

# Learning Teams

A facilitation guide

---

## Learning Teams – Facilitation Guide

This guide is arranged in a structure that allows you to follow the process or jump to sections as needed as the bulleted points are hyperlinked.

### Background to Learning Teams

- [What is a Learning Team?](#)
- [Why complete a Learning Team?](#)
- [Principles of a Learning Team](#)
- [Who is on the Learning Team?](#)
- [When to run a Learning Team?](#)

### Executing the Learning Team

- [Phase 1 – Determine the need / Standing up the Learning Team](#)
- [Phase 2 - First session: Learning Mode only](#)
- [Phase 3 - Provide “soak time”](#)
- [Phase 4 - Second session: Start in Learning Mode](#)
- [Phase 5 - Define current defences/Build new ones](#)
- [Phase 6 - Tracking actions and criteria for closure](#)
- [Phase 7 - Communicate with other applicable areas](#)

### What is a Learning Team?

A Learning Team is a facilitated means of engaging with workers to understand and then learn from the opportunities that are presented by everyday successful and safe work as well as learning from events or incidents that could have or did harm workers.

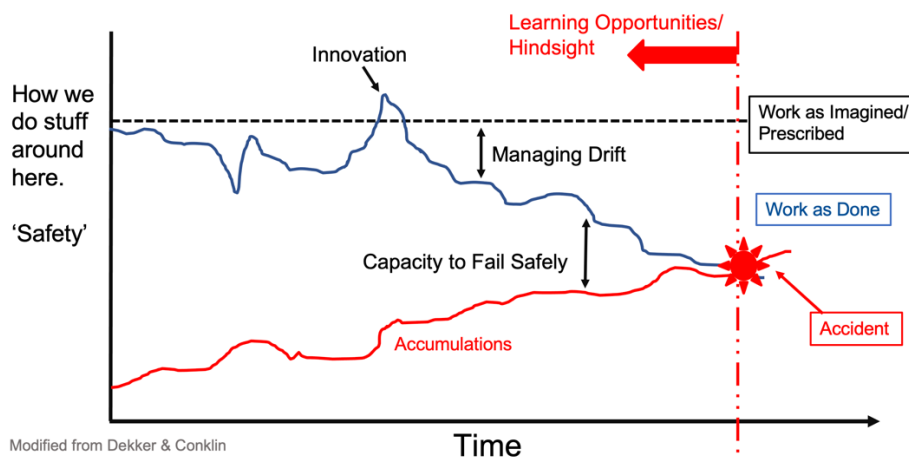
### Why complete a Learning Team?

Way more goes right than wrong in work. If ‘bad’ things only happened when rules weren’t followed, then we’d have many more accidents and incidents than we do. Workers (at all levels in the system) adapt, workaround, innovate, ‘bend’ and ‘break’ the rules to achieve the goals they are rewarded for. That doesn’t mean they are bad; it means they are human. If the rules and standards are being worked around, modified, bent, or broken, it is on the organisation to find out the reasons for this and that doesn’t mean immediate punitive action. Your workers will be working within the system to achieve, what they think, is success. The challenge is that workers often don’t even recognise that they are adapting and working around the system because that is what ‘experts’ do. They understand the risks, the context, and how to achieve success. Note, that when the term ‘worker’ is used, it does not always mean front-line operational worker, it could also mean supervisors, middle, and senior management. They are all doing ‘work’. In fact, ‘knowledge’ workers can have a much greater impact on organisational success/failure than operators.

Not everyone is an expert and the tacit knowledge that is held needs to be uncovered if the wider teams and organisation (plus domain) are to learn. Learning doesn’t just happen when we reflect on an adverse event, we also learn when we reflect on successful outcomes so we can replicate the

successful processes (or work out if we were just lucky). And because more goes right than wrong, there is more learning potential with successful outcomes.

The diagram below shows Organisational Drift in action. Drift is normal. It happens because there are goal conflicts, the process isn't clear, the task changes in the moment, or the design doesn't match the reality. And humans work around these, and most of the time, don't have accidents or incidents. Importantly, we don't need an accident to create learning opportunities, because if we stopped time at any point, the gaps between 'Work as Done' and 'Work as Imagined' and the aggregation of background risk (accumulations), provide learning opportunities.



The outputs from a Learning Team should be 'learning products' that allow the gaps between 'Work as Imagined', 'Work as Done', and 'Work as Disclosed' to be reduced to as small as possible without emphasising the compliance. The specifics of these products will be discussed in the guide under the outputs section. Note, 'Work as Disclosed' might be different to 'Work as Done' because there is fear, there is trauma, or there may be an inability to remember what actually happens. These gaps, residual risks, will never be zero, but if they are known about, they can be treated, transferred, tolerated or terminated as part of the formal risk management process. Importantly, "you can't fix a secret" (Clive Lloyd).

## Principles of a Learning Team

There are five principles within a Learning Team:

1. Understanding that 'Work as Imagined' and 'Work as Done' give context.
2. Groups outperform individuals regarding problem ID and problem solving.
3. Workers have the best knowledge and understanding of the problem.
4. More effort into problem solving, better solutions.
5. Group problem identification, solving, reflection drives learning and improvement.



As in the five principles of HOP, they are guiding statements rather than rules to follow. By using the wisdom of the masses, in a psychologically safe environment, we can solve some pretty wicked problems.

## Who is on the Learning Team?

Those involved! It is worth having a core group of people who know how to facilitate a learning team, but those people shouldn't be those doing the work that is being examined, otherwise there is a conflict of interest, and the real stories won't come to the fore.

The Learning Team should involve a number of people directly involved in the work, but also others from within the system, 3 to 8 works well. There shouldn't be any direct hierarchical conflicts in the room e.g., line managers of workers, but it is worth considering similar individuals to get leadership and organisational perspectives. Subordinate perspectives e.g., contractors or suppliers are also very useful contributors to help with sense-making. Ultimately, the goal is to understand 'how it made sense for those to do what they did' and workers don't just operate in isolation. For that to happen, there must be shared trust, psychological safety, otherwise learning opportunities i.e., 'Work as Done' will not be disclosed.

The number in the Learning Team isn't that important – it is the ratio of facilitators to members that is important. A good ratio is 2:3-8 i.e., 2 facilitators to every 3-8 people. This allows trustworthy relationships to be built. Two facilitators also allow for conversation and note-taking to occur without interrupting the flow of the stories being told.

The Learning Team 'Leader' is responsible for setting up the Learning Team and these responsibilities will be covered in the relevant phases.

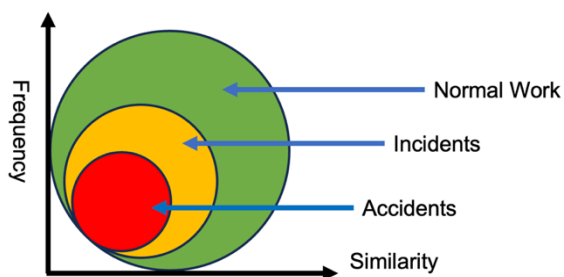
Having a 'standing' learning team will not work because it is the local work that needs to be explored.

## When to run a Learning Team?

Learning Teams are about learning. That might appear to be obvious, but consider that learning happens all the time, and is often focused on small activities that went well or didn't go to plan. What facilitates the learning is the ability to reflect in detail about what happened, what the context was, and how it made sense for those to do what they did. That means it must be relatively small, something that can be covered in a few hours (plus overnight soak). It is important to recognise that Learning Teams aren't just looking at the negatives, they are also looking at positives.

- Lifting operation where a failure occurred but no-one was hurt – a HiPo. What 'created' the safe environment?
- An exceptional project kick-off where everything went above and beyond expectations.
- Continued frustrations over a lock-out-tag-out procedure.
- An 'unexpected' failure mode e.g., a fall from height when no hazard was thought to exist.

Traditionally Learning Teams are run based on 'events' but you can also run them for 'normal work' – consider using a technique called 'Critical Insights' – or you can use a Learning Team as part of the Management of Change process.



In terms of 'events', consider how much distributed learning might be possible by running a Learning Team. This image, based on work by Erik Hollnagel, shows that accidents have few similarities to other accidents, but incidents and normal work have considerable similarity.

If you are dealing with something that will take more than a few hours with an overnight soak, you might want to consider a Learning Review where more resources and sense-making capabilities can be deployed, or to run multiple Learning Teams to focus on specific elements, and then create an integration Learning Team to bring it all together.

## The Learning Team Process

To maximise the effectiveness of the Learning Team, it is recommended that the following process is followed. Of the phases outlined, the most important is Phase 3, the soak or reflection period.

- Phase 1 - Determine need / Standing up the Learning Team
- Phase 2 - First session: Learning Mode only
- Phase 3 - Provide "soak time"
- Phase 4 - Second session: Start in Learning Mode
- Phase 5 - Define current defences/Build new ones
- Phase 6 - Tracking actions and criteria for closure
- Phase 7 - Communicate with other applicable areas: "Tell the story and share success"

Each of these phases will now be covered in more detail.

### Phase 1 – Determine the need / Standing up the Learning Team

Decide who is going to attend. Consider the scope of the ‘system’ you are examining and those stakeholders who might contribute to the learning. One output from after Phase 2 is that others are needed. Limit the number of people to 3-8 per pair of facilitators.

It is critical that trust and psychological safety are created quickly. This means that whoever is leading this needs to be vulnerable – talk about their gaps in knowledge. A deeply personal story from the leader can help with this. Setting ground rules like ‘no one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once’ can help the quieter ones in the room have a voice.

Introduce the process and stages, emphasising the discovery and learning mode before solution identification and learning product definition. Understand the local rationality of all those involved in ‘normal work’, not ‘would’ or ‘should’ happen i.e., ‘Work as Imagined’. Explain that you will be firm on the use of counterfactuals, and if they come up, the local rationality principle will be called out ‘People make sense of what they do at the time, given their knowledge, resources, and drivers. This sense-making is independent of the outcome, irrespective of how severe the outcome is.’ so how did it make sense for THEM (not you) to do what they did. Moving to ‘how’ disconnects the person from the decision/action – we can then focus on changing context.

Explain the timelines for the Learning Team but not necessarily the solutions or outputs because they won’t be known at this stage.

Trust is critical and therefore it should be emphasised that everything remains secure in the Learning Team area and emergent discussions and details should not be shared outside the team. This allows ‘warts and all’ to be disclosed. This can be difficult for managers and leaders, especially when they hear how work is done. It should not be challenged. However, if criminal activity is exposed, then stop the Learning Team.

## Phase 2 - First session: Learning Mode only

People want to find the answers and provide solutions, even before they've understood the problem. Be curious. Understand what 'normal' looks like. Organisational learning starts when we understand the gaps between what should happen and what does happen. As such, we need to understand what a 'normal' day looks like, and the list of questions on the right can help with this.

These could be summarised as the 4Ds.

- What is Difficult about this job?
- What is Dumb about this job?
- What is Dangerous about this job?
- What was Different about this job?
- What does routine work look like?
- How hard is it to get things done?
- What frustrates you on your job?
- What doesn't make sense?
- What do you do to make the job easier?
- How doable are your procedures?
- What tools do you have and do they work well?
- What were the conditions leading up to the event?
- What other near misses have you seen in this area?
- What worked well? Why?
- What failed or went wrong?
- Where else could a similar event happen?
- What else should I know?
- Who should this be shared with?
- How did the actions or inactions of those involved make sense in their context? (Not yours!)
- Where is slack most important? i.e., what makes things fragile.

The duration of this phase depends on the complexity of the task but should be at least a couple of hours, and likely up to 3 or 4. Take breaks if you go more than 90 mins. The first part of this phase time will be spent creating psychological safety (especially Learner and Contributor Safety).

Going to the site location can help understand the team understand the mechanics and context of the event. If you do go, recognise that you'll need to capture the contextual information in a manner that can be used back in the Learning Team e.g., photos, videos, and audio notes. The use of audio capture and AI-powered transcription is a great way of capturing lots of information, but there might be concerns over privacy.

The key thing is that the better the problem is understood, the more likely you'll find the effective answers to closing the problem down. While it can be hard, it is essential that the facilitators keep the conversations in the 'curious' and learning modes and not the solution finding. Use the TEDS question set. Tell me about..., Explain to me about..., Describe to me..., and Show me... These questions are open and curious. Try not to use closed questions which can be answered, yes or no.

Points to consider here are how are you going to capture and then display this information. You could use tables with columns, a hierarchical system with headings, sub-headings & bullet points, a mind map like Miro or Mural or sticky notes and a whiteboard, or qualitative research methods with codes and themes. Whatever you use, make sure that it allows the data to be captured and transferred between the different stages. Finally, make sure that confidentiality can be created and maintained.

### **Phase 3 - Provide “soak time”**

Putting an intentional break between Phase 2 and Phase 3 has a couple of benefits. Firstly, it holds people in the Learning Mode because the facilitator can say we haven't finished Phase 2 yet. Secondly, and potentially more importantly, free time to think and reflect allows connections to be made in our brain. Humans are great at identifying dots and then drawing connections when they aren't thinking about anything – something that should happen when we sleep. Spaced learning is also a recognised learning technique, where we put a different activity between two learning sections to make it easier to find and recall the information.

The soak period also allows the facilitators to understand the problem space and see if there are any changes that need to be put in place to help facilitation in the subsequent phases. Is there a 'voice' in the room? Is there something distracting the focus?

### **Phase 4 - Second session: Start in Learning Mode**

Phase 4 is where we start to transition from learning mode (identify the problem) to discovery (finding the dots), and then solution finding (joining the dots). Phase 4 starts with a recap of the problem space from Phase 2. If new people have joined, recap the problem space, taking care not to jump into the solution space too soon, especially with the newcomers. There isn't a hard and fast rule as to how long this part of Phase 4 should last, but probably at least 30 mins.

Consider that the context might be shaped by the different domains e.g., task, materiel, environment, management, and people, and so you might want to explore these areas. The following table provides some questions to consider in this Phase.

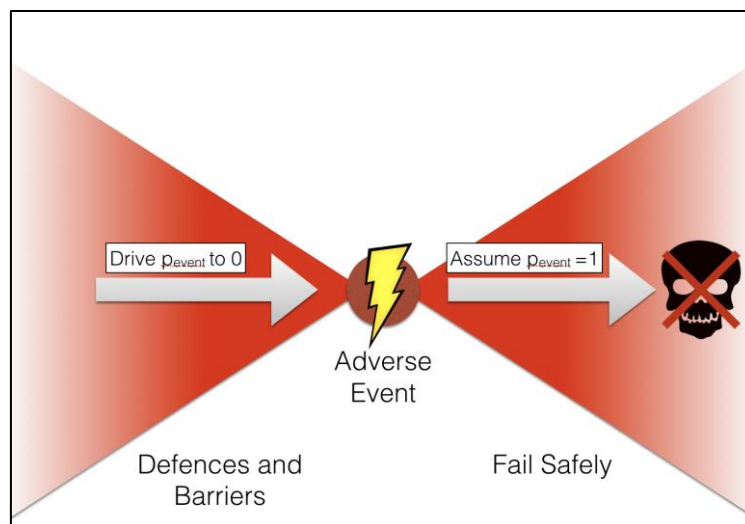


Domain	Questions
Task	Use of safe systems of work? Whether conditions can change to make the normal safe systems of work unsafe? The use of correct tools and materials? The use of incorrect tools or materials? The lack of safety devices? The suitability of safety devices? The maintenance and inspection of safety devices? The correct use of safety devices?
Material	Modifications from the original design? The material used outside the design specifications? Age of material? Maintenance, cleaning and inspection needs? Suitability of material used? Need and level of health monitoring? Need and level of personal protective equipment (PPE)?
Environment	Need and level of housekeeping? Need and level of ventilation (clean air) for dust, gases, fumes, etc.? Need and level of noise management? Need and level of lighting? Need and level of heat/cold/sun/hydration etc?
Management	The need and level of a safe system of work? The level of communication and understanding of safe systems of work? The need and level of written procedures and diversity of workers they apply to? The need and level of monitoring and enforcement of safety rules? The need and level of supervision? The need and level of training required? The need and level of required safety inspections? The level of maintenance of equipment required? The need and level of emergency management? Current regulatory requirements?
People	Need and level of worker competency and experience? Need and level of qualification, license and training? Need and level of fitness and general health? Routineness and work demand (fatigue/stress)? The positioning of people?

One of the challenges in this phase is moving from the concrete (what happened here) to the abstract (what might happen in the future and elsewhere). The more abstract something is, the more context is needed to explain its relevance to the actions at hand. The use of graphical tools like fishbone diagrams and network of influence maps can help identify patterns that will help with Phases 5, 6 and 7.

## Phase 5 - Define current defences/Build new ones

Phase 5 is where the current barriers, controls, and mitigations are identified (or identified that there weren't any!). "Safety is not just the absence of accidents and incidents, rather it is the presence of barriers and defences and the capacity of the system to fail safely." (Conklin). One way of depicting this is using a 'bowtie' model, where we look to drive the probability of the event as close to zero as possible, but because of the variability of work, it will never be zero. So we have to create situations where we can recover the situation and not have a loss of life or catastrophic material loss.



Three considerations regarding the barriers and defences in the system and how the event developed in the way it did:

- There weren't barriers present for the nature of the event.
- The barriers were present but ineffective, on both sides of the event (prevent and/or recover).
- The event exceeded the design expectations.

In terms of understanding the effectiveness of barriers, the following questions can help unearth the strengths and weaknesses of the system. This is especially relevant when it comes to looking at surprisingly successful outcomes.

- What has been working well?
- What needs to be done to improve the job?
- What do you want to do differently?
- What do you want to do to make it better and safer?
- When should there be a follow up to make sure things are getting done and working better?
- How can small experiments or prototypes be set up to try some of the solutions?
- How can the story be told? Who to?
- How can progress be tracked on making improvements?

Finally, recognise that every potential solution is a hypothesis for either success or failure, and you can't know which until you've tried it. This is the downside of being in the complex domain. Therefore, the use of Red Teaming tools like assumptions checking can help identify potential issues before they are put in place. In a complex system, unintended consequences can be very real, so use the wisdom of the team to ask the question "If we put this in place, how do we know it is going sideways before we have a catastrophic failure?"

The output from Phase 5 should be a series of points that need to be considered. The prioritisation and focus come in Phase 6.

## Phase 6 - Tracking actions and criteria for closure

Phase 5 generated the points that need to be addressed. If you're lucky, there might only be a few of them. However, in many cases, you might be looking at more actions that you can immediately address. This means we need to sort them.

In big bucket terms, we are looking at:

- Stuff That Will Kill You (STKY) – immediate actions that can be done right now.
- Quick Wins – these will have a minimal impact on organisational and operational performance or activity.
- Planned Wins – these will require serious consideration as to how to put them into place as they will impact the organisations outputs or goals.

If you have lots of actions in the Quick Wins or Planned Wins 'buckets', consider using liberating structures or tools like dot-voting or 1-2-4-All. You can find details of these and how to run them in the UK MOD Red Teaming Handbook which is available online.

When looking at the specific actions and learning products that will come out of the Learning Team, ensure you focus on the needs of the different stakeholders within the system – one size does not fit all. These actions might focus on redesign of equipment or process, some might focus on cognitive aids to slow people down (a slow-down the company accepts), some might be about building expertise through coaching, mentoring, or training (depending on their existing skill levels). It is tempting to focus on proximal causes (single-loop learning), but if real change is to happen, double- and triple-loop learning are needed. More on this in the 'Learning in Loops Guide' provided.

One point recognised when it comes to change is that you can't get someone to change until they've recognised the new task or paradigm is advantageous to them – the status quo bias is powerful! Two tools to help with communicating the need are below:

### **SBAR**

S – Situation. What is the current situation? What is the problem that needs to be solved?

B – Background. How did the situation develop to be in the way it is? What is the context that will

### **SPIN**

S – Situation. What is the background to the issue that requires a recommendation?

P – Problem. What problem is the issue causing or could cause to workers? How

help understand the local rationality of those involved?

A – Assessment. What is the assessment about the problem (i.e., output from Phase 4), and the effective/ineffective barriers (from Phase 5)?

R – Recommendations. What are the hypothesised plans going forward? How do we know what success looks like for the experiment? When do we call stop on the experiment if doesn't appear to be working?

does the issue impact the organisation in any way?

I – Implication. What is likely to happen if nothing is done about the problem? What level of risk does the problem pose?

N – Need. What options are available to fix the problem or reduce the problem? What is the likely cost and what timeframe does the Learning Team recommend?

In the event of harm, seriously consider applying the Restorative Culture Checklist from Dekker. This is not a tick-box checklist, but rather a subjective assessment to identify who has been harmed, what do they need, and whose obligation is it to address that need?

## RESTORATIVE JUST CULTURE CHECKLIST

Restorative Just Culture aims to repair trust and relationships damaged after an incident. It allows all parties to discuss how they have been affected, and collaboratively decide what should be done to repair the harm.

WHO IS HURT?	<b>ACKNOWLEDGED:</b>	
	NO	YES
<i>Have you acknowledged how the following parties have been hurt:</i>		
<b>First victim(s)</b> – patients, passengers, colleagues, consumers, clients	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Second victim(s)</b> – the practitioner(s) involved in the incident	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Organization(s)</b> – may have suffered reputational or other harm	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Community</b> – who witnessed or were affected by the incident	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Others</b> – please specify:.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

WHAT DO THEY NEED?	<b>EXPLORED:</b>	
	NO	YES
<i>Have you collaboratively explored the needs arising from harms done:</i>		
<b>First victim(s)</b> – information, access, restitution, reassurance of prevention	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Second victim(s)</b> – psychological first aid, compassion, reinstatement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Organization(s)</b> – information, leverage for change, reputational repair	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Community</b> – information about incident and aftermath, reassurance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Others</b> – please specify:.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

WHOSE OBLIGATION IS IT TO MEET THE NEED?	<b>IDENTIFIED:</b>	
	NO	YES
<i>Have you explored the needs arising from the harms above:</i>		
<b>First victim(s)</b> – tell their story and willing to participate in restorative process	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Second victim(s)</b> – willing to tell truth, express remorse, contribute to learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Organization(s)</b> – willing to participate, offered help, explored systemic fixes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Community</b> – willing to participate in restorative process and forgiveness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Others</b> – please specify:.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## Phase 7 - Communicate with other applicable areas

The goal of a Learning Team isn't just to identify the factors relating to this particular event (positive or negative) and come up with ways in which the effect of these is reinforced or replicated (positive outcome), or prevented or reduced (negative outcome) for that particular team or business unit, but to be able to abstract and transfer the knowledge to another team, business unit, or the wider domain.

The normal 'lessons identified' process for organisations puts these actions into a database or spreadsheet and tracks them. That is a start. Those actions need to be part of 'normal work' so the context for 'normal work' might need to be addressed e.g., checking the lessons identified book prior to tasks which are similar or have similar contextual factors. Actions should not be closed until the hypothesis for change has been deployed and its effect measured. It might be the action didn't solve the problem and so the latent issue remains.

A true learning organisation will spend time building knowledge within its team to be able to abstract from one team or business unit to another, by focusing on the context and not the specific activity. This increases organisational learning by sharing and celebrating stories of learning, be that learning from an adverse event or a successful one. The key is building the learning time into the organisation's scheduling.

## Summary

Learning Teams are a structured way of collecting knowledge and intelligence from the workers to understand how 'work as done' is executed. There are always gaps between what should happen ('Work as Imagined'), what does get done ('Work as Done') and what gets recounted to others in the organisation, especially leadership and management ('Work as Disclosed') – these gaps are risks or uncertainties for the organisation that need to be managed. The absence of an adverse event doesn't mean that the operation was safe. The team might have been lucky. The same goes for an exceptionally well-done task – can it be replicated? In both cases, there is a need for reflection.

The seven different phases of the Learning Team process allow a clear understanding of the purpose of the Learning Team, the learning mode which allows discovery of the real problems, and the 'soak phase' which allows ideas to develop. The next phases allow the comparison of 'work as done' and 'work as imagined' to allow for the gaps in the barriers and defences to be identified and new or enhanced barriers to be suggested. These suggestions are just hypotheses though. A lesson is not learned until the hypothesis has been deployed, tested, and measured. Until then, it is just a lesson identified.

## About Human in the System

By shifting from blame to learning we turn human error into opportunity. This is why we need to flip the perspective - to create resilient systems that work FOR instead of against people.

### Our Mission

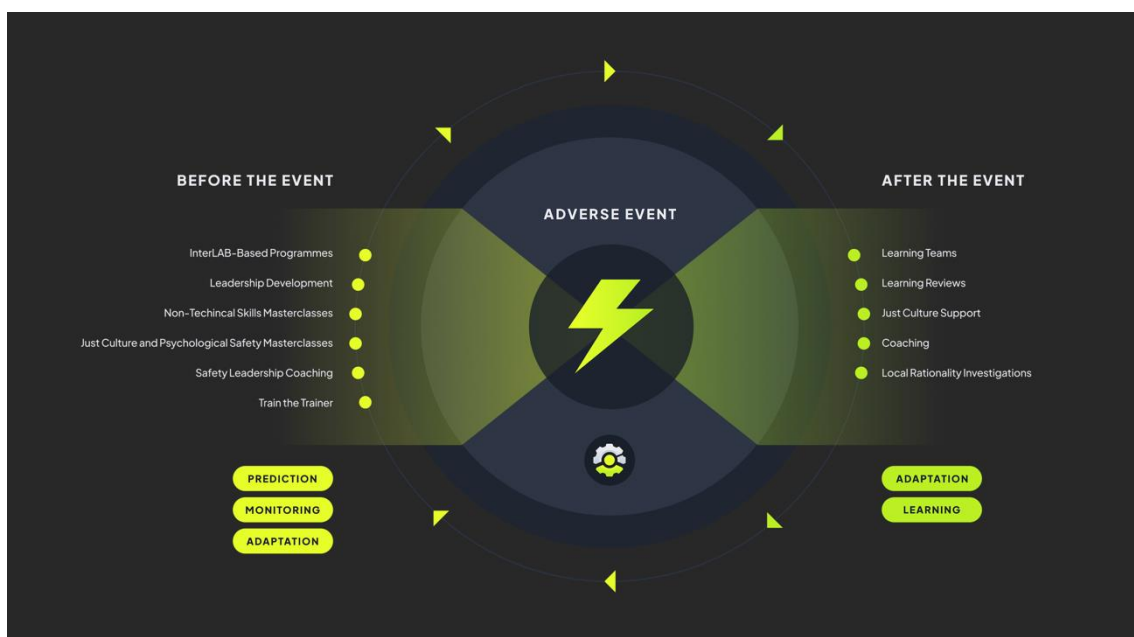
Through eye-opening, immersive experiences, coaching and mentorship we hold a mirror up to leaders and teams - empowering them to discover, explore and learn a path to peak performance.

### Our Vision

By designing systems with humans in mind, we harness their full power and capacity for developing resilient operations. We start ripples of change that will grow and interact, transforming the world of work.

Our modus operandi is based on three core values: exploration, discovery, and learning. We help clients explore uncertainty and complex systems, and through guided discovery, find the answers themselves, leading to learning both inside the formal learning environment, but also more importantly, in the operational space through transference exercises. We develop learning interventions using user-centred design, ensuring that the learner's outcomes are at the focal point, not just meeting learning objectives which can be ticked off against a matrix.

### Our Methods and Methodology





**Human in  
the system**

Guiding you and your teams to peak performance through thought-provoking and experiential training,  
coaching and mentorship

m: +44 7966 483832 e: [contact@humaninthesystem.co.uk](mailto:contact@humaninthesystem.co.uk) a: Malmesbury | Wilts | SN16 9FX