ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES

JO HICKMAN 2025

INTRODUCTION & INVITATION

Proposed Agenda

- Intro to recent report
- Culture and climate – general
- Culture and climate – advice sector
- Key recommendations
- Then some useful ideas

Stepping off the Hamster Wheel:

Retention, Wellbeing and Culture in the Social Welfare Advice Sector

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HOT OFF THE PRESS!

Context: Pay & Conditions work

Objective: Develop understanding of how changes in organisational culture, along with practical interventions, might improve retention in the advice sector.

Assumption: It is impossible and in any case undesirable to separate questions of retention from the necessity of achieving a sustainable advice sector that is capable of thriving rather than merely surviving.

THE EVIDENCE TELLS US:

Making a meaningful difference to levels of wellbeing in the advice sector will require systemic interventions focused on the ultimate *drivers* of workplace wellbeing. *"…you can't yoga your way out of more structural challenges….".* We need to focus on how work is led, organised and managed.

Workers with better wellbeing, better work-life balance and more positive attitudes to work are in jobs characterised by high work involvement, skill use, training and development opportunities, team working, information sharing, regular performance appraisals and job security. ("Good Jobs")

Improved workforce wellbeing correlates with improvements in performance & productivity. The available evidence 'strongly suggests' this link to be causal (i.e. that wellbeing *improves* performance).

There is a clear and proven link between learning and development, retention and wellbeing.

Positive changes to levels of wellbeing will positively influence workplace culture.
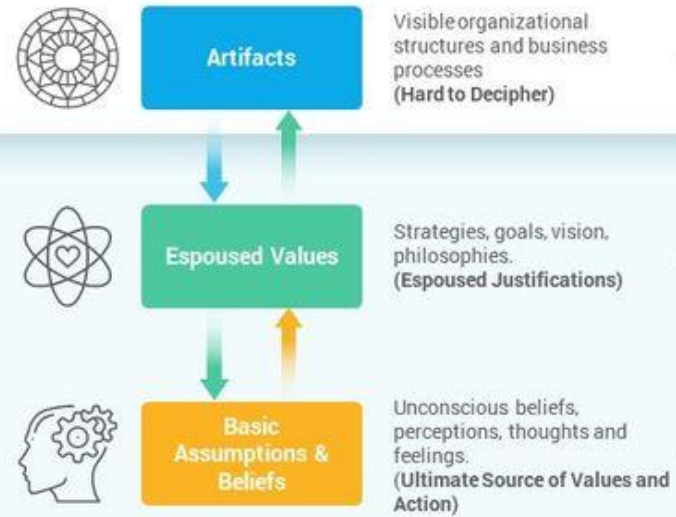
ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE – GENERAL

- '...*a tricky concept as it is easily used to cover everything and consequently nothing.*' Alvesson 2002

- A '*pattern of basic assumptions that a given group...consider[s]...the correct way to perceive think and feel*' (Schein 2010)

- Popular shorthand: '*the way we do things round here*' (Deal & Kennedy 1982) ...but...

- Western (2019) suggests a more accurate simplistic description would be: '*the way things feel around here.*'

- Cultures within cultures: eco-systems within eco-systems.

- Also NB Climate: '*shared meaning organisational members attach to the events, policies, practices they experience and the behaviours they see being rewarded, supported and expected.*'

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES EXIST WITHIN WIDER CULTURAL CONTEXTS

- Individualism
- Attention economy
- Wealth inequality
- Geopolitical instability
- Climate crisis
- 'Progressive'/charity/advice/legal sectors beliefs, norms and mental models – justice, rights, power, fairness, vulnerability, societal inequality.
- "VUCA" ➡ "BANI"

INDIVIDUALS ARE NOT SEPARATE FROM CULTURE

- Cultures form part of who we are. Part of our *selves*.

- We are tribal animals shaped by as well shaping in turn our environment, families, schools, communities, workplaces, sectors, wider societies.

- Ideas, norms, value judgements that instinctively feel '*right*', '*common sense*', '*how things are*' '*how things ought to be*' '*not ok*' etc We will all have internalised notions about good and bad, right and wrong, success and failure.

- Much of it will be outside conscious awareness. Won't always be consistent. It is normal to have strong cultural attachments to ideas that are in tension or which actively conflict with each other.

- Culture changes how we see the world, the assumptions we make without realising we're making them.

ADVICE SECTOR CULTURAL INDICATORS?

- NB at outset that 89% of workforce quite happy or very happy with job. However 24% of workers agreed or strongly agreed "*my work is negatively affecting my mental health and wellbeing.*" Stress and burnout remain key concerns.

- Only 53% were happy with training and career progression. This has long been flagged as an issue.

- Levels of psychological safety need to be improved. In parts of sector/ins some contexts people often feel defensive and anxious with each other. Heightened interpersonal fear (more likely to occur in cultures in which people fear making mistakes or getting things wrong) impairs analytic thinking, creative insight and problem-solving.

- Strategy tends to be top down and reactive – not always connected to/shaped by workforce. Linked to outdated managerial leadership approaches.

- Limited evidence of genuine prioritisation (ie deciding what good things we are NOT going to do).

- Complex relationship with accountability
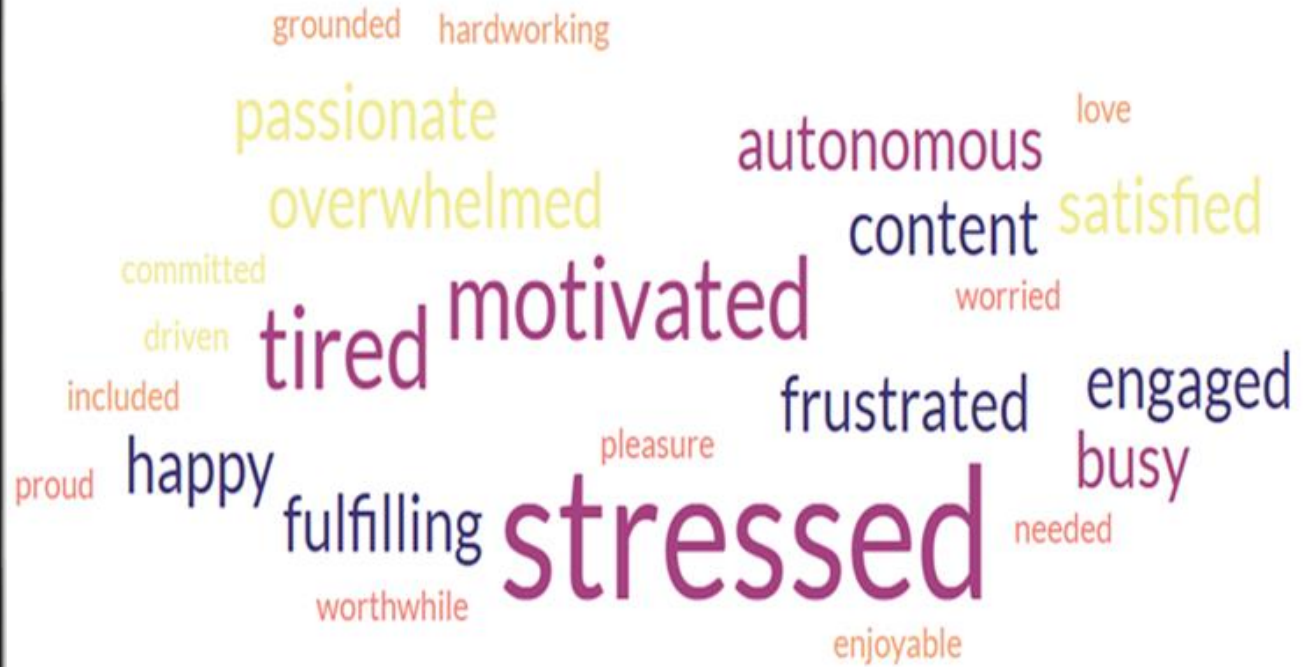
HOW WORKFORCE FEEL:

The most popular words were supported (37), busy (36), happy (33), stressed (31), tired (19), valued (18), satisfied (17), frustrated (16), overworked (14), overwhelmed (12) and underpaid (12).
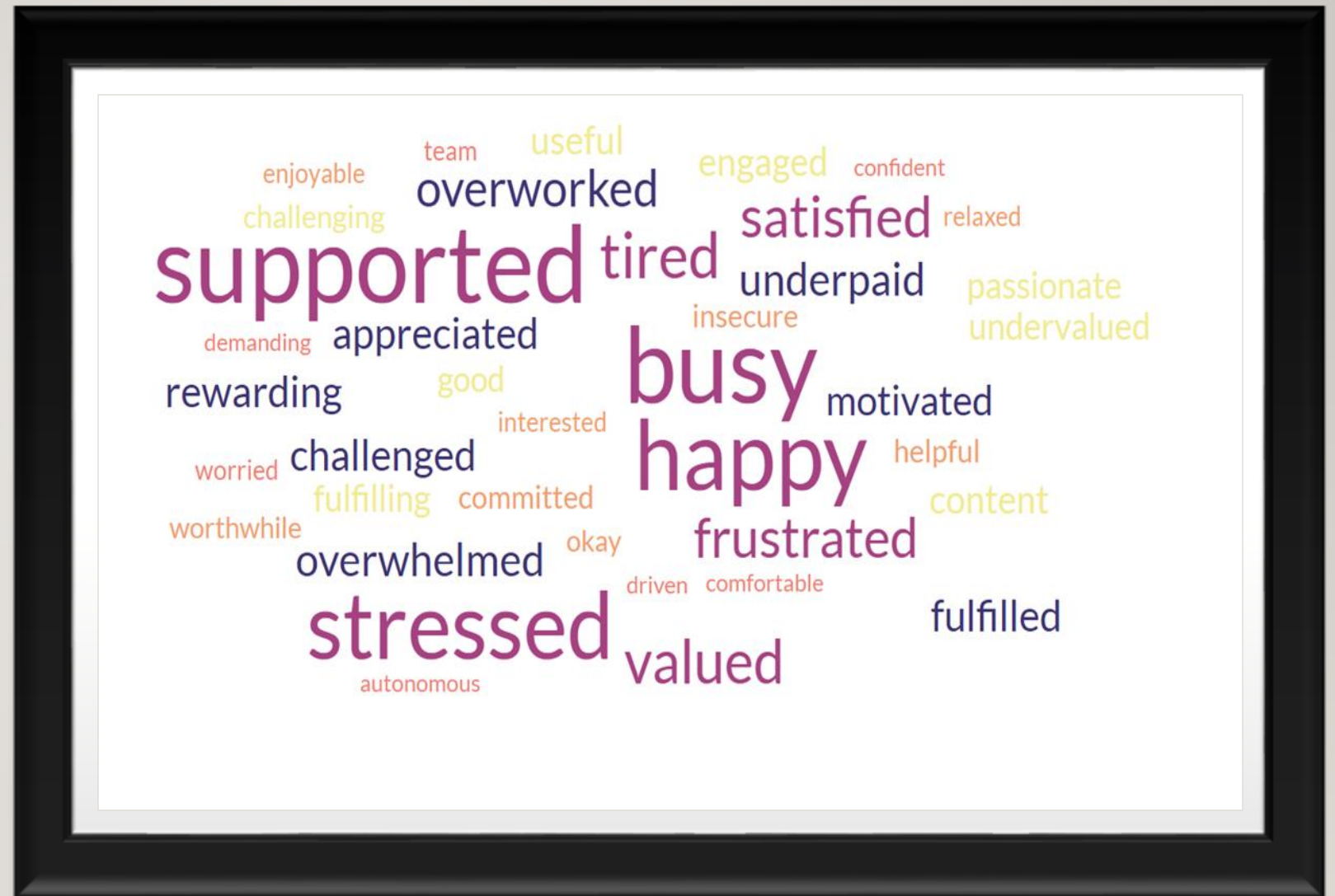
HOW SENIOR LEADERS FEEL:

The most popular words were stressed (5), tired (3) and motivated (3).

No one in a leadership role used the word 'supported' or 'valued' to describe how they feel.

HOW MIDDLE MANAGERS FEEL:

The most popular words were busy (6), stressed (5), fulfilled (4), happy (4), overworked (4) and undervalued (4).

No one described themselves as feeling 'valued'. Middle managers were the workforce group most likely to use negative words.

"I FEEL LIKE I'M ON A HAMSTER WHEEL…"

'No time to think…'

'Always firefighting'

'No time to breathe…'

'Too many meetings…'

LIMITED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Standardise and share the way we measure and conceptualise wellbeing

- Set unequivocal performance goals to a) improve wellbeing and b) deliver better jobs; and

- Take action to reduce the sense of oppressive overwhelm and create more time for intentional, important, non-urgent activity.

BELL-CURVE OF EFFORT VS RESULTS

Illinois Institute of Technology study by Van Zelst and Kerr.

"the quicksands of negative returns…"
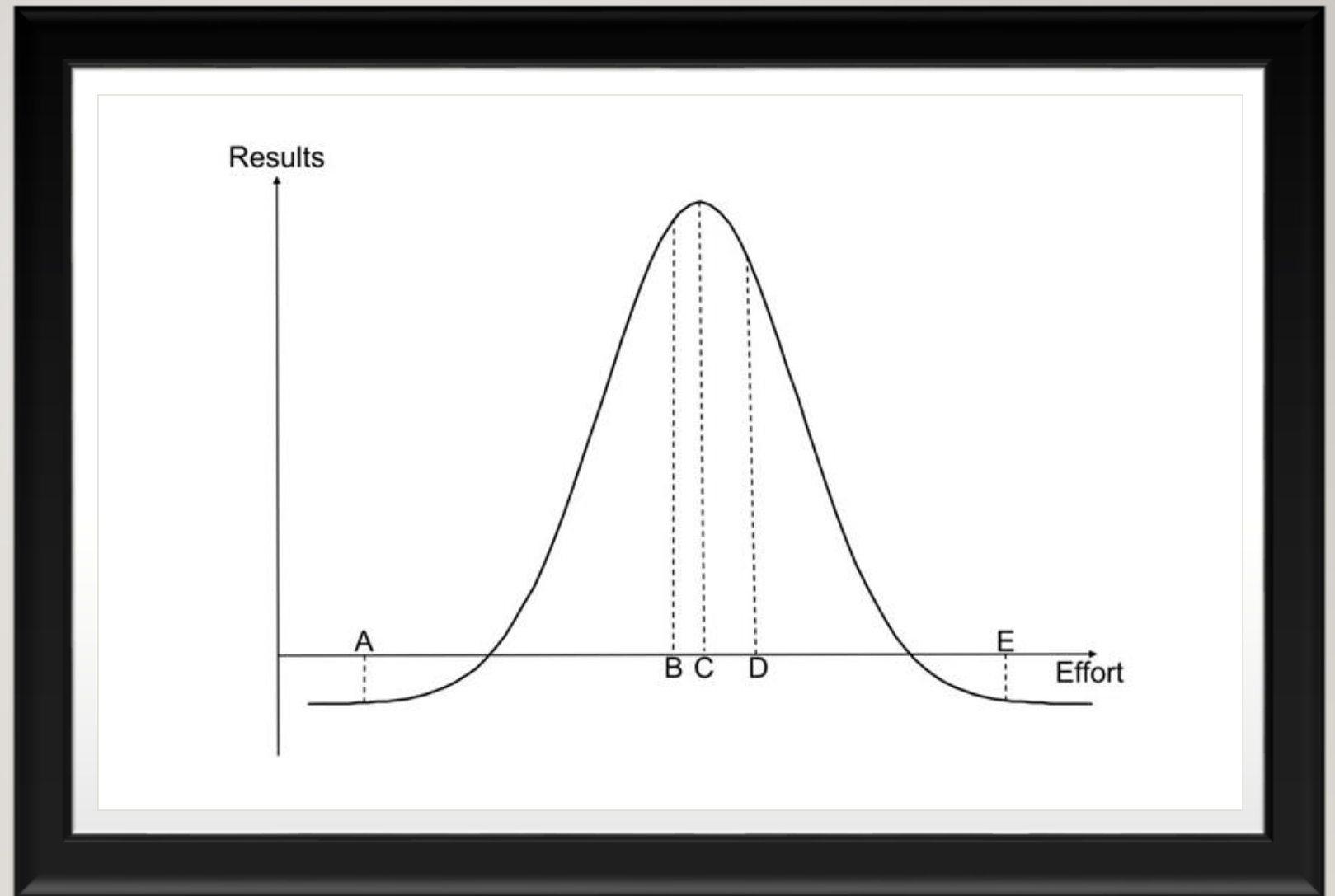
EVIDENCE FROM 4 DAY WEEK TRIALS

- The evidence from trials of four-day working weeks is that business revenues increase.

- Staff turnover decreases.

- Wellbeing increases.

- Productivity overall increases.

- Not relative productivity per day but productivity *overall*.

OPERATION HAMSTER!

Draw on what we know about stress and overwhelm and evidence from four-day week studies and theories of intrinsic motivation to give us confidence to trial a pilot reducing the business-as-usual work week to 80%.

Ringfence 20% of organisational time for strategic, learning and developmental activities (for all staff at every level).
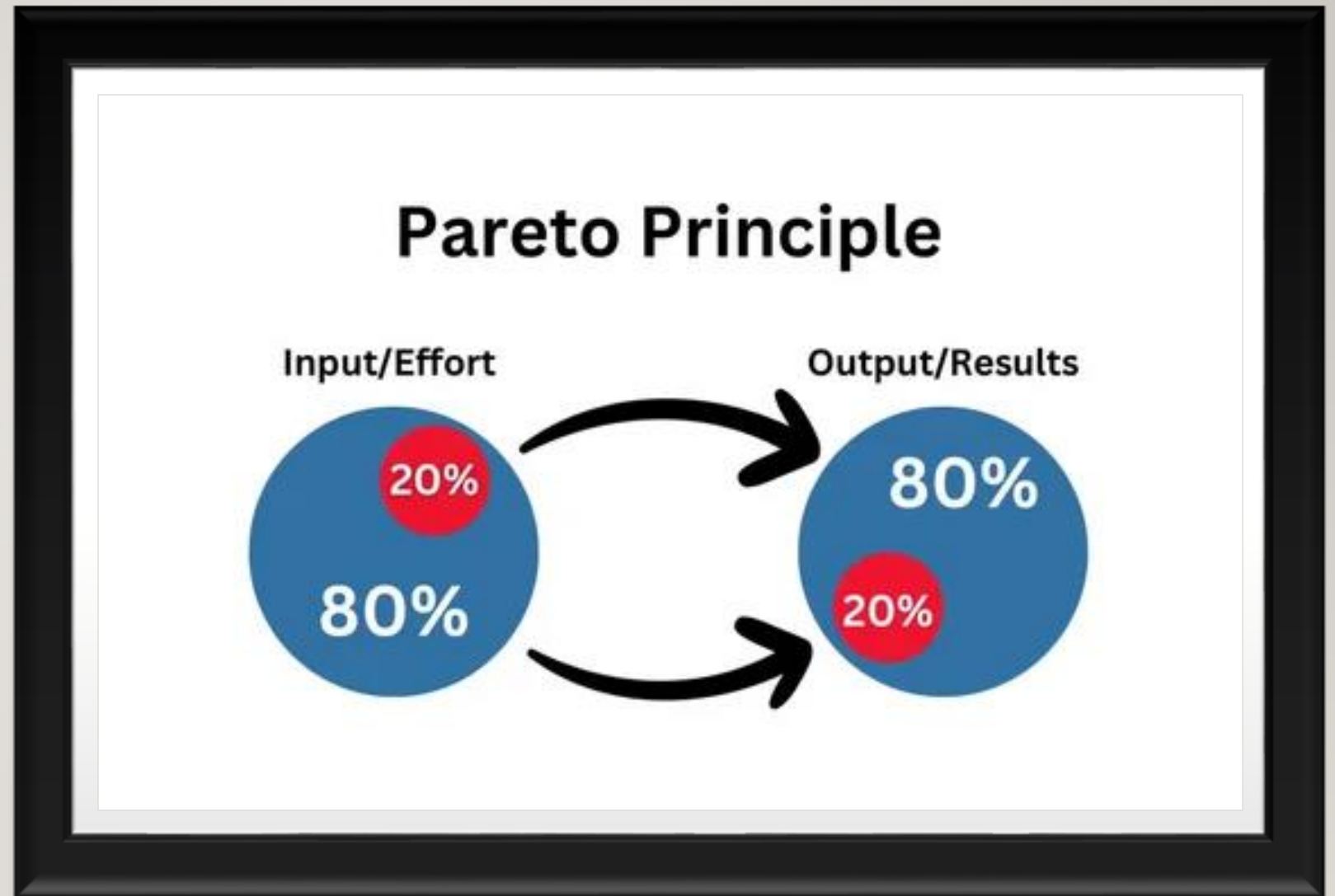
No meetings. No casework.

"PARETO PRINCIPLE"

What should we stop doing?!

IMPORTANT-BUT-NOT-URGENT ACTIVITY COULD INCLUDE

Reading, research, physically exercising, undertaking 1-1 or group coaching, strategic brainstorming, implementing initiatives from the Wellbeing Playbook, futures visioning, choosing between priorities, engaging in solitary or group reflective practice, job crafting, engaging in clinical supervision, listening to podcasts, problem-solving, participating in action learning sets, attending sector book clubs, designing or attending training courses, participating in wellbeing workshops, attending lectures, undertaking online or self-directed study…

THIS RESOURCE CONTAINS OVER 50 EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE 12 SPECIFIC DRIVERS OF WORKPLACE WELLBEING…

Cunningham, S., Fleming, W., Regier, C., Kaats, M., & De Neve, J. (2024). Work Wellbeing Playbook: A Systematic Review of Evidence Based Interventions to Improve Employee Wellbeing. World Wellbeing Movement

KEY IDEAS & USEFUL RESOURCES

- **Intrinsic Motivation**: *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us.* Pink, D. H. (2009). Concepts of Autonomy, Mastery, Purpose are key to ensuring work is intrinsically motivating. (Key components of 'good jobs.')

- **Psychological Safety** *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth. Edmondson, A. (2019).* The defining feature of high performing teams.

- **Learning Agility**: A 'meta-competence' which predicts workplace performance and is 'critical' to leader success. Linked to retention. Linked to better organisational cultures.

- **Coaching Cultures**: *Building a coaching culture: The LEAD Framework. Passmore & Crabbe*

- **Vertical Development**

VERTICAL DEVELOPMENT

- *"When we are learning skills or knowledge, we are developing horizontally. By contrast, vertical development is growing what we call our inner operating system: the mindsets, emotions and habits that guide how we make sense of situations, prioritise what matters, react emotionally, and act… This greater perspective and self-awareness then bring us more flexibility and choice over how we manage the complexity. It's no surprise, therefore, that there is a positive correlation between the level of vertical development and leadership effectiveness, especially in more complex roles."* Dietzel & Watkins (2021)

We have tended to conceptualise the sector skills gap in predominantly horizontal terms. But it is vertical development that will allow us to develop a deeper awareness of how we really influence our organisational cultures and climates, and how we might measure the true success of our leadership.