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# **Building the road as we walk: Leadership through uncertain times**

## **1. The person of the leader**

**Centre for Charity  
Effectiveness**

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**[ Always learning ]**

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“Charities may be in the grip of uncertainty, but many leaders have the agency, energy and will to find a practical way through”

# About this resource

This resource, exploring leading through uncertainty, is an invitation to charity leaders to celebrate the practices that support them in their leadership, as well as an encouragement to experiment with ideas, frameworks and practices that may be less familiar.

It does this by:

- capturing some of the ways that leaders in the sector lead during uncertainty;
- exploring new thinking about leading in uncertainty; and
- offering insights and practical suggestions.

The experience and wisdom of charity leaders is what forms the basis of this resource. It summarises the major themes gathered from interviews and focus groups held during 2022 with over 60 leaders, as a part of a CCE leadership research project led by [Tammy Tawadros](#) and [Lisa Barry](#), and supported by the Bayes Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund (KEIF). [Find out more about how the research was conducted here](#). The participants came from a wide variety of organisations, and represented a diverse demographic in terms of age, gender, and race. We are grateful to all those leaders who generously gave their time, and openly shared with us what they had learnt from their own experience.

The resource builds on the insights we gathered, extending the findings with evidence from leadership, psychology, and social science literature and research. It addresses the answers to some of the following key questions:

- What is the lived experience of leaders in our sector grappling with the daily realities, challenges and opportunities involved in leading through uncertainty?
- What psychological and other resources do individual leaders draw on to support them during uncertainty?
- How can charity leaders lead and implement their strategic work in challenging and uncertain times?
- What do they do to help their organisation’s stakeholders to thrive in uncertainty?

# The person of the leader

**What helps you on an individual level to lead in uncertainty?**

## Well-being and resilience

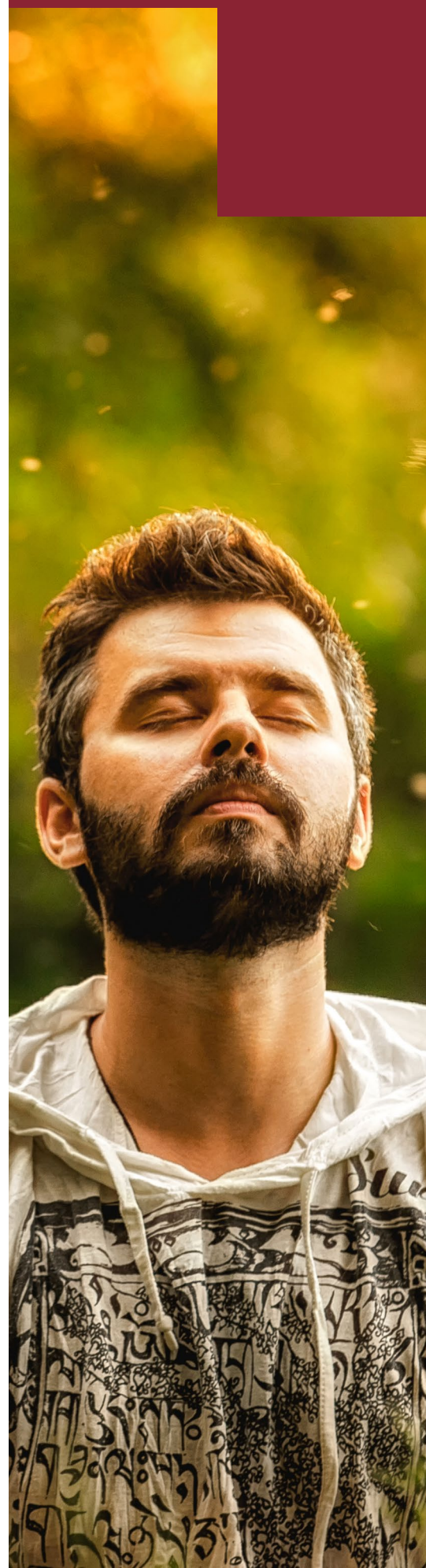
While many charity leaders we talked to have well-established exercise and relaxation routines, some struggle to maintain balance or take much time for themselves, whether for self-care or to reflect on their work.

### What you told us

“We are well aware that eating healthily, getting enough rest, sleep, and exercise, and having a social life is important.”

“For me it is more about getting beyond the basics and making sure my resilience isn't worn away by the constant battle to keep [the organisation] going.”

“My two biggest takeaways have been remembering to stop to take a breath and getting into the habit of having thinking and reflecting time and booking it in the diary.”





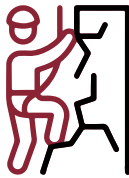
## What helps?



“Taking a lunchbreak:  
dancing in the street!”



“Having support  
and a network.”



“Climbing. It helps me  
master my emotions.”



“Accepting my limits.”

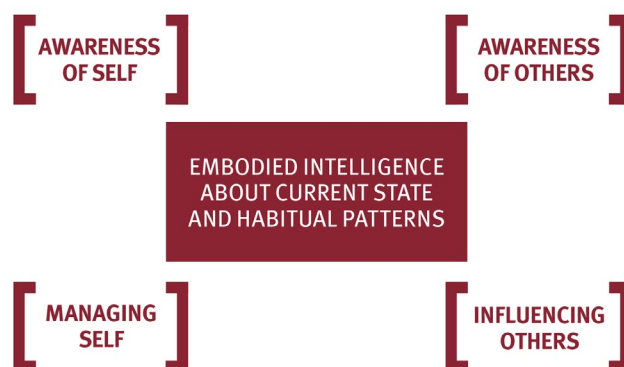
## What works

- Live in the moment, be present
- Don't lose focus on your own wellbeing
- Find out what works for you to stay sane and healthy, and make it your intentional practice
- Switch off purposefully to keep a sense of proportion
- Don't be myopic – remember there is life outside the office
- Focus on process not outcome
- Learn to accept that our reactions come in waves of self-doubt - often followed by resilience.

## What the science says – Embodied Intelligence

### Embodied Intelligence

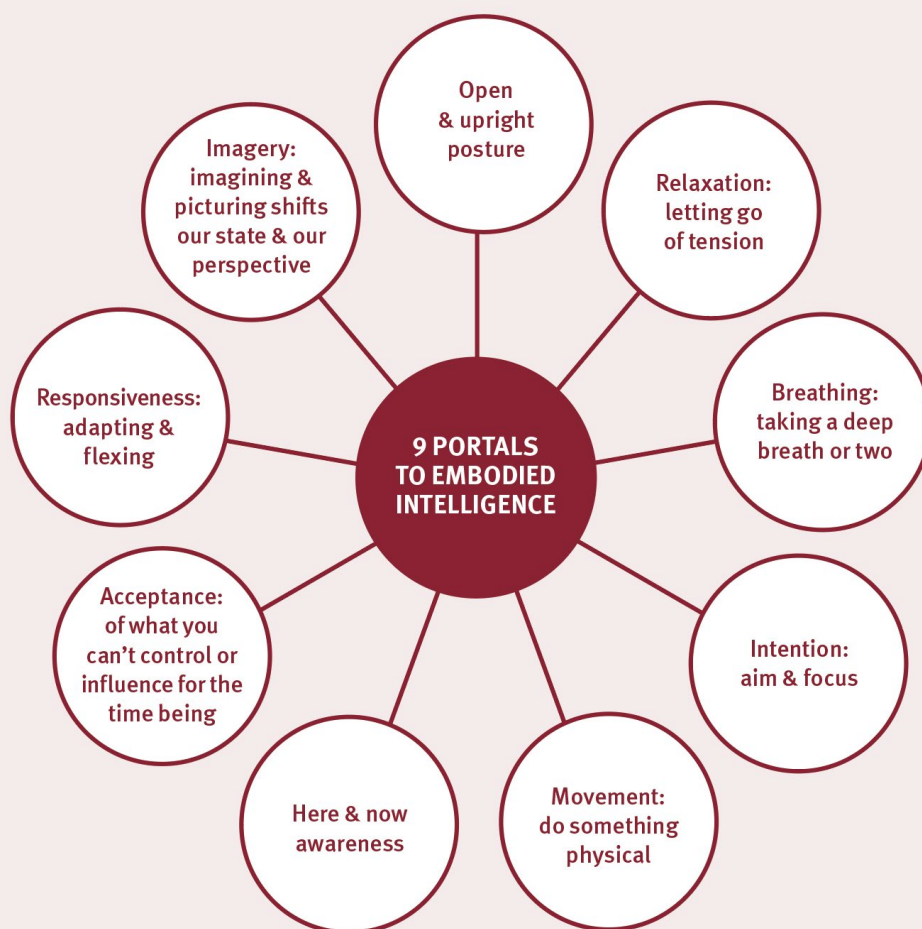
The evidence from neuroscience and elsewhere points to the importance of what Mark Walsh (2020) calls ‘embodied intelligence’. See this model of embodied intelligence.



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Adapted from Walsh (2021)

### Ways to access embodied intelligence

Walsh (2021) suggests nine different ways to access and enhance embodied intelligence. See below for an overview of these nine portals.



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Adapted from Walsh (2021)

## What the science says – Building self-awareness

### Leading in uncertainty is inherently anxiety provoking,

and it is likely to present us with demands and stressful situations that trigger our nervous system to respond to these as ‘threats’. We know that as humans we are built, and biologically primed, to react to danger and to threats, so that we can survive and find safety. Our nervous system responds ‘automatically’ to fear triggers. It doesn’t matter whether that trigger is a tiger coming towards us, an unpleasant email that lands in our inbox, the prospect of a cut in funding to the organisation, or something that reminds us of a past trauma - our nervous system doesn’t differentiate. Uncertainty in the external environment can also act as a fear trigger. Fear activates our nervous system’s threat response of fight, flight, or freeze.

### Leading in uncertainty winds you up.

We might experience fight-flight states as a sense of feeling ‘wound up’, ‘ready to spring’, like a jack-in-the-box. Alternatively, we may experience a felt sense of being vigilant, on ‘high alert’, and perhaps unable to ‘switch off’.

### Overload plus uncertainty can shut you down.

Freeze states can often accompany times when we feel overwhelmed by demands, and ‘last straw’ moments. Those moments when yet another task or problem comes your way when you’re already super busy, or one more thing goes wrong at the end of a long or a difficult day. We might feel paralysed with disbelief, numb, unable to register – ‘shutting down’. Uncertainty itself can lead to a freeze-like state, or it might compound the experience of overwhelm and shut down.

### Know what state you are in!

Being able to recognise what ‘state’ you are in at any given moment is important because our nervous system reactions are very fast. What’s more, the reactions happen outside our awareness, before we have registered a reaction, and before our brains have formulated a thought or interpreted an event.



## What the science says – Befriending your nervous system

“Our nervous system is always trying to figure out a way for us to survive, to be safe.” Dr Stephen Porges, 2022

### Give yourself a moment of pause

This can be in the form of a deep breath, a movement, a stretch, or closing your eyes or giving them a rest by looking to the middle distance, looking, and smiling at a colleague. Whatever works for you to introduce a pause or slow the pace of your system can be very grounding, counteracting the ‘high alert’ state that has been activated outside conscious awareness.

Research backs up what many spiritual and other practitioners have known for millennia - that slowing down breathing and meditative breathing can send the message to our nervous system that we are safe. This enables us to think more clearly and creatively.

See for example:

*Breathing Happiness*, TED Talk by Emma Seppälä PhD. Science Journalist and author, and the Associate Director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University.

Nestor, J. (2021) *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*. Penguin Books equanimity and focus.

### Give yourself a positive anchor

This can be in the form of a pleasant memory of a person, place, or moment. Or it can be a simple activity that brings you joy, pleasure or satisfaction.

### Create a library of positive anchors

Moments, micro-moments, short, pleasant activities and/or the memory of such moments and activities can provide you with a reliable support in your day. Making it a habit to use or recall your anchors can become a simple and practical way to resource yourself when the ‘going gets tough’, to bring yourself back into a state of equilibrium and a sense of safety.

Deb Dana, a leading specialist in this field, recommends identifying positive anchoring experiences and keeping a list of these that you can return to and use.

### Building a library of positive anchors

Use the categories and prompts below to build your library.

**Who.** Think about the people in your life. Make a list of those who make you feel safe and welcome. You may have a pet who brings you that experience. Think of people in both your personal and your professional world.

**What.** Reflect on what you do that brings you moments of joy, simple pleasure, small actions that feel nourishing and connecting.

**Where.** Walk around your local area, your workplace (or beyond). Or visualise physical places that you have visited. What are the places that feel special, that cue you to feel safe, to feel ‘warm inside’, or that you have a special connection with.

**When.** Identify times when you have felt safe, calm, and connected. Bring them to mind and conjure the sensations you had. Write these down in as much detail as possible.

**Build your library.** Decide how you want to put this together. This might be in the form of a notebook or journal, in which you include any relevant images or photos. Or you may choose to put up post its. Make sure that you can access your library easily.

Adapted from Dana (2020)  
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## What the science says – Befriending your body

“We’ve taught the body – our nervous system – to be numb, not to be aware of our bodily needs, to sit still. We tend to shame people who listen to their body.” Dr Stephen Porges, 2022

There is often a disconnect between the way our body feels, our physical sensations, our physiological states, and how we come to interpret these. Stress manifests in our body well before we register it consciously, and usually before we can make a choice about what we feel, think, and do. Becoming aware of our fleeting embodied responses can be key.

Recognising our habitual embodied reactions helps us to cultivate and learn how to respond more skilfully and resourcefully in stressful circumstances and in a radically uncertain context. The evidence from biology and neuroscience is overwhelming. Without listening to our bodies, without being aware of our embodied reactions, we are not able to shift beyond the grip of flight, fight or freeze. All we can do is put a brave face on what our physical being is

manifesting - a layer of laminating behaviour that sits on top of our stress or survival reaction.

Directing our attention to our posture is one way that we can befriend our embodied self. Our natural reaction to fear and stress is to hunch and close up. Changing our posture to become more uplifted, by standing or sitting upright with both feet on the ground for example, physically changes how we think and how we talk about our feelings and thoughts. Spending more time in a centred posture can help us change our perspective and see more options and possibilities. This in turn, can help us meet the challenge of uncertainty with greater equanimity and focus.

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## What the science says – Befriending your mind

### Using self-talk to befriend your mind

There is mounting research evidence which shows that self-talk can be hugely influential on performance and confidence across many different endeavours, from sports to leadership. Using self-talk as a deliberate strategy is based on the premise that what people say to themselves ‘internally’ and therefore what they think, influences how they feel and how they behave.

Our inner monologue can often be quite a negative one, with an inner voice that may be critical and unhelpful. When the external context is unpredictable and/or rife with economic, political, and social disruption, befriending our minds through our self-talk can become particularly important. It can counter the harsher or more critical internal voices leaders may encounter, and it can also help us to increase self-confidence and a sense of agency. Evidence also suggests that self-talk plays a part in helping us regulate our emotions, cope with difficult experiences, and facilitate perspective-taking. Moreover, using self-talk as a strategy seems to work better in novel situations, than when carrying out familiar tasks. This suggests that self-talk may lend itself even better to situations where leaders are

facing self-doubt, external uncertainty, or when they are making decisions during uncertainty.

See also: [Being uncertain might make you a better leader, Tammy Tawadros](#)

### Using reflection to befriend your mind

“Booking myself time to think in the diary can feel like an indulgence. In fact, it’s what we are paid to do.”

“Reflecting alone on a walk, and with others who are in the same boat has been a lifeline.”

“What we need is help with ways to commit time and energy to developing our leadership skills and thinking – creating moments for ourselves.”

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“Every senior leader needs a ‘professional posse’!”

**Christine Fogg,**  
Honorary Visiting Fellow  
at Bayes Business School

## Peer relationships

Many senior charity leaders frequently feel lonely and alone. They draw comfort from the knowledge that other leaders in the sector face similar challenges and that they share many of the same experiences, especially feelings of self-doubt and ‘imposterdom’.

While they value peer connection and support, many are surprised at just how important this can be at times of crisis and uncertainty, and how crucial a network of peer relationships can be for personal and professional well-being and resilience.

## What you told us

The reflections below capture some experiences of the value of talking and sharing with peers:

“Having other people outside the organisation who understand makes all the difference.”

“My relationship with my colleague, who works across the country and in a very different part of the charity world, has been absolutely invaluable – it is like a sacred space – the only place I can be myself and speak my truth. I think it is the same for her.”

“I felt much less emotionally exhausted, and though it is a bit odd to say this, I realised that I had accomplished a lot more in my role than I realised.”

“Somehow, I never believed that sharing different experiences and also being in the same boat would be so important. It is such a support and a relief!”

“The organisation faced the same trials and tribulations, not to mention turbulence and though I have rarely felt more challenged –being part of a network, being part of something bigger seemed to ease the stress.”

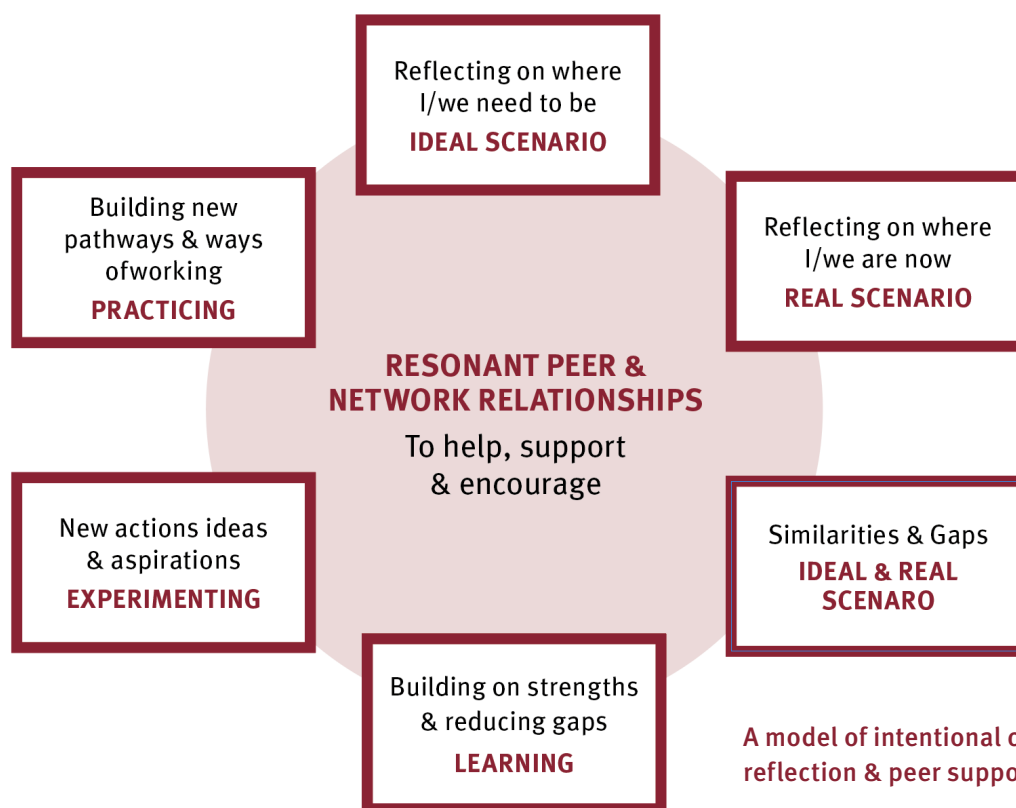
## What works

- Think of it as an investment! You will always have someone whose brain you can pick. Call an executive friend!
- If you're not comfortable asking for help or you don't have a network, at least you can be there for someone else.
- Talk to others at every chance you get. Don't go it alone.
- It helps to be reminded that you are not alone, and that there are others facing the same self-doubt and struggles that you face.
- Being exposed to diverse thinking, and a diverse group or network, brings a wealth of new and different information, knowledge, and perspectives.



## What the science says

Below is a model of intentional change that shows how combining individual reflection with peer support would enable leaders to capitalise on inherent and available resources during uncertainty, to generate new ideas and options.



**A model of intentional change using reflection & peer support**

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Adapted from Boyatzis (1995)



## The power and importance of connecting with others

Feeling lonely, whether 'at the top' or elsewhere, and not having people to share your problems and dilemmas with is the single most injurious experience for health and well-being. In terms of predicting poor health and well-being outcomes, loneliness is worse than lifelong smoking!

As humans we cannot thrive without a sense of connection with others, without relationships in which we can 'tune in' to one another's needs and share experiences, including the issues and problems we face.

See for example:

The Power and Science of Social Connection, TED Talk by [Emma Seppälä PhD](#).

Pinker, S. (2015) *The Village Effect: Why face-to-face contact matters*. Atlantic Books

## Resilience is a social sport!

Although we tend to relegate resilience to the realms of the individual, being with others, particularly during times of uncertainty is something that positively feeds our resilience as leaders. Whilst leaders in our sector are often concerned with the

resilience of the team and the organisation, they are often surprised to find that their own personal and leadership resilience is in part drawn from groups of peers and other networks.

Although few studies pay specific attention to the part that peer groups and networks play in boosting leaders' resilience, there is a good deal of evidence that social support and social connections militate against the impacts of adversity and stress, including disruptive change and prolonged uncertainty. We have a good deal of evidence to show that for clinicians, health practitioners, and leaders for example, being part of a peer group seems to have a positive impact on psychological well-being and mental health. Research also tells us that those leaders who deal with adversity and uncertainty best, are those who have close and confiding relationships during difficult times. Many consistently emphasise the significance of relationships in their ability to be resilient.

See for example:

The Hive Effect: Building resilience in groups, Tammy Tawadros

Earned Resilience and Learned Optimism, Tammy Tawadros

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## Join the conversation

We would encourage you to engage with the Building the road as we walk, resource on social media and [share your own experience](#) of leading through uncertainty. Please tag @BayesCCE in your post.

## Acknowledgements and thank yous

We would like to thank all of the charity leaders and colleagues who helped to input into the Building the road as we walk research. In particular Caroline Copeman, Christine Fogg, Alex Skailes, and all the CCE consultants for sharing their experience and for their invaluable support.

We would also like to thank the Bayes Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund (KEIF) for supporting this work.

## About terminology

At some points throughout this resource we have used the term 'beneficiary'. We understand that this phrase carries paternalistic connotations and we use it to refer to clients, customers, members, people who benefit from the charity's activities.

## Disclaimer

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