expect a lot of our leaders, so take this document as an inspiration to reflect on your own leadership style, your strengths and your development needs. In the accompanying podcast episodes and webinars, you'll find plenty of evidence-based tools to experiment with and potentially add to your leadership toolkit.

How you can find out more

The best way to learn more about our approach to leadership and leadership development is to visit the website at worklifepsych.com/SustainableLeadership

We also have a range of episodes dedicated to all aspects of leadership on our podcast, My Pocket Psych. This is available wherever you get your podcasts, or directly from worklifepsych.com/podcast

If you prefer to get your content in a visual way, check out our YouTube channel, where you'll find bite-sized explanations of key concepts, as well as longer podcast discussions about what it means to be a leader youtube.com/@worklifepsych

Don't hesitate to get in touch with your follow-up questions by emailing us at info@worklifepsych.com





1. Defining leadership

What is leadership?

Leadership describes a process where people in your business can motivate one or more other people towards achieving collective goals. This is usually successfully done through a collection of behaviours that shape people's beliefs, values, and understandings in any given context¹.

Leadership is about relationships and working collectively to achieve organisational goals. Effective leaders work through others by getting them to want to do something, rather than making them do it.

What do we mean by 'Sustainable Leadership'?

Firstly, it's important to clarify that this isn't another new model of leadership or silver bullet for your leadership challenges. Instead, this is an overarching ethos of leadership, anchored in behavioural science and evidence-based management, which should be interpreted and applied with your organisational context in mind.

¹ We use the definition of leadership from Haslam, S. A., Alvesson, M., & Reicher, S. D. (2024). Zombie leadership: Dead ideas that still walk among us. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 35(3), 101770.

It's a philosophy of leadership that's rooted in contextual behavioural science and emphasises sustainability at its core. "Contextual behavioural science highlights the importance of psychological flexibility as an important and impactful skill set for navigating life's challenges. This is the "ability to notice our internal and external experiences and, rather than reacting to or making decisions based on those experiences, making decisions based on what is important and workable in that specific situation."² Sustainability, in its broadest sense, implies a focus on how resources are sourced and utilised, and requires a concern for the impact of this activity on the wider environment. And so it is with leadership.

When we talk about sustainable leadership we mean the behaviours that lead to better long term impact³:

- **Being intentional** – noticing the context and doing what will work best
- **Being adaptable** – evaluating impact on self, others, the organisation, and the wider community.
- **Being purposeful** – focusing on meaningful actions and doing more of what matters

Think, feel, do

When we refer to sustainable leadership, we explore what leaders think, feel and do, all through the lens of sustainability. This includes the impact they have on their own performance and wellbeing, the performance and wellbeing of others, and the impact on the organisation, and society more broadly.

Whether it's the investment of their limited time each week, how they set targets for over-stretched teams, or the inter-personal behaviours they're prepared to accept in the name of profitability – each has an implication for the sustainability of performance, wellbeing, relationships, productivity and organisational success.

Think – how leaders think of themselves, others and society

Thinking and decision-making is a critical element of any role. For leaders, we point to the following critical cognitive capacities:

- How they see themselves and their role in the organisation
- How they think about their own thoughts and beliefs
- Awareness of their strengths and development needs
- Clarity on their values and the values of the organisation
- A capacity to take different perspectives, flexibly, as needed

² MacKinnon, R., Skews, R. and McIntosh, R. (2025), Addressing psychological discomfort with Acceptance and Commitment Coaching. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 20, 29-37.

³ These behaviours are drawn from Contextual Behavioural Science and collectively represent the skill of psychological flexibility. You can learn more about these skills by visiting worklifepsych.com/PsychologicalFlexibility

- Making decisions in an evidence-based way, with awareness of their own biases
- Consideration of the whole person when it comes to employees
- Awareness of the footprint of their organisation: social, environmental, financial, and ethical.
- Think strategically and with an eye on the longer term

Feel – leadership and emotional literacy

We're fundamentally emotional beings, and how and what we feel can impact our behaviour significantly. Leaders, both aspiring and existing, need to:

- Be aware and literate when it comes to their emotional experiences
- Notice the impact their emotional expression has on those around them
- Effectively de-couple emotions felt from behavioural responses
- Notice and effectively navigate difficult emotional experiences
- Make space for uncomfortable emotions, rather than avoid or suppress them
- Use their emotions with intention, to guide, motivate and inspire others

Do – leadership behaviour

Leadership behaviour is what others see leaders actually do. The action they take and how they respond to events impact them, those around them and the organisation. It's therefore important that leaders develop the capacity to:

- Align people and their efforts to the organisation's purpose
- Set and pursue meaningful goals, for themselves and others
- Cope effectively with and navigate challenges and setbacks
- Engage intentionally in self-care to maintain their wellbeing
- Manage their limited personal resources on an ongoing basis
- Bring their values to life, especially when under pressure
- Model sustainability in action to their colleagues
- Moderate what they require of those closest to them (personal and professional).

Taking the longer view

When discussing the sustainability of their approach, we challenge leaders to reflect on the longer-term implications of their actions. Because sustainability isn't about any single day at work, but rather the trends – and the consequences.

- If they've managed to 'survive' the week, is this really how they want to live every other week until they leave the workforce? If not, what can they change to ensure their working style doesn't leave them exhausted or feeling on edge?
- If they've achieved another extremely stretching goal, how satisfied and proud are they of the decisions and actions they took in order to get there? If they feel discomfort when they reflect on their approach, it's often a good indicator that goal attainment came at the cost of a values-led approach. We can leverage this discomfort to help them reconnect with what matters and adopt a more sustainable approach.
- When excusing their working style with "I just need to get through this busy period", we ask them to identify a time when they weren't battling feelings of busyness. And to consider whether they're simply jumping from one sprint to another, without looking up to see the direction of travel or whether they can actually keep sprinting.

Some myths about leadership

We think it's important to be honest about what leadership is and isn't. Unfortunately, like a lot of topics concerning human beings at work, there are some enduring myths about leadership and leaders⁴.

- **Myth 1:** We can only understand leadership by focusing on leaders; when in reality, leaders are dependent on other people to achieve collective goals. Leadership is really about being able to work with, and through, others.
- **Myth 2:** There are special people who have the right qualities to be leaders; whereas science clearly demonstrates that people can develop leadership skills, and what really matters is how the people they work with see them.
- **Myth 3:** Effective leadership is a simple set of particular behaviours; when in reality, effective leaders adapt to the context and the people they are working with.
- **Myth 4:** We all know a great leader when we see one; in fact, our view of what a leader looks like is influenced by unhelpful biases we have learned.
- **Myth 5:** Leadership is the same set of qualities in all leaders; actually, what leadership needs to be is different in different organisations and different contexts.
- **Myth 6:** Leadership is elite, expensive and exclusive to a special set of people; when leadership skills are beneficial to pretty much all employees and they are skills that can be developed throughout someone's career.
- **Myth 7:** Leadership is always good and it is always good for everyone; when the reality is that leaders need to reflect on how they are working, whether they are achieving goals in a sustainable way, and who is benefitting from the work they are doing.
- **Myth 8:** People can't cope without leaders; on the contrary – poor leadership can actually inhibit the success of employees and teams.

⁴ Our summary of leadership myths is adapted from Haslam, S. A., Alvesson, M., & Reicher, S. D. (2024). Zombie leadership: Dead ideas that still walk among us. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 35(3), 101770.

The benefits of sustainable leadership

There's no one single route to leadership burnout or career derailment. But by recognising the ways that unsustainable leadership shows up, we can easily see how developing more effective and healthy sustainable leadership behaviours impacts people, processes, performance, and the wider social impact of an organisation.

Typical changes we would expect to see when an organisation invests in sustainable leadership behaviours include:

- Reducing maladaptive coping strategies like micro-management, unhealthy working hours, procrastination, use of substances etc.
- Ensuring that the sometimes necessary brief sprints of pressure and workload don't extend to become an ongoing, unsustainable demand on individuals and teams ("We just need to get through the next two months...")
- A shift from leaders' neglecting of their own wellbeing through a lack of self-care, to proactive investment in health and understanding how to manage their own resources for long-term high impact
- Focusing on doing what matters, rather than being led by emotions or the various forms of psychological discomfort that our minds can give us
- Being more able and willing to seek help and support for themselves and their team when needed, reducing the negative impact of stress, loneliness and disconnection
- Effectively managing the boundaries between work and non-work, and realising that being an 'always on' leader can be counterproductive in the long term
- Reducing unhelpful over-identification with the job, and a rigid self-concept (i.e. 'I am my job')
- Developing an effective understanding of individual and team performance based on behavioural science and evidence, meaning less unproductive and demanding leadership behaviours
- Building more effective and healthier interpersonal relationships, while leaning away from maladaptive strategies such as manipulation
- Role-modeling these attitudes and behaviours to direct reports and the wider organisational community.



2. What does leadership mean in your organisation?

The contextual nature of leadership means it's important to look to your own organisation and consider how you're thinking and talking about leadership. We believe the best leaders are purposeful, intentional and adaptable in their actions, based on what's required to achieve collective goals and have an impact within the organisational context.

This means that what makes for good leaders in your organisation is not a simplistic, 'off-the-shelf' or 'one-size-fits-all' model of leadership. Effective leadership is a dynamic process that needs to adapt to the organisational context. So it is worth asking yourself what you need from your leaders.

We offer the following three questions to help you reflect and identify how you'd like to adjust your approach or even re-conceptualise leadership.

1. Who are your leaders?

Do you believe leadership behaviours can be exhibited at a variety of levels of seniority? Or is leadership reserved for those at the very top of the organisational hierarchy? Are you thinking about succession planning and how you can identify your future leaders? What risk is there that you are simply 'cloning' your existing leaders?

Re-thinking who leaders are and can be

Dealing with day-to-day challenges in organisations can sometimes leave little time to think strategically about who your leaders are, who they should be, and who the future leaders of your organisation are. However, we think it's important for organisations and their boards to challenge themselves to consider these things.

It's also still far too easy to have our thinking about leaders and leadership unhelpfully restricted by stereotypes and assumptions. Whether it's age, gender, technical background or education, we can each hold onto unhelpfully rigid views of who can lead and who 'should' be leading. When this manifests as policy and process, we see the 'cloning' of existing leaders, restricted access to leadership pathways and a failure to reflect society at large.

We want to draw attention to the benefits of inclusivity when it comes to leaders and leadership, one that considers leadership from an intersectional perspective. In practice? This means doing what's needed to avoid cloning existing leaders, questioning assumptions around skills and experience, actively seeking out leaders from under-represented populations and ensuring that all employees who wish to, can visualise themselves as a leader.

2. What is the impact of your leaders?

Leaders need to know how they are perceived by others, and how their decisions impact those around them. How does your organisation facilitate this valuable feedback? How receptive are your leaders to feedback? How do you measure impact, and do you know what you need your leaders to do to successfully turn organisational strategy into action?

The impact of poor leadership

Poor leadership carries significant costs to organisations. Financially, it can lead to missed opportunities, inefficiency, high turnover, and declining productivity – all of which damage the bottom line. A failure to communicate a clear vision or set clear direction and goals can result in confusion, wasted effort, and stalled progress.

The failure to role-model integrity, accountability, or respect, undermines trust and sets a negative tone for workplace behaviour directly impacting employee wellbeing, increasing stress, and reducing engagement. Culturally, poor leadership can breed toxic environments where fear, favouritism, and dysfunction become the norm.

The long-term impact on organisations can be significant – eroding organisational reputation, driving away talent, and compromising the ability to adapt and innovate – making poor leadership one of the most expensive liabilities an organisation can face.

As role models, leaders set the standard for behaviour, ethics, and work patterns, influencing how others approach their roles. Good leadership demonstrates company values in action – by behaviour, and by the choices leaders make in how they operate their business units or team.

3. How and when do you develop your leaders?

Do you offer development pathways for those aspiring to leadership? And for potential leaders, how do they access this support? As new leaders join your organisation, do you make use of the assessment information that came from their recruitment process to design development support? When do you intervene to provide development and support?

Proactive investments in development and support

Proactivity in planning and deploying leadership development activities pays dividends. Especially when compared to reactive, just-in-time or crisis-led responses. Supporting leaders when their symptoms of burnout are obvious is important, but it's also too late. Knowing what your leaders' development needs are, planning to address them, and doing so in a coordinated way gets better results than knee-jerk responses to problematic behaviours.

Creative thinking about developing leadership

Development for existing leaders is undoubtedly important. As are structured leadership development activities within your organisation. But it might be possible to enhance those elements with a little creative thinking about how to expand a culture of sustainable leadership throughout your organisation.

We believe in offering development activities creatively across the business. For example, some organisations may decide to offer leadership development opportunities upon request, as well as when people step into leadership. There may be additional ways that the key principles of leadership in your development activities can be echoed at other levels of seniority in the organisation. There may be benefits to creating an understanding and alignment of what it is to lead across all your development activities.



3. Why development matters

What is leadership development?

Typically leadership development is any intervention focused on an individual's ability to lead, influence, and guide others effectively within an organisation, by building the knowledge, skills, mindset, and behaviours necessary to inspire teams, drive results, and navigate complex challenges.

An area of focus

Leadership development isn't a single event or even a single programme of events. It's best thought of as an ongoing area of focus – just like finance and workplace wellbeing – that is never 'accomplished'. This development can happen through formal training programmes, coaching, mentoring, as well as on-the-job experiences, feedback, and self-reflection. When leaders see themselves as 'in development', they can remain open to new ways of approaching work and its challenges, rather than viewing themselves as the 'finished product'.

Leadership is what you do with the tools

In our experience as leadership development practitioners, an unhelpful focus is often given to the acquisition of leadership 'tools'. Whether this is a collection of technical skills, industry knowledge, software or even the development of a professional network, the emphasis is often on more tools, rather than how they are used.

Consider the leader who is presented with the opportunity to install software on every employees' computer to monitor their time spent 'at work'. Sustainably-minded leaders, who are purposeful, intentional and adaptable, will consider whether 'bossware' will have its intended impact and drive up productivity. Or, more likely, whether it will fly in the face of their stated values of trust and respect, potentially eroding employees' positive views of the organisation and negatively impact prospective employees' thoughts about joining.

Consider also the leader who introduces a new method for conducting meetings, which requires in-person attendance and negatively impacts remote employees. Or the leader who loudly reaffirms their commitment to work-life balance, yet uses an instant messaging platform to contact their direct reports at all hours.

While tools are useful to leaders, we think it's what you do with them that makes a difference. Understanding the impact or function of a tool is the most important skill.

Dealing effectively with common challenges

There are any number of challenges organisational leaders can face. While it's always been a VUCA world, leaders have to cope with rapid pace of change and technological development. The pressure of consequential decision-making, effective role-modelling and the responsibility for motivating others can take its toll if not managed.

Leaders can face acute challenges to their individual resources: time, attention and physical energy. They need to invest these where it's most appropriate to avoid unsustainable working hours, divided attention and neglecting true organisational priorities.

Effective leadership development equips individuals with the skills, knowledge and personal attributes that allow them to weather these challenges in a sustainable way. Through development of intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness, and an awareness of their context, they can navigate such challenges in a way that doesn't detract from their wellbeing and effectiveness, the experience of those that work with them, or the effectiveness of their organisation.

The costs of leadership development

Leadership development comes with both direct and indirect costs, but these should be seen as strategic investments rather than mere expenses. There's also the cost of time – leaders stepping away from day-to-day responsibilities to engage in development activities. That in itself can be a test of leadership. Can a leader step away and trust their team to carry on in their absence?

Beyond the financials, there's an emotional and cognitive cost for individuals undergoing leadership development. It often involves confronting personal blind spots, receiving tough feedback, and navigating discomfort as they stretch beyond their current capabilities. For the organisation, there's a risk that not all development efforts yield immediate results.

While leadership development may require upfront investment, it pays off through stronger leaders, healthier teams, better decision-making, retention of key talent, and organisational success. It's not just a cost – it's a commitment to the future and critical for the development of sustainable organisations.

The alternative?

Is there a simple alternative to developing your leaders? The decidedly less palatable alternative is to let leaders 'sink or swim', throwing them into the thick of leadership challenges and hoping that subjective estimations of their potential and ability turn out to be true. This way lies leadership behaviour that is later regretted, an emphasis on short-term survival through difficulties, and the neglect of wellbeing in a way that also impacts performance.

This also implies the ensuing need for tertiary interventions around wellbeing, relationships, productivity and so on. All of which come at a cost.

Those who step into leadership without structured developmental support can frequently fall back on the attitudes, skills and personal attributes that previously advanced them in their career. They can over rely on strengths that boosted their performance in a different context and experience frustration when they don't get similar results.

In the next sections, we want to outline the kinds of challenges leaders face that can be addressed by structured and evidence-based leadership development initiatives, specifically:

- Threats to wellbeing
- Threats to performance



Wellbeing challenges faced by leaders

Leadership roles often come with in-built demands that exceed role-holders' resources and capacity to cope effectively. Whether it's a demanding workload, a punishing schedule, the impact of business travel or the sense of isolation that leadership can bring, leaders can find themselves exposed to wellbeing challenges unlike any other role.

Drawing attention to this is important for two reasons:

- Investment in leaders' wellbeing is effectively an investment in their performance
- The impact their performance and behaviour has on the organisation justifies this focus

What do we mean by wellbeing?

Wellbeing at work is not simply the absence of illness or injury. It comprises the whole continuum of illness through to thriving at work and includes various facets of the human experience like connection with others, beliefs about competence and impact, connection with the work and its meaning and all the various manifestations of psychological health and illness that humans can experience.

We conceptualise leaders' wellbeing as comprising three broad themes:

1. Physical wellbeing

The threats to leaders' physical wellbeing are many and varied. From overly sedentary office time and a lack of intentional physical movement, through to disturbed sleep, unhealthy approaches to food and unsustainable coping strategies (see below), leaders can frequently de-prioritise their physical health until it presents itself as a significant problem. International business travel in particular comes with risks to wellbeing and performance, through a toxic combination of jet-lag, disturbed sleep, entertainment, compressed schedules and long working hours.

2. Psychological wellbeing

Leaders' psychological health can be threatened by a range of workplace factors like excessive workload, interpersonal conflict, and organisational change. There is long-standing quality evidence to show the deleterious impact these external demands have on psychological wellbeing.

As psychologists, we also want to highlight the internal factors that can erode leaders' psychological wellbeing. These include self-imposed pressure, adherence to unrealistic standards and perfectionism, imposterism (and its behavioural consequences) and an overly-rigid self-concept. These internal and external factors, and how leaders respond to them, can combine to cause psychological strain.

3. Social wellbeing

Leaders often talk about the loneliness of their jobs, especially at the very top of organisations. Whether literally missing peers, or not feeling the psychological safety to open up about their perspectives, leaders can find themselves disconnected from those around them – despite being surrounded by colleagues. Loneliness is not about being alone.⁵

⁵ Find out more about the negative impacts of workplace loneliness – and how it can be addressed – by visiting our resource page at worklifepsych.com/ConnectAndThrive

Whether full-blown loneliness or simply lower levels of fulfilling connection with others at work, the experience can erode leaders' wellbeing and their performance. It's made all the more difficult by the taboo associated with the experience and the stigma individuals feel when discussing their lack of meaningful connection.

The leader? The environment? Or both



It's important to consider the role of the demands leaders face, along with how they respond to them. When we equip leaders with more resources, they can deal with more of the demands – a simple and long-standing equation when it comes to the world of work.

But sometimes, leaders' responses to demands are ineffective or even counterproductive. This can be in the form of knee-jerk reactions to challenges and setbacks which see them relying on unhealthy coping mechanisms. Or it can be on seemingly helpful responses, like putting in longer hours to deal with workload, which only make their negative impact seen over time.

A key theme in our focus on sustainable leadership is the need to take a step back and look at leaders' behaviour, performance and wellbeing over the longer term. Anyone can survive a day or even a week of unsustainable and counterproductive behaviour. But examine the consequences of this over time and you'll quickly see the impact on performance, health and organisational effectiveness.

The role of coping and self-care

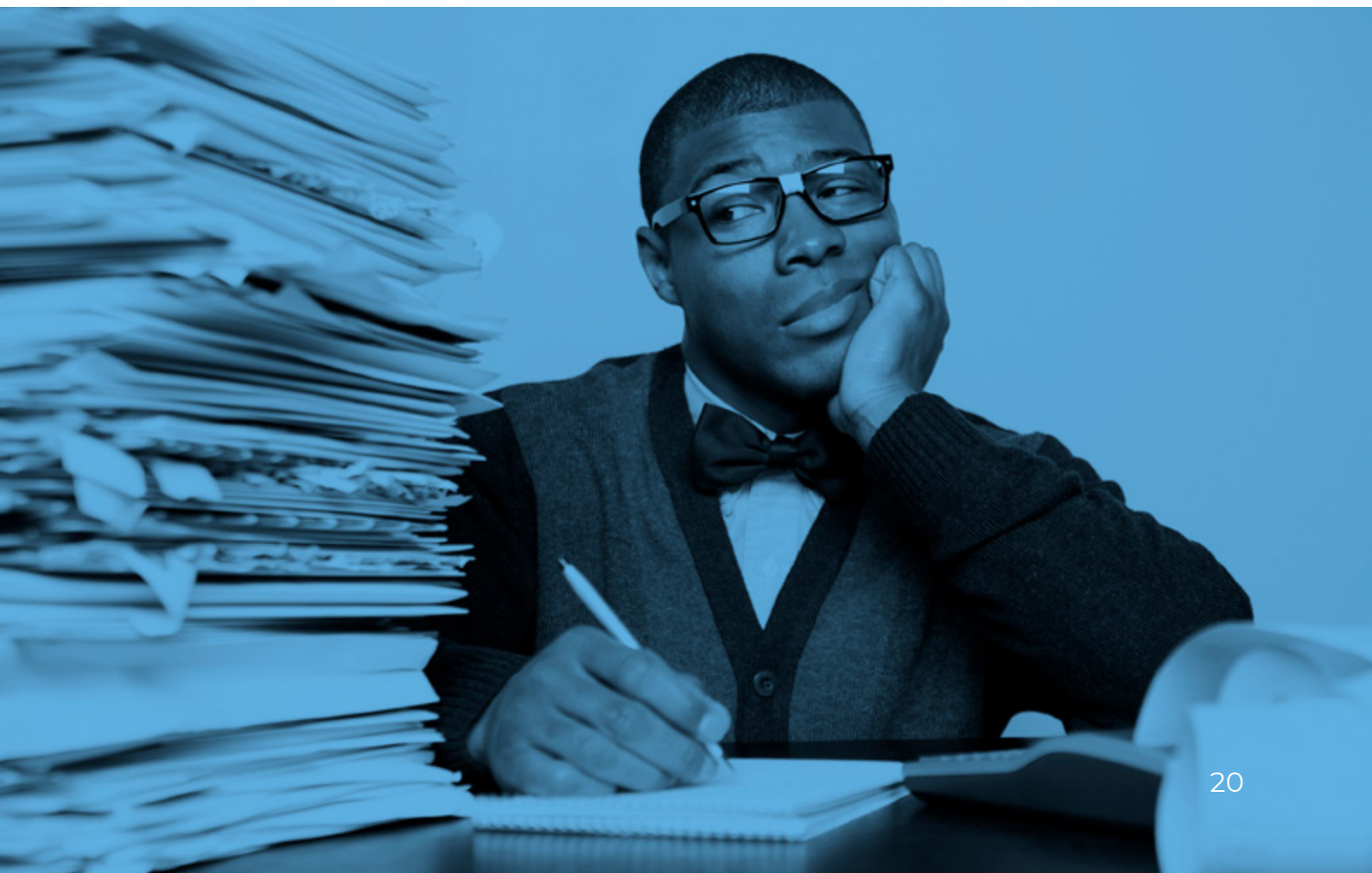
These terms may be used interchangeably (and they may even look similar), but there is a difference.

When it comes to workplace wellbeing, we frame self-care as all the activities employees engage in intentionally, with the aim of improving their situation. While this could include naps, long bubble baths and completing jigsaw puzzles, we also point to the self-care benefits of addressing long-avoided uncomfortable conversations. Of managing personal boundaries. Of taking care of unpaid bills and overdue paperwork.

Self-care may not, in fact, always be enjoyable. But if it's done properly, it will always be sustainable and leave the individual in a better place than before.

In contrast, coping is basically anything we do in response to challenges we encounter. So if self-care is proactive, coping is reactive. As we can't predict every challenge we might encounter, coping is a key skill for all of us. Sustainability of coping strategy is key. We promote the development of a 'coping toolkit' comprising a variety of approaches and methods, all of which can be used repeatedly without detracting from wellbeing or performance.

Leaders' attitudes to self-care and coping play a direct role in how they deal with challenges and how their wellbeing suffers as a result. We make this point to underline the role of the individual, as well as the organisational context, in leadership wellbeing.



Performance challenges faced by leaders

Fundamentally, the provision of quality, evidence-based leadership development contributes to individual and organisational success. And while it's difficult to perform at your best if your wellbeing is suffering, even the healthiest of leaders may find their performance threatened by their ways of thinking and behaving.

With carefully crafted development support, aspiring and existing leaders can side-step common pitfalls that come with progression and increased levels of responsibility.

These include, but are not limited to:

- Failure to delegate effectively, which can lead to overwhelm and its impact
- Ineffective relationship management, leading to erosion of trust
- Career derailment through over-played strengths, meaning organisational exit
- Failure to adjust to seniority, leaving leaders thinking and operating tactically
- Failure to read context, behaving inflexibly and on 'autopilot'
- Inability to handle complexity, giving rise to avoidance and delay
- Failure to develop others, creating a succession 'bottleneck' and loss of talent

All have serious implications for leadership performance and sustainability in post. And given the responsibilities of leaders, implications for organisational effectiveness and success. Performance issues like those we list above can take time to manifest and even longer to be addressed if leaders don't receive feedback or get access to professional development.



4. A fresh perspective on leadership development

While we are not proposing a new model of leadership, we are offering a fresh perspective on leadership development. One that's anchored in contextual behavioural science and evidence-based management.

We've brought together knowledge from across human performance and workplace psychology to share the different behaviours that lead to both better performance and better health in the workplace.

Putting it as simply as possible, there is no tension between wellbeing and performance. The science of human performance shows that environments where sustainable high performance happens are the same as those that create better wellbeing⁶. Similarly, the evidence is clear that wellbeing supports workplace performance⁷. Wellbeing is a prerequisite for sustained high performance, not a topic to address only after performance targets have been reached.

We believe that leaders who are more purposeful, intentional, and adaptable generate better performance and wellbeing, both for themselves and their teams.

⁶ Based on evidence of the impact of higher psychological flexibility on workplace performance and wellbeing.

⁷ Based on evidence from models such as the Job-Demands resources Model: Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands resources model: State of the art. *Journal of managerial psychology* 22(3), 309-328.

Leadership essentials: a 'three-legged stool'

To keep things simple when exploring leadership, we emphasise three core areas of focus, all of which are equally important. These are the skills that leaders need, and should be represented in leadership development activities. We frame it as a 'three-legged stool', which definitely won't be effective unless all three legs are present.

These areas of focus represent all the ways in which leaders might have impact or influence within an organisation. In our approach we explore how leaders can be purposeful, intentional and adaptable in each of these areas to have the greatest and most sustainable impact on both performance and wellbeing in the organisation.

The skills we develop in our programmes are evidence-based ways to improve both workplace performance⁸ and workplace wellbeing⁹. There are of course a host of technical skills that leaders can benefit from acquiring. However, we propose the above three areas as priorities for the selection and development of organisational leaders due to their fundamental impact on the organisation, its members and wider stakeholders.

1. Contextual awareness

2. Intrapersonal skills

3. Interpersonal skills



⁸ Koopmans, L., Bernaards, C. M., Hildebrandt, V. H., Schaufeli, W. B., de Vet Henrica, C. W., & Van Der Beek, A. J. (2011). Conceptual frameworks of individual work performance: A systematic review. *Journal of occupational and environmental medicine*, 53(8), 856-866.

⁹ Shuck, B., Hart, J., Walker, K., & Keith, R. (2023). Work determinants of health: New directions for research and practice in human resource development. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 34(2), 227-244.

1. Contextual awareness

This set of skills is about leaders being purposeful, intentional and adaptable in relation to the specific organisational context within which they are working. Specific skills focus on building sensitivity to and appreciation of the organisation context at various levels, understanding organisational culture and their role in shaping it, and being able to remain in contact with the present moment of a context to take cues from it.

Some key questions these skills help leaders to answer are:

- What's my impact on the organisation, and am I having the impact I want to have?
- What culture of work am I creating or supporting?
- Am I helping the organisation to adapt to its evolving context?
- What kind of role model am I being in the organisation?
- What takes me away from the present moment, and who does this impact?

Noticing organisational impact

This skill focuses on a leader's understanding of their impact at the macro level. This means thinking about the organisational context; including their operational impact, financial impact, whether they are moving strategy forward, their impact on customers, as well as social and environmental stakeholders. Finally it's about the impact on people within the organisation. Doing this well means using the organisational context – not the competition – as the cue for focus and action.

Understanding and developing the culture of work

Leaders play a role in developing and managing the workplace culture, both within teams, and across the organisation. For leaders to be most impactful, they need to think about the culture of work they are creating or supporting. This means understanding how to create the behavioural norms for high performance and wellbeing in your organisational context – including the critical impact of effective and authentic role-modelling. It also means being able to notice and willing to address counter-productive work practices.

Organisational adaptability and flexibility

This skill is about a leaders' capacity to attune to the organisational context they are in at any given time, intentionally bringing their attention to the present moment and its demands. They then use the information provided by the here and now to influence not only their behaviour but the behaviour of others. They can also use it to guide decisions and interactions, while having consideration for the wider industrial, community and international context when working towards goals. Organisations don't exist in a vacuum – and sustainable organisations adapt.

Being a role model within the organisation

While there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of leadership, there is some consensus on the principles of good, ethical conduct for leaders within organisations¹⁰. Leaders should be willing to lead by example within their organisation. They should aim to act with integrity, transparency, accountability and fairness. Finally, leaders should demonstrate responsible business practices, both towards individuals in the organisation, the organisation itself, and its wider societal and environmental impact.



2. Intrapersonal skills

This set of skills is about leaders being purposeful, intentional and adaptable in relation to themselves. Specific skills focus on building greater awareness of self, connecting with what is important, evaluating personal impact, and balancing personal demands and resources.

Some key questions these skills help leaders to answer are:

- What are my strengths and areas for development?
- Who do I want to be as a leader, and what can I do with these qualities?
- Is what I am doing working, and am I having the impact I want to have?
- Am I working in a way that is sustainable for me, and for my team?
- Fundamentally, what really matters to me as a person?

¹⁰ We refer here to the Code of Conduct for Directors, published by the Institute of Directors in 2024
<https://www.iod.com/resources/iod-code-of-conduct-for-directors/>

Building greater self-awareness

This aspect of leadership concerns leaders' levels of self-awareness, what they think and how they feel. It includes how they conceptualise themselves and their capabilities, their awareness of their values and preferences, their ability to think about their own thinking, side-step their biases and make quality decisions. It includes their emotional literacy and self-management, their capacity to learn from experience, and how much they can flex their perspectives as the situation requires it.

Connecting with what is important

This relates to both what is important in terms of achieving tasks and goals; but it also relates to a sense of meaningfulness and purpose in work. This set of skills impacts not only performance in the workplace by doing what matters, but it also enhances wellbeing. Research shows that work that is dignified and connected to a sense of value and worth is beneficial to our wellbeing.

Evaluating personal impact

This is a key skill for leaders that relates to noticing the impact of their behaviour. The focus could be on the direct impact of their behaviour on achieving work goals, but it can also be the impact they have on the people they work with. This skill helps leaders to ask whether they are having the impact they want to have, and the extent to which what they are doing is workable longer term. It's not just about what a leader does, but also about how they do it. Reflecting on both these things can lead to greater longer term success.

Balancing personal demands and resources

Leaders can face demands when they have the appropriate resources. We earlier explored some of the various threats to leaders' wellbeing and the role that self-care and coping play. Self-aware leaders invest in proactive self-care, to boost their resources, in ways they know work for them. And they effectively deal with the demands placed on them through the judicious and intentional use of healthy and sustainable coping strategies.

Our ethos when it comes to wellbeing is to emphasise the skills, attitudes and personal attributes that positively contribute to leaders' wellbeing and minimise the risk of work-related ill health and burnout. It's very much a case of 'prevention is better than cure'.

Self-compassion

Compassion doesn't mean 'soft' or not caring about quality or performance. Compassion doesn't mean giving up at the first sign of challenge. At its heart, there are two key elements to compassion: a recognition of our humanity and fallibility, and a desire to do something to improve our situation.

Cultivating self-compassion can help leaders avoid adhering to rigid rules about what they 'should' be able to achieve or persist through. It can help them side-step a need to have all

the answers. To always be in control. Self-compassion is the answer to that ‘dictator within’ that demands ever-increasing levels of excellence and perfection. Self-compassion can also support the cultivation of compassion for others. This helps leaders see the individuals they work with as something beyond roles and job titles.



3. Interpersonal skills

This set of skills is about leaders being purposeful, intentional and adaptable in relation to others. Specific skills focus on leadership in action through relationships with others, sharing values to put strategy and mission into action, setting the tone and developing others.

Some key questions these skills help leaders to answer are:

- How do I build effective relationships with others in the workplace?
- How do I share the vision and values of what we are trying to accomplish?
- How should I balance the load for my team?
- What are the environments I’m creating, both physical and social – and are they working well?

Building effective relationships with others

Effective leaders work through others. Essential to doing that is the ability to develop and maintain good working relationships with others. Often, once leaders have explored the intra-personal relationship they have with themselves, they have an excellent understanding of how to build better relationships with the people they work with. Other areas of focus in this skill are how leaders use their relationships to notice and address stress and overwhelm in others, and share a sense of meaning and purpose in the work a team is tackling.

Sharing vision and values

Leaders who create a clear purpose are likely to effectively get things done. Part of this is completing tasks related to organisational goals – but effective leadership is more than that. It is also about creating motivation in others, shaping the way people think through good communication, creating spaces for innovation, and helping teams to adapt to evolving organisational contexts. Employees who understand the vision and values, and see them enacted consistently in their leaders' everyday behaviour, are more likely to understand their own contribution to organisational success, as well as experience more psychological safety.

Balancing the load

Leaders make decisions on how the resources within teams are deployed, and so a key skill is being able to share the load in a way that is workable and effective. This is important not just from the perspective of achieving goals and completing tasks, but also to make sure individuals have the right resources needed to contribute what they've been asked to do. If leaders get the capacity right for their team, then they are likely to hit a 'sweet spot' in terms of performance – with each individual working to their capacity without being underutilised or overwhelmed. This sounds simple, but it's a dynamic process that requires good relationships and ongoing communication to keep the demands and resources balanced over time.

Managing the physical and social environment

Leaders play a key role in managing both the physical and social environments in which their teams operate. In simple terms this means creating safe spaces for employees and facilitating coworker support and social networks. Equally important is the ability of leaders to tackle both performance issues and wellbeing issues with integrity, fairness and transparency. We help leaders develop their confidence and willingness to have those hard but important conversations.

Developing others

The best leaders intentionally and generously develop those around them. They share their expertise, give others a chance to step into responsibility, coaching their direct reports to higher and more sustainable levels of performance. Rather than seeing development of others as an optional extra, or even a chore, leaders need to see this as a core part of their role, making the time and space for it in their everyday routines.



5. What makes for good quality leadership development?

The challenges of sourcing quality solutions

We recognise it's hard to identify and work with external providers when it comes to developing your future and existing leaders.

There is the ever-present temptation to do what has always been done, simply replicating methods and approaches from previous years. But without truly knowing if something has worked for you and your leaders, what is the point in repeating it?

There can also be the temptation to follow market trends, compelling marketing messages, or look to the competition for inspiration. This can lead to the rollout of development interventions that lack evidence or the contextual sensitivity that makes all the difference. A related point is the lure of the business school. Long established and reputable academic institutions feature in this space, but don't always have the practitioner experience to ground theory, nor the focus on the interpersonal skills that make all the difference.

Even when taking a more contextually sensitive and evidence-based approach, we recognise the challenges inherent to being an evidence-based practitioner. The additional workload, the challenging questions, the risk of feeling like a 'lone wolf' in the organisation.

Leadership development doesn't take place in a vacuum, and we also recognise the challenges of managing senior stakeholders' perspectives and preferences when it comes to leadership development.

The design of leadership development activities can be complicated by the fact that you're supporting a time-poor population. It can therefore be tempting to look for solutions that promise to deliver a lot in very short slices of time. But the reflection, discussion, and behavioural experimentation that are crucial for learning and development are difficult to achieve in one-off webinars or half-day offsites.

How we approach leadership development

Leadership development, from our perspective, is both a strategic investment and a strategic imperative. It is not just about teaching people how to manage others, although that is undoubtedly an outcome. It is about helping leaders grow the self-awareness, emotional intelligence, contextual sensitivity and critical thinking skills needed to lead with purpose, alignment and integrity whilst maintaining the well-being of themselves and their teams. It is ensuring that leaders are developed through continuous learning, feedback, experience, and reflection throughout their careers.

Done well, leadership development is a systemic organisational intervention. It helps individuals unlock their potential, supports healthier team dynamics, drives better decision-making, and builds a stronger culture. It also ensures a pipeline of capable leaders who can navigate uncertainty, adapt to change, and inspire others along the way. But it has to be intentional – rooted in real-world challenges, aligned with organisational purpose, strategy and values. It needs to be supported through coaching and mentoring and through the practices that drive accountability – such as OKRs/goal setting and performance management.

Investing in leadership development isn't just about performance – it's about shaping environments where people thrive, innovation flourishes, and long-term success becomes possible.

Key areas to review

We're on a mission to change how leadership is thought of and how leadership development initiatives are designed and deployed. And so, we highlight the following areas for improvement we regularly encounter when discussing development with organisations in our network.

When you consider your own leadership development initiatives – or your plans to introduce structured development – we encourage you to reflect these principles in your plans. To question your assumptions about leadership and who your organisational leaders could be. And to ground your work in the organisational context where leadership will actually take place.

1. Contextual sensitivity

Leadership development activities must be sensitive to the context of the organisations where leaders actually work. Not built on case studies from decades ago, or on models copied from the competition. While more difficult, it's beneficial to start afresh, review the mission, vision, values and strategy of the organisation and ask: what do we want of our leaders, now and in the future?

2. Evidence-based models, skills and approaches

Leadership literature is replete with myths and received wisdoms. We've highlighted a few fundamental misunderstandings about leadership earlier in this paper. An evidence-based approach takes account of the best available scientific evidence, the expertise of the leadership development practitioners, the organisational context and the needs of the population impacted by the intervention.

3. Wellbeing, self-care and coping

We believe we've made the case for prioritising leaders' wellbeing, and this includes equipping them with the skills and awareness to manage and maintain their health while addressing challenges. Consider the difference between using exercise and alcohol to deal with a tough day at work. The difference between confiding in a trusted friend and spending the evening eating a mountain of junk food. While any of these can lead to short-term feelings of relief and relaxation, some of these will over time erode wellbeing and performance.

It's therefore key that leaders learn how to prioritise proactive self-care routines to maintain their wellbeing and performance, while cultivating a selection of effective and sustainable coping strategies for when they encounter challenges and setbacks.

4. Structure of development activities

Following our principle that leadership development isn't an event, we want leadership development to be thought of as an ongoing area of focus for organisations. Yes, this can include structured development programmes, coaching initiatives and training courses. But it will be most impactful when combined with ongoing reflection, behavioural experimentation and course adjustments, to retain alignment with organisational strategies.

5. Leadership coaching

Leaders can experience real benefit and change as a result of coaching – when that coaching is evidence-based and facilitated by professional, accredited and experienced coaches. It allows leaders to explore their unique, personal development challenges and learn how to implement the knowledge and skills they acquire on a structured programme. Fundamentally, it represents a safe place for them to discuss their doubts and concerns, balanced by coach support and the all-important ingredient of accountability.

6. Whole person development

This reflects the importance of considering the leader in development as more than their role, and as more than the skills and knowledge that are prerequisites for success in that role. It means acknowledging that they have passions and preferences, a life outside of the workplace, goals for themselves, and a unique way of seeing the world. It also reflects the importance of addressing not just deficits in knowledge, but giving them the opportunity to acquire the thinking skills, the emotional literacy and the interpersonal skills that will make their experience of work so much more rewarding – and sustainable.

7. Addressing over-played strengths

Career derailment is often the result of overplaying existing strengths, in an inflexible and sometimes automatic way. Comprehensive leadership development allows leaders to understand their strengths, but also how to moderate them, in context. This is especially important for newly-appointed and aspiring leaders, who may not realise that the strengths that represented effectiveness in their previous role may not necessarily be what's required in leadership.

8. Support and accountability

Good quality leadership development will balance provision of support (knowledge, skills, insights, space and time to learn) with accountability – a clear expectation that leaders will apply their learning for the good of the organisation.

9. Asynchronous learning

Given the workplace demands placed on leaders, it's not realistic to expect all development can take place in face-to-face contexts, such as offsite training events. Leaders benefit from an opportunity to reflect and engage in learning in self-directed and asynchronous ways. This can take the form of preparatory and follow-up learning mediated by technology, peer accountability and reflection groups.

10. Turning insight into action

There is always the risk with learning that delegates focus on concepts and theory at the expense of application. All leadership development interventions need to include space for leaders to turn what they've learned into behavioural experiments in the workplace. As we find ourselves saying in coaching repeatedly, knowing is not the same as doing. This means attendance at workshops is only the very start of learning – skill and acquisition and growth happen as a result of practical application.



6. How we can help

We'd love to discuss how we can help your leaders be their best selves, and achieve high performance via sustainable means. Whatever stage of the leadership journey you're at, we believe we can add valuable insight and experience.

Contexts where we can add value

You're considering leadership development options

If you're looking at introducing leadership development for the first time – or the first time in a while – we can help you avoid the most common pitfalls, design activities and interventions based on your needs, and bring the science to life through evidence-based tools and techniques.

You have an established leadership development pathway

If you already have a selection of leadership development activities in place, we can help you evaluate their suitability for your present context. We can audit their effectiveness and alignment against your strategy. And should you identify gaps in your leadership proposition, we can contribute targeted modules

The wellbeing of your leaders is a priority

Whether you want to address wellbeing proactively, or you're already aware of a need to support leaders' wellbeing, we can provide structured training and coaching support to help your leaders engage in the self-care and coping activities that contribute to a sustainable approach. Where wellbeing is already a presenting issue, we can provide stress management support and help leaders develop the psychological flexibility that boosts wellbeing and performance.

If you, as a leader, would like support

If reading this paper has prompted you to reflect on your own leadership style, we'd love to discuss how we can provide coaching to help you get to where you want to be. You can arrange a free no-obligation 'Chemistry session' with one of our leadership team by visiting worklifepsych.com/appointments



How we bring this to life

Our core proposition is focused on the provision of coaching, training and development programmes to employees at all levels. With leaders in mind, we can provide the following tailored solutions.

Leadership coaching

Leaders can benefit from one-to-one coaching to build their self-awareness, interpersonal effectiveness, productivity and wellbeing. The coaching context is one where they can be as open and honest as possible and benefit from the objective perspective of a coaching psychologist. Coaching can act as an ideal adjunct to existing leadership development activities and represents a place where leaders can discuss and reflect on the application of their new skills.

Find out more about our approach to coaching, as well as the details of our coaching team, by visiting worklifepsych.com/coaching

Development programmes

We can design and deploy an end-to-end leadership development programme for your organisation, designed around your vision, values and strategy. Built to address your leaders' specific needs, our evidence-based programmes reflect the issues we've raised in this paper, ensuring delegates get the support and accountability they need. And if you have an existing programme, we can seamlessly design and integrate new content to take it to the next level. We have created development programmes for groups as small as seven leaders, and as large as international programmes supporting several concurrent cohorts.

Find out more about our approach to development by visiting worklifepsych.com/development

Training workshops

We already have a wide range of workshops addressing common leadership topics which we can tailor to any organisational context. From learning how to improve productivity and wellbeing through sleep, building resilience and coping strategies, to having difficult conversations, to learning how to bring values to life in everyday working situations. We guarantee a stimulating, challenging and supportive learning environment.

You can find a full list of our training programmes by visiting worklifepsych.com/training

What our clients say

“ We engaged Richard in a series of 1:1 coaching sessions. Initially they complimented our workshops, providing a confidential place for individuals to share their own situational challenges and personal development needs. We have evolved these sessions to bring new directors on board and provide them the opportunity to be coached and be part of the shared team experience. By investing in these coaching sessions, it has enabled our new directors to feel confident in their development journeys and provides them tools to enable them to be more effective leaders. The results have been quicker than we thought, building personal awareness and creating visibly changed behaviours.

Richard brings with him a wealth of behavioural coaching experience backed by scientific psychological insight, this, combined with his understated delivery style gives him a very high level of credibility with all colleagues. He has an ability to make you think, to develop your personal awareness and take ownership for change. ”

Tim O'Connor

Managing Director, HBI Laleham

“ We asked Richard and the WorkLifePsych team to assist in the start-up phase of our new business. As a new talent-based creative business, unencumbered from legacy ways of working we were determined to put in place the most contemporary and relevant people strategy.

Richard worked closely with us to develop our people strategy, including how to clarify and communicate our organisation's values, how to identify and nurture talent and how to create a sustainable people development strategy. Richard continues to support Untold Studios. He is insightful, attentive and challenging in all the right ways. He has been instrumental in our launch and remains a supportive and trusted advisor. I have no hesitation in recommending Richard to other startups – I've no doubt Richard and his team will have a huge positive impact on any new business. ”

Darren O'Kelly

Co-founder and CEO at Untold Studios

“ There is a before and an after working with Richard. Once you embark on the coaching journey, be prepared for a tremendous positive change in your daily life.

Thanks to his strong experience, focus, kindness and skills, Richard successfully and gently steers you towards personal breakthroughs and discoveries.

The impact of having Richard as a coach has influenced me to sign up my leadership team for the same programme. ”

Alvaro Duarte

VP Live Games, Voodoo

“ We asked WorkLifePsych to design and run a bespoke development programme for us. Richard demonstrated a strong drive to understand our unique needs as a business, and to ensure that what he designed was a good fit for us and our employees. Richard and his team developed four, high-quality and interactive workshops for the programme, supported by one-to-one coaching sessions.

We could see improvements in team performance before the programme even finished. Our managers have gained confidence and are more cheerful as they go about their work – despite the day to day challenges of management.

We are extremely pleased with the programme and its impact and wouldn't hesitate to recommend Richard and WorkLifePsych. They have exceeded our expectations. ”

Conall Lavery

CEO, Real World Analytics

“ We retained WorkLifePsych to design and deliver workshops on essential coaching skills to the delegates on our “Inspire” leadership development programme. Richard worked closely with us to identify our requirements and ensured that he reflected our company's culture in the final version of the workshop.

Having observed the delivery of one of the workshops, I would say that Richard's style engaged and challenged the delegates. He responded well to all their questions and provided feedback and support throughout the various practical components of the workshop. He delivered a workshop that met our needs perfectly.

I would have no hesitation in recommending WorkLifePsych as a provider of coaching skills and development interventions more generally and I look forward to working with Richard again. ”

Louise Morris

Certas Energy