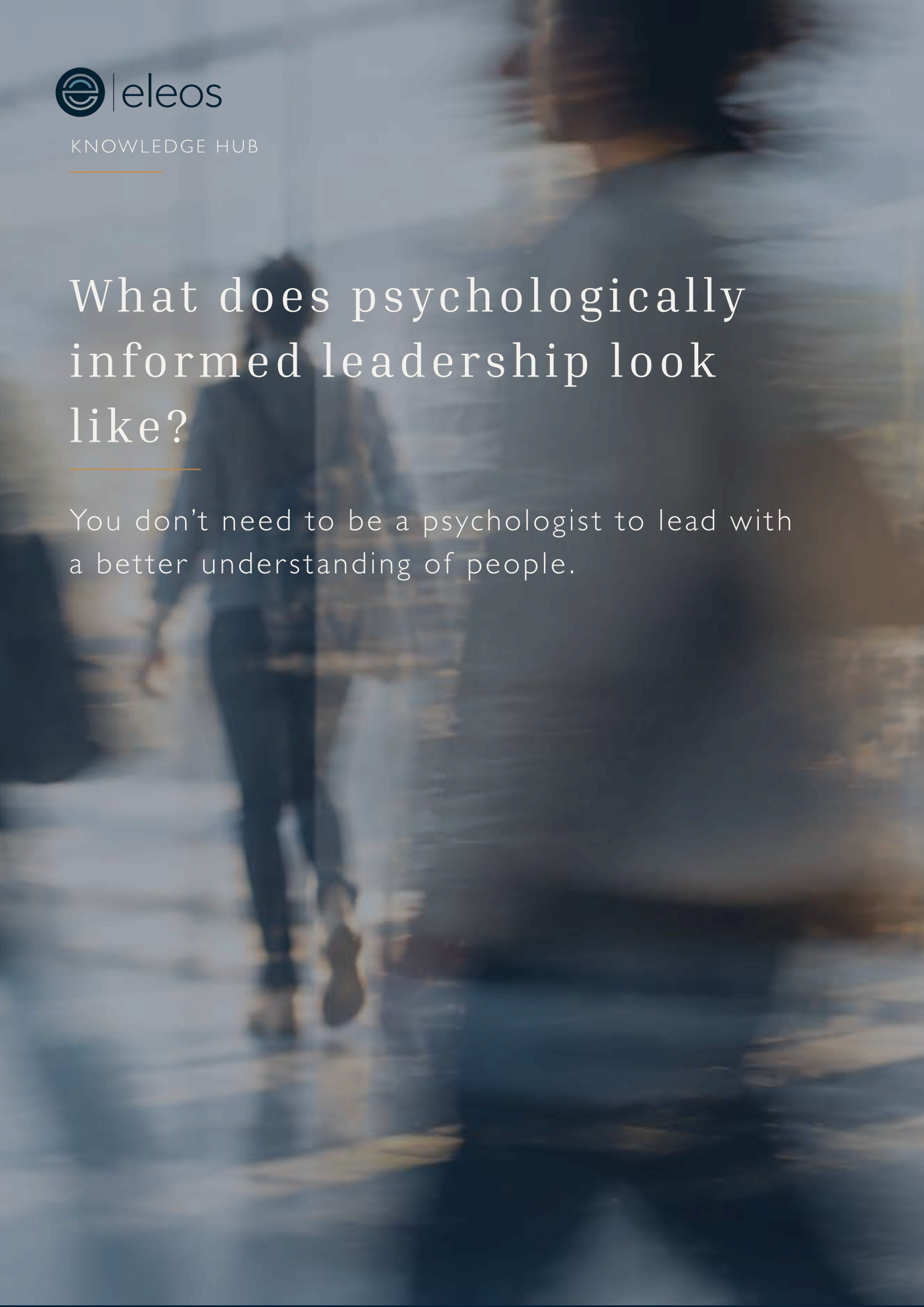


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KNOWLEDGE HUB

What does psychologically informed leadership look like?

You don't need to be a psychologist to lead with a better understanding of people.

Most leaders spend a significant amount of their working lives trying to understand people. Someone who has always been reliable starts missing things. A usually confident colleague becomes quieter in meetings. Two capable people repeatedly clash. Someone's performance drops despite several conversations about what needs to improve. A team that previously worked well together becomes frustrated, defensive or disengaged.

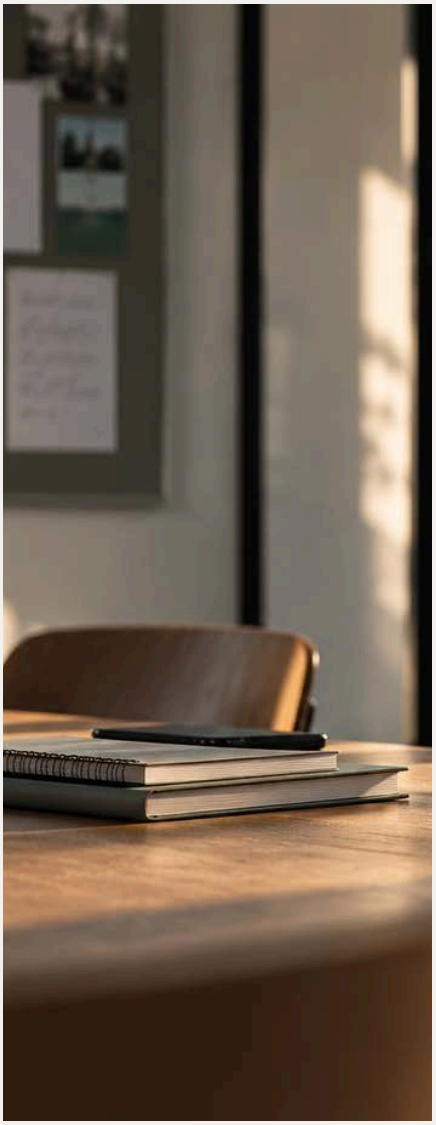
A leader has to decide what to do with what they can see. They cannot wait until they completely understand everything that might be happening, and understanding someone does not remove the need to set expectations, make decisions or address behaviour. But the explanation a leader gives to what they see matters.

If reduced performance is understood as a lack of effort, the response will probably look different from one based on overload, unclear expectations or somebody struggling with something outside work. If silence in a meeting is interpreted as disengagement, we may respond differently than if we discover the person no longer feels able to disagree openly. If conflict is understood entirely as a personality problem, we may never examine the conditions in which the same conflict keeps occurring.

> *Psychologically informed leadership isn't about turning leaders into psychologists; it's about understanding the human factors affecting how people work, and using that to lead more effectively.*



What you see isn't always the explanation.



Leaders usually encounter the visible part of a situation first. A missed deadline. A difficult conversation. Irritability. Absence. Reduced confidence. An argument between colleagues. Somebody repeatedly asking for reassurance. A member of staff who appears to have stopped taking responsibility.

Those things are important, but they are observations, not necessarily explanations.

The difficulty begins when the gap between the two disappears. They missed another deadline quietly becomes "they aren't committed". They challenged the decision again becomes they're just difficult. They haven't said anything in meetings recently becomes they've checked out.

Sometimes that interpretation will turn out to be right - psychologically informed leadership does not require leaders to find an alternative explanation for every problem or assume that poor behaviour must have an underlying psychological cause. It simply introduces another step before deciding what something means.

What have I actually observed? What am I assuming from it? What else could reasonably produce something similar?

That small distinction can materially change what happens next because it moves the leader from reacting to an interpretation towards understanding the situation they are actually trying to manage.

> *Psychologically informed leadership doesn't require leaders to find alternative explanations for every problem - it introduces another step before deciding what something means.*

People don't work separately from the conditions around them.

When something changes in an individual, it is very easy for the individual to become the whole focus. Yet the same person can function very differently in different circumstances.

Clear expectations, manageable demand, trusted relationships and sufficient autonomy can bring out something quite different from chronic overload, ambiguity, repeated change, unresolved conflict or a working environment in which mistakes feel dangerous.

That does not mean the environment explains everything. People still make choices. Standards still matter. Sometimes somebody simply has not done what was reasonably expected of them.

Good leadership requires us to look at the whole picture. What is happening for the person? What is the work currently asking of them? What is happening in the team or wider environment? What effect might our own leadership be having on the situation?

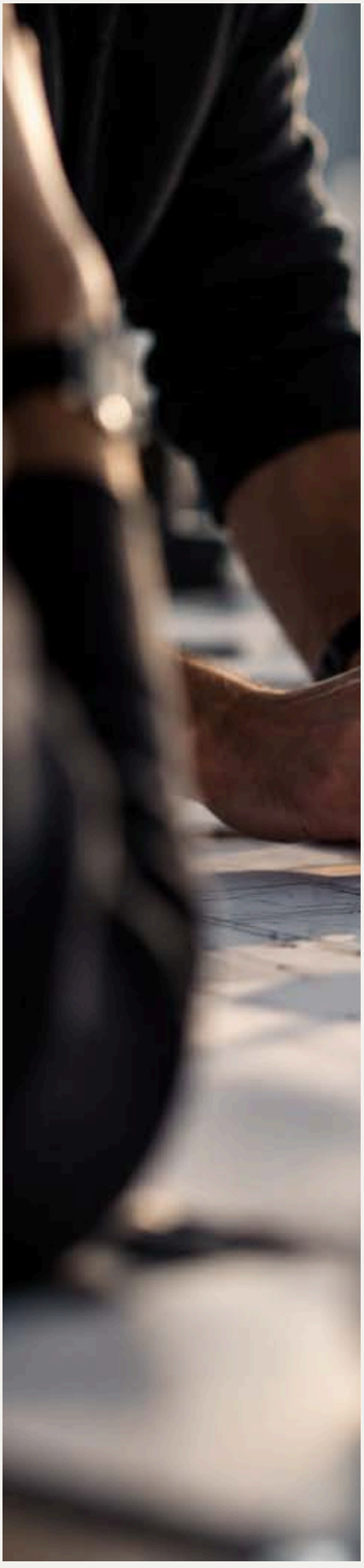
That last question is particularly important - leaders are not standing outside the psychological environment observing it. The way they communicate, respond to mistakes, manage uncertainty, challenge performance, make decisions and behave under pressure helps to create the conditions in which other people are trying to work.

A leader does not control all of those conditions, but leadership itself is one of them.

> *What effect might our own leadership have on a situation? Leaders are not standing outside the psychological environment observing it - they are part of it.*



Understanding someone doesn't mean removing accountability.



This is where psychologically informed leadership can easily be misunderstood.

Suppose someone's performance has deteriorated. A conversation reveals that their workload has increased substantially, responsibilities have become unclear and something difficult is also happening at home. Understanding those things gives the leader a better picture of what is happening. It does not automatically tell them what to do.

Some of the workload may need to change. Expectations may need clarifying. The person may need support. There may still be work they are reasonably expected to complete. There may also be behaviour that needs addressing regardless of what has contributed to it.

Psychological understanding is useful because it helps leaders choose a response that better fits the problem. It is not a reason to avoid the problem.

The same applies to difficult behaviour. Understanding why somebody reacted badly does not make the reaction acceptable. Recognising that a team is under pressure does not mean standards disappear. Being curious about what sits behind conflict does not mean a leader should indefinitely postpone addressing it. Understanding and accountability can exist at the same time.

In practice, the more accurately a leader understands what is contributing to a situation, the better placed they are to decide what needs support, what needs to change and what still needs to be expected.

Leadership changes the conditions in which people work.

Psychologically informed leadership is sometimes reduced to how a leader responds when somebody is struggling. That is only part of it.

Leadership also shapes what happens before somebody struggles. Whether expectations are clear. How manageable pressure is discussed. Whether people can raise a concern before it becomes a crisis. What happens when someone makes a mistake. Whether challenge is possible without damaging a relationship. How change is communicated. Whether people know what they can decide for themselves and when they need to ask.

These are ordinary leadership practices, but they have psychological consequences.

The same is true when leaders themselves are under pressure. A leader who becomes more controlling when anxious, avoids difficult conversations when overwhelmed or communicates less when there is uncertainty can unintentionally change the conditions for everyone around them.

Psychologically informed leadership therefore includes the ability to notice your own impact. Not in pursuit of perfect leadership, but because your response becomes part of the environment your team is responding to.

This is why the approach is broader than supporting mental health at work. It is about understanding how people function in the context of work and using that understanding in everyday leadership: when managing performance, navigating change, handling conflict, making decisions, developing people and responding when something is not working.

What to take from this.

Psychologically informed leadership does not require leaders to diagnose people, become therapists or have an explanation for every human response at work. It requires enough understanding of people to avoid treating the first visible behaviour as the whole story.

1. **What you observe and what you conclude are different things.**
   Behaviour provides information, but it doesn't always explain itself.

2. **Look beyond the individual.**
   The person, the work, the environment and the leadership around them can all contribute to what you are seeing.

3. **Understanding does not remove accountability.**
   Context can help explain what's happening while expectations, boundaries and responsibility remain.

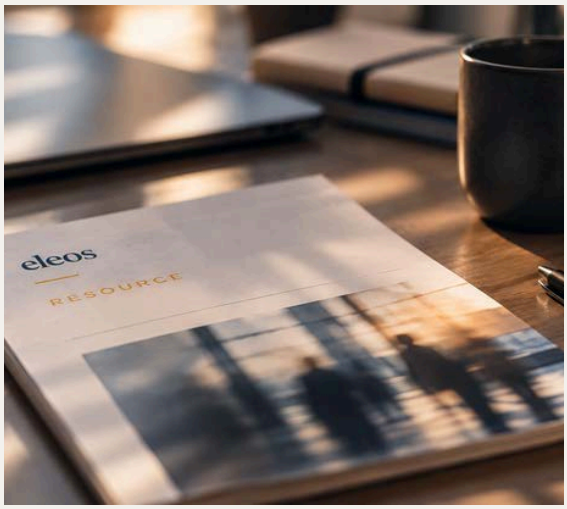
4. **Leadership is part of the psychological environment.**
   How leaders communicate, challenge, decide and respond under pressure affects the conditions in which other people work.

The central shift is this: before deciding how to respond, make sure you understand enough of the situation to know what you are actually responding to.

Psychologically informed leadership is not about becoming responsible for everything affecting the people you lead. It is about being better equipped to understand what you are seeing, decide what sits within your role and respond more effectively.

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.

Looking at the whole picture.
Use a psychologically informed lens to look at a real leadership situation before deciding what it needs.



LISTEN

Hear the thinking.

What does psychologically informed leadership look like?
Hear the thinking explored through the everyday situations leaders are already managing.

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