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***Feel your feelings: Action research into embodied emotional intelligence in cultural leaders***

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**Year paper completed:** 2023

**Leadership Content Theme/s:** Inclusive Leadership Practice, Sector Insights

**AHRC Subject Area/s:** Policy Arts Management and Creative Industries, Theatre and Society

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# Feel Your Feelings

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



By Sholeh Johnston

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With support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Clore Leadership

January 2023

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## Introduction

“Emotional labour”<sup>1</sup>, “compassion fatigue”<sup>2</sup>, “burnout”, “collective grief”<sup>3</sup>. These are all words that have been used to describe the state of leaders navigating through recent years. They have become leadership and management concerns and concepts, but they started as feelings – as an embodied experience in response to personal and collective challenges being faced in organisations while coping with rapid changes, loss and uncertainty. The presence of these feelings has become so pronounced in the wake of Covid-19, the deepening economic and climate crisis, and global warfare, that between 2020 and 2022 there has been an explosion in articles aiming to address their effects in the workplace, and equip leaders with knowledge, tools and approaches to cope with their own and organisation-wide mental health and wellbeing crises. Interestingly, in popular and academic literature, antidotes to all of these challenges focus on empathetic and compassionate approaches to leadership, and how to regulate, process and integrate emotion in the workplace.

This research is a response to the need to make space for difficult feelings and experiences in a way that can support leaders and their organisations to thrive, rather than feelings being experienced as barriers to wellbeing and creative action, especially when bold creativity and courageous action are most needed to respond to complex and challenging circumstances. At the heart of it lies a provocation: what if our feelings hold the wisdom we need to turn challenging circumstances into opportunities for creativity, growth and self actualisation?

## Context

Aside from the wider systemic complexities and challenges moving in the research period (October-December 2022), it was also a particularly heightened moment for the cultural sector. After three years of pandemic-related financial and mental health challenges, including a brain drain of cultural professionals to other sectors, and on top of the strain that the sector had already been experiencing for some time before it, Arts Council England also announced the 2023-26 national portfolio (NPO) funding outcomes – a nerve-wracking moment for organisations waiting to see if they will sustain, lose or gain on their core funding. All people participating in the programme, whether they were from NPOs or not, were in some way feeling the stress of the moment which

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<sup>1</sup> *The Emotional Labour of Being a Leader*. Harvard Business Review. 02.22.222.  
<https://hbr.org/2022/11/the-emotional-labor-of-being-a-leader>

<sup>2</sup> *Signs you're a compassion fatigued leader*. GovLoop. 14.04.222.  
<https://www.govloop.com/community/blog/signs-youre-a-compassion-fatigued-leader-and-10-tips-for-recovery>

<sup>3</sup> *Compassionate Leadership: A Response to Collective Grief*. LinkedIn. 18.05.2022.  
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/compassionate-leadership-response-collective-grief-amy-shannon>

meant fundamental shifts and big changes for the whole sector. In many ways, this felt like the perfect circumstances to test out whether it was possible for leaders to reconnect with a place of thriving, and use this moment of great challenge as an opportunity for transformation.

## Unpacking the research question

This research looks at how embodied emotional intelligence supports cultural leaders to thrive and creatively respond to adversity.

### What is a ‘cultural leader’?

In *An Integrative Theory of Leadership* Martin M. Chemers offers that a “definition of leadership that would be widely accepted by the majority of theorists and researchers might say that ‘leadership is a process of social influence in which one person is able to enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.’ The major points of this definition are that leadership is a group activity, is based on social influence, and revolves around a common task” (Chemers 1). This definition felt fitting for a sector as complex in its leadership structures as culture, where an artist or creative freelancer can be as much of a leader as the executive director of a large institution in terms of social influence and impact, in realising common tasks related to the production of cultural works and knowledge. Based on this, we defined cultural leaders as “individuals currently in positions of directorship or senior management, including individuals leading projects or teams within larger organisational structures or as freelancers”.

It also feels pertinent to mention that this research sits with a broader aim to contribute to a paradigm shift in the wider culture of leadership, towards being more embodied, emotionally literate and creatively empowered. In this sense, a cultural leader can also be taken to mean someone who is modelling behaviour that enables this cultural shift in the sector’s approach to leadership.

## Feeling your feelings: Towards embodied emotional intelligence

*“We should take care not to make the intellect our god. It has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead, it can only serve... the intellect has a keen eye for methods and tools, but it is blind to ends and values.”*

- Albert Einstein (Einstein 322)



Broadly speaking, there are two traditions in emotion research: one that sees emotions as disruptive and chaotic forces to be controlled, and another that considers them adaptive responses that organise thoughts, motivate action (Salovey and Mayer 186), and play a crucial role in all aspects of learning, reasoning and creativity (Manstead et al. 49). This research sits in the second camp, with an interest in *feeling* – the experience of perceiving the bodily changes and thought patterns that accompany an emotional state (Manstead et al. 52). We also explore the nuance of different types of feeling – how we feel in the body, how we feel towards the stimulus of our emotional responses (Goldie 235), and how our awareness of these various feelings can uncover intentions, information and needs that support leaders to understand themselves and respond to social circumstances with greater insight.

## Emotional intelligence in leadership

In leadership research, 'emotional intelligence' defines most closely the outcome of becoming aware of our feelings. Mayer and Salovey first defined emotional intelligence as the "ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey, 5). Daniel Goleman later popularised emotional intelligence in its application to leadership in his 1995 best-seller (Goleman), and defines four domains and twelve competencies that express emotional intelligence in the workplace (Goleman and Boyatzis):

Domains	Self-awareness	Self-management	Social awareness	Relationship management
Competencies	Emotional self-awareness	Emotional self-control	Empathy	Influence
		Adaptability		Coach and mentor
		Achievement orientation	Organisational awareness	Conflict management
		Positive outlook		Teamwork
			Inspirational leadership	

While people will differ in their levels of competence in these domains, they can be learned, and emotional intelligence is possible when all four are present (Goleman). Emotional intelligence is not a leadership style, rather a necessity for successful

leadership, because what brings organisations together, and makes leadership possible, are relationships (Weymes 325). When these relationships are determined by fear, people lack the psychological safety to perform with the best of their capabilities, experience and talents, but when there is care, trust, respect and integrity – modelled first by authentic leaders within the group – the possibility exists for everyone to feel positively engaged and able to bring their best to the task at hand.

As emotion is a relational experience, it's also important to consider how environmental factors play a role in the emergence of emotional responses. Calahan proposes "Four C's of emotion" that can trigger positive and negative emotional responses in a given situation – context, challenge, communication and community. He suggests that understanding how one can be potentially triggered by each of these domains improves one's capacity for emotional intelligence (Callahan 37). For example, a change in context or an internal change based on new information or trends from outside the organisation can provoke resistance, excitement or fear (35), and the way that contextual engagement is communicated can determine how it is received.

As a form of social intelligence, emotional intelligence has both an inner and outer, or *inter-* and *intra-*personal dimension. Feelings, according to Howard Gardner, are the starting point for deepening one's awareness of both:

*The core capacity at work here is access to one's own feeling life - one's range of affects or emotions: the capacity instantly to effect discriminations among these feelings and, eventually, to label them, to enmesh them in symbolic codes, to draw upon them as a means of understanding and guiding one's behavior. In its most primitive form, the intrapersonal intelligence amounts to little more than the capacity to distinguish a feeling of pleasure from one of pain.... At its most advanced level, intrapersonal knowledge allows one to detect and to symbolize complex and highly differentiated sets of feelings... to attain a deep knowledge of... feeling life (Gardner #).*

Developing this depth of feeling and emotional vocabulary is crucial to emotional intelligence. The ability to understand and name one's own emotions, often has a self-regulating affect, directing the power of the emotional response. As Brene Brown writes in *Atlas of the Heart*:

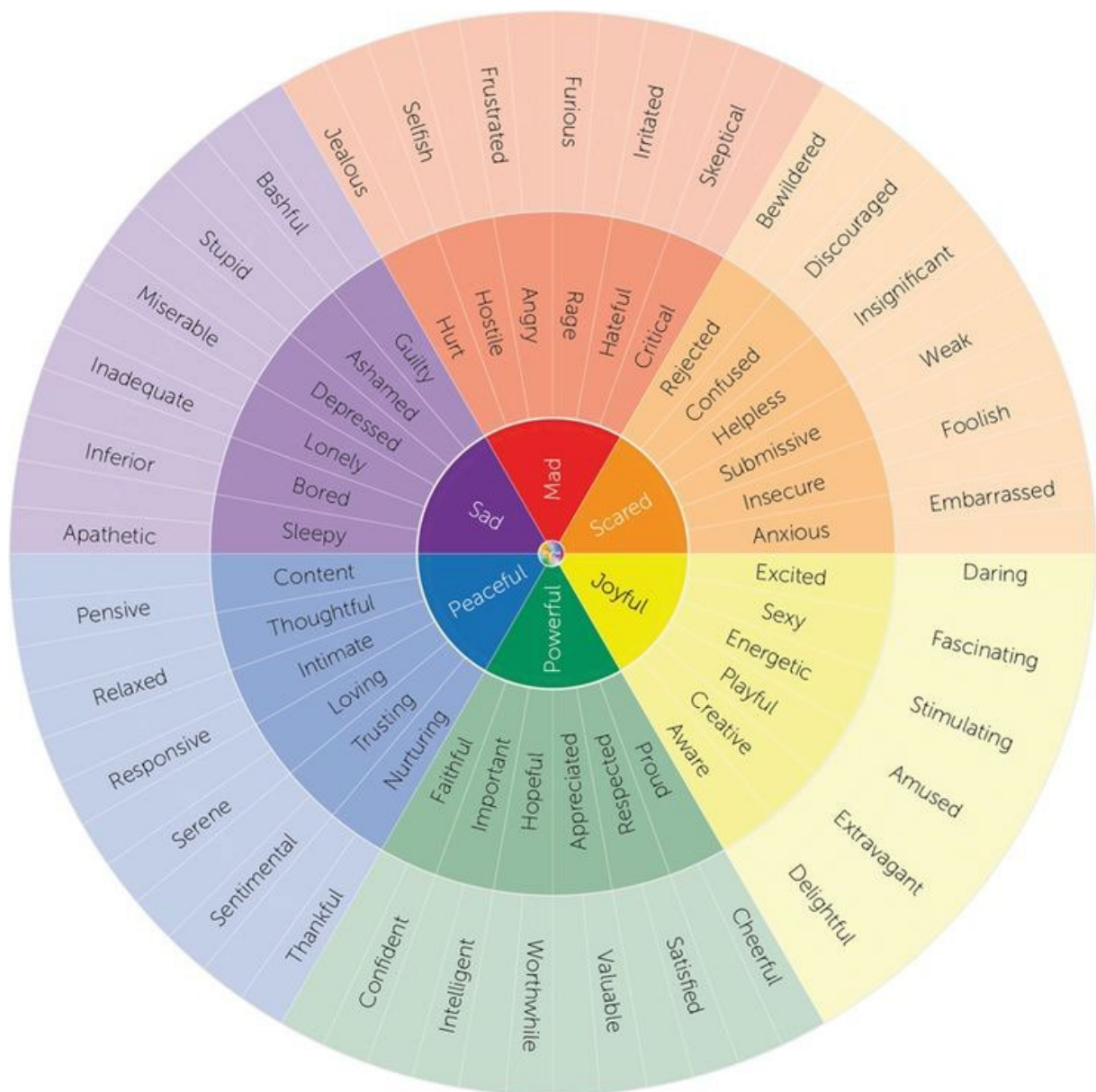
*Language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning and self-awareness. Having access to the right words can open up entire universes. When we don't have the language to talk about what we're experiencing, our ability to make sense of what's happening and share it with others is severely limited. Without*



*accurate language, we struggle to get the help we need, we don't always regulate or manage our emotions and experiences in a way that allows us to move through them productively, and our self-awareness is diminished. Language ... gives us the power of understanding and meaning (Brown xxi).*

This power of naming works also with the emotion we perceive in our interactions with others, or in situations we are experiencing collectively. Sometimes the act of naming a feeling that one senses underpinning a social atmosphere can have the same effect of redistributing power back to people, building their capacity for understanding and taking responsibility. Feeling one's own feelings in this way opens the door to social awareness, because when we fully understand our own experiences it's easier to empathise and imagine ourselves into the shoes of others to understand how they might be feeling, bringing insights as to how to respond appropriately to nurture and manage healthy workplace relationships, whether that's to motivate or to diffuse a potential conflict.

Developing this nuance of emotional understanding requires precision, and research shows that most people struggle to name more than three primary emotions – most popularly angry, sad and happy (Brown xxi). To support the naming of feelings, Gloria Wilcox developed the Feeling Wheel, which displays the diversity of human emotion as well as gathering feelings within groups that connect to "primary" feelings that most people are able to name (Wilcox), illuminating the interconnection between different emotions and feelings.



It's worth noting that this wheel is not exhaustive. Several of the feelings that leaders expressed at the start and during the programme are not included, suggesting the need for one more specifically tailored to leadership, but what it represents about the diversity and interconnectedness of emotional experience is valuable.

The greater our emotional vocabulary, the deeper our understanding of ourselves and others. Connected to this is the importance of reframing our bias that emotions are "good" or "bad". In her book *Emotional Agility*, Harvard psychologist and founder of the Harvard Coaching School, emphasises the importance of accepting all of our feelings as valid parts of our human and leadership experience, seeing even "negative" emotions as "working in your favour" (David 173). She describes emotional agility as a process that, instead of trying to ignore difficult emotions and thoughts, allows you to be present,

“hold” these emotions and thoughts lightly, facing them courageously and compassionately, and changing your behaviours so that you can “live in ways that align with your intentions and values” (David 192).

These research-based approaches to emotionally intelligent leadership speak to similar sentiments found in Eastern mysticism and spiritual traditions. The Dalai Lama has sponsored the development of the Atlas of Emotions, an interactive “map of our emotions to develop a calm mind” in collaboration with emotion researcher Dr. John Elkman (Elkman), illuminating how we respond to triggers differently depending on what emotion they elicit in us, and how to become more conscious of our responses through the Buddhist practises of mindfulness. Persian poet, Rumi, expressed similar ideas in the twelfth century:

### **The Guest House**

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

– Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

The rich importance of feelings to knowing ourselves and developing a deep understanding of others and the world is not a new concept, but there being a place for emotions in the workplace and in leadership is a relatively recent one. The impact of nurturing this deep knowledge of feeling life in alignment with one's deeply felt values and intentions is what this project is exploring, in the context of cultural leadership, through coaching emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, adaptability, empathy and conflict management, to refer to some of Goleman's competencies above. Our method for doing so focuses on re-establishing the mind-body connection that was lost in a workplace paradigm governed by the rational mind.

### **Embodied emotional intelligence in leadership**

*“Without understanding how our feelings, thoughts and behaviours work together, it's almost impossible to find our way back to ourselves and each other. When we don't understand how our emotions shape our thoughts and decisions, we become disembodied from our own experience and disconnected from each other.”*

– Brene Brown (Brown xx)

Embodied leadership development recognises the whole body as the centre of our human experience, and the portal through which we encounter ourselves, others and the wider environment. The body is the vehicle through which we engage, learn, create, enact change, communicate and express our intentions, values and purpose. Our facial expressions and body language say as much to others about what we really feel about them or a situation as our language; as dancer Martha Graham famously said, “the body never lies”. If there's a mismatch between what we say and what others perceive in our physical expression, it can create mistrust. Our bodies, then, are a crucial resource in leaning into authenticity, and authentic leadership.

The importance of the mind-body connection is often missing from explicit definitions of emotional intelligence in leadership, though there is an emerging field of embodied leadership and in psychology there has been an “attempt to ‘take the body seriously’, which began in the late 1990s” (Willis and Cromby 2). In popular literature and practise the focus is often on the importance of managing thoughts, rather than working with the whole body and its multiple instruments of perception – our senses, sensations, “intuition” and “gut” feelings (Hamill), for example.

Emotions have also been defined as “embodied habits” (Wetherell 5) that are inseparable from their stimulus or “affect”, such that experiencing emotion is “a figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled

together with meaning making and with other social and material figurations” (Wetherell 19). In other words, while great effort has been made in mapping the landscape of human emotion, how and why we experience emotions as we do is idiosyncratic. In her introduction to *The Embodiment of Leadership*, Lois Ruskai Melina writes:

*In life, leaders have bodies that think, move, act, have emotions and desires, age, hurt and sense. This corporality is raced, gendered, cultured, sexual, instinctual, and emotional. Too often, however, in both academic literature and mainstream media, leaders are treated as disembodied, their leadership qualities referred to in ways that not only suggest leadership involves only cerebral functions but fail to recognize that cerebral functions originate and are actualized in the body... Ropo and Parviainen (2001) pointed out that leadership practice originates in and is informed by bodily experiences... situated in social, cultural, historical, and deeply personal contexts. This practice is conveyed through the leader’s body and experienced through our own, in a profound exchange of knowledge mediated and informed by, among others, identity, beliefs, language, race, age, gender, psychology, family dynamics, birth order, language, illness, and appearance. (Lid-Falkman et al. xiv)*

These aspects of our identity and experience are embedded in the body as “somatic markers” (Goleman 45) which shape our sense of who we are, and influence our behaviour and speech. They move through us whether we are conscious of them or not. They can manifest as our “shadow” – the repressed, hidden, and unclaimed part of the self (Jung 266), that expresses in things we do or say unconsciously or “out of character”, informed by past experience, inherited cultures or beliefs, or trauma – or as consciously held feelings, values and experiences that help us make choices and take actions that are in alignment with our purpose and goals. At this level of feeling we are able to map the relationship between bodily response, emotion, thinking and identity (including our beliefs, assumptions and judgements), noticing automatic responses or feelings that disrupt or sabotage our actions and intentions, and the beliefs that connect to them, and opening windows of opportunity to consciously change our behaviours, beliefs and concept of self to align with who we want to be, our values and intentions.

At this level of perception there is a wealth of information, insight, learning and wisdom that we can draw on, especially when we consciously attempt to improve ourselves as leaders. Embodied learning, as opposed to cognitive learning, leads to *being* different leaders, as opposed to having a theoretical understanding of what better could look like while missing out on how each of us, specifically, can become better versions of ourselves as leaders.

Attending to “feeling life” through the body as part of leadership development creates the possibility for leaders to increasingly lead beyond their automatic instincts and reactive self with the best of their specific strengths and qualities, with their “whole” or “true” self, while healing and overcoming the aspects of their identity which are attached to fear or false ideas about the self. This sense of “true self” is shaped by “symbolic interactions” with the outside world – the language, gestures and facial expressions with which our behaviour is responded to that tell us something about “who we are” – and by being attentive to “somatic self processes” – the feelings and emotional sensations of the body (Wilson 65). Again, feelings can be seen as a conduit through which we relate simultaneously to ourselves and the outside world, creating the possibility to perceive the truth about how the external world influences us and why, and empowering us to choose how we want to integrate our experience and respond authentically.

The Leadership Circle assessment framework frames this process as a shift from “reactive”, fear-based leadership to “creative”, love-inspired leadership. Reactive tendencies are characterised by self-limiting inner beliefs and assumptions that manifest as self-protective behaviour, approval-seeking and aggressive, highly controlling tactics that limit effectiveness, authentic expression, and empowering leadership. Creative competencies on the other hand are characterised by the fulfilment of potential and manifest as bringing out the best in others, leading with vision, enhancing one’s own development, acting with integrity and courage, and improving organisational systems (Leadership Circle).

Richard Strozzi-Heckler has been a major contributor to the practice and knowledge-base of somatic coaching and embodied leadership training over the past twenty years. He defines the body as “a domain of action, mood, learning and coordination with others” (Strozzi-Heckler 21), and somatics as “the human possibility of harmonizing body, mind, emotions, and spirit” that “envisions responsible citizens that have the physical, emotional, and moral commitment to work and live together in integrity and dignity. These citizens are persons of feeling, authenticity, and commitment whose emotional range encompasses everything from gentleness to the rage of indignation. The body expresses our history, identity, roles, moral strength, moods, and aspirations as a unique quality of aliveness we call the self ... The body we are *is* the life we live” (22).

According to Strozzi and other somatic coaches, the pathway to leadership excellence is to understand an individual’s barriers to authenticity and create a change at the *body* level, in turn affecting one’s perspective and approach towards life and work. It calls to mind the well known (and often mis-attributed) quote: “We are more likely to act our way into a new way of thinking, than to think our way into a new way of acting.”

Embodied leadership is about becoming the living example of one's values in action – by feeling one's emotions, observing patterns of behaviour, and making conscious choices about how to respond in purposeful alignment with one's values and goals.

The impact of embodying one's sense of "true self" and acting based on the alignment of this self-awareness with one's ethics and values in ways that can be perceived and received by others, gives rise to authentic leadership (Donna and Taylor 65), and this authenticity is an important facet of building trust and psychological safety in the workplace (Edmondson 8). In our working environments, we are mostly concerned with what we and others "think", and what we and others "feel" is more often than not taboo. Why? Because to express our feelings feels much more intimate than expressing a thought, and when things around us feel unsafe or uncertain, feelings (as opposed to rational thought) can feel like unstable territory, especially when there is no explicit organisational consensus about what an emotionally healthy work culture looks like, and how each person involved is accountable for co-creating it. We hold anxiety about overstepping boundaries, oversharing, making ourselves susceptible to manipulation, control or other kinds of fear-based power play in the absence of vulnerability. But being more ourselves as leaders – having the courage to speak the truth, share how we really feel, and assert our needs – also creates the conditions for others to lean into their authenticity too, and this has knock-on effects that extend beyond self-actualization: research shows teams have better morale, communication, performance and creativity when people feel safe to show up with their whole selves (Edmondson 124). In these workplaces, fear-based control tactics lack a strong foothold because trust, motivation, accountability and responsibility shape better performance, so long as leaders are modelling authenticity, and holding space with a balance of empowerment and honest feedback for their teams to do the same.

## Thriving vs. resilience

This research project aimed to explore the impact of (re-) connecting cultural leaders with their embodied wisdom, resources and authentic experience, particularly during a time of consistent challenge and uncertainty. Specifically, we are looking at how being aware of one's feelings influences a leader's capacity to thrive. 'Thriving' has been purposefully chosen as opposed to 'resilience'.

Resilience has been defined in many ways, but in an attempt to synthesise a rich and diverse field of psychological study, it is seen as an individual's capacity to maintain a state of "equilibrium" in relation to external circumstances, stressors, challenges and traumatic events (Bonanno 20). Some attribute it to a personal trait, others to a dynamic biopsychosocial process in response to context, both of which enable people to "bounce



back" and positively adapt in the face of stress and adversity. Resilience then, is an interactive experience between the individual, adversity and positive outcome (Vella and Pai 233-34), where "resilience" as a trait or process doesn't exist without adversity.

Resilience is fundamental to mental health, but anecdotally amongst participants of this research and my other coaching and training clients, "being resilient" has also been associated with exhaustion and burn-out, particularly in the face of ongoing and long-term challenging circumstances. For this reason, I became interested in the concept of "thriving" as an alternative point of focus to "resilience" in leadership, particularly given the challenging systemic circumstances of pandemic, energy and cost of living crisis and cultural sector depletion as a result.

Whereas resilience is about persistence in the face of adversity, thriving is about continuous regeneration, using adversity when it arises as an opportunity for self-actualisation. The capacity to thrive is strongly linked to resilience, but differs in that "the person who experiences thriving comes to function at a continuing higher level than was the case before the adverse event"; it is the capacity to continue growing despite the experience of adversity, and while the measures of thriving are hard to evaluate, they include self-acceptance, a change in perspective, priorities or life philosophy, a sense of purpose, renewed or new social connections, and the uptake of hobbies or creative pursuits (Carver 250). This research proposes that the self-acceptance of all our feelings and emotions as a source of growth and positive change, rather than "good" or "bad" experiences that need to be controlled or "fixed", is what supports leaders to grow through adversity.

In the workplace, thriving is defined by Spreitzer et al as the joint experience of vitality and learning; when either one of these qualities are inhibited, an individual will either begin to "overheat" and burn out from lack of vitality, or become "cold" with stagnation and depletion due to a lack of opportunity to learn and grow (Spreitzer et al. 155). Thriving by this definition happens when there is a balance between nurturing vitality and opportunities to learn – one without the other, or neither, leads to low wellbeing.

Vitality is a feeling of "aliveness" and passion. It is a "conscious experience of possessing energy and aliveness" psychologically and physically within the "regulatory control of oneself", and is associated with being spontaneous, "free of conflicts, unburdened by external controls, and feeling capable of effecting action" (Ryan and Frederick 530). Vitality relates to taking care of personal psychological, physical, social and spiritual health. It is nurtured through healthy self-care practices e.g. eating well, exercise, good sleep (i.e. understanding and meeting your specific biological, psychological and social needs), and feeling that your work is contributing to a sense of higher purpose and

meaning. Vitality emerges from within us and the choices we make, and is a □ ected and inhibited by external factors such as toxic work environments, especially if the individual loses connection with their body, confidence in their sense of personal power and their capability to take action and make changes to support their wellbeing and express their passion and creativity.

Learning satisfaction is experienced via opportunities to try new things, innovate and generate new insights and skills (Spreitzer et al. 158). Overall, thriving employees feel intrinsically motivated and that their work is supportive of self-development and personal growth, and – speaking to the principles of freedom, autonomy and feeling free of conflict articulated in the definition above – this is enabled by organisational cultures and relational behaviours such as trust, respect, celebrating diversity, autonomy in decision making that relates directly to an individual’s job, keeping employees informed of the organisation’s purpose, values and strategy, civil communication, honest and constructive feedback, opportunities to learn and growth, and supportive leadership (Spreitzer et al. 158-161). I would go further to define “opportunity to learn” as “creative expression”, and see vitality and creative expression as two aspects of the same innate impulse to live, experience, and creatively engage with life, which we will discuss in more detail below.

This circles back to our discourse on embodied emotional intelligence as the spring from which authenticity, trust, meaningful relationships and creativity flow, and the importance of leaders modelling these qualities to shape emotionally intelligent workplace cultures. Emotional intelligence, then, has a direct relationship to thriving – if we lack self and social awareness, vitality and creativity can easily be stifled by fear and fear-based behaviours.

*People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.*

– Mihály Csíkszentmihályi

## Thriving and creativity

Of particular interest and relevance to this research is the association in current organisational research between thriving and creativity, building on Western psychodynamic as well as Eastern perspectives, such as the Chinese concept of *Chi* or the Balinese *bayu* (Ryan and Frederick 532), suggesting that vitality and creativity arise from the same internal source. Alikaj et al suggest that thriving – the combination of

vitality and learning – enables some people to navigate changing environments with creative solutions. They connect it to an individual’s level of proactivity; one’s capacity for experiencing “flow” – a positive state of consciousness that people experience when they are completely immersed in the activity they are performing, such that they ignore time and their surroundings (Csikszentmihalyi); and Fredrickson’s “broaden and build” theory, which draws a connection between people’s experience of positive emotions (such as feeling “energised”) and the range of possibilities they perceive, in turn increasing their potential for generating novel ideas (Alikaj et al. 859). Wymes builds on this, connecting an emotionally intelligent workplace environment with the concept of an “inspirational dream” – a shared vision or higher purpose that fuels intrinsic motivation, aligns individual and collective values, and creates an atmosphere of harmony that induces flow and unleashed vitality: “where individual passions merge to create intensity and invincibility where anything is possible, when action and awareness merge” (Wymes 31). This suggests a relationship between creativity, thriving and a sense of purpose bigger than oneself.

This research draws together these seemingly interconnected elements of embodied emotional intelligence, thriving and purpose, to explore a hypothesis that leaders are better able to thrive and respond creatively to challenges when they become self-aware of and resolve their internal barriers to thriving, through embodied emotional intelligence. Secondly, the research makes a start at exploring how this individual growth relates to a leader’s capacity to translate their personal growth into organisational development that supports a culture of thriving, in which their teams, collaborators and employees are able to thrive also.

## Research process

This paper is a synthesis of findings from an action research process that took place between October and December 2022. It consisted of:

- an eight-week coaching programme called THRIVE, which took place from 20 October to 8 December 2022 for nine cultural leaders based in the UK, including two live one-day workshops at Pavilion Dance South West in Bournemouth, two two-hour online group coaching sessions, and a final three-hour online workshop, as well as two individual coaching sessions per person;
- an email-based “THRIVE DIY” programme which ran from 1 November to 3 December 2022 for a wider group of participants consisting of twelve emails, each with themed content and an exercise to try individually and/or as a team in their own time;

- desk research to strengthen the academic basis for the method we were testing and the findings that emerged; and
- a reflective evaluation that took place via feedback forms and notes taken (with permission) during all live sessions with participants.

The training and coaching elements of both programmes were delivered by me, joined in the live programme by my collaborator and co-facilitator, Vid Tratnik – an executive coach and facilitator focused on embodied approaches to personal and leadership development.

## Participant selection

### Live coaching programme

Participants for the live coaching programme were selected via an open call and application form. The open call was distributed directly via LinkedIn (the social network I am a member of), Clore Leadership newsletter, my newsletter (The Field Consulting), and direct emails to colleagues and collaborators in the UK to invite them both to apply and distribute the call. The call was indirectly distributed by others on LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and via individual emails recommending individuals to apply.

The criteria for eligibility were based on them meeting our definition of a cultural leader (outlined in the definitions above); their self-assessment of urgency for a leadership coaching intervention; and, based on the applications that were received, an aim to gather as diverse a group as possible considering gender, age, ethnic diversity, geography, art form, organisation size etc.

Fourteen people applied, of which thirteen identified as female and one as male, two identified as having a disability, and three identified as mixed-heritage, Chinese and Latin American. Ages ranged between 24-64, and leadership roles included executive level directors, heads of department in larger organisations, producers (in-house and freelance) and managers. I received direct interest from three additional potential male participants who were unable to make the dates or logistics of the programme work, but there was an overwhelming bias towards women applying and participating (mirrored also in the DIY programme below).

The final participant group of nine selected included:

- eight women, one man;
- eight identifying as white and one as Latin American;
- two identifying as having a disability (dyslexia);

- seven leaders based in organisations as executive or managerial level and two freelance producers;
- a range of artforms represented including museums, libraries and archives; performing arts; socially-engaged arts; and visual arts.

Most participants for the live programme were based in the South of England, due to the location of the live workshops (Bournemouth) being a barrier to others participating. Other barriers included people's availability for the live dates, and childcare logistics, which led to a less diverse group than we aimed to recruit from the pool of applications received.

It will be important for the ongoing development of this work to understand from a more diverse spectrum of cultural leaders whether there were other barriers to applying in the first place, for example the language or format of the programme, and the reach of the open call advertised.

## DIY programme

Applicants who were unsuccessful or unable to make the dates of the live programme were able to sign-up for a four-week, "DIY" version of the programme to complete in their own time, which was also shared via an open call to the wider sector. The open call was distributed similarly to the live programme open call above.

This email-based programme delivered a mixture of written content and short exercises, mirroring the core themes of the live programme, for participants to complete in their own time between 1 November to 3 December 2022. Participants were also offered the chance to join two live group coaching calls during the four-week process. There was no criteria for eligibility other than being a cultural leader based in the UK.

Sign-ups included twenty-nine women and two men, and a geographical spread which included England, Wales and Scotland, and two international sign-ups from Slovenia and Spain. Ethnicity and age data was not gathered for the online programme at sign-up, but six participants gave additional data through our pre-course evaluation identifying:

- four as white and two as mixed heritage;
- an age range spanning 25-64;
- a range of sectors represented including digital arts; museums, libraries and archives; performing arts; and multi-artform practitioners;
- a variety of roles including creative director, curator, consultant, independent artist, executive producer and environmental sustainability manager.

An internet search of the other participants indicated most operating at executive level in a diversity of sectors.

The names of participants from both programmes will be kept anonymous in this report, to preserve their privacy and honour the sanctity of the safe space we created to share deeply during the programme.

## Activity

The action research process aimed to test a coaching methodology designed to develop embodied emotional intelligence through direct experience, releasing vitality and offering practices for ongoing learning that enable leaders to thrive. For this research programme, we named the methodology and the coaching programme 'Thrive'.

The method draws on practices from coaching, systemic constellation theory, forgiveness processes, mindfulness, Qi Gong, "games for actors and non-actors" from Theatre of the Oppressed, and content from a variety of research-based resources, many quoted in the first section above, related to emotional intelligence and leadership. It was developed and co-facilitated in collaboration with coach, trainer and Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner, Vid Tratnik.

Thrive is designed to encourage an integrated mind-body approach to emotional intelligence by, firstly, deepening the leader's connection to their bodily experience or 'embodiment', to develop awareness of their felt experience. Secondly, this is integrated with a process for cognitively understanding what these feelings are communicating, and thirdly offering a framework for deciding how to act ahead in a way that is self-compassionate, respectful of others and in alignment with the leader's goals and desires. In other words, the method aims to support leaders to process their feelings and experiences – particularly their experiences of adversity, past and present – in a way that enables their growth, nurtures meaningful relationships, and supports their thriving.

Fundamentally, the method trains four core skills: presence, curiosity, acceptance and responsibility that support development across all four domains of emotional intelligence. It is not theoretical. It is practised rather than taught, working with the real-life challenges and barriers to thriving that people bring into the workshop space. The aim is to enable people to experience change within them during the process, to come away feeling different, rather than simply being equipped with ideas while lacking

the *how* to apply them. The content combines every piece of content with practices that bring it to life practically, engaging the body as well as the mind.

More about the detail of the method will be shared in the findings, as we unpack what happened for participants in terms of tangible changes, and wider outcomes related to thriving.

## Evaluation methodology

The methodology was evaluated based on a mixture of pre-determined metrics and open reflections conducted throughout the process:

- Changes in self-reported levels of overall wellbeing, able to be present with one's feelings at work, comfort with handling uncertainty, ability to be vulnerable (authentic expression) in the workplace, ability to express creativity in the workplace, and confidence in taking action measured Before (during the application process) and after (in the final written evaluation) at the end of the programme;
- Informal reflections, insights and outcomes noted throughout the process that participants felt related to their capacity to feel and process feelings and their ability to thrive;
- A written reflective evaluation completed after the first and last workshops.

While I anticipated certain outcomes based on previous research and experience, which were explicitly tested in the evaluation, I also left space for unexpected outcomes and insights with open questions and reflective space throughout the process and in each of the written evaluations.



## Findings

In short, the action research uncovered a direct relationship between emotional intelligence and thriving. Our findings include the direct impacts participants experienced as a result of the THRIVE programme, as well as insights that we honed during the process as we reflected and observed the method in action.

### Applicability of the method

*“What stayed with me was the beginnings of a process that I can replicate. The outcome is a desire to explore more deeply.”* – THRIVE participant

The practical nature of the tools we shared were intended to support people to apply their learning quickly and directly to current challenges, and, after some practice during the workshops and coaching sessions, begin to arrive at their own solutions for moving ahead. By the end of the programme, all participants had felt some change and an integration of the practices into their daily lives and leadership. The extent to which the practices were habitual differed, but everyone reported that they felt more conscious of their feelings and needs, and were better able to translate this awareness into their choices and relationships with others.

### The emotional landscape of cultural leadership

Based on the applications to be part of THRIVE, I mapped the feelings and emotions that cultural leaders named in relation to contextual, organisational and personal leadership challenges were provoking in the following word cloud. The larger the word, the more frequently it appeared.



## Challenges and the feelings they trigger

It's fair to say that for many, the past three years in particular felt traumatising, and for some opened old wounds and traumas that were exacerbated by their experience during lockdowns and the pandemic's overall environment of fear, isolation and uncertainty. We also mapped the common challenges that people named these feelings in relation to.

### Demands on time and energy

Leaders were feeling pulled in too many directions trying to balance organisational survival in the context of a sector financially decimated by the pandemic; managing their team; and relationships with their boards. One in particular was struggling with the real risk of complete organisational failure due to historic bad governance and internal cultural challenges, as well as financial implications from the pandemic, which called for a deep and long-term change process. Many named being in this constant state of response and reactivity as "firefighting", with increasing physical symptoms of low energy and sickness in some cases. Aside from the personal consequences, this situation was also preventing time and capacity for (much-needed) long-term planning.

**Feelings associated with this were** exhaustion, overwhelm, burn-out, depleted of energy to be visionary or creative, loss of confidence, self-doubt, lack of creativity, lack

of confidence, turbulence, lack of motivation in general, and specifically lack of motivation to stay in the sector.

### Managing stressed teams

All those who directly managed teams were struggling with feeling responsible for the wellbeing of their colleagues, and trying to hold a safe space for the emotional repercussions of the pandemic to be acknowledged and responded to, while also maintaining the organisation's performance and accountability to their board and professional commitments.

Strained team dynamics were impeding several leaders' ability to delegate effectively, while also feeling weighed down by a tendency in their teams to "load" challenges rather than take initiative to seek solutions. This was particularly acute in organisations where people were signed off for mental health reasons over prolonged periods.

**Feelings associated with this were** exhaustion, overwhelm, frustration, resentment, feeling drained, self-doubt, and lack of confidence.

### Conflictual team dynamics

Several mentioned that conflictual or "dyscult" team dynamics were having more of an impact in this period. One leader felt like they were often playing the role of a peacemaker while experiencing hurt from the behaviour of others. The effect of persisting in a peacemaking role was to feel unsatisfied with decisions and outcomes of conversations, and unaddressed tensions and repeated negative behaviours. Another mentioned struggling to be assertive, specifically around what she needed to do her job and deliver to a high quality.

**Feelings associated with this were** hurt, self-doubt, lack of confidence, powerlessness, overwhelm and tension.

### Lack of support

Almost every applicant felt the lack of (or desire for!) a supportive peer group with whom to discuss their challenges and find new solutions. Many felt that they lacked creative space to process their own feelings and challenges, reflect, heal, develop their skills, and engage in longer-term planning collaboratively.

There was also an explicit and implicit feeling of disconnection amongst teams in the workplace as a result of the pandemic.

**Feelings associated with this were** isolation, loss, disconnection, overwhelm, lack of safe space, and lack of motivation.

### Wellbeing and mental health challenges

Two applicants mentioned specific mental health disorders that they had developed during the past three years. One referred to this as a new tendency to respond emotionally to situations in ways that they hadn't experienced before, leaving them feeling vulnerable and lacking in the skills and reflectiveness to deal with these outbursts. Another was living with a diagnosis of severe anxiety disorder, linked specifically to work-place stress, which was causing physical, emotional and mental symptoms. Other leaders mentioned feeling challenged to find the time to balance work with necessary personal leisure and self-care, and two specifically mentioned balancing their experience of being new mothers with workplace demands.

**Feelings associated with this were** anxiety, stress, vulnerability, exposure, procrastination, disengagement, isolation, lack of passion, lack of confidence, unworthiness and unfulfillment.

### The burden of unexpressed emotion

One leader was feeling the loss of colleagues who had decided to leave the organisation, and the repercussions of this loss within the remaining team. She felt like she was personally carrying emotions that hadn't been dealt with, because of a lack of time and space to process. This burden of unacknowledged emotion underpinned many of the other issues people shared, and was a validation of the necessity for this research.

**Feelings associated with this were** exhaustion and disconnection.

### Misalignment of values and/or talent

One leader felt that a gap between her values and those of the organisation had emerged, making it challenging to continue leading with passion and energy. Another felt that her experience and talent was not being given space and time to be fully utilised by her organisation, specifically her creative and artistic sensibility.

**Feelings associated with this were** lack of motivation, low energy, lack of fulfilment, paralysis, waste, uncertainty, and a lack of purpose.

### Paralysis in decision making

All of the issues above were also associated with a common feeling of paralysis in decision making.

**Feelings associated with this were** ineffectiveness, redundancy, a lack of clarity, overwhelm, burn-out and self-doubt.

### Systemic dysfunctionality

Several leaders felt challenges by systemic issues beyond their direct control or influence. This included the changes and challenges being experienced by the sector as a whole, and the lack of “structural solutions”. Climate collapse, economic instability, racism, ableism and transphobia also arose as live topics for leaders, their teams and the artists and SMEs they collaborate with and support, as was the impact of the negative bias in mainstream news on mental health and mindset. Leaders expressed the impacts of holding space for their own and others’ collective grief in grappling with these systemic issues, particularly the process of navigating the line between emotional acknowledgement and responsibility as pressures become more extreme.

**Feelings associated with this were** ineffectiveness, grief, frustration, anger, powerlessness, responsibility and burnout.

### Needs

In relation to these challenges and feelings, applicants felt they needed:

#### Safe space

... for deep reflection, learning, curiosity, exploration, vulnerability, honest conversations, the development of new skills and practices, to “feel out” possibilities for themselves, to plan and grow in thinking and optimism.

#### Peer support

... to share challenges, explore solutions collaboratively and receive encouragement and support.

#### Boost in confidence

... in themselves, independent of the “props” of their institution, and also re-develop confidence in the sector as a place for them to continue growing.

#### Strategies to support wellbeing

... their own and their teams, so that they can deliver meaningful work.

#### Unleashing creativity

... their own as well as the creative potential of their team.

## Reigniting energy

... to go beyond coping and reconnect with the passion for what they do.

## Reconnecting with purpose

... to find a new way of thinking about themselves, the value they provide and their contribution.

They were inspired by the language of the programme, and the idea of moving from resilient to 'thriving'.

## Relevance of the research

Mapping this emotional landscape based on the feedback from applicants was a validation that there is a profound need within the sector to find space and strategies for feelings to be processed, in service of collective wellbeing and unlocking the creativity, energy and passion that cultural leaders need to do meaningful work.

## Action research process and insights

The impact of the Thrive coaching programme on participants evolved throughout the process in small moments of breakthrough, as we moved, talked and interacted with one another. Here we unpack the process and its impact through some of these case studies of micro-transformation.

## Getting out of our minds

In the first Thrive workshop, we opened with a check-in circle asking people what they'd like to get out of the day. All nine participants gave some version of the same desire: to be able to calm their minds and exit the whirlwind of overthinking that was on the edge of overwhelming them most of the time. Our response to this was pragmatic: to calm the mind, we will engage the whole body, and then reconnect to the mind as a tool for understanding.

Through a series of theatre games adapted from the work of Augusto Boal, the group were guided to bring their attention to their bodies: how they move, and how they feel when invited to move in different ways – slow, fast, stressed, happy. In these exercises, participants began to observe how emotional states influenced their behaviour, and vice versa. Walking "stressed" provoked a raised heart-rate, rushed movement, lack of eye contact with other people, tension and other psycho-physical symptoms. Being asked to walk "happy" immediately shifted people's state to be lighter, make eye contact, smile, feel joy. We perceived the power we have in choosing our state, and the relationship between a decision in the mind, and feeling in the body. We also observed

how a decision to walk very slowly provoked different outcomes. For some, it intensely focused their attention on the detail of walking – what bones in their body were moving and how, and the importance of balance and placing their feet well, for example – and produced a state of calm. For others this provoked a feeling of stress, and a feeling that not enough was happening. In both cases we were able to make observations about the power of “slowing down” and the psycho-emotional barriers to people doing so; the *feeling* of urgency, rather than any specific task or need, was preventing a possibility to take time, and in a working context where demands and pressures are high, that feeling of urgency finds a million reasons why there is “no time” to slow down for things that matter – like long-term planning, conflict resolution and other challenges that people were sitting with that they felt unable to make space for amongst “more pressing” demands.

## Observing and naming to deepen awareness

*“Theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see itself – see itself in situ: see itself seeing. Observing itself, the human being perceives what it is, discovers what it is not and imagines what it could become. It perceives where it is and where it is not, and imagines where it could go ... The human being alone possesses this faculty for self-observation in an imaginary mirror ... The self-knowledge thus acquired allows him to imagine variations of his action, to study alternatives.” – Augusto Boal (Keefe and Murray 32)*

Building on this body-based awareness, we took time to explore what emotions were arising in general, where they felt these feelings located in the body, and what sensations they were provoking – pain, discomfort, pleasure, heart-rate. Using the Feelings Wheel as a starting point for naming feelings, participants identified a feeling that was present for them, and worked with naming it as precisely as possible. We also explored how sometimes a feeling is a mask or umbrella for another, harder to feel, emotion. For example, how feeling withdrawn was a coping strategy for a deeper feeling of fear, or how frustration was a protective cover for feeling inadequate. We connected this to the thoughts that people experienced when connecting with these feelings, identifying patterns of judgement, blame and assumptions that were barriers to taking ownership of their feelings.

We explored what happened when they activated self-compassion by placing their hands on their hearts, accepting their feelings and asking the feeling what it needed. For one participant, her judgements of other people “not caring” about the challenges she was working through, shifted into an acknowledgement that her feeling of overwhelm needed support. When she owned this feeling, an insight emerged that she was



preventing herself from accessing support by not having the courage to ask clearly for specific kinds of help. The fear behind this was that if she took the risk to ask, she might be rejected, which touched a sensitive self-judgement about being unworthy (a belief I've anecdotally observed to be common amongst independent, capable and caring people who are comfortable with giving but not with receiving support). By owning this feeling, she was able to reframe it by seeing the potential rejection of others as a consequence of their own lack of time or capacity, rather than a fundamental fault within her. This act of bringing self-limiting beliefs into consciousness through compassion towards self and others unlocks new possibilities for meaningful relationships, as well as meeting individual needs that overcome barriers to thriving.

Throughout this process, people experienced what happens when we *lean into* the emotional, psychological and physical discomfort that our feelings can agitate, rather than escaping it by retreating from the body into our mind. The outcome was feeling more deeply connected to themselves, experiencing calm, and arriving at greater clarity about their needs and what they could do to address them. This brought relief and a release of energy towards purposeful action.

Resisting action is not a passive state. It takes energy to hold ourselves back from feeling and acting on the needs and insights that our feelings communicate. When we find the courage to own our feelings rather than resisting them with judgements or assumptions about how and why we or others feel and act in certain ways, we release stuck energy that can (em)power action, growth and purposeful forward momentum.

## Embracing the body's wisdom

*"The idea that I could make change in my body and feel what I felt fully was very empowering. I had been holding back so much feeling for a long time."*

When we connect with and engage the whole body, the rational mind is relieved of being alone in figuring out what's best for us. It gains access to the wisdom that emerges from our senses, instincts, subconscious and intuitive readings of situations, people and places, and the knowledge of our accumulated embodied experience. The rational mind is an incredible tool, but the body as a whole is our instrument of perception, action and creation – the mind alone is incapable of finding all the answers we need.

During the workshops we spent time exploring participants' experience of leadership through the body. One of the most powerful moments was an exploration of the difference in how each participant interpreted "resilience" and "thriving" through an

image-making exercise, adapted from Augusto Boal's games for actors and non-actors (Boal).

Each participant was asked to make an image of "resilience" without words, using their whole bodies. What emerged was an exhibition of sculptures that displayed a mixture of "power poses" and fighting stances, fists often balled up, wide legs or seated on the ground to find stability. When asked what it felt like to be in their position, many say that it felt "exhausting to sustain", "combative" and in a "heightened state of awareness". Others noticed that they were "intensely" focused, and some "defensive" or "self-protective", with the arms creating a protective barrier. From this evolved a conversation about the relationship between our interpretation of what "resilience" means and provokes – in this case exhaustion, stress, conflict, a slow drain of energy.

Half the group was then asked to create images of "thriving". These poses were still stable – solid stances standing, with legs around shoulder-width apart, or sitting, open (looking outward peacefully, curious, palms turned outward), and neutral. When asked which of the images they felt most drawn to, the "resilience" half of the group unanimously chose the most open and neutral of the images. In the discussion, people expressed their attraction towards this state of calm readiness, open to what will come, content and present in the moment, and felt it a state more stable and sustainable to begin from and return to as we encountered challenges. One described it as a state of "calm readiness".

The experience of *feeling* the difference between these two states of resilience and thriving gave people a perspective on their behaviours and choices that a conversation would not have. It gave them an understanding of why they felt burned out or overwhelmed, and how it could be different, by allowing the *body* rather than the mind alone to offer new strategies.

### Making new choices

One participant later shared how embodying her experience of resilience brought up a memory of the exact moment when, as a child, she had decided that "resilience" meant to keep going no matter the impact on her wellbeing. Accepting that she made the best choice she could under these past circumstances with self-compassion, and seeing that this understanding of resilience was no longer serving her, opened the possibility to redefine it for herself in a way that supports her thriving in the present.

This was a powerful example of how, through being present in and observing our bodies and the insights they offer, we can become conscious of how past experiences are determining some of our current behaviour, thinking and choices, and embrace the

opportunity to choose new ways of approaching life and leadership based on who we are and what we need and desire today, rather than the automatic strategies we inherited as children adapting to our particular social and familial environment.

This includes noticing which of the classic fight/flight/freeze strategies we automatically adopt when our fear response is triggered, or we sense a threat. For people experiencing high levels of stress, the fight/flight/freeze response is often activated, and creates peaks of adrenaline that can exhaust the body, particularly the immune system. Taking note of how we tend to respond to stress or threat in the body – for example, self-defence (fight), avoidance (flight) or paralysis (freeze) – and how this feels, can bring us the consciousness to understand why we default to certain emotional reactions, and give us the power to choose new ones.

### Noticing who is reacting

*“If I am triggered by something that’s information for me I can be curious about (rather than it taking control of me).” –THRIVE participant*

This practice of noticing when it is an inner child acting or reacting, rather than our conscious, adult selves, was also part of the process. Usually, the inner child is active when we are holding ourselves back because of a fear, accompanied by a deeply-held belief, judgement or assumption. During a coaching session, one participant uncovered a paradox between wanting to “be more in her power” and “shine” more, meaning to express herself more boldly and authentically, and a fear that this would make her “immodest”. What emerged was that her value of modest conduct was inherited from her parents, whose shared values of modesty and hard work shaped part of their family identity, particularly considering her mother’s experience as an immigrant establishing herself in the UK. For the participant to be immodest would risk betraying her family’s values, and her safety and sense of belonging. She observed this as a belief she had taken on as a child, which had sometimes inhibited her self-expression and encouraged her perfectionism. From this place of consciousness, she was able to accept the choices and inhibited desires of this inner child, decide to reconnect with and relate to her source of authentic power in a new way, and give herself permission to express herself more truthfully, without being inhibited by the fear that she would be rejected by her parents if she were truly herself.

This “re-parenting” of our inner children is an act of self-compassion which allows deeply held resistances in the body and mind to be released. It is sensitive work, especially if someone has a history of trauma, but it’s also a helpful tool – when participants noticed that a feeling was provoking self-judgement or blame beyond the merits of a situation, they were invited to acknowledge this was a part of them that was

being triggered and needed their attention and acceptance, rather than being a feeling provoked solely by the situation at hand in the present. This allowed them to take responsibility for their reactivity, regulate their emotional state, and see the situation from a more neutral perspective without getting lost in fear, blame and judgement. Beyond these pragmatic possibilities, several also experienced a deep peace, self-trust, joy and care in witnessing and accepting their inner child.

Far from being a part of us active only in emotional reactivity, our inner children are also the keepers of our dreams, hopes, ideals, visions and belief in the (im)possible. When we choose to see our past hurt, choices and strategies as the best efforts of an innocent child, and offer that part of us self-compassionate acceptance, the gifts and resources of the inner child also open to us in the form of optimism, creativity, a sense of possibility, enthusiasm, curiosity and the specific dreams and purpose that is closest to our truest self and heart's desire.

## Dancing with resistance

We observed that the greatest barrier to the feeling of "flow" and forward movement in one's life is resistance. Resistance shows up in the body as discomfort or agitation (which can be both pleasurable or painful), and in the mind as irreconcilable, repetitive, overwhelming or inflammatory thoughts. Relationally, it shows up as strategies that create disconnection rather than connection. It is caused by fear and manifests as judgements, assumptions and core beliefs about who we are and what is possible for us.

A common experience amongst participants was to question or feel resistance towards the feelings and insights that emerged, especially when how they felt clashed with their identity – who they thought they were or wanted to be. What might be the consequences of being a person who feels incapable or scared? For many people, it feels too unsafe to find out because they sit with assumptions and judgements about what a "scared" person is that undermines other ideas about themselves as courageous and capable.

This clash emerged in the form of judgements, like "it's not useful to be angry"; or "if I feel rage about this situation, I will act inappropriately"; or "if I accept that I feel powerful I'll be too much for other people." At their root, these judgements exist to protect us from the risk of eliciting judgement from others – the risk of not belonging, the fear of being without love. They could be rephrased as "if I have the courage to really feel what I'm feeling, and accept it and what it's telling me about what matters to me, I might lose something or someone I love".

These judgments and the resistance they create shut down the possibility to feel, release and take authentic action on our needs, and they reveal two things. Firstly, our judgments reveal a mis-identification of feelings as an expression of identity, and we work with this to reframe “I am anger” to “I am feeling angry” which separates one’s sense of self from their feelings. Secondly, resistance reveals a choice we are making to inhibit ourselves and the uniqueness of our self-expression, in service of being accepted by others. Conversely, as participants opened up to trusting their feelings and bodies, self-compassionately acknowledging their experience, they began to be rewarded with the calm, clarity and sense of internal safety that they were seeking, shifting from acceptance by others to self-acceptance.

## Change in mindset

This shift to self-acceptance and compassion was accompanied by a shift in mindset too. Participants felt better about themselves and, unburdened by self-judgement and blame, were able to access new perspectives, compassion for others, and felt empowered to seek for positive and regenerative ways forward. Experiencing or feeling closer to a state of thriving was directly related to this shift in mindset and perspective away from dis-empowering patterns of judgement and blame to active strategies of curiosity, acceptance, compassion and the capacity to communicate and act on one’s needs. It’s worth noting, as in other approaches to coaching and self-development this reframing of mindset is led by cognitive processes, rather than beginning with feeling and the body. The difference is that when we begin with the body and make a shift in feeling, then often a shift in thinking follows; when a resistance or pain in the body is relieved, the mental limitation or agitation caused by that feeling (whose purpose it is to alert us to something not feeling right within us) can let go.

Fundamentally, we observed that often this shift in mindset – at its root – is a shift from people feeling and perceiving themselves and situations from a place of “lack” – not being enough, not having enough time, space or funding, lacking courage, confidence or acknowledgement – to one of abundance: feeling whole, perceiving possibilities, seeing opportunities for growth, connection and development.

## Fearless Compassion

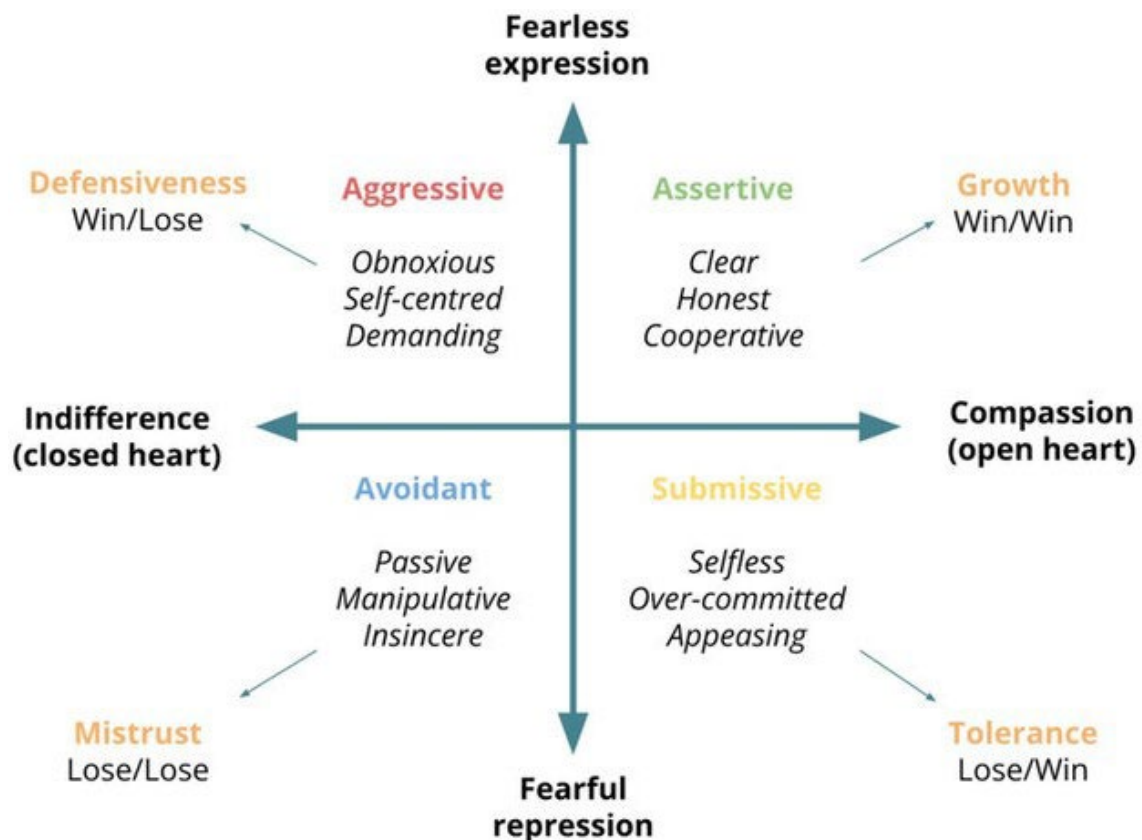
Fearless Compassion describes a state of being in which one has the courage to face adversity and the fear that it provokes with an open heart. It is a state founded upon the balance between feeling worthy of love (particularly self-love and compassion) and recognising the worthiness of others to be treated with compassion and respect. Open-heartedness here means actively choosing to “open to” connection, to feeling and responding to one’s own and others’ emotions with authenticity and compassion, despite the risk and uncertainty of being vulnerable. Compassion is chosen specifically

as opposed to empathy (the experience of emotional resonance) or sympathy (emotionally distant pity), because it includes not only the emotional understanding that comes with empathy, but also tangible actions that specifically and relevantly respond to a need or situation from a place of mutual respect, integrity, responsibility and love (Sinclair et al.).

During the THRIVE programme, I developed a model called “Fearless Compassion” (Table 1 below) to support participants to identify how different strategies of resistance can put us and others out of alignment with a thriving state, and what getting back into alignment looks like. It describes a way of relating to ourselves and others that creates the conditions for vitality and creativity to flourish through adversity. It emerged from observations and discussions with the group (and previous groups and coaching clients) about the internal and relational barriers that were holding back thriving and creativity. It was also inspired by learning from my own healing journey as well as other similar leadership models, such as Stephen Covey’s courage and consideration matrix for developing the maturity to seek win/win negotiation outcomes (Miller), Kim Scott’s Radical Candor framework for honest feedback (Scott), and Amy Edmondson’s work on psychologically safe and “fearless” organisations (Edmondson).

#### **Table 1: Fearless Compassion Model**

The Fearless Compassion sets out the behaviours, relational dynamics and outcomes that emerge depending on the extent to which we are in touch with our feelings (open-heartedness) and have the courage to express ourselves authentically in the face of circumstances that challenge us. It can be applied to the relationship we have with ourselves, other people and wider systems.



The model acts like a compass for identifying one’s own particular emotional and/or behavioural tendencies, and opens reflection on what is preventing open-hearted, fearless expression and how to get back in balance. Below each segment is unpacked, drawing on observations from working with people experiencing the symptoms and outcomes of the four “extremes” that the matrix explores.

### Fearful Indifference

When we are fearful and indifferent, we are in a state of avoidance. This space is one in which we feel disconnected from ourselves and other people, and we feel cast in the role of a victim. Our fear response here is usually to flee or freeze, and common feelings associated with this state are powerlessness, insignificance, insecurity, isolation, loneliness, unworthiness, depression, sadness, anxiety, withdrawal and stuckness or paralysis. The strategies we reach for to communicate are often manipulative, trying to control others to meet our needs without directly expressing ourselves and giving the other person a choice, often because it feels too unsafe to be vulnerable and potentially rejected. While we may have good reasons for feeling like this in some circumstances, choosing to behave in this way breeds mistrust and deepens conflict with ourselves and others. It’s a vicious cycle.



If you or someone you know are in this space, the antidote is to take a step back and understand what it is that's causing you to feel so disconnected and unsafe, and what you need to reconnect to yourself (self-care) and others in a way that supports you to cultivate courage and compassion.

### **Fearful Compassion**

This open-hearted person tends to say yes to almost everything, at the cost of meeting their own needs and honouring their boundaries. They quickly become over-committed and feel the need to appease everyone to maintain a conflict-free environment, in which they feel safe. This fear response is called "fawning". Here, we feel connected to everyone else but disconnected from ourselves, prioritising other people's needs above our own. We are at risk of tolerating rather than addressing issues and communicating honestly, and over time consistently ignoring your needs can burn you out. Common feelings associated with this state are frustration, repressed anger, exhaustion, lethargy, burn-out, feeling unappreciated, injustice, envy and unworthiness.

If you or someone you know are in this space, it's important to refocus on what your needs are, and get support to build the confidence and safety within yourself to communicate clear boundaries without apologising for doing so.

*Note: most of the programme participants identified with this box. We observed correlations between burn-out and a state of "resilience" that was about coping with circumstances (referred to as "tolerance" above) rather than using them as opportunities for transformation.*

### **Fearless Indi□erence**

Also known as the "bulldozer" this person is completely centred on what they need, and they have no problems with demanding that their needs be met or communicating what's not OK for them (with aggression if need be). There is not much space for hearing others, and when confronted with a need for accountability the response is usually defensive. Much as it may seem fearless, this behaviour can be an expression of the "fight" fear response. Feelings associated with this state are rage, defensiveness, feeling unsupported, hurt, abandoned and unworthiness.

If you find yourself or others slipping into this space, it's time to consider why you feel disconnected and indi□erent to other people. Usually this comes from being deeply hurt or scared, and it's important to get support to heal the pain that is preventing you from accessing your consideration for and connection with others. If you are on the receiving end of a bulldozer's behaviour, you need to get to safe ground to rebalance and then set clear, strong boundaries to prevent yourself from enabling their behaviour.

## Fearless Compassion

Here you feel able to say yes or no truthfully and without apologising for it. You own your feelings and communicate your needs to others clearly. You can listen to and acknowledge others without feeling the need to compromise yourself in how you respond to any requests or demands that you receive. You know here that when you say “no” to one thing, it means you have the space to say “yes” to something else, and say both genuinely, with a clear conscience. When fear arises here, it is acknowledged with compassionate acceptance, so that it doesn’t subversively disrupt your capacity to communicate and take action. Courage in this space is not an absence of fear – it is the acceptance of fear as a natural protective response to threat and challenge, and the capacity to continue acting on your needs, plans and goals despite its presence. Feelings associated with being in this state are calmness, readiness, clarity, care, compassion, empathy, assertive, courageous, powerful, in “flow”, humorous, optimism, a sense of possibility, determination, worthiness and feeling motivated by purpose.

This space is one in which you express yourself authentically and establish clear boundaries with others, while staying open to cooperation and understanding. It’s a space of abundance, rather than lack, where a win/win solution or outcome is possible: an outcome where you (or both people) feel heard and come away with an outcome that’s in service of growth and higher purpose.

## The power of acceptance

Throughout the coaching programme, whenever a participant raised a feeling or shared an insight, our refrain was “can you accept that [you feel... / X happened... / what you’re observing...]?” Banal as this may seem, it was one of the most profound catalysts for change. Acceptance, as opposed to resistance, overcomes fear of the unknown by expanding our sense of possibility and range of experience. If we can accept that we are out of balance, acting in fearful or indifferent ways due to resisting something, we are able to embrace the opportunity to face what we fear with compassion.

For example, if we can accept that feeling anger doesn’t mean we are a “bad” person, then it opens new possibilities for how we relate to our experience of anger and how we take responsibility for addressing it, whether that is to choose to let it go or take action against an injustice that needs to be called out with clarity and from a place of internal power. Anger is a potent example because time and again I have witnessed the adverse effects of repressed anger in clients, which emerges either as an uncontrolled outburst (fearless indifference as above) or manifests as illness (including depression, and symptoms of fearful indifference above) or pain in the body. Anger, however, can be immensely useful fuel for action. Anger is usually a response to a violation of boundaries, and it has motivated countless campaigns and political movements

throughout history, as well as personal stories of personal liberation and transformation. Sometimes anger is also a protective cover for another feeling: hurt, sadness or fear, for example. Letting go of anger when it's a cover can open us to what we, our relationships or the situations we encounter really need. If we can feel and accept anger without reacting from it, we create the possibility to decide what we need and how we would like to respond from a place of courage and compassion.

For example, one participant initially felt unable to accept a feeling of rage in relation to an emotionally triggering and difficult negotiation with a funder. The reason was that she felt that accepting rage would provoke her to act out of character – a fear that the rage would take control. Accepting that feeling something didn't mean that it would take control of her, she was able to accept rage as a valid feeling given the situation, and what emerged after accepting her rage was that it was actually a response to a feeling of injustice. Accepting her feeling of injustice opened the realisation that she felt like a powerless victim, and invited a creative inquiry into whether it was possible and what it would look like for her to take responsibility for this feeling. Accepting her sense of victimhood and injustice allowed her to see a bigger picture – that the people she was in negotiations with felt under pressure and threatened by the conversation, because they also lacked power (a reflection of her own feeling of powerlessness) to make any changes to their organisation's official position.

From this perspective, a new approach emerged that shifted from her trying to engage her funder through making demands (combative, fearlessly independent) – thereby exacerbating the feeling of defensiveness on the other side – to extending an invitation to be a meaningful part of her organisation's next chapter, and explore what that would look like over time. Centering herself back into fearless compassion enabled her to accept herself, accept others, and open to a way forward that created the possibility for both sides to gain something from the exchange.

Observing participants' transformation through acceptance led to the following observations:

<b>Acceptance is a bridge from... to...</b>	
Fear	Compassion
Disconnection	Connection
Distrust	Trust
Manipulation	Sincerity

Defence	Cooperation
Lack	Abundance
Resistance	Openness
Reactivity	Creativity
Control	Authenticity
Rigid identity shaped by social constructs and external forces	Letting go of identity to allow transformation and embrace the true self
Unworthy of love	Worthy of love
Attachment	Detachment

Acceptance is a choice to love ourselves for who we are and let go of inhibiting identities and ideas about what “should be”. When we can do this for ourselves, it is possible also for us to extend this perspective to the behaviour of others. Acceptance expands our experience because it opens us to living fully, true authenticity and meaningful relationships.

Acceptance is a choice to embrace “what is” and face the truth, whatever that might be, as we are experiencing it. It needs courage – self-responsibility is both a terrifying and liberating experience. It recentres our locus of power within ourselves, rather than giving power to others and external circumstances to determine our state and behaviour. It strips us of defence mechanisms like judgement and blame, and invites us to act from our deepest knowing, one that can’t be validated by another, but which requires our own validation.

Our feelings communicate what matters to us; acceptance enables us to expand beyond the feeling itself to regain peace and clarity to move ahead with purpose. When participants practised relating to their feelings with curiosity and self-compassion, acceptance felt within reach. The outcomes of practising acceptance were emotional self-awareness, self-acceptance, new perspective, empathy for others, compassion, courage and creativity in identifying new, empowered ways of moving ahead.

### Seeing the mirror

In the case study example above about the participant who unravelled her rage, acceptance brought her to see that the feeling of powerlessness that her situation provoked was also mirrored in the people on the other side of the conflict. I call this “seeing the mirror”. Often a feeling we have is an indication of a wider feeling common

to people participating in a shared situation, organisational culture, or wider social and environmental paradigm. Becoming aware of the mirror builds a sense of connection even in dire circumstances, and refocuses communication on finding a shared resolution to a common experience. It unites us in experience, and in positive, purposeful action.

## Taking responsibility: aligned action

*“I want to invest time in what is aligned for me, rather than give away energy to what isn’t a priority or meaningful.” – THRIVE participant*

Acceptance often brings us to an awareness of our needs, values, desires and responsibilities, which invites communication and/or action. We observed that unresolved, difficult feelings can keep us in a state of paralysis, procrastination, confusion, unclarity or waiting – fear and closed-heartedness – that holds back communication and connection. Taking responsibility for what acceptance reveals to us creates forward movement, whether that is a need for self-care, exercise, healing an unresolved trauma, offering an apology to someone else, facing a difficult conversation with honesty, restructuring the organisation or deciding to move on. I call this “aligned action” – action that is taken consciously, with fearless compassion, in alignment with our values, insights and intentions. Here are some of the common themes that emerged in the research to support aligned action.

## Honouring needs and boundaries

When participants spent time connecting with and feeling what was happening in their whole bodies, they were better able to understand what was causing their mental anguish, and identify what they specifically needed to relieve their discomfort. Sometimes, this need was to establish stronger boundaries with their time or other people, which had two dimensions to it: being clear about “yes” and “no” within themselves, and having the courage to honour this by decisively saying “yes” or “no” to others.

We explored what “yes” (an uprising feeling) and “no” (a downward “drop” into the stomach) felt like in the body, and also explored the reasons why we ignore or override this inner knowing sometimes. Often the reason was a care, consciousness or fear of the potential impact on or judgement from other people. But often this care and mindfulness of others leads us towards compassion fatigue, if we don’t have an equal concern for ourselves (courage to match the compassion). In *Atlas of the Heart* Brene Brown writes: “Boundaries are a prerequisite for compassion and empathy. We can’t connect with someone unless we’re clear about where we end and they begin... if we

really want to practise compassion, we have to start by setting boundaries and holding people accountable for their behaviour.” (Brown 128)

With participants we also explored being decisive about “maybe” – creating time for thinking through something by communicating an alternative time to follow-up with someone and provide a yes/no response.

Feelings associated with the lack of boundaries, or poorly communicated boundaries, were powerlessness, frustration, burden, anger, apathy and defensiveness. When participants saw these experiences as a result of not caring for their needs and boundaries, and began to assert themselves with fearless compassion, they were able to take responsibility and experience positive forward movement. Doing so was not always easy – one participant received a strong negative reaction from someone she set down new boundaries with, and keeping these boundaries was an ongoing exercise. The important shift was in valuing her need for the boundary, rather than the other person’s needs above her own.

### Control and influence

Taking responsibility is different from acting with the expectation of an outcome. Several times when we began to explore needs, participants would focus on what they needed from others, rather than what they could do themselves to meet their needs. This led to a discussion of focusing action on what we control (ourselves, our reactions, our behaviour, our actions) and what we can influence through our capacity for communication, social capital, role and power. With this perspective, participants could refocus their expectations and recenter their locus of power to within themselves, rather than relinquishing it to a dependency on others to meet their needs and provide for their wellbeing. They could also recognise that other people are also responsible for their reactions, rather than taking on responsibility for other people’s feelings and needs at the expense of their own.

### Knowing our values and purpose

During the Thrive workshops we led participants through an exercise to identify their top three and one “core” value. We also led an exercise for participants to reconnect with the “bigger picture” of their lives, what matters most to them, and the long-term goals that they have.

These insights acted as a “compass” with which participants could decide how to act after having felt and become conscious of their feelings. Their values speak to who they want to be and the behaviour they want to model from a place of authenticity. Knowing their purpose gives an opportunity to be able to connect to a bigger perspective every

time they feel themselves getting lost in emotional entanglement. Asking “what matters most to me” in relation to a feeling, situation or opportunity for action, aligns our capacity to respond (our response-ability) and “open” to engaging with events, challenges and life with our “true”, authentic selves.

One participant, for example, shared that her feeling of ambition was driving her to consistently make big changes in her life. While this had served her until now, leading to a fulfilling career, wonderful family and a new house renovation project, the itch to find “what next” was diverting her attention away from being present with smaller, everyday experiences which she deeply valued, particularly time with her young and fast-growing children. Connecting with her values, she was able to articulate that it mattered to her to have both a fulfilling career and be a present mother, able to enjoy the gifts of her children’s early years. Connecting with the bigger picture, she perceived the abundance of time that she had to continue growing her career, and was able to see that slowing down the pace of her ambition, setting longer term goals, and appreciating the “small wins” each day could also fulfil the needs of her ambition to experience life and realise her potential fully.

### **Case study: Coaching Presence, Curiosity, Acceptance and Aligned Action**

The one-to-one coaching sessions were a space within which we could coach participants through the four key skills that we’ve been discussing in the sections above: presence with the body, non-judgemental curiosity, compassionate acceptance and taking responsibility with aligned action. This case study reveals the process and outcomes of one participant’s coaching journey through two one-hour sessions.

In the first session, we began with the participant feeling stressed. She shared a feeling in the chest that felt like a tangle of different feelings related to her workplace – frustration, isolation, conflict and others. We decided to work with the metaphor of the “tangle” because she was able to name it precisely, rather than going into individual feelings – a practice I developed to support people to speak about feelings that are difficult initially to name. When she saw and accepted this metaphor of the “tangle”, it began to dissipate and separate into several different “spheres”. One of these felt like a resource for addressing the tangle – an uplifting and childlike feeling. When she asked this feeling what it needed, it was asking for her trust. She identified this feeling as her creativity, which she had been sidelining opportunities to express in favour of “hunkering down” to deal with the challenging moment for her organisation post-covid and in the midst of recalibration as the next three years of Arts Council funding were

decided. When she accepted this feeling of creativity and offered it her trust, actions began to pour out of her.

Reconnecting with this creativity and accepting its call for trust had spectacular results between coaching sessions. She joined a choir, responded to new creative opportunities at work that she had been avoiding, and began to ask colleagues, particularly in the artistic leadership, to be more involved in the process of creating work to share ideas, insights and feedback that she deeply felt would benefit their development as well as the quality of work being created, without “waiting for an invitation”. She realised that her team was willing and appreciative of her being in the conversation, she just needed to dive in. She distinctly felt the shift from resilience to thriving, and the importance of trusting, nurturing and advocating for her creativity to her thriving.

In the second session, we began to speak about her desire for a different role in the organisation, and how hard it was to think about creating a new role to support her to fill a creative gap in the organisation when budgets and the external context are so tight. I asked: What is hard about this moment and this situation specifically?

We explored feeling on the one hand optimistic and on the other a need to “hunker down” in relation to a very difficult post-pandemic sectoral collapse. We explored the extremes of these two feelings and began to enquire what the middle ground or balance might look like. She named this as “creatively optimistic” – the ability to keep being creative in uncertainty. I offered the name of “creative confidence” which resonated with her. She described that she was already trying to nurture this middle ground by telling her team to keep all the doors open, to open new ones and keep looking for possibilities behind every door. We named this as “curiosity”, a creative superpower which makes it possible not to have all the answers without compromising your safety, to “not know” resourcefully, while generating insight and potential new connections that feed creative possibilities.

From this she unfolded a realisation that her own sense of disconnection from the creative process and need to “get her hands dirty” were most probably indicative of a wider organisational culture in which, especially during the pandemic, people were isolated, disconnected and segregated from each other and from the everyday reality of making shows. We also uncovered different layers to this isolation– a systemic layer where opportunities for people to really journey alongside the creative team as they make new work were missing; an interpersonal layer where there was a lack of specific invitations and delegation to team members to get involved meaningfully with projects; and an individual layer where people were struggling with self-inhibition and a difficulty in deeply connecting with each other as a result of the isolation they experienced long-term during the Covid pandemic working from home. Naming these feelings of



segregation and isolation, and her need for invitation, opportunities to connect, and “get her hands dirty” supported the realisation that these feelings were part of a cultural experience within the organisation, rather than distinct personal feelings unrelated to others and context. Seeing and accepting her own experience enabled her also to “see the mirror” of how, as a leader, she was experiencing and had the power to influence the wider emotional landscape of the organisation.

Thinking about what the organisation needed to address this disconnection, we explored that there were different ways of “hunkering down” which included slowing down and pacing things better to allow those opportunities to deeply connect to one another and the work meaningfully. She shared that at this moment of strategic planning and change it felt like they had the possibility to do this, and that this slowing down and profoundly connecting could build a strong foundation of purpose (the “why”) that would empower people to explore “how” to go ahead with more initiative, responsibility, trust and relevance. This clarity about what they do and why, could turn every employee into a relevant and regenerative advocate for the organisation and new opportunities, even in tough circumstances. Flipping this responsibility pyramid – from the founder directors taking all of the responsibility to generate new opportunities that will build the resilience and thriving capacity of the organisation, to the staff all being possibility-makers, has potential to relieve overworked directors and release energy for focusing on what really matters – the work and audiences.

This session for me really demonstrated the power of witnessing, simply holding space for someone to think and feel. The participant almost coached herself through these multiple realisations, with some light observation, prompting to see what she was ready to accept, invitations to name feelings, and reflecting back. There was a huge well of thought and emotion there just waiting to pour out and unfold a way forward. Again, a profound reminder of how much can happen when you give someone the chance to feel heard, and space to allow their thoughts to untangle and their body to reveal the sense they have been trying to make all along.

## The space between

*“Thrive created ‘a space between’. A space where reflection and preparation happens.”*

– THRIVE participant

It was clear that all participants valued the opportunity to take a step back and out of their normality to do some reflecting and gain some support. But another “space between” emerged as part of our practice together – the space between feeling and response. Throughout the process we heard of and observed people finding “power in the pause” and reclaiming their power of choice to choose how to respond to triggers

and situations that felt emotionally challenging. One participant shared that “before the training I feared voicing my opinion especially with colleagues who could judge me and create difficult situations. I now feel a lot more confident that, in fact, it is important for me to step back and take time to consider a genuine response versus one that is conflicted by emotion and reaction. Taking time is critical.”

## Trusting the process

*“The programme gave me more confidence, faith and understanding.” –THRIVE participant*

In the case study above, it’s possible to observe the power of trusting the feelings and parts of ourselves that do not always “rationally” seem like the highest priority. We can also observe how trusting a process of presence, curiosity, acceptance and aligned action, can deliver unexpected but precise and profound possibilities for transformation and thriving, if we are able to trust the process and lean into the unknown to uncover answers from within us without becoming attached to an outcome, or to a dependency on others to resolve our feelings, too early.

This depth of self-trust in the face of uncertainty is sometimes called “faith”. Divorced from its religious connotations, faith in oneself is about trusting our whole selves, including our “irrational capacities” – feelings, intuition, inner knowing and insights (symbolic, literal and visual) – as relevant guidance alongside our rational thinking, values and purpose. This shift of trust from external certainties to inner knowing was something that supported participants to feel able to take risks and engage with uncertain circumstances with greater confidence and creativity.

## Choosing to thrive: Conditions for the process to work

Two conditions for this method to make a genuine difference to someone’s leadership and life emerged from the reflective evaluation:

The first was a **willingness to make changes and heal.**

While we didn’t refer to this method as a process of healing, that’s what several participants described it as. When people expressed willingness to “show up”, shifts happened.

The second was that **it requires practice.**

We don’t change by knowing something, we change by doing things differently. The participants who did the work and practised the methods we shared saw measurable differences in their leadership, relationships and dynamics in the workplace, and their lives.

Based on this, it seems that **thriving is a choice** rather than a capability. It is a choice which is made possible when people have the tools to understand and accept how adversity affects them, and the willingness and courage to try out new ways of relating to themselves and others from a place of acceptance.

## Outcomes

*“I’m thriving!”*

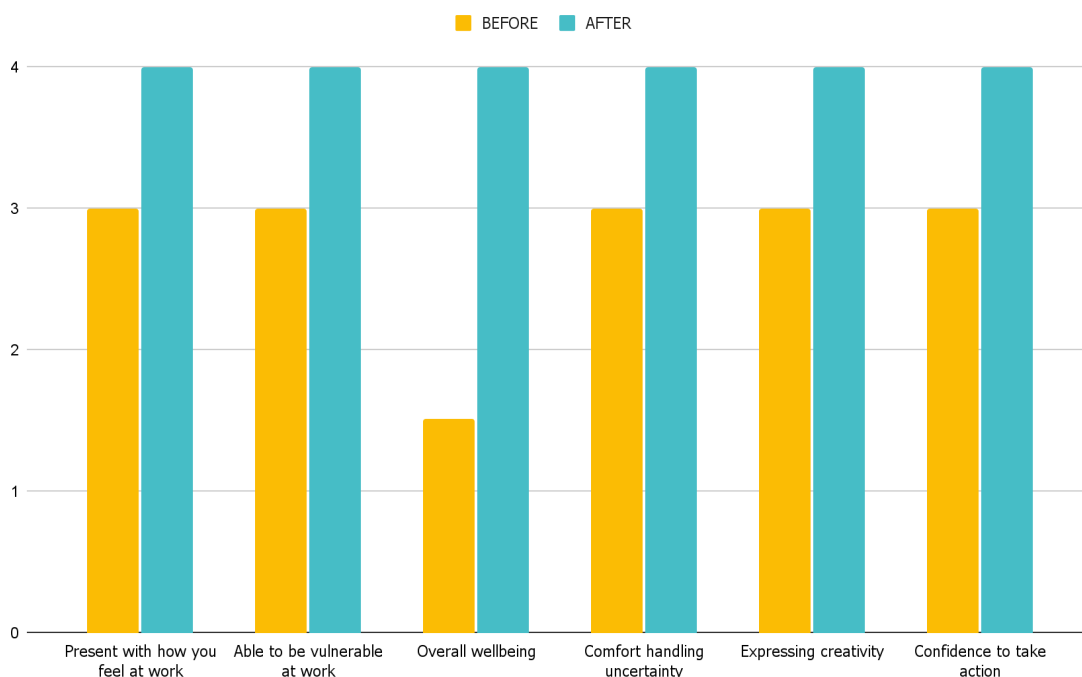
*“Now I feel I am me doing the job and I am bringing all of myself to it. I feel and accept my frustration and understand it now as a route to what needs to change. I feel creative. I feel purposeful. And I feel more confident. It is a reconnection of mind and body which is always what I felt as a performer, but on reflection, maybe struggled with as a director.”*

– THRIVE participant

## Self-assessment

The whole group experienced progress across the six key areas we linked to thriving, based on previous experience and desk research. Table 2 below shows the median average of the group’s self-assessment across these six areas before and after the Thrive programme.

**Table 2: Before and After Self-assessment of Thriving**



## Presence

*"I am more content with where I am now and not constantly searching for the next thing, this means I am more focused on my current leadership and not the future."*

– THRIVE participant

Everyone who took part in the live programme said that they felt more present with and aware of their feelings, and more able to name them, hold them, identify what their needs were clearly, and translate this into action and communication with others. Some connected this to feeling less stressed, calmer, and 'more in control' of themselves and their lives. Presence was also connected to the ability to listen more deeply to themselves and others to arrive at understanding, particularly as several found it hard to be and stay present in the body. As one participant summarised, "If I am not grounded, it's usually because I don't want to feel grounded" – recognising what feeling in the body was disrupting their capacity to be present was a powerful tool to emerge repressed feelings and issues that were calling for participants to address. This, of course, is sensitive work. None of the participants declared a history of significant trauma, but it can also be a cause of disassociation from the body and lack of presence, and it's important to be mindful of what might be triggered for someone when doing embodiment work. Our practice was comparable to sports training: when stretching, stretch as far as the pain but no further, i.e. don't risk a pulled muscle. Participants were invited to feel as much as felt safe, training self-responsibility alongside practices for embodied self-inquiry.

## Vulnerability and authenticity

*"I am being less performative. I am being more me."* – THRIVE participant

Participants felt more able to express themselves authentically without worrying about other people's judgements or opinions, with two specifically referring to their previous approach to leadership as a performance of who they were, rather than being authentic. One particular participant expressed feeling like she had come into contact with her power in a new way, finding a place of abundance and self-acceptance that she had never experienced before. Another described how finding the courage to clearly express their ideal outcome to a specific upcoming situation, and what would help to realise it, led to collaborators expressing support to make it happen in a new way. This capacity for authentic expression suggests an improvement in a sense of psychological safety within oneself, as well as a capacity to create an environment of psychological safety for others; several participants mentioned no longer being 'afraid' of their own or other people's different feelings, and eight out of nine participants specifically

mentioned case studies of an increased capacity for honest conversations (see 'Confidence' below).

### Wellbeing

The change in people's sense of wellbeing was the most profound difference compared to before the programme. Participants reported feeling less stressed, calmer, more grounded and more connected to themselves (relating also to an increased feeling of presence and vulnerability above). Three people took specific actions to invest in their physical wellbeing – joining yoga classes, taking up exercise, joining a choir – and mentioned that they had been "meaning to do this for some time" but that THRIVE unlocked their resistance to taking action. Over half the group said they felt more energised, signalling a spike in vitality as a result of the programme. Most of the group experienced shifts in mindset towards being more grounded, positive and self-compassionate, which accompanied a deeper awareness of their embodied experience.

### Handling uncertainty

All participants felt better able to handle uncertainty and one specifically connected this to feeling more present in the moment, and able to observe what is emerging now, rather than constantly focusing on the future.

### Creativity

Participants felt more able to express their creativity, having worked through feelings, judgements and beliefs that were barriers to doing so. We observed many instances during the programme of how acceptance of one's feelings opened the possibility for a new perspective and before unanticipated solutions to a situation, activating creative thinking and motivation to try new approaches. When a participant was ignoring a feeling, it became a resistance that drained energy away from vitality, creativity and action. This was particularly acute when a participant was resisting their own creativity, as in the coaching case study above.

### Confidence

The increase in confidence to take action on their feelings most common to the whole group was the confidence to express themselves more truthfully, and have the courage to initiate difficult conversations, personal and work-related. These sometimes long-overdue conversations centred on money, creative feedback, performance feedback, contractual negotiations, and necessary changes in work culture or structure connected both to their own needs and the needs of the organisation to function better.

This included one participant who shared that while her numeric rating for confidence did not change overall, she still felt a difference because her confidence felt “more embodied”, she was able to take challenges “less personally” and feel more in control of how she shared her emotional responses. This exposes the lack of nuance in quantitative ratings, but opens an interesting reflection on the distinction between confidence that comes from our thoughts and our story about ourselves, and the confidence that we *feel* in the whole body. These are of course related, but it’s note-worthy that embodying confidence made a difference.

Confidence, and the ability to take courageous action, was connected for several people to a greater sense of self-worth that arose from doing the THRIVE practises.

## Additional self-reported outcomes

### Feeling purposeful

Three participants specifically mentioned feeling more purposeful as a result of the THRIVE programme and practises.

### Overcoming fear

Three participants said that they felt less afraid of their own and other people’s feelings and emotions, as a result of the programme demystifying feelings in the workplace specifically, and providing a framework for how to ‘hold’ them.

### Relationships with others

While the majority of the THRIVE process was in training the individual’s embodied emotional intelligence, the ripple effects of the individual impact extended into team and organisational culture. Here are some of the trends we observed and participants self-reported.

### Conflict transformation

*“I’m better equipped to have emotional conversations, both in and out of work.”*

*“I am definitely feeling more connected on a feeling rather than emotional level. I’m also feeling able to ‘rise above’ rather than react to other people’s feelings. I am reading their feelings more accurately and feeling my way into how to respond.”*

– THRIVE participants

Four people shared how previously the potential or actual risk of conflict in conversations that felt sensitive or difficult would have been a barrier for them, but that they felt better able to hold their own and others’ emotions in a way that enabled a

potentially inflammatory situation to transform into an honest conversation that brought value to everyone involved. This included conversations that would have been previously “triggering” but that went differently to before, due to a newly found capacity to ‘hold’ their feelings related to the situation.

### Team leadership and communication

Six out of nine gave tangible examples of how they had applied their learning in leading and managing their teams, beginning to role model and extend their learning into the organisational culture, with benefit to themselves and others. This included sharing insights and practices from the Thrive process, and one participant scheduled her first team meeting of 2023 to be focused on values. Others came to a place of acceptance about their current leadership role not being right for them and started to take action on addressing next steps to exit from an environment that didn’t have the capacity to meet their needs or conditions.

### Facing systemic crises

Several participants spoke about their feelings in relation to wider systemic challenges that were having a direct impact on them: the covid pandemic, the climate crisis, inequality in working rights for women and particularly mothers. They shared how it was harder to thrive in the midst of these wider challenges if their day to day emotional existence was turbulent, and they felt that after THRIVE their capacity to face these systemic or planetary challenges, and the collective anger, fear and grief that accompanies many of them, increased as their sense of self, possibility and perspective expanded.

### Thriving beyond resilience

*“[My goal for doing Thrive] was to become more resilient, but I have realised that actually I now want to thrive. This feeling is so much more exciting and progressive. The general goal was to find a more flexible, energetic way of thinking about my situation. Thrive certainly brought me closer and gave me reassurance.”*

*“Thrive introduced me to concepts and approaches which really are central to how I tackle work now. It is not a radical change because they complement my existing style. What changed was the confidence to pursue ideas and approaches I already knew, at my fingertips, but Thrive gave a name to and gave me permission to jump into.”*

*“I hadn't realised how much striving for resilience was exhausting me. That for the people I work with we need to make space for thriving and understanding what that means for us all. It is exciting territory.”*

– Thrive participants

In short, participants reported that **feeling their feelings was creating the conditions to know what thriving could look and feel like**, and **awakening the vitality, creativity and motivation needed to make choices that brought them closer to this state**, including facing and responding to challenging circumstances.

## Improvement in emotional intelligence

The principles and practices we shared involved training participants' embodiment of the following emotional intelligence competencies, in response to the challenges they were facing. I have adapted Goleman's domains and competencies model of emotional intelligence to visualise what we did that led to improvement, and indicated using **yellow** (at least half the group) and **green** (at least 80% of the group) the degree of change people felt across the model:

Domain	Competency	Activity
Self-awareness	Emotional self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting with the body through movement.</li> <li>• Observing what we learn about ourselves and our emotional lives through how we move, and how we interpret meaning through the body.</li> <li>• Feeling what is happening in our bodies in specific circumstances, observing where in the body these feelings occur and what sensations and thoughts they provoke.</li> <li>• Relating to ourselves with curiosity and non-judgemental positive regard (compassion).</li> </ul>
Self-management	Emotional self-control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Naming feelings.</li> <li>• Exploring the relationship between different feelings and emotions using the Feeling Wheel and somatic coaching.</li> </ul>
	Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating space between feeling and action to choose how we respond to and act on our feelings.</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing through thought patterns of judgement, blame and assumptions to own what we are feeling beyond automatic reactions.</li> <li>• Identifying the needs that our feelings communicate to us.</li> <li>• Honouring our “yes” and “no” – being clear about what boundaries we need in place to stay in balance.</li> <li>• Practising fearless compassion in communicating our boundaries with others.</li> </ul>
	<b>Achievement orientation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying what our feelings are saying about what matters to us.</li> <li>• Knowing our values and purpose so that our choices and behaviours can be guided by intention and integrity.</li> </ul>
	<b>Positive outlook</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving beyond a view of feelings as “good” or “bad” to accept all our feelings as having their own purpose and wisdom, though self-compassion.</li> <li>• Identify how our feelings are presenting opportunities for growth and alignment with our life goals and intentions.</li> </ul>
<b>Social awareness</b>	<b>Empathy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using our own experience to understand what others might be feeling in similar situations.</li> <li>• Creating safe space and trust by being curious about, actively listening to and believing people’s feelings.</li> </ul>
	<b>Organisational awareness</b>	Identifying how some feelings we have indicate a wider organisational issue, and seeking an appropriate response to those specific feelings.

<b>Relationship management</b>	<b>Influence and Inspirational leadership</b>	Modelling emotionally intelligent, authentic leadership.
	<b>Coach and mentor</b>	Building self-responsibility by using open questions and active listening to evoke reflection, creativity, empowerment and initiative in others.
	<b>Conflict management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practising non-violent, honest communication.</li> <li>• Using empathy and organisational awareness to identify underpinning or unacknowledged feelings driving conflict.</li> </ul>
	<b>Teamwork</b>	Setting clear roles, expectations and boundaries.

## Live vs. online experience

Participants felt that in-person work was important for delivering the outcomes above, particularly in creating a safe and engaged group dynamic to share their challenges and work through them openly together, and for doing the movement practices which created a foundation for embodying their experience and learning. This confirmed my sense that it was important that this programme be partially delivered live, and is something to consider for the ongoing development of this work.

That said, important insights and learnings emerged also from the individual coaching sessions and group coaching sessions, which were entirely online and also reached to integrate embodiment practices. It will be worth continuing an exploration of delivering this methodology online, and comparing the extent of the impact between live and online sessions, which has increasingly become important during and post-pandemic.

## Live vs. DIY programmes

The DIY programme was evaluated via a final survey and direct email follow-up. Despite 23 sign-ups consistently opening and engaging with the email content, only two people responded to the final survey and email invitations to provide feedback. Informal conversations were held with an additional two people to gain insight into their experience. Consistently, these two participants that completed the survey fed back that

the opportunity to take time to connect with and reframe their relationship to their feelings supported them to:

- Feel less afraid of difficult feelings
- Feel better able to process feelings
- Feel more informed about how to navigate feelings in the workplace
- Feel empowered to approach themselves with compassion to identify the wisdom behind their feelings

This was echoed in the informal conversations had with participants, and the feedback suggests that, while the live elements of the programme were reported as important for people's learning and deeper work, the DIY exercises still had an impact and felt accessible to people unable or unwilling to commit to the live programme.

## Conclusion

Thriving is the capacity to flourish no matter the circumstances, the ability to live fully and continue to pursue long-term goals and meaningful experiences without burning out. Thriving doesn't mean you don't experience pain or trauma, it means you have the perspective, support and tools to transform and integrate your suffering into regenerative self-development. Often our pain carries the seeds of new possibility, purpose and meaning. In the same way, the feelings we experience through our bodies as we interact with others in work and life circumstances 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. Thriving is a journey towards wholeness that brings body, mind, emotions and spirit into alignment with compassion and courage. It is also a choice, for which we are entirely responsible for making.

This action research took nine people 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. At the start, the group was in a state of anxiety, self-doubt, overwhelm and exhaustion (to name some of the key feelings they raised themselves). The outcome was a group that felt more present, calmer, more confident, creative and connected to others; a group more in control of themselves and their lives, with the courage to assert their needs, be honest with others and lead authentically. The group felt closer to, or were directly experiencing, a state of 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 beyond judgement and blame; compassionate **acceptance** of our experience, needs and insights; 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 mindset shift from judgement and blame towards curiosity and compassion that was enabled through embodied practices of self-acceptance and curious observation, was significant in empowering participants with new perspective and systemic awareness that opened the possibility for new ways forward.

The process didn't solve all of their problems directly, it focused on building their capacity to move through them with new strategies that released emotional blockages and cognitive 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. During the research the competency that came to characterise this shift in perspective was "fearless compassion": the ability to face your fears with courage and address them with compassion towards yourself and others.

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 asserting healthy boundaries was 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. Examples included one participant gathering the courage to make the case for additional administrative support and receiving approval for a new employee; several giving honest artistic, performance and ideas-related feedback to colleagues with fearless compassion that, while difficult to hear, offered constructive ways to grow ahead while encouraging self-responsibility and initiative; and three ending collaborations or partnerships in a way that was amicable, clear and non conflictual; one reimagining her relationship with her main funder; and others moving ahead with strategic plans, organisational change initiatives, deepening commitment to environmental and social values from a place of acceptance and power, and sharing Thrive learning with teams. 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.

As multiple global crises continue to pose challenges to leaders, employees and organisations across the economy, the "soft" skills and cultural principles that support people to thrive in rapidly changing circumstances are still lacking, especially as people are challenged to find time and finances for personal development. While there is a wealth of academic research documenting the importance of psychological safety to the creativity, wellbeing and resilience of organisations and workers, there is still a need for research-based tools and practices that can support a paradigm shift towards a leadership that creates conditions for collective thriving rather than burn-out. 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. The research reveals individual and collective trauma that is manifesting in (often unintentionally) harmful workplace dynamics, that requires support, acknowledgement and response-ability to heal. It makes a case for investment in the emotional intelligence of cultural leaders, for the wellbeing of the sector as a whole, and also for increased access to knowledge and services that support leaders to feel confident building and leading emotionally healthy workplace cultures. Feedback from participants of both the THRIVE live and DIY programmes valued the opportunity and context to take time to individually and collectively work with their feelings through guided exercises, with significant results over just eight weeks.

This research and the resources which will follow are not a silver bullet, but they are a contribution towards a desperately needed case for emotionally healthy workplaces. The context for cultural leadership in the UK today is complex. Leaders and their teams are facing multiple, long-term and constantly shifting challenges: a funding infrastructure creaking at the seams, the rebuilding of audiences following the turbulence of the Covid years, a "brain drain" into other sectors, a mental health crisis amongst the workforce and constant adaptation in the face of economic and climate crises. My previous research, *Vulnerability and Cultural Leadership* (2018), collated data that showed the sector on the brink of mental health collapse. Following the intensity, uncertainty and trauma of the Covid pandemic, this has only worsened. The vitality and psychological safety people need to give their best is burning out, and there is an urgency to respond before the fire spreads beyond control. Culture is made by passionate and values-driven people dreaming big and giving everything to what they love. The systemic act of love in this moment would be to make a collective effort for the passion, vitality, connection and joy of our working culture to be revived, with feeling.

## Acknowledgements

Huge thanks to the team at Clore Leadership and the selection committee at the AHRC for their support of this work, and me. The opportunity to begin consolidating an intellectual basis for what has been a journey almost entirely led by feeling has been a humbling gift. To Chris, my supervisor, thank you for the encouragement, excellent questions and guidance, it's been invaluable.

To the participants of both programmes, I am deeply grateful and honoured to have had your trust to go on the journey we did together, and thank you for the detailed and generous contributions you made to the research process. I truly hope the ripple effects for you are lasting.

Thank you to Victor and the team at Pavilion Dance South West in Bournemouth for supporting the programme by hosting our two days of live workshops – you made us feel so welcome and taken care of.

My gratitude to Petia Tzanova, Jo Hunter and Deborah Williams, who gave feedback on Thrive behind the scenes – your generosity and friendship made launching something close to my heart less scary. To all the people who saw Thrive and shared it with their networks, thank you.

To my collaborator and Thrive co-creator, Vid Tratnik – what a journey. Thank you for the inspiration, insight, creativity, courage, feedback and support. I couldn't have done it without you.

Finally to my parents, who gifted me with the social and spiritual consciousness that was the starting point for this work, thank you for being who you are.

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## Appendix: Thrive 2022 programme outline

### THRIVE PROGRAMME 2022

An individual and group coaching programme for cultural leaders

DATE	TIME	ACTIVITY	
<b>14/10</b>	<b>08:30 - 09:30</b>	<b>ORIENTATION CALL</b>	<b>ONLINE</b>
A chance to meet your facilitator and fellow participants, get a detailed overview of the programme, ask questions and set intentions for the journey ahead.			
<b>20/10</b>	<b>10:00 - 18:00</b>	<b>EMBODIED LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>LIVE (BMTH)</b>
A one-day workshop on authenticity and emotional health in leadership, with practical exercises and tools to support thriving, even when challenges threaten to hold you back.			
<b>21/10</b>	<b>09:00 - 18:00</b>	<b>HEALTHY TEAM CULTURES</b>	<b>LIVE (BMTH)</b>
A one-day workshop on how to shape a healthy team culture that invites creativity, initiative and shared responsibility by setting a foundation of psychological safety and emotional awareness.			
<b>10/11</b>	<b>09:00 - 11:00</b>	<b>GROUP COACHING CHECK-IN</b>	<b>ONLINE</b>
A facilitated check-in with the group to unpack live challenges that people are experiencing with putting learning from the programme into practice.			
<b>24/11</b>	<b>09:00 - 11:00</b>	<b>GROUP COACHING CHECK-IN</b>	<b>ONLINE</b>
<b>08/12</b>	<b>14:00 - 17:00</b>	<b>EMERGENCE AND NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>ONLINE</b>
A half-day workshop to close the programme with a learning review, emergent strategy tools for growing ahead, and intentions for next steps and engagement beyond the programme.			

*Individual coaching sessions will take place between 07/11 and 07/12.*

The **LIVE** workshops will take place at Pavilion Dance South West, Bournemouth.