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Supporting leadership through a critical incident.

How Eleos brought specialist psychological expertise to a senior leadership team navigating the aftermath of a critical incident.

CRITICAL INCIDENT SUPPORT



The challenge

There are moments in organisational life when the usual expectations of leadership become considerably more complex.

A critical incident can leave people trying to make sense of something deeply distressing, while the organisation must continue to function around them. Reactions are rarely uniform or predictable. Some people may need to talk, others may withdraw, and concerns can emerge in ways that are not immediately recognisable as responses to what has happened.

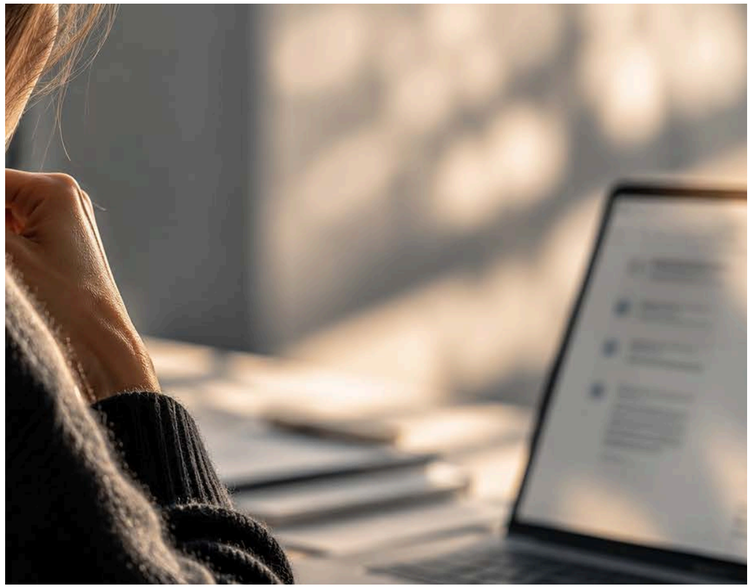
For those leading the organisation, this creates a particular tension. They are expected to provide reassurance, make decisions and respond sensitively to the needs of others, often while managing their own emotional reactions and uncertainties.

Even experienced leaders can find themselves questioning their judgement. Is this response appropriate? Are we doing enough? Are we inadvertently making things more difficult? What should we be concerned about, and what might be an understandable reaction to extraordinary circumstances?

These are not simply questions of management or organisational procedure. They require an understanding of the psychological impact of critical events, the different ways people respond to distress and the demands placed on those who carry responsibility for others.

Following a significant incident affecting its workforce, an organisation sought Eleos's specialist psychological expertise to support its senior leadership team through the immediate aftermath and the weeks that followed.

“Leadership can mean providing reassurance while carrying uncertainty of your own”.



Our approach

The starting point was a recognition that the leadership team occupied two positions simultaneously: they were responsible for the organisation's response, but they were also people affected by the circumstances themselves.

Supporting them meant attending to both.

Eleos provided access to a senior psychologist who could bring an independent clinical perspective to the experiences, concerns and decisions confronting the team. This was not about taking over the organisation's response or introducing another layer of process. It was about ensuring that those carrying responsibility had somewhere to bring their uncertainties, consider what they were seeing and draw on psychological expertise when their usual professional experience might not provide all the answers.

An important feature of the work was the reassurance that came from recognising what the leadership team was already doing well.

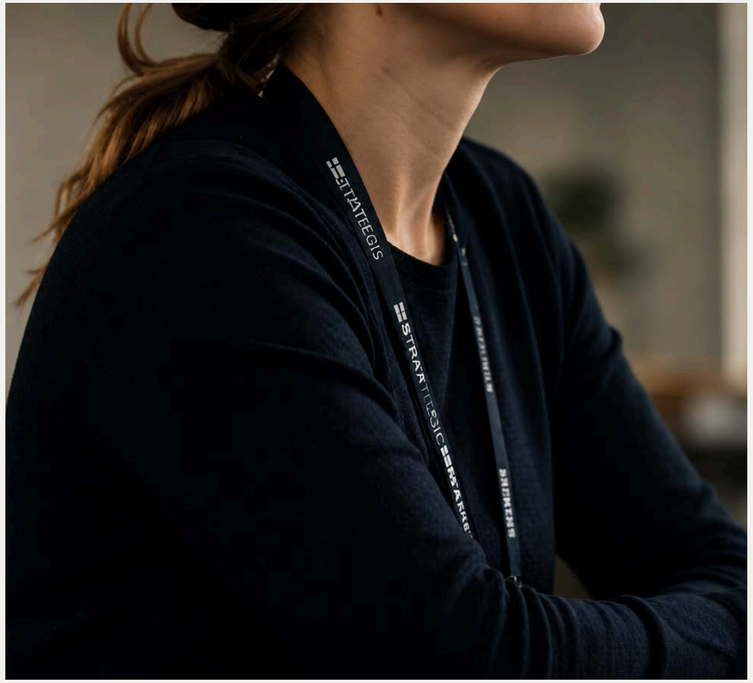
In difficult circumstances, leaders can become acutely conscious of the possibility of getting something wrong. Yet an appropriate response does not always involve doing more or doing something different. Sometimes the most valuable contribution of specialist expertise is to help people understand why their judgement is sound, where their approach is meeting the needs of others and when a different consideration may be necessary.

The psychological input therefore provided more than an opportunity to discuss the incident. It offered a way of understanding the emotional and behavioural responses emerging within the organisation, while supporting leaders to remain thoughtful and confident in how they responded.

The intention was not to replace leadership judgement, but to strengthen it with specialist psychological understanding and assurance.

THE CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE

Strengthening leadership judgement, not replacing it.



Psychological expertise at the point of need

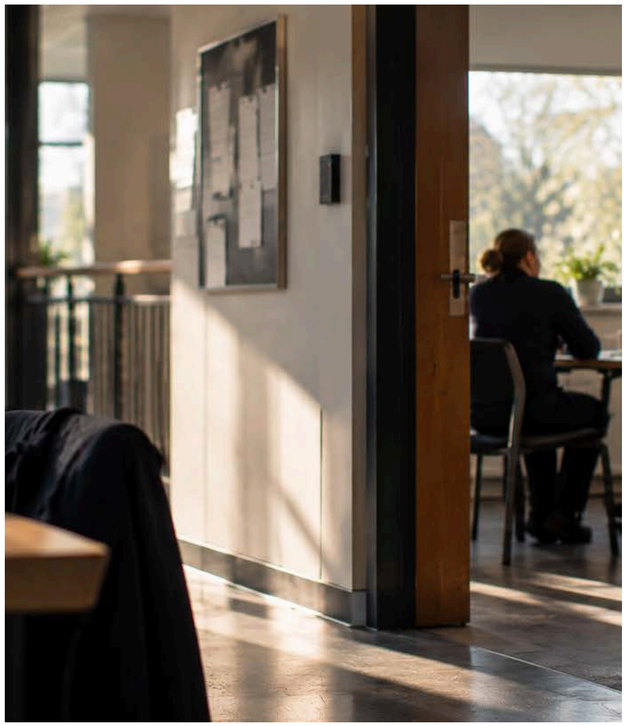
In the aftermath of a critical incident, needs can change quickly. Questions that seem settled one day may take on a different significance as people return to work, new concerns emerge or the immediate intensity of events begins to subside.

Support therefore needed to be available when it could make a difference, without becoming another demand on an already stretched leadership team.

Eleos established regular opportunities for facilitated reflection during the initial three weeks, with a further review at six weeks. The provision was responsive to the team's working commitments, allowing leaders to engage with support without unnecessary disruption to their responsibilities.

Importantly, the relationship was not confined to scheduled sessions. Leaders also had direct access to Eleos when unexpected concerns or difficult situations arose, providing continuity of psychological expertise as circumstances developed.

This created a balance between the value of protected time for reflection and the reassurance of knowing that specialist advice was available beyond those conversations.



Planned opportunities for reflection.
Direct access when new concerns emerged.

The value of supporting those who lead

The value of this work lay in addressing a part of critical incident response that can be easily overlooked.

Organisations understandably focus on the people most visibly affected by an event. Attention turns to communication, immediate welfare concerns and the support that should be made available to staff. But the people coordinating that response may be carrying considerable psychological demands of their own.

Without appropriate opportunities to reflect, uncertainty can become difficult to manage. Leaders may feel pressure to appear confident when they are unsure, to have answers when there are no straightforward answers, or to remain continually available to others without recognising the effect on themselves.

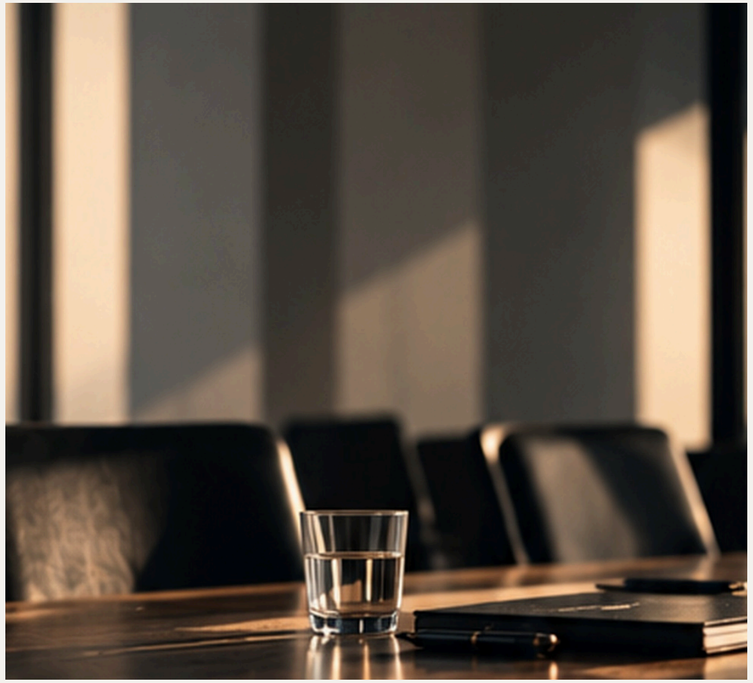
Specialist psychological input offers something different from general reassurance. It brings an informed understanding of distress, behaviour and human responses to exceptional circumstances, together with the clinical judgement to help distinguish between concerns that require further attention and reactions that may be understandable in context.

In this commission, that expertise provided a source of perspective and validation for the leadership team.

It allowed them to explore the challenges they were encountering, consider their own wellbeing and approach their responsibilities with the reassurance of independent professional support. It also recognised an important connection between the experience of leaders and the wider organisational response. Leaders who have the opportunity to consider their own reactions, make sense of what they are observing and seek advice when needed are better supported in creating the conditions for others to feel heard, understood and appropriately cared for.

The provision was therefore concerned not only with the wellbeing of the senior team, but with the psychological demands of the leadership role itself and its relationship to the wider workforce.

The people coordinating a response may also be carrying significant psychological demands.



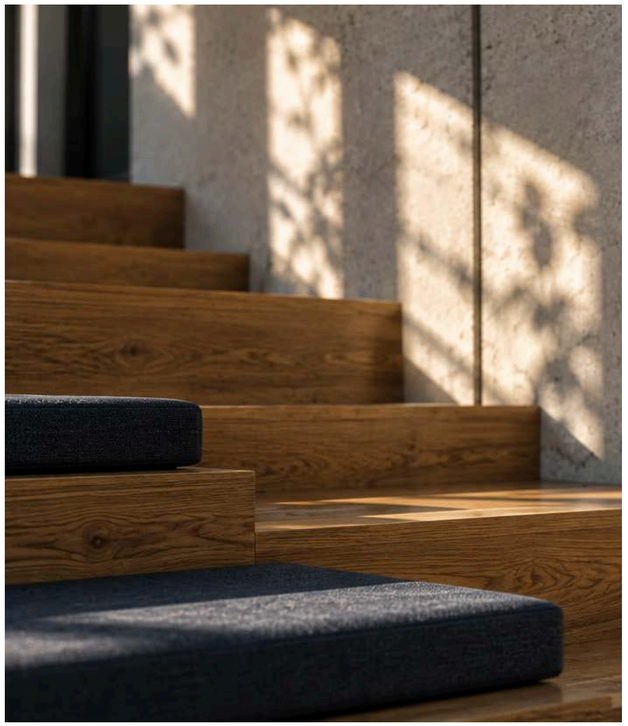
What this demonstrates

Critical incidents place unusual demands on organisations, but particularly on those expected to guide others through them.

The value of psychological expertise in these circumstances is not limited to providing direct support to affected individuals. It can also lie in helping organisational leaders understand the human impact of what has happened, navigate uncertainty and retain confidence in their judgement during a period when the consequences of their decisions may feel especially significant.

This commission illustrates the importance of timely, senior clinical input that is responsive to the organisation's circumstances, respects existing leadership expertise and remains accessible as needs evolve.

Effective Critical Incident Support recognises that the people responsible for supporting an organisation through a difficult event also need somewhere to turn. Providing that expertise can help sustain the judgement, confidence and psychological understanding on which the wider organisational response depends.



Those responsible for supporting others also need somewhere to seek support.

eleos