



National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care

Safe Uncertainty

Barry Mason 1993

The concept of safe uncertainty was initially described by Barry Mason, working in the field of family therapy. He used a four-quadrant model to describe unsafe uncertainty, safe uncertainty, safe certainty and safe uncertainty. He illustrated how a shift in thinking to allow space for safe uncertainty can help the dynamics and interactions that occur in a therapeutic setting.

The values, beliefs and subsequent behaviours of the leadership team will shape and inform the culture that pervades the organisation.

If the senior leadership team are not committed, engaged and willing to examine the impact of their own behaviours on the overall culture – nothing will change.

Organisational Operating Domains

	Safe	
<p>Safe certainty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dogmatic & inflexible • Denying & defensive • Status quo & looking back • Blind to others viewpoints <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stagnating 		<p>Safe Uncertainty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of intent • Edgy & energetic • Responsive awareness & learning • Resilience & agility • Confidence & creating hope
Certainty		Uncertainty
<p>Unsafe Certainty Reacting to symptoms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over reliance on checklists & guidelines • Blame when things go wrong <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned helplessness • Slow to respond to the unexpected 		<p>Unsafe Uncertainty Lacking direction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of consequences • Micro-management & over control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inertia • Energy sapping
	Unsafe	

No organisation sits in a single quadrant across its entirety - but many will show characteristics typical of the descriptors above.

Unsafe Uncertainty

- Many recent exposures of organisational failure
- An accident waiting to happen with potential (or actual) serious consequences

- Everyone knows how bad things are but there is denial, obfuscation and hope that things will just go away.
- A culture where fear of possible consequence outweighs the courage to speak out for change, where lack of confidence perceives rules and procedures as a substitute for hands-on leadership

Unsafe Certainty

- Often a reaction to the previous quadrant - reacting to issues that surface through blame and restrictive protocols.
- In turn may demoralise those very individuals who are committed to the organisation and could be instrumental in supporting positive change.
- An atmosphere of false certainty – ‘we’ve thought of that and put a checklist in’, that may be reactive to a symptom rather than identify the root cause of an issue. Because of this belief that things are OK, there is often a time lag when evidence to the contrary is presented

Safe Certainty

- The domain of the market leader or sole supplier with no perceived pressure for change.
- Potentially confident to the point of arrogance, unable and/or unwilling to listen to feedback either internal or external.
- Will defend status quo and get defensive when challenged as to alternative approaches; hence perceived as one dimensional and inflexible.
- May stagnate and be superseded by more agile and responsive competitors.

Safe Uncertainty

- Safety comes from clarity of intent and confidence in delivery – ‘we know exactly where we are going, we’re just not too sure as to how we’re going to get there, but we will’.
- Open and responsive to feedback externally and internally with the resilience to manage short term setbacks.
- A culture of enablement and personal leadership with high levels of engagement and commitment to a shared purpose.
- Edgy and energising once the realisation and acceptance of a safe and supportive environment is achieved

(adapted from Barry Mason CFSSW presentation [PowerPoint Presentation \(cfssw.org\)](#) and [Microsoft Word - Leading with Safe Uncertainty - Perspective.docx \(moonstoneassociates.co.uk\)](#))

Connecting to The Leadership Circle [The Leadership Circle Profile | 360 Leadership Assessment](#)