THRIVING AT WORK – KEY FINDINGS

- Thriving at work requires an upward spiral of psychological safety and meaningful work, is less dependent on the organisational culture than you might think and more dependent on the actual work. Small things matter - progress within a day, the close-in interactions with colleagues and the feeling that you have faced a challenge and made a difference.

- The generation of meaning and what created psychological safety (i.e. what they feared) differed between the two organisations involved in the research, but these differences were nuanced rather than substantial.

- Leaders can support thriving at work by 'getting out of the way', providing a trusting supportive safe environment and giving freedom in which people can find challenge, ownership and meaning.

- When people are thriving at work they know their manager is there if they need them, provides air-cover and values their contribution. This is more important than some of the traditional roles attributed to mangers, including coaching.

- Organisations will create more thriving by noticing, valuing and rewarding the small steps of progress within the activities that create challenge, ownership and meaning, over and above achievement of longer-term corporate goals.

- Thriving at work is individual and organisations should encourage their employees to consider what allows them to thrive at work and how they can create these opportunities, rather than imposing a rigid framework that is meant to work for all.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on thriving at work in order to better understand the concepts that contribute to a more positive experience of work, so that they may provide new perspectives on how to improve individual wellbeing (Cole, Daly, & Mak, 2009). This emphasis on the positive experience of work also resonates with a plethora of literature on the psychological benefits of working and the harmful effects of unemployment (Clark & Oswald, 1994; Cole et al., 2009).

Thirty managers from two very different organisations took part in the interviews. Organisation A was a research department in a multinational PLC and Organisation B was a multi-disciplinary department within the civil service. Fifteen managers from each were interviewed and the group was, by chance, balanced on gender and time in the organisation, but the group from the civil service organisation were, on average, younger. Most of the participants reported being in their respective roles for less than five years and tenure in the organisation was evenly distributed. The group represented a variety of managerial roles, and the number of employees in their teams also varied, although 28 of the 30 participants described the size of their team as somewhere between one and 25.

2. KEY FINDINGS

- Day-to-day relationships with all co-workers have the potential to contribute to thriving at work. In particular, the role of the manger in both empowering and supporting the individual was significant, and a balance between the two was required. Participants perceived the freedom they were given as an indicator of their line manager's trust in them, but also wanted to know they were there for support if needed. Too much freedom could be perceived as a lack of interest, and too much support could be seen as micro-managing. Similarly, with co-workers and the people who reported to them, participants valued both the recognition of competence and being recognised as worthy of their trust, and the knowledge that colleagues could be trusted for support if necessary. These behaviours appear to create the conditions that enable individuals to feel confident to take on new challenges and able to try new things.
- Participants' perceived that they were being challenged when they were thriving at work, in an area to which they felt ownership and could ascribe meaning. This was informed by the internal validation of progress and the external validation that came from a participant's sense they were doing well, receiving recognition, and helping the team that works for them to thrive.

- Participants tended to focus on the cumulative and iterative small wins that denote progress, leading to increases in confidence and enthusiasm, as opposed to the achievement of larger corporate goals.

- Many participants volunteered descriptions of *not* thriving at work which was often described as a lack of energy and enthusiasm, perhaps even boredom, which feeds a downward spiral of loss of confidence and lack of progress. This articulation of the opposite state is aligned to the concept of languishing (Keyes, 2002, cited in Spreitzer et al., 2005) and appeared to be the absence of specific experiences, factors and emotions, rather than the presence of negative experiences such as stress or burnout.

- The priority an individual allocates to each of these factors varies significantly and seems to create an almost unique "code" that combines various elements to create their own definition and experience.

A new concept of thriving at work for managers is proposed that captures these findings. The model is represented by the helix of DNA, as this analogy captures both the consistency of the experience and the individual code that reflects each participant's perspective. Without stretching the analogy too far, it is also known that DNA does, to a limited extent, change in response to the environment and over time. In this context, the culture of the organisation may influence thriving. The organisation can provide an environment for managers that enables psychological safety and meaningful work, while focusing reward and recognition on the small steps that signify progress and build confidence. There are differences between the two organisations that suggest these initiatives can be tailored.
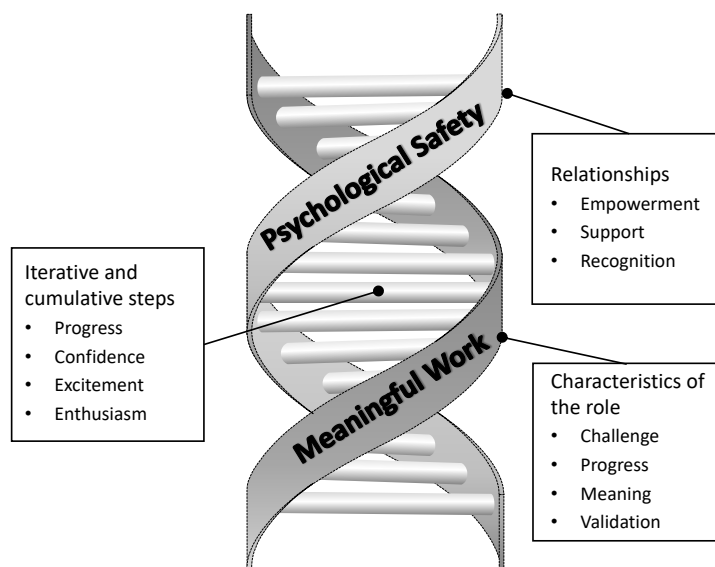
3.   DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO ORGANISATIONS

The different narratives between the two organisations in this study appeared to reflect the differences between the scientific endeavour and the project orientation of the civil service department, or the dynamics of the external environment in which they operated. This was exemplified in different perspectives on trust given the perceived consequences of making mistakes, how meaning was created based on the purpose of the organisation, and perceptions of competence and expertise. There were no significant differences that could be attributed to the demographic attributes of the participants.

3.1 The Role of Trust Given the Consequences of Making Mistakes

The narrative around trust appeared to be slightly different across the two organisations. Participants from Organisation B, the public-sector organisation, seemed more focused on avoiding mistakes and being supported, or even protected, by both their line manager and their co-workers if they did. They also appeared to care more about their personal relationship with co-workers. As a result, they valued the safety net provided by the relationships around them. One participant simply described it as:

> *"It's that thing about having one another's backs."*

> Participant 13, Organisation B

In Organisation A, participants were more likely to appreciate support from co-workers in the form of valuable advice and ideas, especially when the participant was faced with a new challenge. They also seemed less concerned with building personal relationships with co-workers, focused instead on positive attitudes and working well together.

This may reflect the different context between the two organisations. In Organisation A, mistakes may be considered part of the scientific process, whereas a mistake in the civil service may be more open to public scrutiny. As one participant put it:

> *"There are so many things in the civil service that actually could have a negative impact on thriving because we're so worried about what the Daily Mail would say."*

> Participant 4, Organisation B

This quote also emphasises the importance of trust as an antidote to fear and anxiety, as participants expressed the safety and confidence they associated with trust. The same participant eloquently captures this:

> *"Fear is not good for thriving, that's my conclusion."*

> Participant 4, Organisation B

3.2 The Creation of Meaning

Participants from Organisation A were more likely to talk about meaning in general terms of a broader benefit, or the impact of their work on patient care. One participant described a strong personal connection to this sense of meaning:

> *"I've been touched throughout my life with people who have had various illnesses… so you know that's what makes me passionate about coming here every day."*

> Participant 6, Organisation A

Participants from Organisation B, who worked across several diverse areas of policy within the civil service, often perceived meaning to be just as important, but evaluated the opportunity for meaning in each project. One participant described what they do before embarking on a new project:

> *"You almost do a test of, is this work going to add something? Is this work going to be meaningful to me as well?"*

> Participant 9, Organisation B

A further source of meaning identified by many participants was the sense of how they contributed to some larger goal or vision. Given the emphasis on evaluating each project in turn it is perhaps unsurprising that participants from the public-sector organisation (B) often referenced the negative impact of a lack of vision. These participants described the ambiguity of roles, responsibilities and decision-making that this lack of vision created, and there was an implication that it was easy to lose your way within the organisation, as captured by this comment from a participant:

> *"There was no strategic vision around it, everyone just seemed lost and unable to explain what the overall objective was, and it was just demoralising, utterly demoralising."*

> Participant 2, Organisation B

3.3 Perceptions of Competence and Expertise

Participants from Organisation B, the civil service organisation, suggested they value praise that focused on their expertise and knowledge, whilst very few of the participants from the private sector Organisation A, mentioned it. This difference may be connected to the role of expertise within each organisation. For example, in Organisation A, most of the participants mentioned in their introduction that they were qualified to at least Masters level, and many to PhD. The expertise they held was often specific to their field of endeavour and, as a pre-requisite to the role, could almost have been taken for granted. In contrast, there was a sense that expertise must be earned in this particular area of the civil service, and participants often gave examples of where they were placed in a role without significant prior knowledge or relevant qualifications. Thus, their

expertise was under scrutiny and thriving often seemed to be connected to their ability to establish themselves as the expert on that area of policy.

> *"…being like a trusted, knowledgeable person on that chosen field, a policy that I was responsible for, so I clearly get a sense of worth and value from that kind of feedback,"*

Participant 3, Organisation B

Similarly, participants from Organisation A (the private sector company) were more likely to describe the challenge in terms of the difficulty or scale of the task asked of them. The participants in Organisation B were more likely to describe being busy and having a number of projects or tasks to do simultaneously. This perspective on the definition of a challenge can be seen in this description:

> *"We worked silly hours …. I had my fingers in so many pies."*

Participant 15, Organisation B

These differences may be a function of the purpose and culture of the organisations and reinforce the need to tailor any initiatives to increase thriving at work.

4.   AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The experience of thriving at work appears to be a mechanism for building greater trust and confidence both for an individual and, possibly, for the organisation they work for. The upward spiral of significant organisational and individual resources this implies has the potential to make a real difference to the experience of work.

4.1 Placing the Individual at the Centre

Given the individual differences that appear to generate a unique set of circumstances to support each person's experience of thriving at work within the broad integrative themes, it is possible to imagine a process whereby an individual is able to self-assess why it matters to them, how they evaluate it and the factors that most influence it. This could lead to a person-oriented perspective, whereby the employee takes responsibility and is supported, in whatever ways they need, by their manager and colleagues. This requires a shift in emphasis that places the responsibility with the individual, whilst being less paternalistic. This is not to suggest that organisations bear no responsibility for the thriving of their employees, but rather that they are responsible for creating the conditions that enable the individual to thrive, responding and adapting to their changing needs over time.

4.2 Management by Getting out of the Way

This study raises some questions that could have implications for understanding effective management in the context of thriving at work. Participants described the value they placed on "management by getting out of the way"; feeling trusted to make things happen and supported when things go wrong, rather than being coached by their line manager to minimise mistakes. The line manager could also have a role in creating a climate where a team can trust each other, share a common purpose, value competence and have a social and personal connection, thus supporting psychological safety and meaningful work. This shift in emphasis for managers of others has already been identified within the literature on psychological safety (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017), and is worthy of further exploration in the context of thriving at work.

4.3 Recognition and Reward of Progress Over Achievement

Managers might be expected to have a longer-term, more strategic focus, on yearly business goals, for example. This analysis does not refute that this more strategic focus may contribute to the sense of making a difference, but the shorter term, incremental progress participants describe, provides a significant contribution to thriving at work.

Given the annual process of appraisal, reward, objectives and goals within most large organisations, a deeper understanding of how this approach supports (or potentially undermines) thriving at work, is of interest. It is possible to hypothesise that the achievement of big, important goals, that accumulate to deliver an organisation's plan is less relevant than a greater emphasis on small steps and progress in the context of work that matters to the individual. Interestingly, many organisations are attempting to move towards more agile and flexible planning processes in order to respond to a rapidly changing environment, and incentive schemes that reward these individual goals are being questioned (Chidiebere, Daniels, & Nielsen, 2017; Jaggars & Jones, 2018).

5.   CONCLUDING REMARKS

The integrative themes identify the commonality of experience across the participants, suggesting an increased emphasis on psychological safety and meaningful work, is likely to increase thriving at work. This study also captures the importance of placing the individual at the centre of any discussion of thriving at work. This can be justified by the emphasis on the direct relationships that participants in this study perceive to be so important – these relationships are with other people, not the entity or an abstract concept such as culture.

The voices of this study suggest that thriving at work was important to the people who took part, led to outcomes that they perceived to be beneficial to themselves and their organisation, and appeared to be open to influence from both external factors and individual appraisal. This provides a strong justification for further exploration, and it is hoped their experience will provide a platform for further research, as well as the potential to better inform interventions in the workplace.

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