IMPROVING LEARNING

Improving learning

The purpose of this resource is to help you develop a clear action plan for improving this area.

Each resource follows a common structure:
- What we mean by this area
- Why it matters
- What good looks like
- Common traps to avoid
- Possible first steps
- Links to additional resources (where applicable).

What we mean by a learning culture

A culture where everyone understands what success depends on and is continually seeking to improve these key areas of performance. This individual commitment to learning is supported by a systematic approach to better understanding what works and what doesn't, along with a culture of experimentation to test new approaches.

Why it matters

'Even if we're on the right road. If we stand still, we'll get run over!
'If the rate of change within an organisation is slower than the rate of change in its external environment, it will become irrelevant.'
Jack Welch - CEO and Chair of General Electric for 20 years

You have an obligation to be as good as you can be. If you can improve you should, and a learning culture is key to continual improvement. You need to keep adapting: The pace of change in sport and society in general, means you constantly need to be alert to the need to adapt. This includes changes in what the people you serve are looking for, what competing sports and other similar sectors are offering, and what technology makes possible.

Despite best intentions, problems and issues will arise. A learning culture is critical to identifying issues quickly, and having a systematic approach to solving them.

Culture is like a garden. Left untended, it will grow weeds. You need to create a mechanism to regularly step back and listen to people about the culture they're experiencing. Identifying issues and opportunities for improvement. You also need to make it easy for people to raise issues [see improving psychological safety paper].

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What does good look like? Key features of a learning culture

Read the following description, and make notes on where you most want to improve learning in your organisation.

- **Shared agreement on what it takes to be successful,** so learning efforts are focused on key areas of performance.
- **A systematic approach to frequent debriefs.** Open and honest conversations around how you're doing, what you've learned about what works, and what doesn't. Using data where possible. Identifying opportunities for improvement. These discussions are action orientated, leading to possible solutions, and next step actions to test this approach.
- **Continuous informal learning.** Learning is not limited to formal reviews, or training. People take responsibility for continuous improvement and development.
- **Feedback-rich culture.** People offer feedback to each other, and are open to it. Teams seek feedback from other teams to offer a fresh perspective.
- **A willingness to face reality as it is,** not as you would wish it to be. People don't hide away from bad news. Difficult problems are faced up to with a mindset of curiosity and determination to put it right. When things go wrong, people focus on learning, not blame.
- **Learning is shared across teams**. Including learning from successes and issues.
- **Openness to new ideas, and experimentation**. People are encouraged to explore new ideas and experiment with innovative approaches. Supported by effective problem-solving techniques for understanding root causes and generating creative options. Also open to learning from other organisations, with similar goals or challenges.
- **External awareness and adaptation**: Frequent reviews of how the external environment within which you operate is changing, reflecting on how you should respond.
- **A commitment to supporting development**. People are supported in identifying skills and areas of knowledge they need to develop, and given time and resources to invest in this development. The organisation provides training, coaching &mentoring, and stretch opportunities to help people grow.
- **Senior leaders demonstrate a commitment to the importance of learning**. Committing time to it, encouraging it from others. Asking questions to stimulate reflections on learning. Modelling an openness to learning from your own mistakes and commitment to your own ongoing development. E.g. Seeking frequent feedback on your impact.

Common traps to avoid

Again, read through these traps, noting which you recognise a need to work on.

- **Over relying on assumptions** about what will work. Strategies should be viewed as a hypothesis of what *might* work that need to be tested.
- **Not making time to debrief** and identify opportunities for improvement.
- **Becoming complacent on the back of success.** It is much easier to create success, than it is to sustain it. Complacency is a key reason for this. Organisations that do sustain success are nervous of success, and continue to focus energy on continuous improvement. The New Zealand All Blacks team call this Confident Discontent.

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- **Being defensive and making excuses** to explain away issues, rather than facing up to the need for change they indicate.
- **Confirmation bias.** The very common tendency to pay more attention to evidence that supports our existing assumptions.
- **Top-down culture of innovation and learning.** Relying only on senior leaders to solve problems and come up with innovations.
- **Resistance to change.** Tendency to want to stick with what is known and comfortable.

Possible actions to improve learning in your culture

1. Agree on and communicate the most important areas you want to lead improvement on.
2. Get leaders to rate where they feel their team is at on the 'Growth vs Fixed Mindset Continuum' (see additional resources section).
3. Make regular debriefs a feature of the culture. Starting with yourselves as a senior team to develop buy-in to, and skills in the process of debriefing - using the resources below.
4. Invest in developing your leadership skills in supporting a learning culture, including skills in:
   a. Debriefing
   b. Feedback skills
   c. Creative problem solving
   d. Coaching and mentoring
5. Prioritise behaviours you need to work on in your culture: Bring your desired behaviours to life by asking people to score how consistently you live up to them in the culture, using the scale below. Encourage discussion in small groups around why people gave the score they did.
   Score the consistency of each on a scale of 1 – 4, where:
   - 4 = Consistently a strength
   - 3 = Generally good, but not always. Still fall short sometimes
   - 2 = Some great examples, but not the norm
   - 1 = Seldomly live it. Critical weakness
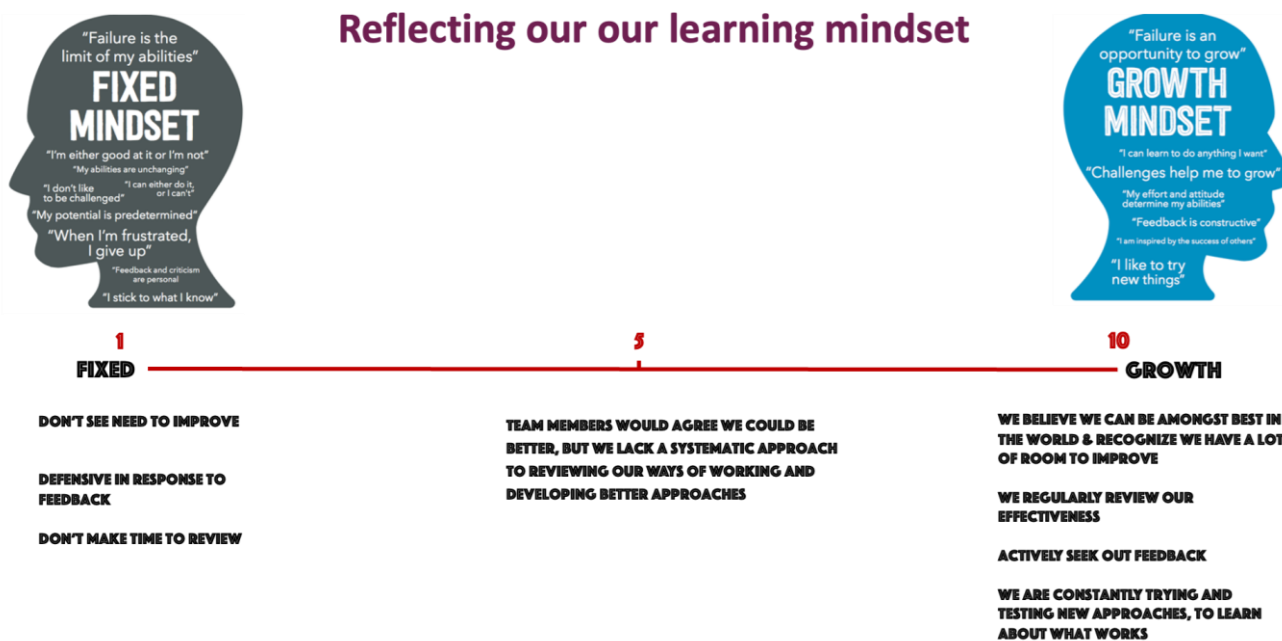6. Map out the most important areas of knowledge and skill you want to invest in as an organisation, plotting them on the following model based on importance [from useful to mission critical] and what your current level of skill is relative to what you actually need.
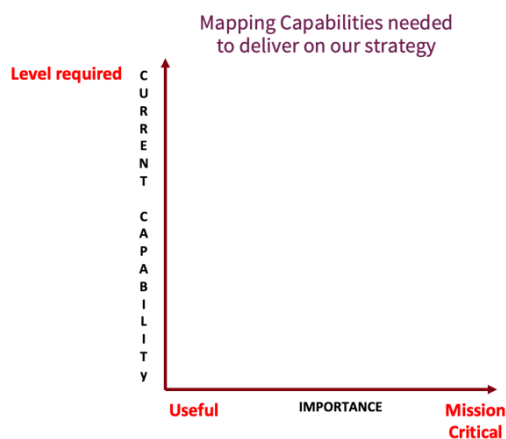
Using this exercise to prioritise your Learning and Development plan for the organisation.

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Additional Resources – insights from some of the world's leaders in this space

- Developing a Growth Mindset. 2 minute summary video link
- More in depth case study exploration of growth mindset. Exploring what we can learn from aviation and black boxes, science and British Cycling - Brilliant 15 minute talk by Mathew Syed, author of Black Box thinking, contrasting the learning cultures of aviation with medicine link
- **Work sheet for reflecting on the Learning culture in your team**

Reflecting our our learning mindset

"Failure is the limit of my abilities"
FIXED MINDSET
"I'm either good at it or I'm not"
"My abilities are unchanging"
"I don't like to be challenged"
"I can either do it or I can't"
"My potential is predetermined"
"When I'm frustrated, I give up"
"Feedback and criticism are personal"
"I stick to what I know"

"Failure is an opportunity to grow"
GROWTH MINDSET
"I can learn to do anything I want"
"Challenges help me to grow"
"My effort and attitude determine my abilities"
"Feedback is constructive"
"I am inspired by the success of others"
"I like to try new things"

1 **5** **10**
FIXED ———————————————————————————— **GROWTH**

DON'T SEE NEED TO IMPROVE

DEFENSIVE IN RESPONSE TO FEEDBACK

DON'T MAKE TIME TO REVIEW

TEAM MEMBERS WOULD AGREE WE COULD BE BETTER, BUT WE LACK A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO REVIEWING OUR WAYS OF WORKING AND DEVELOPING BETTER APPROACHES

WE BELIEVE WE CAN BE AMONGST BEST IN THE WORLD & RECOGNIZE WE HAVE A LOT OF ROOM TO IMPROVE

WE REGULARLY REVIEW OUR EFFECTIVENESS

ACTIVELY SEEK OUT FEEDBACK

WE ARE CONSTANTLY TRYING AND TESTING NEW APPROACHES, TO LEARN ABOUT WHAT WORKS

- Debriefing guidelines and questions [see annex]
- Solider vs Scout mode – two approaches to conversations which have big impact on learning. When we're in soldier mindset, you're focused on defending your ideas and trying to 'win' the argument. In contrast, 'scout mode' is all about a collective search for the best thinking. We're drawing the map together. Listen to this 22 minute podcast with Author Julia Galef to explore this idea in more depth link
- Principles of a learning culture - 3-minute video based on work of Peter Senge link , a pioneer in this space and author of the classic book the 5th Discipline.

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Using Debriefs to Drive Learning
Overview of the key ideas

The old adage that people learn best through experience is not necessarily true. For learning to take place, people need to both reflect and make sense of the experience, and then think through how they will apply that learning.

One of the most powerful applications of coaching is to facilitate learning through effective debriefs of experience. This is about taking the time to squeeze more richness out of the experience you have. Done well it can drive a very steep learning curve, build both responsibility & confidence, and increase focus on results. This skill is a huge part of UK Sport's High-Performance System.

5 Building blocks of great debriefs:
- Create a calm, positive and supportive space.
    - Set people up to focus on learning, not to be defensive; and model your belief in their potential to create great performance.
- Questions: Use open, non-judgemental questions and a lot of follow up questioning
    - Allow time for reflection.
- Strike a good balance between focus on the positives and areas for learning.
    - Key insight: You learn quickest by reinforcing what works.
- Manage group dynamics to get the best possible contribution from all individuals.

When and where to use these skills:

With teams
- Team reviews against goals
- Reviews of major events

With individuals
- Periodic reviews - either at a set period or (more usefully) after a significant real example of performance they can analyse (e.g. end of a project)
- More specifically - around progress on a specific goal or learning objective
- In helping an individual to learn from a mistake or area of poor performance
- In helping an individual to learn from a significant success (particularly if it breaks the norm)
- In helping someone to give you some useful feedback on what they have observed in your performance

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Using Debriefs to Drive Learning

Some useful questions

Establishing where you are in relation to your goals:
- What were your key goals?
- How effective have you been in your progress towards each of these, on a scale of 1-10?

Exploring and drawing learning from what's going well:
The goal here is to learn from when you were at your best:
- Where have you made really good progress? Why?
- What are the examples of when you've been at your best?
    - What stands out as different in these examples?
- What's worked? What's going well?
    - Lessons from these areas?

Exploring areas for improvement:
Your goal here is to help them to learn from when they are not at their best:
- What are the issues?
- What isn't working?
- What's hindering you?
- [Key question] What are the key lessons to take from this experience?
- If you were starting again, what would you do differently?

Drawing out and summarising the key learning
- So, what are the key lessons to take forward?

Moving forward - application of the learning:
- What would be a good step forward in x months time?
- What are you going to **continue** doing?
- What do you need to put more of a focus on?
- What are you going to do **differently**? What are you going to **start** doing?
- What are you going to **stop** doing?
- How are you going to ensure you follow through on this intent?

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