Breakout Session: Organisational Culture

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Attendance: 33 participants

Part 1: Report Overview

Title: *Stepping off the Hamster Wheel: Retention, Wellbeing and Culture in the Social Welfare Advice Sector*

- The metaphor of the *"hamster wheel"* was frequently used to describe the relentless pace and pressure in the sector.
- Retention is inseparable from the goal of creating a **sustainable, thriving advice sector**.
- Systemic interventions are needed, focusing on **workplace wellbeing drivers**.
- Wellbeing must be **embedded in organisational strategy and systems**.

Characteristics of "Good Jobs"

- Include: training and development, teamwork, regular performance appraisals, job security, high work involvement, and skill use.
- Intrinsic motivation is a key factor alongside pay.
- Good jobs lead to **improved wellbeing**, which boosts **performance and productivity**.

Organisational Culture

Definitions

- **Schein (2019):** "A pattern of basic assumptions that a given group considers the correct way to perceive, think, and feel."
- Informally: "The way we do things around here" or "The way things feel around here."
- Organisations are **eco-systems within eco-systems**, reflecting broader societal complexities.

Organisational Climate

- Defined as the **shared meaning** members attach to events, policies, and behaviours.
- Misalignment in these meanings can lead to communication breakdowns.

Schein's Three Levels of Culture

1. **Artifacts** – visible structures and processes.

2. **Espoused Values** – stated strategies, goals, and philosophies.
3. **Basic Assumptions** – unconscious beliefs and feelings (the "murky space").

Contextual Influences

- Organisational cultures are shaped by broader forces:
    - Individualism
    - Attention economy
    - Wealth inequality
    - Geopolitical instability
    - Climate crisis
- **VUCA:** Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (the way we used to describe workplace cultures)
- **BANI:** Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible (how we now describe workplace cultures)
    - These external pressures can replicate internally and negatively affect culture.

Cultural Indicators in the Advice Sector

- **89%** report being quite or very happy.
- **24%** say work negatively affects their mental health.
- **53%** satisfied with training and career progression.
- Where training is rated highly, **100%** report job satisfaction.
- **Psychological safety** is lacking – people feel defensive and anxious.
- Adversarial environments can make disagreement feel threatening.
- Low psychological safety impairs **analytical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.**

Leadership & Accountability

- **Top-down, reactive strategies** dominate.
- Executives make decisions; workforce implements – a binary that could be rebalanced.
- Lack of **genuine prioritisation** – not enough clarity on what *not* to do.
- Need for **clear accountability** and **realistic expectations**.

Leadership Sentiments

- **Senior Leaders:** Stressed, tired, motivated – but not supported or valued.
- **Middle Managers:** Busy, stressed, fulfilled, overworked, undervalued – most likely to use negative descriptors.

The "Hamster Wheel" Experience

- Common themes:
    - "No time to think"
    - "Too many meetings"
    - "Always firefighting"
    - Repetitive work with unclear progress

Important but Not Urgent Activities

- **Job Crafting:** Involve staff in redesigning roles to reduce stress and increase autonomy, which supports intrinsic motivation.
- **Attending Sector Book Clubs:** Encouraged as a form of reflective, non-urgent professional development.

Key Resources & Frameworks

Work Wellbeing Playbook (2024)

- Synthesised insights from **3,000 papers** on workplace wellbeing.
- Identifies **12 drivers of wellbeing** and over **50 systemic interventions**.

Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us – *Daniel H. Pink (2009)*

- Emphasises autonomy, mastery, and purpose as key motivators.

The Fearless Organization – *Amy Edmondson (2019)*

- High-performing teams make more mistakes because they **recognise, discuss, and learn** from them.
- Psychological safety is essential for innovation and growth.

Coaching Cultures – *Passmore & Crabee*

- Promotes the **LEAD framework**: empowering individuals to make their own decisions rather than being directed.

Vertical Development – *Dietzel & Watkins (2021)*

- Focuses on developing **mindsets, emotional regulation, and perspective-taking**.
- Encourages **autonomous decision-making** and **collective leadership**.

Systemic Challenges & Sector-Wide Reflections

- **Output-driven culture** can lead to burnout and narrow thinking.

- Funders may need to be challenged to allow **time for quality and reflection**.
- Leadership training should be **sector-wide**, including advisors, administrators, and middle managers.
- Greater **sector coordination** is needed to share best practices and advocate for systemic change.

Recommendations

1. **Standardise wellbeing metrics** – separate how people feel *at* work from the *causes* of those feelings.
2. **Set clear performance goals** to:
   a. Improve wellbeing
   b. Deliver better jobs
3. **Regular 1:1s** – essential for support and feedback.
4. **Reduce overwhelm** – create time for intentional, non-urgent activities.
5. **Prioritise learning and development** – key to wellbeing and innovation.

Effort vs Results

- The relationship is **non-linear** – more effort doesn't always mean better results.
- Overwork can lead to **diminishing returns** – the "quicksands of negative returns."
- Slowing down can **enhance quality and outcomes**.

Operation Hamster

- Inspired by 4-day week trials:
  - **Increased revenue**
  - **Decreased turnover**
  - **Improved wellbeing and productivity**
- Proposal:
  - Reduce the standard work week to **80%** of current hours.
  - Ringfence **20% of time** for strategic, learning, and developmental activities.
  - No meetings or casework during this time – just **headspace**.

Pareto Principle

- **20% of effort** yields **80% of results**.
- Many tasks are done out of habit, not impact.
- Re-evaluate what truly adds value.