



Leading with Safe Uncertainty

Living and leading with ambiguity and change

Doubt, it seems to me, is the central condition of a human being in the 20th century. One of the things that has happened to us in the 20th century as a human race is to learn how certainty crumbles in your hand. We cannot any longer have a fixed view of anything - Salman Rushdie (1988)

The new norm for leaders is guiding organisations and individuals through ongoing change and uncertainty.

Research on individuals undergoing transition indicates it is not change itself that is stressful; it's the feeling of not knowing and being out of control. Our fear driven response to loss of control is to try and solve the problem; to create a solution that will 'fix' things. The issue is that we may feel vulnerable and exposed (unsafe) in this environment; yet there are opportunities within uncertainty if we can release and manage the creative tension that arises, both within ourselves and those we lead.

"For many years, the study of change management and leadership revolved around the provision of control and certainty to those who were impacted by the changes so as to alleviate a very natural cause of resistance to change – that being lack of control, uncertainty of the future and fear that we will be unable to cope. Latest thinking in change leadership has evolved whereby a powerful element of a change leader's work is in building the resilience of their people and enabling them to live more comfortably with impermanence, uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of control". Keeley, J 2009

This paper introduces the concept of safe uncertainty, the ability to lead whilst unknowing; working with the creative tension that arises when there is no clear answer.

A position of safe uncertainty is a framework for thinking about one's work, orientating one away from certainty to fit, a framework for helping people to fallout of love with the idea that solutions solve things. Mason, B (1993)

The concept of safe uncertainty was initially described by Barry Mason, working in the field of family therapy. He used a four-quadrant model to describe unsafe uncertainty, safe uncertainty, safe certainty and safe uncertainty. He illustrated how a shift in thinking to allow space for safe uncertainty can help the dynamics and interactions that occur in a therapeutic setting. Jeremy Keeley developed this approach and brought it into an individual context, developing the model further, suggesting safe uncertainty would help individuals:

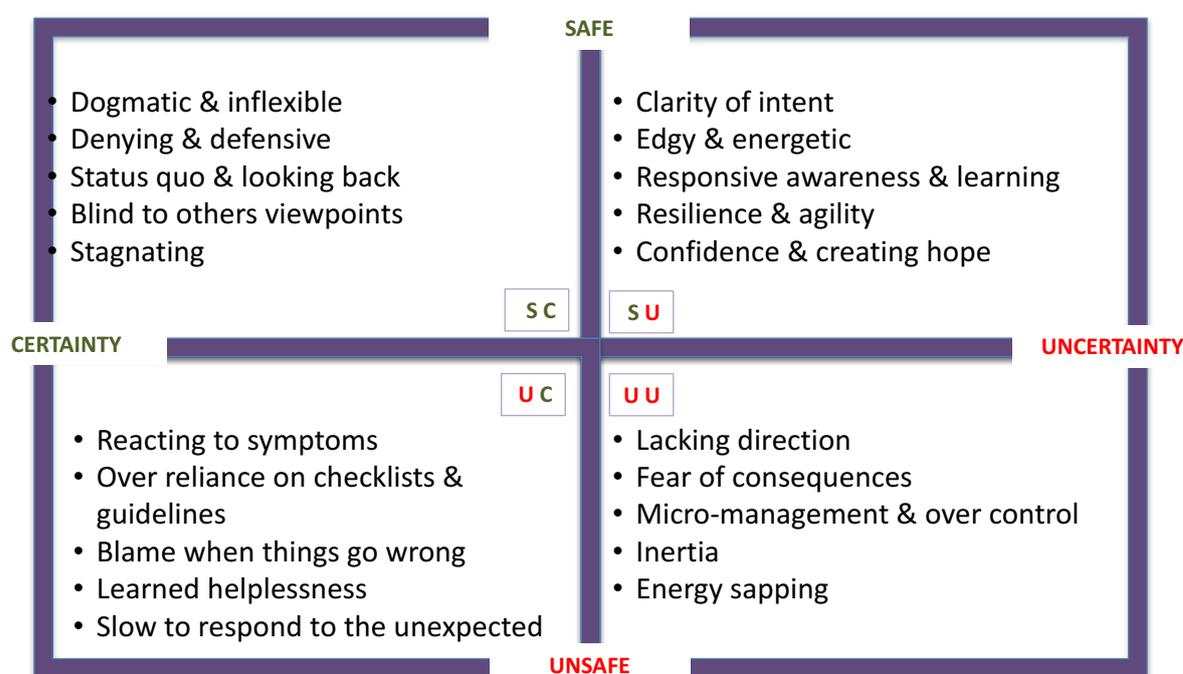
"... distinguish between their real and genuine need for safety and their apparent and false need for certainty, enabling them to really focus on safety whilst thriving in uncertainty and allowing the possibilities to emerge". Keeley, J 2009



We were struck by the parallels between this concept and our ongoing work on conscious leadership – creating awareness and creativity by releasing reactive and controlling behaviours. We have worked for several years with Bob Anderson’s framework – the Leadership Circle™ profile and Keeley’s concept for individual safe uncertainty clearly maps against the upper (creative) part of the Leadership 360 profile and the Leadership Culture Survey.

Based on our experience of working with corporate organisations at all stages of growth, consolidation and change, the next step was to consider the organisational characteristics that we felt would manifest in each of the four quadrants:

Organisational Operating Domains



These are stressing the negative aspects to make a point; no organisation sits in a single quadrant across its entirety - but many will show characteristics typical of the descriptors above.

Unsafe Uncertainty

An environment that has come to light in many recent exposures of organisational failure. An accident waiting to happen with potential (or actual) serious consequences. At one level, everyone knows how bad things are but there is denial, obfuscation and hope that things will just go away. A culture where fear of possible consequence outweighs the courage to speak out for change, where lack of confidence perceives rules and procedures as a substitute for hands-on leadership.



Unsafe Certainty

Often a reaction to the previous quadrant - reacting to issues that surface through blame and restrictive protocols. This in turn may well demoralise those very individuals who are committed to the organisation and could be instrumental in supporting positive change. An atmosphere of false certainty – *'we've thought of that and put a checklist in'*, that may well react to a symptom rather than identify the root cause of an issue. Because of this belief that things are OK, there is often a time lag when evidence to the contrary is presented

Safe Certainty

The domain of the market leader or sole supplier with no perceived pressure for change. Potentially confident to the point of arrogance, unable and/or unwilling to listen to feedback either internal or external. Typically, will defend status quo and get defensive when challenged as to alternative approaches; hence perceived as one dimensional and inflexible. May well stagnate and be superseded by more agile and responsive competitors.

Safe Uncertainty

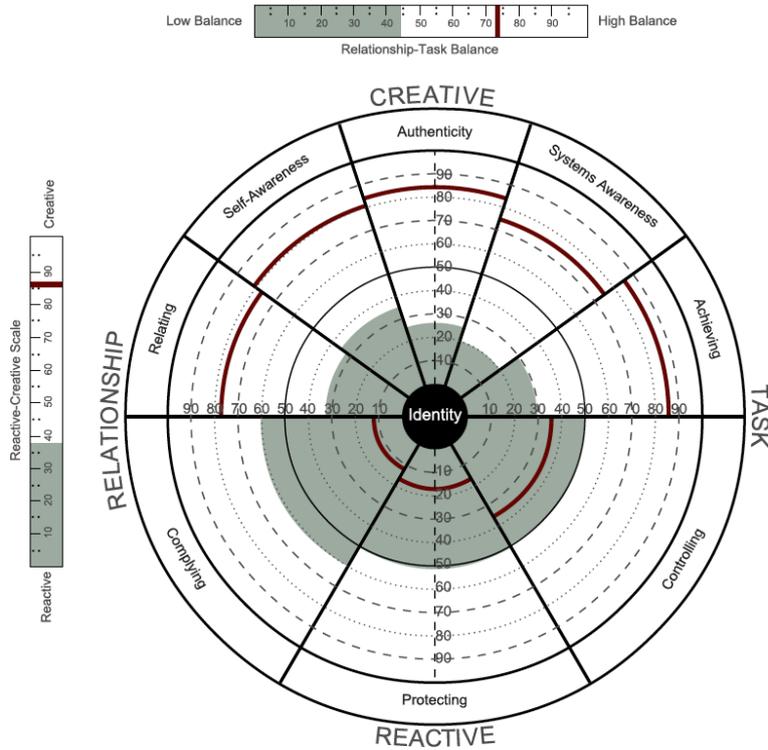
Safety comes from clarity of intent and confidence in delivery – *'we know exactly where we are going, we're just not too sure as to how we're going to get there, but we will'*. Open and responsive to feedback externally and internally with the resilience to manage short term setbacks. A culture of enablement and personal leadership with high levels of engagement and commitment to a shared purpose. Edgy and energising once the realisation and acceptance of a safe and supportive environment is achieved.

Leading with Safe Uncertainty

So, how to diagnose the existing culture, build on the best aspects and set a route map for a culture that embraces safe uncertainty? There are a wealth of cultural diagnostic tools and frameworks; our perspective focuses on the leadership culture. The values, beliefs and subsequent behaviours of the leadership team will shape and inform the culture that pervades the organisation.

This does not in any way negate the use of engagement surveys, individual and team profiling or wider organisational diagnostics; it merely reflects our own experience over the last 20 years across a breadth and depth of organisations. If the senior leadership team are not committed, engaged and willing to examine the impact of their own behaviours on the overall culture – nothing will change.

Recognising pressures on time, resource and availability of senior teams we felt that any approach had to be focused, accessible and able to operate virtually. Referring back to the Leadership Circle™, we have been using the Leadership Culture Survey to give a highly visual and structured insight into both the existing culture and the shared vision for change. Well validated and with a direct link to organisational performance, an approach such as this provides credibility and robustness to engage senior teams.



Percentile Scores:
 All scores are displayed as percentile scores comparing your scores to our norm base. High scores are beyond the 67th percentile. Low scores are below the 33rd percentile.

Sample Culture Survey

Key:
 ■ Desired Culture
 ■ Actual Culture

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Summary

Changing times need changes in perspectives. We need to evolve the way we lead and structure our organisations to respond to changes in the political, economic and social landscape of the 21st century. There is no panacea, no definitive answer to the challenges that leaders face. What there is, is a body of substantive learning from a wide range of perspectives (research, practitioner, ethical) that can be blended and adapted to current circumstances. Our aim is to encompass these perspectives and adapt/evolve these to meet current needs – leading with safe uncertainty is one such approach.

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