Feel Your Feelings: Synopsis

An action research inquiry into how embodied emotional intelligence contributes to the capacity of cultural leaders to thrive and respond creatively to challenging circumstances.

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This action research took nine cultural leaders from the UK through an eight-week coaching programme called Thrive, to explore what the impact of (re)developing their mind-body connection and emotional intelligence would be on their capacity to thrive while leading their organisations through challenging circumstances.

Through a literature review of current leadership and psychological research into emotional intelligence, embodiment and thriving, the research establishes:

- that emotional intelligence can be learned through a process of deepening one's awareness of “feeling life” by observing one's internal experience in relation to others and the external environment;
- the importance of emotional intelligence to leadership, particularly authentic leadership which creates the psychological safety required for leaders and their teams to show up “wholeheartedly”;
- the importance of embodiment to emotional intelligence and enacting personal transformation;
- the distinction between thriving and resilience, where thriving is the capacity to flourish no matter the circumstances by integrating emotional suffering into regenerative self-development, and continuing to pursue long-term goals and meaningful experiences without burning out;
- and the relationship between creativity, vitality, wellbeing and thriving.

Through case studies and insights from the Thrive programme, the research reveals how feelings carry inherent wisdom about our needs, growth and potential for transformation, if we nurture our ability to feel, listen and accept them with compassion, and muster the courage to fully take responsibility for our wellbeing.

At the start of Thrive, the emotional landscape that the nine leaders were experiencing was a state of anxiety, self-doubt, frustration, overwhelm and exhaustion (to name just a few of the key feelings they raised themselves). The outcomes of the programme for participants included improvements in presence with and awareness of their feelings and needs; feeling calmer, less stressed and more positive about themselves and their capacity to face leadership and personal challenges; increased self-connection, confidence and creativity; improved wellbeing and tangible actions to invest in their health including exercise and creative hobbies; feeling better able to handle uncertainty; better communication with their teams and in personal life; establishing healthy boundaries to manage their needs and energy; and taking action to address conflictual situations and events that were holding them back. All felt that becoming more aware of and better able to process their feelings was directly linked to a shift in state and mindset towards thriving.
This transition was enabled by practices that fundamentally trained four capacities: **presence** with one's body and feelings; **curiosity** to understand what these feelings indicate about our needs and what matters to us; compassionate **acceptance** of our experience, needs and insights without judgement; and **taking responsibility** for acting in alignment with our needs, insights, values and sense of purpose. We found that when people were able to move through this process, guided by practical tools to support ongoing self-practice, not only did they achieve a state of calm, clarity and disposition towards action, but their empathy for others and wider systemic challenges also increased, along with their courage to face their circumstances and take action.

The research identifies emotional “resistance” as a fundamental block to thriving. This resistance is experienced in the body as discomfort or pain and manifests in the mind as inflammatory thoughts that judge, blame or make assumptions about ourselves, others and situations. Resistance to what we feel is, in itself, an internal conflict which can become externalised in conflictual, controlling, manipulative, defensive or self-defeating behaviours that create mistrust and disconnection. The research consolidates types of resistance into a model called “Fearless Compassion”, which identifies three broad categories of “resistance” behaviour, strategies and outcomes, based on the degree to which we are compassionately open-hearted and fearlessly expressing ourselves authentically. Finally the model offers a snapshot of what behaviours, strategies and outcomes enable thriving – not resisting, but facing ourselves and others with courage and compassion.

The process didn't solve all of the participants' problems directly, it focused on building their capacity to move through them with new strategies that released emotional blockages and beliefs that were draining their energy and preventing them from making change, opening space for new possibilities and growth despite adversity, rather than persisting in an approach to resilience defined by defensiveness, “coping” and resignation of personal power.

It's important to acknowledge that the participants of this programme considered themselves emotionally-literate, empathetic people. They were already holding space for the emotional and wellbeing needs of their teams and collaborators, often at the expense of meeting their own needs for emotional and mental health support. The findings of this research were that thriving for these individuals is less dependent on emotional intelligence competencies relating to relationship management, awareness of others and empathy, but heavily dependent on the competencies of self-awareness and self-management that enable them to prioritise their wellbeing, needs and desires alongside those of other people (for the benefit of everyone). In particular, the
importance of being clear about “yes” and “no”, and asserting healthy boundaries, were transformative for people who were natural “givers”, and outcomes included receiving support and respect from others, as well as taking action on overdue, burdensome situations.

While the coaching process mostly focused on individuals’ emotional self-development, the outcomes indicated that this process also increased their capacity to change not only their internal conditions for relating to work and life events, but their capacity to communicate and collaboratively change external conditions within and beyond their organisations to create possibilities for other people’s thriving. The most profound change in this regard was the power of having the courage to be authentic, honest and direct with others (in work and personal life). Every participant experienced some version of this change and shared how the outcomes were positive not only for themselves, but for those they communicated with, often in service of the wellbeing of the organisation or common project on the whole. This reveals the interconnectedness of leadership: a change within oneself has automatic ripple effects for everything that we are in relation with – other people, situations, organisations, and the wider environment.

The findings of this research indicate that shifting the emotional landscape of cultural leadership at this moment depends on leaders having the space and tools to reconnect with their embodied experience as a source of support rather than burden, and to process difficult emotions that are standing in the way of collective wellbeing, creativity and capacity for courageous action. It makes a case for investment in the emotional intelligence of cultural leaders, for the wellbeing of the sector as a whole.