



Aiming to Nourish the More Human Organisation

Michael Chaskalson, Helen Sieroda, Chris Nichols, & Philippa Hardman

The first article in this series examined the importance of Team Mindfulness using the AIM model (Allowing, Inquiry, Meta-awareness) and explored how the application of the model in practice addresses important areas of organisational life, including purpose and the quality of participation, both of which impact performance.

This article takes a deeper dive into a fundamental question on the agenda of most organisations right now: how can we be more fully human in our work? Our research and client work tells us that this question has become more pressing during the months of the COVID era, as the challenges of moving to new ways of working have had their impact on us all. We have been using the AIM model as a guiding principle over this time.

These are some of our experiences and findings

What's the problem?

Teams are almost universally reporting that the scale and pace of organisational challenges are unrelenting. Some teams, and some team members, are having a tougher time than others. Alongside the exuberance of reinvention and transformation, teams are having to recognise that their new ways of working can pose a challenge to well-being. We are seeing strain and distress, and where it exists, it is unevenly distributed.

At root what we are facing is a sharpening of the question of how organisations do, and do not, support the needs and well-being (in the broadest sense) of the humans involved. There has been a definite shift towards a world intermediated by machines. For many of us work has become physically distant, at least in part, conducted through digital interfaces. Much of the day-to-day social activity of organising travel, setting up meetings, and sharing informal conversations, have been replaced by incessant online activity. Many organisations have already announced an intention to retain many of these ways of working. But, in doing so, it is also essential to address the human consequences and to act wisely to gain the benefits of such ways of working, without doing harm in the process.

This matters on both the ethical level and in respect of organisational effectiveness. We recently conducted a qualitative survey of OD consultants and clients on the issues that teams are finding hardest to address in the face of new ways of working. We can summarise the issues emerging into the following main areas.

The team as a team.

Some of the teams we have surveyed have described difficulties arising in the nature of the team itself, which are not unique to digital working, nor to the pandemic, but have been exacerbated by these factors. Teams describe themselves as struggling to find and agree on a shared purpose, contesting the purpose of the team itself.

Team performance.

Some teams are facing challenges around the performance of the team. To what extent is the team working well? Some teams are struggling to get a right balance between time spent individually and time as a team. Sometimes the urge to create connection is creating a demand for more and more meeting time.

The adequacy of conversation.

Some teams are reporting a difficulty in addressing tougher issues in their virtual conversations. Often, difficult conversations are being avoided out of concern that a virtual meeting is a tough place in which to have such conversations well. As a result, certain issues of individual or team performance are neglected. When those kinds of difficult conversations are avoided, creative juice leaks away.

Difficulties of inclusion and participation.

Teams are reporting that they are seeing new challenges in the use of power, affecting the way inclusion and participation is working. Individual life circumstances can be amplified in new ways of working. It is easy to rely on some people more than others in virtual meetings. The efficient use of the chat function, or the use of side-messaging on other platforms, can exclude and isolate alongside creating efficiency.

There are also specific issues arising in complex teams

Where there is wide geographical distribution involving multiple time zones, or complex cross-cultural factors – which may exacerbate all of the other issues.

Throughout all of this is the issue of balancing human and organisational needs. Organisations often have an element of “the machine” about them, with processes and reporting cycles that are not particularly flexible to the needs of the people who work there. The move to digital and online often makes the machine-human interface a little more obvious. Clearly if we want humans to flourish and work well in organisations that themselves serve customers well and succeed in their commercial goals, we need to pay attention to the balance, the co-existence of the needs of both the organisation and the individual humans in it.

Our practice shows that the AIM framework can help. It helps to identify the source of issues and assist in addressing them creatively and with rigour. The rest of this article explores how

A Recap of the AIM Approach

These AIM foundations of Allowing, Inquiry and Meta-awareness were first set out in earlier research discussed in an article by Michael Chaskalson and Megan Reitz.

Allowing

is the practice of recognising reality for what it is. We all spend so much our time living in a “what if” world. When we are stuck in an attitude of wishing things weren’t like this or an attitude of denial, there is very little choice available to us. It’s fruitless to spend time wishing the world were somehow different. When you’re able to allow things to be as they actually then possibilities emerge.

Inquiry

is the practice of disciplined interest in opening things up. So much of creating the future involves moving beyond the ways of seeing and acting that have brought us to the problem we’re in. The ability to address the problem creatively demands that we see the world another way. We can only see another way if we are willing to look through fresh lenses. This is where nurturing a team’s ability to inquire really matters.

Meta-awareness

is the ability to look at the team from an ‘outsider’ perspective and see the behaviour of the team as it is happening, like looking down at the swirling patterns of people moving around a busy railway station from a high up balcony. The team learns to see itself in action. It sees what is going on its own collective behaviour and its own patterns – what it is doing while it is actually doing it.

As we discussed in our previous article, the three fundamentals of AIM – allowing, inquiry and meta-awareness – can all be learned and nourished. Let’s now see how they work in the context of the challenge of creating a more human organisation.

Looking at one team's experience using the AIM lens

To make this practical, let's look at the experience of one team we are working with (we've changed some details to keep confidentiality intact). This team sits within the research arm of a larger, high-profile organisation. The organisation concerned depends upon the team's ongoing research activities, and their archive of past work makes a continual contribution to the organisation's current output. Several factors have combined to require a significant examination of the purpose, form and operation of the research work. The parent organisation is moving its city HQ and this is leading to questions about exactly how the research archive serves the firm best. What is the place of digitisation of the activity, and what structural and operational changes will that mean? Does the archive need to be physically located in prime city centre HQ space? Will tomorrow's staff need very different skills than the current team?

There has been a lot of anxiety and some conflict, within the research team and between the research team and the wider organisational management, who view the research team as presenting unwelcome and emotional obstacles to reasonable strategic questions. The COVID crisis has led to much of this research activity being done remotely, with the team never fully coming together during the last year. Discussions about the potential changes have therefore all taken place in virtual meetings.

Let's turn to how the AIM model helps make sense of this situation and how it assists the team in the situation they face.

The starting point is to **allow** what is happening simply to be accepted as facts. We've been working with a cross section of the people involved to encourage them to recognise what is happening, without judging anything as right or wrong. Some of the facts that have had to be accepted include:

There is fear and anxiety about the potential impacts of the changes on individual work patterns and lifestyles. The team has worked together in one physical space for many years, and team members are widely spread within commuting distance of the HQ. A move to any other location will clearly benefit some and disadvantage others. This is leading to conflict in the research team itself.

The difficulty has been exacerbated by home working, since it has become obvious which team members have been called into the office to meet "essential" projects and which have been fully at home, which is causing fears over differential job security. In addition, although some team members welcome the flexibility of working from home, others do not have suitable workspaces, or have home schooling or caring responsibilities and have felt disadvantaged in the new ways of working.

The leaders of the team have come to recognise that their team is not in fact acting as one team, but as groupings with very different concerns and interests in respect of the changes at hand. Although they have previously set great store in their team spirit, it's been no use to pretend that this is currently "one happy family", as they previously saw it. The very different needs and realities of the team members have called for a more detailed and richer examination of the concerns and challenges of individual team members.

It has been no use to simply wish this to be different, and the leaders have gradually let go of the fantasy that everyone can rationally accept that there are strategic advantages and future gains. The reality is that the restructuring and new ways of working will have costs and benefits that are going to be unevenly borne, and that these differential impacts create a more complex situation to be managed.

We have seen similar situation in other organisations, where the act of "allowing" what is there, rather than trying to gloss it into something more palatable, provides a richer, if

sometimes more complex and difficult, agenda that leaders are then able to work with through inquiry.

Inquiry asks better questions.

In the example we have been working with here, we encouraged team members to begin to inquire more deeply into different aspects of the situation they are facing:

Firstly, their own experience of being in the team at that point in time. How did they feel about the work they were doing? What impact did working in these conditions have on their experience of work and their life at home?

Then we asked them to envisage and discuss what the proposed changes might mean for them and for others of their team-mates. We created specific periods of time where those thoughts could be shared non-judgementally – in a spirit of allowing.

We also asked people to find words and metaphors to describe the team's climate – what did it feel like working in the team that had been, the team that was now and the team they saw coming into being.

Finally, we asked them to consider how the team's purpose, its task and goals were being affected by the team's current climate.

Much of the value of better inquiry arises from seeing the situation from a fresh perspective. We spend so much of our work lives seeing things from the position in the system that we each happen to occupy. It can be liberating just to realise that other viewpoints are possible! Taking the time to create moments in which a new question can lead to a new way of seeing is often an act of radical creativity. Seeing a situation from another perspective will often in itself create better connections between parties where tension exists, moments of truth and reconciliation as alternative realities are witnessed and acknowledged. In addition, each new way of seeing can offer the seeds of new solutions: a new conversation, the possibility of a new set of action, and these are often helpful contributions to addressing the situation the organisation is facing.

In the case of the research team in our example, this process of rich inquiry, through questioning as we have discussed, fed into the next phase of building a stronger and more capable organisation as the team began to become more aware of itself as a team. They began to experience an increase in meta-awareness.

Meta-awareness makes us pay attention to the patterns of thinking in the team, while they are happening. By developing this capability, the project team began to notice their own patterns of thinking. They began to spot that sometimes their espoused values were not the ones actually playing out in their actions. This meant that they were much more able to do something to correct this.

One thing they noticed was that they were being driven by a number of metaphors. They saw the project as a series of races, with a stopwatch and a series of finish lines to be reached. This was very understandable given that all of this was taking place within a change project, with an accompanying Gantt chart of activities. But it also meant that they came to see anyone who stood between them and the “finish line” as “part of the problem”, and this stopped some of the team hearing the full range of human needs of the people they were dealing with.

By placing themselves “on the balcony” and able to look over at organisational patterns emerging (of which they are themselves a part), the team was also able to see how their privileged position in the system made some important communication much harder

to achieve.

For example, project leaders noticed that they were very attached to the story they had developed about the strategic gains of the office move. In seeing this story above all others, they had placed themselves several steps ahead of the people in the research team, who were looking at a story of personal impacts and possible losses. Once they spotted that there was more than simply their own story running within the project, they were more able to hear what others were trying to tell them.

Stopping to listen made it more possible for the holders of those other stories to be heard, to be treated as humans not mere obstacles to a process. No one had intended to dehumanise their colleagues, but the project team came to see that this had had in fact been the impact of their way of seeing the world. They had become invested in their own story of costs and efficiency measures, and genuinely came to have less interest in the human impacts. Once they spotted that this was so (through allowing it to be) they were able to listen better and that engaged more of the research team in the change process.

The solution of creating more space for human interaction was key to making progress. Some of this was through activity that was not directly related to the research team project. Creating meetings simply to hear what people valued in their work and work lives helped to build a connection that then allowed the energy of the research team to be more engaged in the project.

None of this means that the changes affecting the research team are being stopped, nor does it mean that it will not disadvantage some. It was simply that entering more fully into a human connection allows for more creative ways of addressing genuine needs and meeting them where they can be met is helping to move situation forward.

AIM and the human organisation.

Most of the organisations we work with aspire to be good places to work, and very many genuinely want to provide nourishing places for humans to work with purpose, to develop and to grow, and to have jobs that support their needs on many levels.

But we all also know that it's easy to lose sight of the humanity in service of the day-to-day pressures involved in running a business. It's only by turning up fully and working with a clear focus on the intention of serving humanity well that this aspect really gets sufficient focus.

The structure and discipline of AIM provides a way to do this better. In fact, in our experience, where any team is acting in ways that support human wellbeing well, they will inevitably be following the triple strands of allowing, inquiry and meta-awareness. The more we can bring these practices into our organisational life, the more able we will be to create a workplace in which human beings thrive and succeed together.

What the next article in this series covers

In our next article we will look at the practice of Team Mindfulness in relation to creating and nurturing awareness of the relationship between organisational work and the wider living world. We will look at how the use of the AIM framework can enhance the corporate focus on important aspects of the environmental agenda such as engaging support for effective action to address ESGs, net zero carbon targets and other forms of bio-intelligent activities.