



Leading with Safe Uncertainty®

Living and leading with ambiguity and change

1. Introduction

The concept of Safe Uncertainty was first developed by Barry Mason for use in family therapy, then positioned in an organisational context by Jeremy Keeley in his 2009 paper.

“Latest thinking in change leadership has evolved whereby a powerful element of a change leader’s work is in building the resilience of their people and enabling them to live more comfortably with impermanence, uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of control”. Keeley, J 2009

We have subsequently developed and refined the organisational application of safe uncertainty to develop an approach - *Leading with Safe Uncertainty® (LWSU)*. Our premise is that change and uncertainty are the new norms - yet we still strive for certainty, trying to create solutions that ‘fix’ our myriad of perceived problems.

If we are to adapt, we need to let go of this fixed mindset and recognise the opportunities that change and uncertainty can bring. We need to accept that uncertainty brings tension yet it can trigger a positive change. Based on our research, the practical application of the concept and over 25 years working with senior leaders across all sectors, we now propose:

*“Feeling safe is a need; a prerequisite for creative thinking and a growth mindset
Feeling certain is a preference and can limit creativity and innovation”. Porter & Davis 2017*

Leading with Safe Uncertainty® provides a mindset to move from a world of problems, that demand speed, analysis and elimination of uncertainty to solve - to a world of dilemmas, that demand patience, sense-making and an engagement with uncertainty. The LWSU concept provides a framework for leaders and teams to think, reflect and act upon the dilemmas they face at work. The practical application of Safe Uncertainty also acts as a catalyst to shift mindset and culture.

At the heart of LWSU is the belief that our mandate as leaders is to create an environment of psychological safety in which individuals can flourish. Research has shown that this feeling of safety also brings improvements in business performance; increased engagement, innovation and creativity - allowing employees to learn from mistakes.

Leading with Safe Uncertainty® operates at an individual, team and organisational level; it provides a diagnostic tool, a way of thinking for leadership teams and a framework for cultural shifts. Designed to integrate with a wide range of developmental frameworks and techniques, LWSU provides an overarching route map for sustainable business performance.

2. Leading with Safe Uncertainty® - Concept

This paper introduces the concept of safe uncertainty, the ability to lead whilst unknowing; working with the creative tension that arises when there is no clear answer.

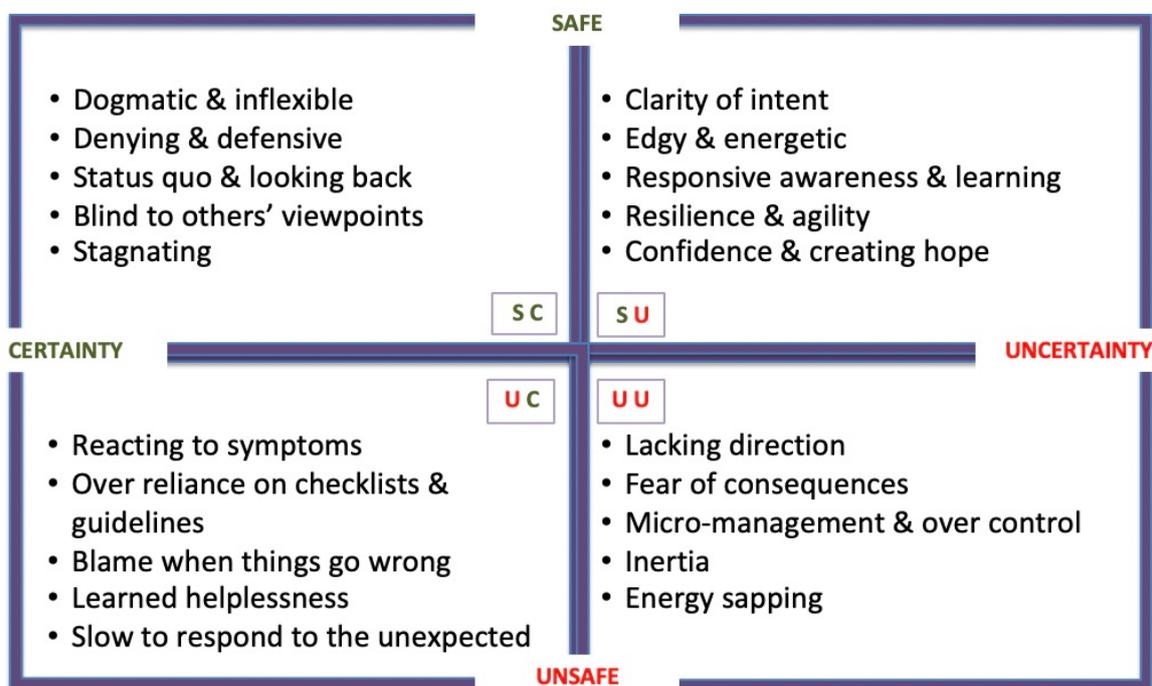
“A position of safe uncertainty is a framework for thinking about one's work, orientating one away from certainty to fit, a framework for helping people to fallout of love with the idea that solutions solve things”. Mason, B 1993

Barry Mason used a four-quadrant model to describe unsafe uncertainty, safe uncertainty, safe certainty and safe uncertainty. He illustrated how a shift in thinking to allow space for safe uncertainty can help the dynamics and interactions that occur in a therapeutic setting.

We were struck by the parallels between this concept and our ongoing work on conscious leadership – creating awareness and creativity by releasing reactive and controlling behaviours. We have also worked for several years with Bob Anderson’s framework – the Leadership Circle™ profile and Keeley’s concept for individual safe uncertainty clearly maps against the upper (creative) part of the Leadership 360° profile and the Collective Leadership Assessment.

Building on our experience of working with corporate organisations at all stages of growth, consolidation and change, the next step was to consider the organisational characteristics that we felt would manifest in each of the four quadrants:

Organisational Operating Environments





These are stressing the negative aspects to make a point; no organisation sits in a single quadrant across its entirety - but many will show characteristics typical of the descriptors above.

Unsafe Uncertainty

An environment that has come to light in many recent exposures of organisational failure. An accident waiting to happen with potential (or actual) serious consequences. At one level, everyone knows how bad things are but there is denial, obfuscation and hope that things will just go away. A culture where fear of possible consequence outweighs the courage to speak out for change, where lack of confidence perceives rules and procedures as a substitute for hands-on leadership.

Unsafe Certainty

Often a reaction to the previous quadrant - reacting to issues that surface through blame and restrictive protocols. This in turn may well demoralise those very individuals who are committed to the organisation and could be instrumental in supporting positive change. An atmosphere of false certainty – *'we've thought of that and put a checklist in'*, that may well react to a symptom rather than identify the root cause of an issue. Because of this belief that things are OK, there is often a time lag when evidence to the contrary is presented.

Safe Certainty

The domain of the market leader or sole supplier with no perceived pressure for change. Potentially confident to the point of arrogance, unable and/or unwilling to listen to feedback either internal or external. Typically, will defend status quo and get defensive when challenged as to alternative approaches; hence perceived as one dimensional and inflexible. May well stagnate and be superseded by more agile and responsive competitors.

Safe Uncertainty

Safety comes from clarity of intent and confidence in delivery – *'we know exactly where we are going, we're just not too sure as to how we're going to get there, yet we will'*. Open and responsive to feedback externally and internally with the resilience to manage short term setbacks. A culture of enablement and personal leadership with high levels of engagement and commitment to a shared purpose. Edgy and energising once the realisation and acceptance of a safe and supportive environment is achieved.

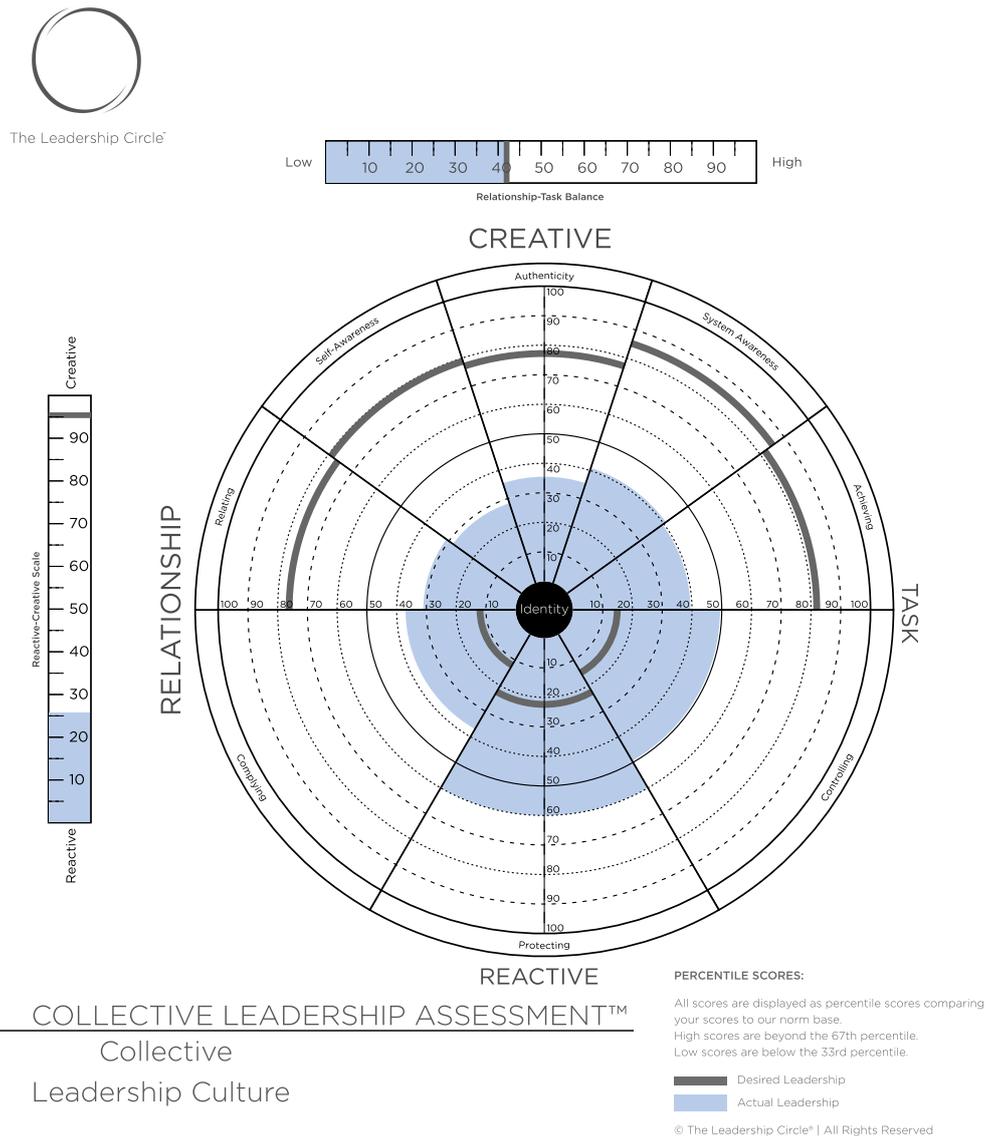
3. Leading with Safe Uncertainty® - Application

So, how to diagnose the existing culture, build on the best aspects and set a route map for a culture that embraces safe uncertainty? There are a wealth of cultural diagnostic tools and frameworks; our perspective focuses on the leadership culture. The values, beliefs and subsequent behaviours of the leadership team will shape and inform the culture that pervades the organisation.

This does not in any way negate the use of engagement surveys, individual and team profiling or wider organisational diagnostics; it merely reflects our own experience across a breadth and depth of organisations. If the senior leadership team are not committed,

engaged and willing to examine the impact of their own behaviours on the overall culture – nothing will change.

Recognising pressures on time, resource and availability of senior teams we felt that any approach had to be focused, accessible and able to operate virtually. Referring back to the Leadership Circle™, we have been using the Collective Leadership Assessment to give a highly visual and structured insight into both the existing culture and the shared vision for change. Well validated and with a direct link to organisational performance, an approach such as this provides credibility and robustness to engage senior teams.



Leadership Circle™



4. Summary

Changing times need changes in perspectives. We need to evolve the way we lead and structure our organisations to respond to changes in the political, economic and social landscape of the 21st century. There is no panacea, no definitive answer to the challenges that leaders face. What there is, is a body of substantive learning from a wide range of perspectives (research, practitioner, ethical) that can be blended and adapted to current circumstances. Our aim is to encompass these perspectives and adapt/evolve these to meet current needs – leading with safe uncertainty[®] is one such approach.

Jan Davis & Andrew Porter

(February 2021)