

KNOWLEDGE HUB

PRACTICE

What does psychologically informed leadership actually look like?



UNDERSTANDING THE WORK.

We expect a remarkable amount from leaders now.

Notice when someone is struggling, but don't diagnose them. Create psychological safety, but hold people accountable. Support wellbeing, but deliver the work. Understand trauma, neurodiversity and mental health, but stay within the boundaries of your role. Manage conflict. Notice risk. Have difficult conversations. Respond appropriately to disclosure. Know when someone needs support. Know when they need challenge.

And do all of that while managing the same operational pressures as everybody else.

Perhaps the problem is not that leaders need another wellbeing framework. Perhaps we have never been particularly clear about what being psychologically informed actually asks them to understand. It isn't primarily a set of behaviours., it is a way of making sense of what happens at work.

The same behaviour can mean very different things.

Imagine an experienced member of staff starts checking decisions they would previously have made independently.

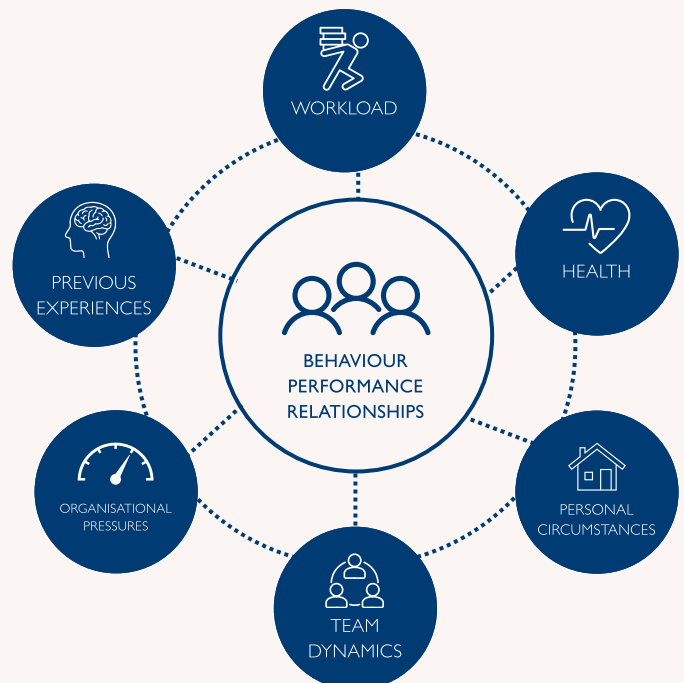
What are you looking at?

A confidence problem? Poor performance? Anxiety? Lack of competence? A sensible response to a recent mistake?

You cannot know from the behaviour alone, and yet organisations make decisions from behaviour all the time.

Someone is described as resistant, disengaged, difficult, emotional, defensive, lacking resilience or “not coping”. Once that description sticks, what happens next tends to follow from it.

A psychologically informed leader does something deceptively difficult before deciding what to do - they remain uncertain for slightly longer. Not because behaviour doesn't matter, but because understanding what is producing it matters if you want to respond effectively.



Sometimes the person is struggling. Sometimes the work is telling you something.

This distinction becomes particularly important in psychologically demanding work.

CONSIDER:



A detective, irritable after months immersed in traumatic evidence.



A safeguarding lead, risk-averse after a serious incident.



A senior manager, more controlling during prolonged organisational scrutiny.



A clinician, less empathic after sustained exposure to distress without recovery.



We could locate each of those problems inside the individual.

Sometimes we should, but behaviour can also tell us something about adaptation to the work.

- Hypervigilance can look like overchecking.
- Reduced psychological capacity can look like poor decision-making.
- Threat can look like defensiveness.
- Cumulative exposure can look like detachment.

None of this means every difficult behaviour has a hidden psychological explanation, it means behaviour is data, not diagnosis.

The leadership task is working out what it is data about.

This is where psychologically informed leadership becomes operational.

If five people in the same team are struggling, we can send five people to wellbeing support.

That might be entirely appropriate, but it would be strange not to ask what those five people have in common.

Perhaps the answer is nothing, or perhaps they share something:

- The same impossible caseload;
- The same lack of recovery;
- The same repeated exposure;
- The same organisational change;
- The same working environment in which saying *"I can't manage this safely"* carries an unacceptable professional cost.

This is one of the most important differences between psychologically informed leadership and workplace wellbeing. Wellbeing often asks what support we can provide to the person experiencing the problem, whilst psychologically informed leadership also asks whether the problem contains information about the work.

That is a considerably less comfortable question, because sometimes the answer sits within leadership and organisational control.

Pressure is not automatically the problem.

This matters because psychologically informed practice can become equally unhelpful when it treats all pressure as harmful. Some work is inherently demanding; police officers will encounter trauma, clinicians will carry clinical risk, school leaders will make difficult safeguarding decisions, senior leaders will have to make consequential decisions.

Removing all psychological demand would mean removing essential parts of the work - that isn't the objective. The more useful distinction is between demand that belongs to the work and demand created by the way we organise it.

DEMAND THAT BELONGS TO THE WORK		DEMAND CREATED BY HOW WE ORGANISE IT	
	A distressing case may be unavoidable.	↔	Consecutive distressing cases without recovery may not be.
	A difficult decision may be unavoidable.	↔	An organisational culture in which nobody can discuss uncertainty about difficult decisions is not.
	Scrutiny may be legitimate.	↔	Chronic ambiguity about expectations is different.
	A period of intense operational pressure may be necessary.	↔	Allowing exceptional working patterns to become normal indefinitely is a choice.

Psychologically informed leadership therefore does not ask: *How do we make work comfortable?*

It asks: *What does this work require psychologically, and what conditions help people continue doing it well?*

Support and standards are not competing positions.

Another problem with the way psychological language has entered leadership is the fear that understanding behaviour means excusing it. It doesn't.

Suppose somebody is under significant pressure and has become repeatedly hostile towards colleagues. The pressure matters, and so does the hostility. Ignoring the first may lead to an ineffective performance response, whilst ignoring the second leaves everyone else carrying the consequences. **Psychologically informed leadership requires the capacity to hold both.**

A leader can consider why a situation has become difficult for an individual, without ignoring the impact their behaviour is having on others. This isn't a contradiction. In fact, one of the most psychologically uninformed things an organisation can do is allow the needs of one struggling individual to become an unspoken burden carried by everybody around them. **Understanding context should improve accountability. It should not remove it.**

Leaders are also part of the psychological environment.

There is another uncomfortable part of this; leaders do not simply observe the environment, they help create it. What a leader notices, ignores, rewards, challenges, tolerates and repeatedly asks of people becomes information about how work should be done.

If a manager routinely sends emails at midnight while telling staff to maintain boundaries, the behaviour communicates something. If people are encouraged to speak openly but those who question workload are treated as lacking resilience, that communicates something. If leaders say mistakes are opportunities to learn but respond to every error by increasing scrutiny, people adapt accordingly. If somebody repeatedly says they are overloaded and the only organisational response is to offer them an EAP number, that communicates something too.

People learn the psychological rules of a workplace from what actually happens, not from what its wellbeing strategy says should happen. Psychologically informed leadership therefore involves examining our own contribution to the conditions we are trying to understand - and leaders are not outside the system



There is a risk of simply transferring another layer of responsibility onto managers to be more psychologically informed; notice more; understand more; support more. That misses the point.

A leader working under sustained pressure, carrying excessive responsibility, lacking supervision and trying to manage demands they cannot influence is subject to exactly the same psychological processes as the people they lead.

- Their decision-making can narrow.
- Their tolerance can reduce.
- They can become avoidant, or reactive.
- They can lose perspective.

This matters particularly in organisations where leaders themselves are repeatedly exposed to distress, risk, scrutiny or responsibility for other people's welfare.

So if an organisation expects psychologically informed leadership, there is a reciprocal question: ***What helps leaders remain psychologically capable of providing it?***

Training matters, but so do manageable spans of responsibility, access to consultation, permission to acknowledge uncertainty, reflective space, organisational backing and clarity about what does (and does not) belong to the leadership role.

We cannot reasonably tell leaders not to become therapists while quietly expecting them to contain every psychological difficulty that enters the workplace.

So what changes in practice?
Psychologically informed leadership changes the questions we ask.

INSTEAD OF	ASK
"Why is this person being difficult?"	→ "What might this behaviour be telling me?"
"We've told everyone support is available."	→ "What might make somebody unable or unwilling to use it?"
"They need more resilience."	→ "What are we repeatedly asking them to absorb?"
"We've got a performance problem."	→ "Is this primarily about capability, behaviour, capacity, conditions, or a combination of them?"
"How do I fix this person?"	→ "What belongs to them, what belongs to me, and what belongs to the organisation?"

Before deciding how to respond, it's worth considering:

 What am I observing rather than assuming?	 What has changed?	 What might be influencing it?
 What impact is it having on other people and on the work?	 What does this person reasonably need from me?	 What do I reasonably need from them?
 What can we change about the conditions around the work?	 What cannot be changed and needs to be better supported?	 What sits beyond my role?

Psychologically informed leadership is not softer leadership. Nor is it another name for compassionate management.

At its very best, it is more accurate leadership. It asks us to understand people in the context of the work we are asking them to do, without losing sight of standards, responsibility or the needs of everybody else.

About the author

Claire Foster is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and CEO of Eleos Group. Her work includes supporting organisations and people working in psychologically demanding environments, including policing, education, public and private sectors.

Published August 2026 | Eleos Knowledge Hub | Reflection
