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KNOWLEDGE HUB

Psychologically informed investigations.

Robust enough to establish what happened. Human enough to recognise what the process asks of people.



When something serious happens in an organisation, an investigation may be unavoidable. Concerns need to be examined, evidence gathered, different accounts tested and decisions made on the basis of what can reasonably be established. That process needs to be independent, thorough and fair.

But investigations also happen to people.

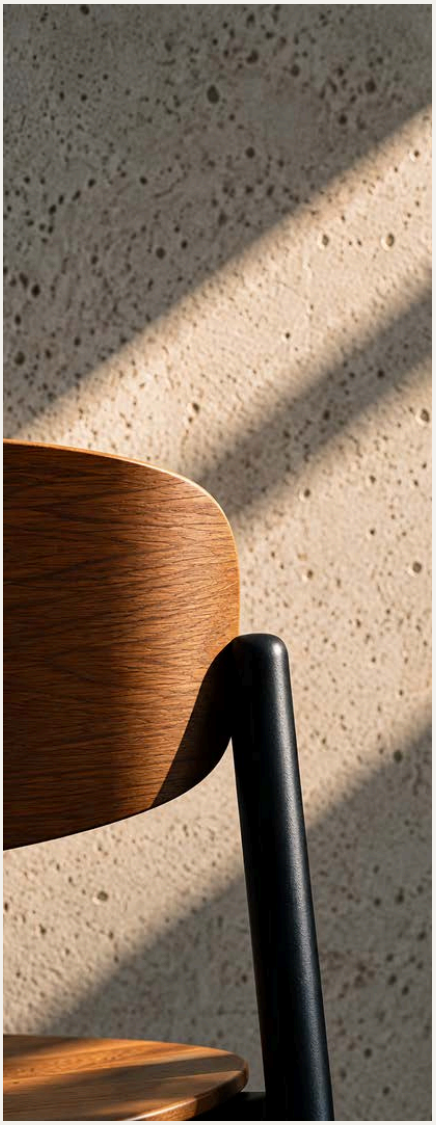
Someone may be describing an experience they found deeply distressing. Someone else may be facing allegations that threaten their career, reputation or professional identity. Witnesses can become caught between colleagues. Managers may be trying to hold a team together while knowing things they cannot share. And investigators themselves may spend weeks or months immersed in conflict, distress and competing accounts while carrying responsibility for decisions with significant consequences.

It is difficult to argue that the psychological demands created by an investigation are irrelevant to how we design and conduct one. A psychologically informed approach starts there: the investigation still has to do its job, but we should understand what we are asking of people while it does it.

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>
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Some of the difficulty is necessary. Some isn't.



There is no version of a robust investigation in which nobody experiences discomfort. A person may need to hear an allegation they strongly dispute. Someone raising a concern may need their account tested rather than simply accepted. Witnesses may be asked difficult questions. Evidence may contradict somebody's recollection. Confidentiality can restrict what an organisation is able to explain, and a thorough investigation can take time.

Removing those things could make an investigation less fair rather than more humane. The important distinction is between the psychological difficulty necessary to conduct a robust investigation and additional difficulty created by the way the process is conducted.

If somebody needs to be challenged, they do not also need to be humiliated. If information cannot yet be shared, that does not necessarily require weeks of silence. If an investigation is delayed for legitimate reasons, people can still know what is happening and when they will next hear something. If somebody needs to recount a difficult experience, we can consider whether they really need to tell it repeatedly.

Psychologically informed practice does not remove the difficult parts. It asks us to become much more deliberate about which difficult parts genuinely need to be there.

> *The important distinction is between the psychological difficulty necessary to conduct a robust investigation and additional difficulty created by the way the process is conducted.*

Humane does not mean uncritical.

One of the concerns about bringing psychological thinking into investigations can be that it somehow softens the process. It shouldn't.

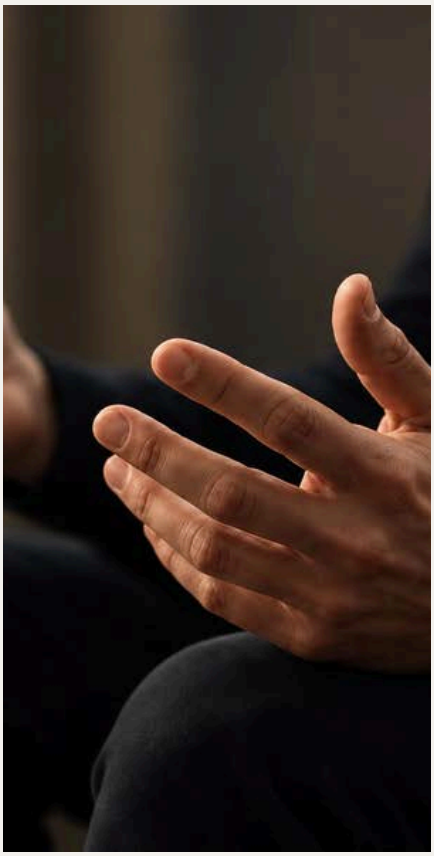
Supporting somebody who has raised a concern does not mean accepting their account as fact. Showing care towards somebody under investigation does not diminish the seriousness of an allegation. Recognising that a witness is distressed does not tell us whether their evidence is accurate.

People also respond to investigation processes differently. One person may become visibly upset; another may remain composed. Someone may become defensive when challenged or struggle to remember the sequence of events. Those responses can be important, but they do not explain themselves.

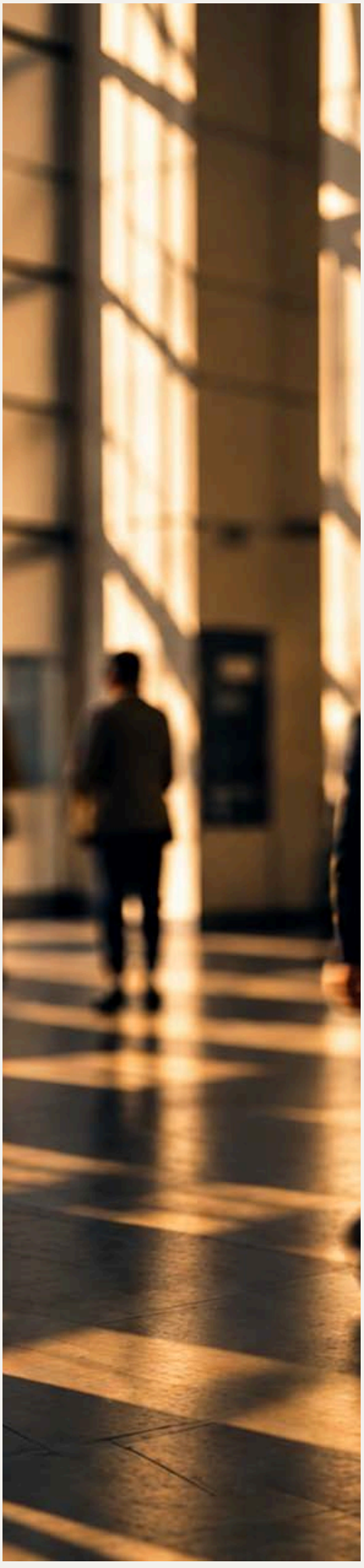
A psychologically informed investigator can notice those things without jumping immediately from observation to conclusion. They can ask difficult questions while explaining why they need to be asked. They can challenge inconsistency without turning challenge into confrontation. They can give somebody time to gather their thoughts without lowering the evidential standard.

Care and rigour are not opposites. In fact, creating conditions in which people can participate effectively can strengthen an investigation. The purpose is not to protect people from difficult questions; it is to obtain the information needed without adding psychological difficulty that serves no investigative purpose.

> *A psychologically informed investigator can recognise that people respond differently to investigation processes without jumping immediately from observation to conclusion.*



The process around the investigation matters.



Much of the psychological demand of an investigation can arise between its formal stages. An interview finishes. Somebody is told they will hear about next steps. Days become weeks. They do not know whether anything has changed, whether somebody has contradicted their account or when a decision might be made.

There may be a perfectly legitimate reason for the delay. The person waiting does not necessarily know that. There is an important difference between not being able to give somebody an answer and not being able to tell them what is happening.

The same applies to arrangements made while an investigation is underway. Suspension, restricted contact or changed duties may initially be necessary, but should not simply become permanent because nobody has revisited them. Managers may need help to support a team appropriately while maintaining confidentiality. People may need a clear point of contact rather than trying to work out who they are allowed to speak to.

None of this determines the finding. It changes the conditions surrounding the process. That is why a psychologically informed investigation is not solely the responsibility of the investigator. The organisation commissioning it also shapes the psychological environment in which it takes place.

And the investigator is a person too.

Investigators can spend substantial periods hearing accounts of bullying, harassment, discrimination, abuse, traumatic events or serious conflict. They may hold several incompatible accounts at once, encounter material that stays with them and still need to remain sufficiently open-minded to keep testing what they think they know.

They also have human reactions. One person may be easier to believe than another. An account may provoke anger, sympathy or frustration. A case may resonate with something from their own experience.

Professionalism does not require pretending those responses do not exist. Appropriate consultation, supervision or reflective space can help an investigator notice the impact of the work and examine whether their own reactions are beginning to influence how they interpret the evidence. That is not somebody else deciding the finding. It is part of maintaining the investigator's capacity to think clearly.

Supporting the investigator is therefore not an optional wellbeing extra. The investigator's capacity to think is part of the quality of the investigation.

Additionally, when the report is finally submitted, the psychological work may not be finished. Relationships may have changed, somebody may have been away from work for months, a team may have become divided, or an investigator may move immediately into another difficult case.

The finding resolves the investigative question. It does not automatically resolve what the investigation has changed.

What to take from this.

A psychologically informed investigation is not a softer alternative to a robust one. It recognises that necessary investigative processes can create substantial psychological demand and asks how that demand can be managed without compromising the purpose of the investigation.

1. **Some difficulty is necessary. Some is avoidable.**
   The task is to know the difference.

2. **Care does not compromise neutrality.**
   People can be treated humanely while their accounts are tested properly and difficult questions are asked.

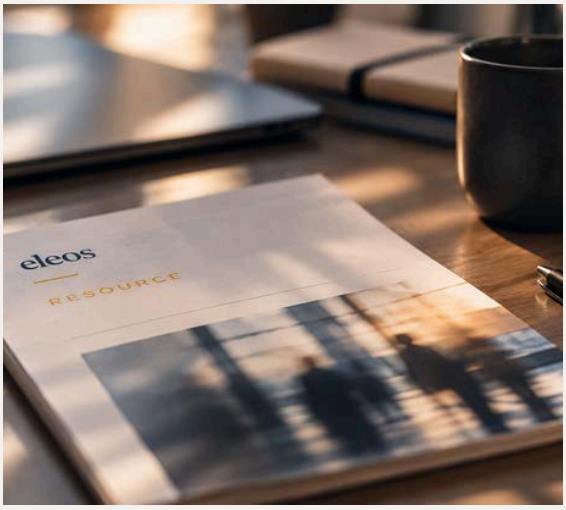
3. **The organisation shapes the experience too.**
   Communication, delay, interim arrangements and what happens afterwards can either contain psychological demand or unnecessarily add to it.

4. **The investigator also needs support around the work.**
   Their reactions and cumulative exposure matter both for them and for the quality of the investigation.

Ultimately, psychologically informed practice is about conducting the investigation that needs to be conducted with both rigour and humanity - recognising that how we establish what happened matters alongside what we ultimately find.

Explore this topic further.

If this article has raised questions or you would like to go deeper into this topic, you may find the following resources useful.



RESOURCE

Use the thinking.

Necessary difficulty or unnecessary harm?
Review an investigation through a psychologically informed approach, considering what difficulty is necessary, what may be avoidable and what could change around it.



LISTEN

Hear the thinking.

Robust and human.
A conversational approach to why investigative rigour and psychological awareness are not competing objectives, and what it means to consider both.

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