

# Cultivate



HOW NEUROSCIENCE  
AND WELL-BEING  
SUPPORT RURAL LEADERS  
TO THRIVE

CYNTHIA MAHONEY

# *Praise for Cultivate*

Rural leaders are no strangers to the forces of nature. The past two years of pandemic though, have asked new things of all of us in virtually every aspect of our lives. How and where we work has been transformed. But this book is not about working in a COVID environment. It's about a redefinition of what makes a high functioning team that puts our humanity at the centre of productivity. This book challenges leaders to pay careful attention to cultivate their own well-being and those whom they lead. It provides the tools to cultivate the courage, compassion and psychological safety which allows leaders and their teams to truly thrive.

**Dr Helen Haines MP, Independent Federal Member for Indi**

In my early work-life as I navigated a career in rural Australia, I was well-schooled by my peers (predominantly male) in what is now clearly an archaic and arguably, authoritarian approach to leadership. As a newbie, I guess I bought into this method also as I saw it played out over and over again in my dealings with other similar organisations and rural enterprises. It was all around me! The stakes were high, the risks were real and therefore a task-leadership approach was what appeared to work best. At the same time, I witnessed numerous industry colleagues endure relationship breakdowns, health issues, work-life imbalance and ultimately burn-out. It was confronting and confusing. Certainly, I did not envisage or had wished for this when I first embarked on my own professional journey in agriculture. With some honesty I questioned how I would ever 'make it,' when intrinsically I knew that it did not reflect who I was or wanted to be. There was no comfort in that.

Gladly over the years, there has been an evolution playing out for us all working in rural industry. There has been a growth in diversity of thought (and thankfully gender!) about what effective leadership can be, hence Cynthia's book is timely in building on this promise. So that new and emerging rural leaders have a reference which reinforces the human element and those characteristics which deliver uniqueness and harmony within us as individuals and as teams working together.

This book provides the framework, scientific backing and reflection opportunities for us to engage better with ourselves and to help us 'cultivate' working relationships which are meaningful and trusting. As a leader there is an important difference between communicating with others because we feel they have something of value to say, versus communicating because we believe they have value. Cynthia's book makes this distinction very clear and why it is so critically important.

**Ged Sippel, Vegetable Seeds Business Unit  
Head (Japan, Australasia, Korea), Syngenta**

This book is for rural, regional and remote leaders, and people for whom the old way of teams, leadership and organisations no longer works. This book is for young people in rural Australia who are doing it differently and no longer want to learn to fit into the old way of thinking.

Cultivate celebrates people as our greatest resource. It will support you to operate more creatively, courageously, and wisely in mobilising collaboration and innovation. It will support you to adapt to thrive in tomorrow's world.

**Lynne Strong, CEO Action4Agriculture**

Rural leaders face many challenges and obstacles, all having an impact on their own well-being, which has a domino effect on

their leadership, decision-making and the well-being of those they lead.

This book will not only give you the tools and structure to thrive as a rural leader, but also to cultivate positive well-being in those around you, so they can thrive and become leaders also.

**Warren Davies, speaker, mental health advocate,  
[www.theunbreakablefarmer.com.au](http://www.theunbreakablefarmer.com.au)**

Cultivate was such a pleasure to read. I couldn't put it down and ended up reading it over two evenings – it was easy to read and had a good flow. The frameworks Cynthia created helped me understand the concepts and pulled everything together. It was great having reflection space after each chapter. I loved the quotes at the start of each chapter. It made the book very inspiring and the design is bright and bubbly – just like the author!

Congratulations on creating a wonderful gift and tool for regional and rural leaders. There are so many nuggets of gold throughout the entire book. I'd recommend this book to anyone who is wanting to improve their leadership skills.

**Den Lim, Community Programs Coordinator  
at GippSport, Traralgon VIC**

Cynthia delivers a compelling science-based case around the need for a human-centric approach or Cultivated leadership. You will be encouraged to walk down the hall of mirrors and reflect on choices that either add or subtract happiness to your life and flow-on impacts to the people closest to you.

Cynthia's lived experiences in rural and regional Australia add context to the premise – Cultivated Leadership is most impactful. Cynthia highlights behaviours we should strive for and hope others around us display. Being a leader in rural Australia has

many similarities to urban Australia. Still, Cultivated leadership is more critical when living and working in rural Australia.

Don't read what I say. Read this book. It will add far more value to your life.

**Chris Sounness, Executive Director,  
Wimmera Development Association**

What a great read, and beautifully constructed. I loved the evidence base throughout and enjoyed the anecdotes and examples. Cultivate is a most excellent title for the process Cynthia takes the reader through. It really drew me in. Each story and context resonated with my experience of living and leading rurally.

**Tricia Currie, CEO Women's Health Loddon Mallee**

Everyone is a leader to someone, somewhere at some time. This book will help you develop the skills needed to lead, but not just to lead, but to cultivate – firstly yourself and then the way that you interact with others. And don't forget a good cultivator replaces him or herself and in a positive way!

**Di Bowles, dairy farmer and board member**

With her trademark warmth and wisdom, Cynthia invites us on a journey of re-imagining what it is to be an effective workplace leader. This is a practical guide to achieving results whilst retaining the heart of rural values.

**Dr Skye Charry (Associate Professor of Law, University  
of New England / Author 'Whispers from the Bush, The  
Workplace Sexual Harassment of Australian Rural Women')**

*Cultivate*



# *Cultivate*

**How neuroscience and well-being  
support rural leaders to thrive**

**cynthia mahoney**



Cultivate  
How neuroscience and well-being support rural leaders to thrive

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# *Dedication*

This book, my first, is dedicated to the ones I love. It's a long list!

I have always been aware that I hit the jackpot in life to be born to my wonderful parents, Anne and Gerard Mahoney. I never take that for granted. Their unconditional love, encouragement, support, generosity and belief in me throughout my life is the ultimate example of how to apply a cultivating approach to life. When you know you are truly loved, you can do anything. They taught me to be true to myself (even when it's hard), stand up for what is right and navigate life with colour, joy and fun.

To my brothers Jules and Josh and sister-in-law Vanessa, I don't know where I would be without you. I know I can always count on my darling younger brothers to keep me honest, call me out, try to keep me from taking myself too seriously. They challenge me, are fiercely loyal and always have my back – as I have theirs. Ness, I'm forever grateful you're my sister-in-law. You are such a special person – strong, kind, creative, thoughtful, generous and just fabulous to be around.

My nieces Georgia and Lila, and nephew Clem, inspire me every day. I'm so proud of the intelligent, caring, thoughtful, and totally fun humans they are. I want the world to be a better place for them. Where they are safe to express themselves fully and are valued for who they are and what they do. I believe a cultivating approach can deliver this for them.

You learn a lot about each other when the chips are down, and your backs are against the wall. I am eternally proud and grateful for how our little family banded together and rowed in the same direction in the years of Mum's illness and after her death. It's

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been hard without her, but we're all still here for each other, led by the example she set.

To my tribe of beloved friends – the goddesses, the PLC girls, the Benalla girls, the Geelong Cat-lovers, the ex-DPI crew, Women in Ag buddies, our gorgeous network of family friends, my awesome neighbours and other fabulous random peeps I've been fortunate enough to meet along the way – thank you all so much. I'm a lucky woman to have you in my life! In memory, too, of those friends no longer with us, including Pete, Nic, Jane and Tan. Forever in my heart.

I would never have written this book without inspiration and expectations from the Thought Leaders Business School community. Matt, Lisa, Pete, Col, Paul M, Kate, Ruth, Paige, Gayle, Maree and countless others. Thank you for setting the bar high, being so generous, and helping people like me achieve things they never thought possible. It's so important to seek out people who inspire you to lift your game – you can't be it if you can't see it!

Thank you to my generous friend Miffy Gilbert who read the first draft of the book and provided such helpful feedback and perspectives.

Thank you to my superstar (and patient) business manager Niki Flood, who manages to work with my ad hoc ways, for all your wonderful support. I'm so appreciative of all you do.

To Cath Connell from Wholehearted Marketing (the name says it all!) for all your terrific work on the book illustrations and graphics – love it!

To Sylvie Blair from BookPoD, who made my words look wonderful on the page.

To my editor Jenny Magee – thank you for holding my hand and

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finding a process for writing this book that worked for me. It took a while, but we got there in the end through your fabulous coaching and encouragement!

And finally, to my amazing clients, colleagues and mentors from many different walks of life, including those of you who generously allowed me to share your stories in this book. I learn so much from you and love working with you. It's such a privilege to do work I am passionate about and to know that we are on the same page. Together we are making the world better!

xxx Cynthia

PS To my fur family, Alfie (Alfred Gary Ablett Mahoney), the cavoodle, and Lulu (Princess Lulu), the cat, I've really had to lift my leadership game with you two and step up to be the leader you need me to be. Alfie, please remember I am the top dog. Louie, I will always be your willing slave.



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## INTRODUCTION

# *Challenges for Rural and Regional Leaders*

**'All great changes are preceded by chaos. The disruption we see in the world is the prelude to emergence. Let's all commit to a more peaceful, just, sustainable, healthier, and happier world. We must become what we wish to see by transcending our limited tribal identities.'**

Deepak Chopra

(Chopra, 2018)

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Mel understood the challenges faced by rural and regional leaders all too well. Her community had been in drought for several years, and, as the local agronomist, she was asked about the weather forecast wherever she went. Mel is like the local doctor who can never go anywhere without people talking about their ailments.

Growers confided their worries and stresses as the drought wrought havoc on farm finances and spread to other businesses in the town. People Mel had worked with for many years suffered strains on their mental health. In her role as agronomist and community leader, she felt under enormous pressure to stay calm, listen, offer some hope and keep giving good advice to help farmers manage through the drought.

What no one realised, though, was that Mel's own mental health was suffering badly. The pressure of constantly being the person that the community looked to for strength and support had taken its toll. She was at breaking point. Mel needed help, so she made an appointment with her local doctor.

Stepping into the waiting room, Mel tried to keep it all together until she saw the doctor. But she was greeted by a couple of local farmers and a nurse (who was married to a farmer). 'Hey Mel,' said one accusingly, 'You told us last week it was going to rain, and it hasn't!' 'Yeah, Mel,' said the nurse, 'How could you do that?'

Mel was devastated. In the middle of a personal mental health emergency, she was abused in what should have been a safe space. The community that was usually so supportive was adding to her stress. She felt she was failing and judged. For her own well-being, Mel started to withdraw from the community to look after herself.

Sound familiar? You may know someone like Mel but not recognise the stress and strains they are under.

## **Rural leadership is public**

Leadership is always full of challenges, but after more than twenty-five years of working with rural, regional and remote leaders (from here on, I will refer to this collective as rural leaders), I've found that these leaders contend with additional and different challenges from their city counterparts.

Rural leaders often live in the same community where they work, so there is nowhere to hide. They always have to be on, and it's hard to switch off because, wherever they go, people always talk about work. If they make a professional decision that negatively affects someone, they will likely see that person at footy, church or school. They will probably also have to face their extended family and friends. One rural leader felt he couldn't terminate a toxic team member because they played in the same cricket team, and life would have just been too difficult.

Because they're so well known, they are under pressure to be authentic. You can't have separate work and community personas because everyone knows you. Senior leaders I worked with in the city could be ruthless and hard-nosed at work, then go home and be entirely different people – caring and considerate.

As a rural leader, you often see the results of hard decisions firsthand and must be present to be accountable. You can't leave work and go home a few suburbs away to another identity where you don't see people you work with. An urban leader usually only needs to lead in an immediate work context, whereas rural leaders, particularly in small communities, wear many hats and carry a weightier leadership load. Unlike in urban areas, rural leaders are also considered role models (Doshi, 2017).

Rural leaders are greatly connected to and influenced by the physical environment in which they live – particularly the exposure

to natural disasters. Consider some of the recent challenges – bushfires, drought, floods, COVID-19 and mice plagues.

In 2019, I attended the Australian Women in Agriculture Conference in Ballina, New South Wales, where there was lush grass, a beautiful river and the majestic sea. I met women who had not seen green grass for years. The effect of that on your psyche and mental health is enormous. Many women took off their shoes and stood barefoot in the grass, revelling in its feeling on their skin. They were mentally uplifted and filled with joy at the relief of seeing things growing instead of the desolate, dust-filled, barren lands that surrounded them back home.

## **The personal cost is high**

Rural leaders often manage staff who, like themselves, are involved in volunteer organisations like the Country Fire Authority or State Emergency Service. Their businesses and community commitment are entwined. If the environment is suffering, your staff and your community suffer too. When a few events pile on top of each other, widespread and cumulative stress and trauma can occur. That's a lot for a leader to bear.

If rural leaders have a different opinion from the general flow of the community, the consequences can affect them and their families, and they can face exclusion and social isolation.

One farming woman I know decided to get involved in a national policy committee to try to make a positive difference for her community. She had identified a proposed change and decided to get involved and influence rather than just protest against it. She spoke out and tried to get the community on board, but the backlash saw friends turn their backs, and threats and abuse directed towards her family. The small community she had been part of since birth turned on her. In the end, the cost was too great, so she resigned from the committee.

## INTRODUCTION. CHALLENGES FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEADERS

Rural leaders need to navigate and respond to the mental health issues of people in their organisations, industries and communities. While people experience mental health issues at a similar rate (twenty per cent) across Australia, the rates of self-harm and suicide increase with remoteness. The rate of suicide in rural and regional areas is forty per cent higher than in major cities. It increases to fifty per cent in remote areas.

While rural people are conditioned for rural stoicism, toughing it out can make it harder to ask for help. There can be a fear of stigma around mental health, and people living in smaller communities may feel more visible and worry about confidentiality (National Rural Health Alliance Inc, 2017).

### **The pressure on rural women**

Women in rural and regional areas are far more likely to experience disadvantage and discrimination in the workplace (and in society more broadly) than women in urban areas near big cities. A 2017 report released by the Australian Human Rights Commission found that intersectional women (for example, women from CALD backgrounds, women who identify as LGBTIQ+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women with a disability) were more likely to face further discrimination in rural and regional towns. Consequently, it can be more challenging for women to break into leadership in rural and regional areas. Isolation and close community ties also mean it is harder to speak up if women experience discrimination, harassment or violence (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

One of my coaching clients explained her experience of leadership like this.

‘Throughout my entire career in horticulture and agriculture, I’ve been patronised and my contribution minimised. When working in the retail sector in the city, this wasn’t the case. There

were far more women and diversity in leadership roles, and our contribution was valued and recognised. I'm only "allowed" to sit on some industry boards and committees because there isn't a man who wants the spot.

I'd like to stand as chair of a board I'm on – but I know the nomination won't be supported. It's doubly frustrating when I know I'm one of the most capable people in the room, and yet they look right through me. I'm the only female on the board.

'Lack of role models means my leadership vision for myself is small. Any role models that have been there, I've seen how they get treated. This doesn't encourage me to strive for the same treatment. There is no obvious circuit-breaker in the current climate.'

## The path to well-being in leadership

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The extra pressures on rural and regional leaders make nurturing, nourishing and leading with a human-centred approach an even higher priority.

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To achieve sustainable leadership in rural areas, we need a cultivating style of leadership that puts well-being at the centre of work. The extra pressures on rural and regional leaders make nurturing, nourishing and leading with a human-centred approach an even higher priority.

Matt Linnegar, chief executive of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, put it like this. 'There are always people who think that a different leadership style could be more successful – more aggressive, more combative, more coercive. Can you get results with that approach? Absolutely you can get results. My

## INTRODUCTION. CHALLENGES FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEADERS

question over a long time of being involved is, how sustainable is it? You can do that and get some short-term advantage but is that to the long-term greater good that you're serving?' (Philanthropy Australia, 2021).

### **This book is for you**

This book is for rural, regional and remote leaders, and people for whom the old way of teams, leadership and organisations no longer works. It is for those who want a more human-centred way of working. A place where employees are free to be themselves without judgement or punishment, use their strengths and flourish at work and in life.

If you want to be authentic, lead with the heart and with emotional courage, be OK with asking for help and offering help, talk about struggles and be supported in the times when life isn't easy, this book is for you.

It is written with love, appreciation and validation, honouring your experience and what you have still to contribute.

Cultivate is a call to action for all who share a well-being, human-centred approach. Creating positive change that benefits ourselves, our people, our industries and our communities starts with you, one step at a time.

It is also for leaders who are frustrated that, despite their best efforts, they haven't been able to tap into their people's potential and achieve the outcomes they need. This may show up when they ask questions in meetings, and no one speaks, or a lack of staff initiative or innovation despite encouragement. It may appear in the conflict that has people talking behind each other's backs rather than addressing it openly. We see a lack of accountability, poor morale and patchy performance. Errors occur, while inefficiencies negatively affect growth and profit.



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Leadership can be a really tough gig.

The ideas in this book are just that, based on research that I, and others, have found helpful. They include real-life examples of cultivating human-centred and well-being leadership styles from people I've worked with. They have inspired me as a facilitator and coach. This is backed up by the latest findings from neuroscience that show how leaders can create brain-friendly environments to get the best out of people. I want to resource rural and regional leaders to be neuro-leaders and add this skill set to their toolkit.

This book also includes real-life examples of what not to do. They are behaviours and actions that we want to eliminate from work, industries and communities. In talking with people about these, I heard clearly that some of the dominant behaviours currently displayed by some leaders are not up to scratch.

None of this suggests that you are personally not good enough or that you are failing if you don't try them. This book is not another reason to whip yourself! My ultimate message is about the need to cultivate well-being and put humans at the centre of work. It is about compassion and generosity. It's OK not to be OK. You're human, and you won't always get it right. You have permission to get it wrong! You are enough.



## PART ONE

# *We Need a New Story of Leadership*

**'The challenge of leadership is to be strong, but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not bully; be thoughtful, but not lazy; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humor, but without folly.'**

Jim Rohn

(Wolfson, 2017)





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## *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

'You have brains in your head  
You have feet in your shoes  
You can steer yourself  
Any direction you choose.  
You'll be on your way up!  
You'll be seeing great sights!  
You'll join the high fliers  
Who soar to great heights.'

Dr Seuss

(Seuss, 1990)

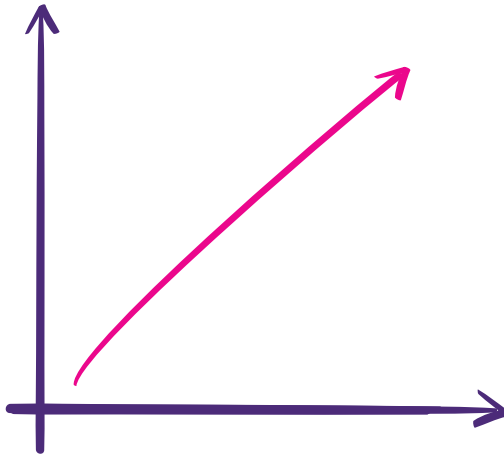
## CULTIVATE

One of my favourite stories of all time is *Oh the Places You'll Go* by Dr Seuss (Seuss, 1990).

It tells the story of how a person starts their life ready to go to great places. They stride confidently into the future, ready to start exploring the world with endless possibilities awaiting them.

*You have brains in your head  
You have feet in your shoes  
You can steer yourself  
Any direction you choose.  
You'll be on your way up!  
You'll be seeing great sights!  
You'll join the high fliers  
Who soar to great heights.*

Sounds like a high performer, doesn't it? Someone you'd want in your team. Being their best self. Living their best life. Being productive. Kicking goals. Delivering outcomes. It seems their performance will follow this trajectory:



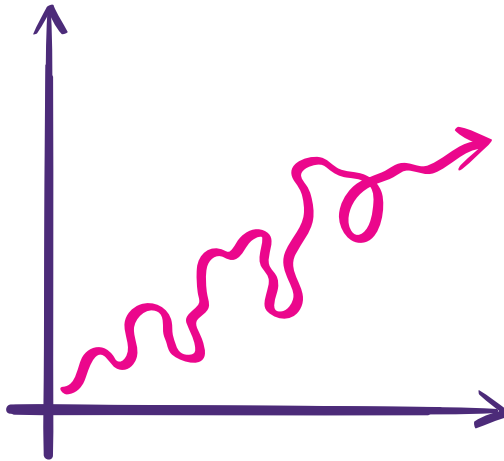
*Figure 1: Perceived high performer life trajectory*

## 1. OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

Until it doesn't. Until life happens.

Everyone's life journey graph is different. Ups and downs. Swings and roundabouts. Peaks and troughs. Two steps forward, ten steps back. Onwards and upwards. Stuck. Paused. Growing. Shining. Stagnating. Falling. Failing. Winning. Losing. In flow. High-performing. Resting. Recovering. Unwell. Healthy. Happy. Sad. Surviving. Thriving. Rejected. Loved. Disappointed. Chaotic.

Perhaps it might look more like this:



*Figure 2: Real human life trajectory*

What would your life journey and trajectory look like if you were to map it? What about for others on your team or in your organisation? Do you even know?

This book started as a guide for leaders to build, nurture and nourish high-performing teams. It has long been my passion to create workplaces where people show up as their best selves and make a great contribution.

As I've dug deeper and done more reflecting, I've realised the very notion of looking at work through the lens of high

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performance sounds exhausting and could be demotivating and overwhelming and unrealistic. I've always been interested in well-being, as I know from personal experience that you need to look after yourself or you won't be able to help anyone else. Yet, I was unsure if organisations would value well-being.

Isn't it time we busted the myth that we must create high-performing individuals, teams and leaders? Is using this language

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It has long been  
my passion  
to create  
workplaces  
where people  
show up as their  
best selves and  
make a great  
contribution.

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contributing to mental health issues, psychological safety concerns and unrealistic organisational expectations that lead to burnout, disengagement and presenteeism?

Is it time to evolve beyond high performance and embrace a style that places well-being first? One that is more fit-for-purpose and reflects the complexities, challenges and pressures of the modern world we live and work in?

I think the answer is a resounding, 'Hell, yes'.

# Reflection questions

What resonated with you in this chapter?

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What insights do you have?

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What could you cultivate (grow more of)?

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What could you eliminate (do less of)?

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If you did this, how would your life be different?

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If you did this, who else would benefit?

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How would they benefit?

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If you don't make a change, what are the consequences?

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# 2

## *From High Performance to Whole Human*

**'Hard work is important. So are play  
and non-productivity. My worth is tied not  
to my productivity but to my existence.  
I am worthy of rest.'**

Glennon Doyle

(Doyle, 2020)

## High performance stress

What comes up for you when you think about high performance? What about a high-performing individual? A high-performing team? A high-performing leader? A high-performing culture?

Until recently, I assumed that we should all aspire to high performance – in ourselves, our teams, leadership, and culture. However, the pandemic has disrupted many traditional work norms, and it's now obvious that what used to work as high-performance culture is not fit-for-purpose in the world in which we now find ourselves. It's time to evolve to a well-being-focused and human-centred world that is much more sustainable for us all.

The thesaurus likens high performance to terms like 'high-octane', 'gassed up', 'high speed', 'pumped up' and 'supercharged'. It's described as 'having the quality of performing exceptionally well. Accomplishing, implementing, executing, actioning, activity, fulfilling, perfecting, completing, accomplishing, attaining' (Thesaurus, 2013).

A high-performance work team refers to a 'group of goal-focused individuals with specialised expertise and complementary skills who collaborate, innovate and produce consistently superior results. The group relentlessly pursues performance excellence through shared goals, shared leadership, collaboration, open communication, clear role expectations and group operating rules, early conflict resolution, and a strong sense of accountability and trust among its members' (Penhart, 2020).

Does that seem like a sustainable or realistic state of being to you? Particularly the 'relentlessly pursuing performance excellence' part.

Leadership expert Daniel Goleman described six leadership styles in his classic HBR article, *Leadership That Gets Results*

## 2. FROM HIGH PERFORMANCE TO WHOLE HUMAN

(Goleman, 2000). Pacesetting is one. It's where a leader sets high standards for performance and is driven to achieve. High performance can have an air of pacesetting about it, but Goleman says this style should be used sparingly. His research found that while pacesetting sounds admirable and you would think that this approach would improve results, it actually destroys organisational climate and can negatively affect employee morale. That is because a leader who predominantly uses this style sets and works to extremely high standards that they also expect from their team. It can be relentless, overwhelming and stressful. And guess what? Neuroscience tells us that humans don't perform at their best when they are stressed! But more on the science behind stress later.

As Carl Lindberg described, there are definite disadvantages to a pacesetting leader or culture (Lindburg, 2021):

- Employees are stressed and overwhelmed
- Trust is lost
- Work can be repetitive and boring
- Employees receive little or no feedback
- Employee engagement is low
- Pacesetting can become part of a system.

A high-performance culture also sounds very one-dimensional. That is, we only have one way of doing things, and that's the high-performing way. It doesn't accommodate life's challenges.

And what about when you're not high-performing? How do we describe the opposite? Failing. Faulty. Shoddy. Unsatisfactory. Inadequate. Dismal. Unfit. Ineffective. Neglect (Thesaurus, 2013).

Wow. That sounds harsh, doesn't it? I don't know about you, but I can't operate at high speed or be supercharged or take action all the time. So, where does that leave me if I'm not continually high-

performing at the standard I should aim for? Probably feeling anxious, under pressure, afraid, shamed, unsafe, an imposter?

That is not a healthy way to live. More than forty-one per cent of millennials and forty-six per cent of Gen Zs report feeling stressed all or most of the time (Deloitte, 2021).

Even elite athletes need regular periods of rest and recovery. They aim for moments of high performance rather than a continual state of being.

This brings me to the second problem I'm having with the term 'high performance'. The alternative definition involves putting on a show. Play acting. Posing. Posturing. Pretending. Showing off. Dramatising. Feigning. Mimicking (Thesaurus, 2013).

There is an element of pretence in this. Of being inauthentic. That there's pressure to act like we're high-performing even if we're not. The subliminal message here is that it's not OK not to be OK.

## **It gets personal**

At a particularly difficult time, I was running my own leadership practice, and my mother had just died from ovarian cancer after four and a half years of illness. I was also going through peri-menopause, had developed anxiety and was fatigued, emotionally spent and run down.

I told my psychologist, 'I'm a leadership facilitator. I'm all about high performance, leading yourself and being your best self, despite the challenges you face. But right now, I'm really struggling, and I can't get myself out of it. I should be able to, though. I feel like such a fraud and a failure.'

My psychologist looked at me with such compassion and said, gently and firmly, 'Cynthia, that is all totally fine when everything

## 2. FROM HIGH PERFORMANCE TO WHOLE HUMAN

is relatively normal. But things for you just aren't normal right now. It's OK to be feeling as you are.'

It was such a relief. To have her accept me as I was and not judge me as failing. I was so fortunate to be running my own business and in charge of my destiny, but I needed deep rest and recovery. I needed to reduce my workload. I needed time to grieve. And I was able to give myself this.

Luckily my work filled my cup and was nurturing, fulfilling and uplifting. It didn't take much from me. I was open with my clients about what was going on and had their acceptance, support and understanding. I was also studying leadership and coaching, which was very nurturing and provided a supportive network. But I needed to go gently, compassionately and carefully with work, study and life while navigating the personal storm.

I remember thinking that I was lucky to be my own boss and not in an organisation. I just couldn't imagine that what I was going through would be accepted or tolerated at my previous workplace. There would have been a sense of, 'Enough. Just get on with it'. I would have felt ashamed and that I was letting the team down. I would have needed to hide how I was feeling to survive. That being my authentic self and admitting my struggle was not OK. I am not sure that the organisation's leaders would have looked at me with compassion either – I feel it would have been more like exasperation and judgement.

### **The price of performance**

The consequences of pursuing an unrealistic expectation of high performance as a continual state of being in the workplace are playing out right now in the form of unwell, disengaged employees and rising mental health problems.

Global analytics firm Gallup has found that around seventy

per cent of employees are struggling or suffering rather than thriving in their overall lives. Eighty per cent of employees are not engaged or actively disengaged at work. This doesn't just have a human cost to these employees and their families; it also has an economic cost. Lack of engagement costs the global economy US\$8.1 trillion, nearly ten per cent of GDP, in lost productivity each year.

In their *State of the Global Workplace 2021*, Gallup chair Jim Clifton, asked, 'What if the next global crisis is a mental health pandemic?

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Eighty per cent  
of employees  
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or actively  
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It is here now. Negative emotions – worry, stress, anger and sadness – among employees worldwide reached record levels in 2020. These problems existed long before COVID-19. Gallup has discovered that negative emotions have been rising over the past decade. Even if we return to pre-COVID-19 levels of these emotions, the trends are still concerning' (Gallup, 2021).

# Reflection questions

What resonated with you in this chapter?

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What insights do you have?

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What could you cultivate (grow more of)?

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What could you eliminate (do less of)?

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If you did this, how would your life be different?

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If you did this, who else would benefit?

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How would they benefit?

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If you don't make a change, what are the consequences?

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# *How do rural leaders thrive in tomorrow's world?*

For too long high performance has been the default strategy for many leaders and organisations. This has led to staff turnover, burnout and a mental health epidemic, especially in rural areas.

There is a smarter way to lead.

Cultivate shares a compelling science-based case about how rural leaders can support themselves and their people to do well and be well at work. Sustainable high performance can be achieved by leading with a human-centric approach, that puts well-being at the centre.



"With her trademark warmth and wisdom, Cynthia invites us on a journey of re-imagining what it is to be an effective workplace leader. This is a practical guide to achieving results whilst retaining the heart of rural values."

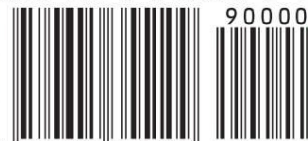
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