Square Peg

WHITE PAPER 1 · THE ADAPTIVE FIT MODEL

Fit Isn't Found. It's Built.

How people, teams and organisations grow into each other



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Summary

Most thinking about fit at work treats it as a match: find the right person for the role, the right role for the person, the right people for the culture. Fit is something you discover, usually at hiring, and then either have or don't.

This paper argues that fit is better understood as something people and organisations **build together, over time.** The person adapts to the work, and the work can be adapted to the person. Good fit is the result of that process going well. Poor fit is usually the result of it stalling.

By **fit** we mean the degree to which a person and their environment work for each other: the person can use and grow what they bring, and the team and organisation get the benefit of it.

The Adaptive Fit model explains how the process works:

- **The peg and the space.** The peg is what a person brings. The space is the conditions around them. Following Kurt Lewin, behaviour comes from the two together. In this model, **the peg and the space meet in behaviour, and behaviour, over time, builds fit or erodes it.**
- **Disequilibrium starts it.** Adaptation begins when something doesn't fit: a new role, a new leader, a change in direction.
- **Learning is the hinge.** When people make sense of the gap, they can choose to adjust themselves, shape the space, or both.
- **Safety decides the direction.** The same gap leads to learning when people feel safe, and to defending when they don't. Meaning gives people a reason to stay and adapt. Agency decides whether they can shape the space as well as themselves.
- **It works at every level.** People, teams and whole organisations build fit, or fail to, through the same process. A team's behaviour can lift its members or drag them down.

For leaders, the practical message is simple. Fit isn't something to screen for once. It's something to create the conditions for, every day.

Adaptive Fit brings together well-established research, but as a whole it is a model in development. The final sections set out the predictions we are testing and the questions that remain open.

Square peg, round hole

Everyone knows the image. Someone who doesn't fit their role or their organisation is a square peg in a round hole. The image carries a hidden assumption: that the peg and the hole are fixed shapes. If they don't match, the only remedy is to find a different peg or a different hole.

Much of the research on fit shares that assumption. Person–environment fit research asks how closely a person's values, needs and abilities match what the job and organisation offer. The findings are robust. Large meta-analyses show that people who fit their organisation and their job

tend to be more satisfied and more committed, and less likely to leave (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005). Fit matters.

The effects are not small. In Kristof-Brown and colleagues' meta-analysis, fit with the job was strongly related to job satisfaction, fit with the organisation was strongly related to organisational commitment, and both were related to lower intention to quit. Fit with the job also predicted performance, though more modestly. For organisations, these are some of the most consequential outcomes there are.

But the match view has three blind spots.

It is a snapshot. It describes fit at a moment, usually at selection, and says little about how fit grows, decays or recovers. Yet theorists of fit argue that it changes over time as people and organisations change (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Someone who fits well at hiring may fit poorly two years and one restructure later, and someone who starts as an awkward fit may grow into a role that becomes theirs.

It treats the person as a fixed shape. If fit is a match, selection is the main lever: screen hard and hope. The match view has much less to say about how people grow into roles, learn new ways of working, or change what they believe about themselves.

It treats the environment as given. In practice, people reshape their work all the time. They craft their tasks and relationships to suit their strengths and interests (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). They negotiate individual arrangements (Rousseau, 2005). They speak up to change how things are done (Morrison, 2014). The hole is not as fixed as the image suggests.

WHEN FIT BECOMES A TRAP

The match view also carries a less obvious risk. Benjamin Schneider's attraction–selection–attrition framework describes what happens when organisations treat fit as similarity (Schneider, 1987). People are attracted to organisations that seem like them, organisations select people who seem like them, and those who don't fit leave. Over time, the organisation becomes more and more homogeneous: "the people make the place". Schneider and colleagues warned that this homogeneity, comfortable as it is, can leave organisations less able to see and respond to change (Schneider, Goldstein & Smith, 1995).

In other words, screening hard for fit can make an organisation fit its past rather than its future. The people who don't quite fit are often the ones who notice what the organisation is missing. A view of fit that only selects and sorts will tend to remove them.

Homogeneity can also hide in plain sight. An organisation that prides itself on everyone being different ("we're all individuals here", "we celebrate difference") may still share one strong, unexamined assumption: that standing out, speaking up and expressing your individuality is how people should behave. That is a form of sameness too. People whose strengths lie elsewhere, in quiet contribution, in harmony, in putting the group first, can find themselves the misfits in a place that believes it has no fit to impose. Research on team diversity makes a related distinction: people

can differ on the surface, in background and identity, while sharing the same deeper values and assumptions (Harrison, Price & Bell, 1998). The question is not only how different people look, but what everyone is quietly expected to be.

The reverse is just as true. A strongly collective setting, where harmony, loyalty and putting the group first are expected, can leave individuals feeling unable to voice a different view or show who they are. Gelfand and colleagues describe this as the difference between "tight" and "loose" cultures: tight ones have strong norms and little tolerance for departing from them; loose ones have weaker norms and more room for difference (Gelfand et al., 2011). Tightness is distinct from collectivism, though the two are related (Gelfand et al., 2011). The issue is not which values a group holds, but how strongly it requires everyone to hold them. In Adaptive Fit terms, both are a question of Safety: is it safe to be myself here, whatever that self looks like?

None of this means the match view is wrong. It means it is incomplete. It tells us that fit matters, but not how fit is made. That is the question this paper takes up.

> ***Square peg, round hole? Maybe it's not the peg. Maybe it's not the hole. Maybe it's whether either of them is allowed to change.***

Lewin's equation: the peg, the space and behaviour

In 1936, the psychologist Kurt Lewin proposed one of the most quoted ideas in social science: behaviour is a function of the person and their environment, written **B = f(P, E)** (Lewin, 1936). Neither the person nor the situation explains behaviour alone. It comes from the two together.

Adaptive Fit starts from Lewin, in plain language:

- **The peg** is what a person brings: their skills and experience, and, crucially, their inner resources. Do they believe it's safe to be themselves? Do they feel that what they do matters? Do they believe they can make a difference? These beliefs are built over a lifetime and carried from place to place.
- **The space** is the conditions around them: how safe it is to speak up, whether the work feels worthwhile, how much room there is to decide and act. Conditions exist for a person in their role, for a team and across an organisation.
- **Behaviour** is where the peg and the space meet: what the person actually does, day to day, and how it lands with others.

So the model's core is a chain:

> **Peg × Space → Behaviour → Fit**

The peg and the space meet in behaviour. Behaviour, repeated over time, builds fit or erodes it.

Adaptive Fit adds two things to Lewin.

First, fit is built, not produced. The match view implies that fit is simply the product of person and environment: put this peg in this space and out comes a level of fit. Adaptive Fit says fit is built through behaviour over time. The same person in the same space can build good fit or poor fit, depending on what happens next.

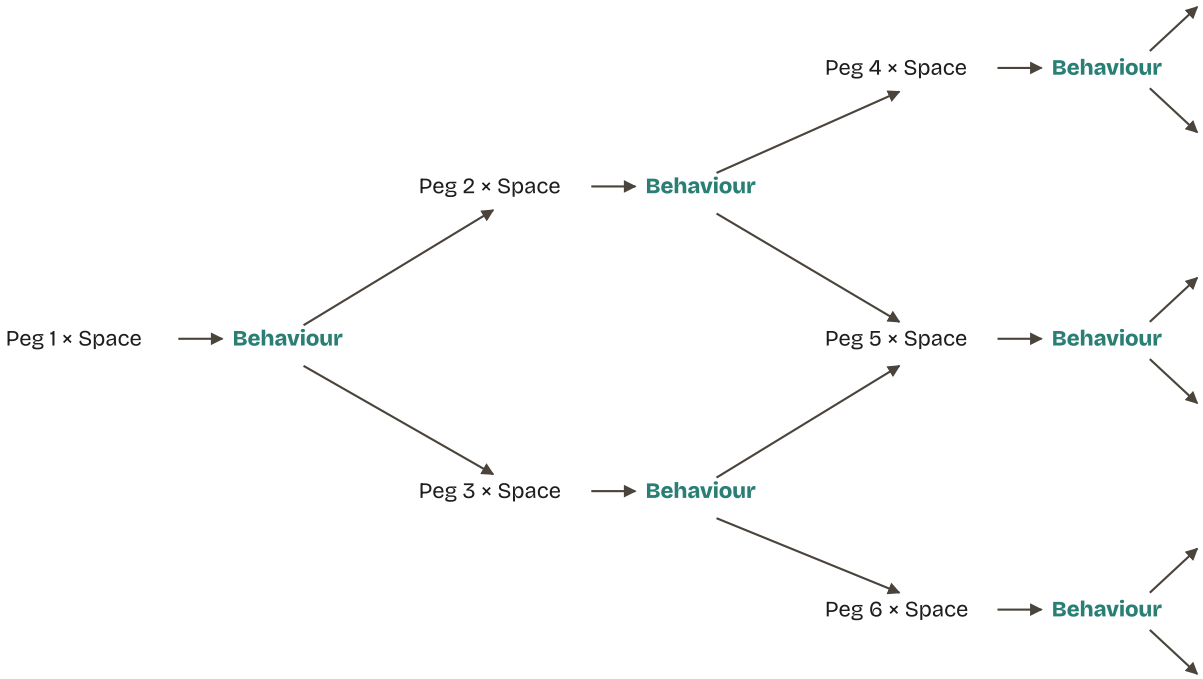
Second, the arrow runs back. Each person's behaviour becomes part of the space for everyone else. A leader who shuts down disagreement makes the space less safe for their whole team. A colleague who admits mistakes openly makes it safer for others to do the same. Person and environment keep changing each other. Lewin's equation describes a moment; Adaptive Fit describes a process.

So the full chain has a second line:

> **Peg × Space → Behaviour → Fit**
> **Behaviour → the Space for everyone else**

One person's behaviour shapes the conditions that the next person's peg meets, and so on through a team.

Each person's behaviour becomes part of the space for the next



Shown as a branching chain for clarity. In reality, every person's behaviour affects everyone else's space to some degree.

Behaviour cascades. Person 1's behaviour becomes part of the space that persons 2 and 3 meet; their behaviour shapes the space for the people after them, and some people, like person 5, meet a space shaped by several others at once.

The diagram is drawn as a branching chain only for clarity. In reality, every person's behaviour affects everyone else's space to some degree, all the time and in every direction. The strength of the influence varies: a leader's behaviour, or that of someone people work closely with, carries more weight than that of a colleague they rarely see. But no one's behaviour is neutral. A team's conditions are built, or eroded, through this whole web of behaviour.

Lewin wrote behaviour as a function of person and environment, not a product. "Peg × Space" is shorthand for the idea that the two interact; neither works alone.

How fit is built

IT STARTS WITH SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T FIT

Adaptation begins when there is a gap between how a person currently thinks and works and what the situation now asks of them. A new role, a new manager, a restructure, a change in strategy, a demand they can't yet meet, a value that clashes with their own. The developmental psychologist Jean Piaget called this **disequilibrium**: the state in which existing ways of understanding no longer cover what is happening (Piaget, 1952).

Disequilibrium is not a problem to be eliminated. It is the starting point for development. Without it, people settle, and nothing new is learned. Research on workplace demands makes a similar distinction: demands that people experience as challenges tend to energise them, while those they experience as obstacles tend to wear them down (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; LePine, Podsakoff & LePine, 2005). What matters is not whether there is a gap, but how it is met.

THREE WAYS OF MEETING A GAP

Response	What happens	Fit over time
Absorbing	The person takes the new situation in without being changed by it. Piaget called this assimilation: fitting the new into existing ways of seeing.	Fine when the gap is small. Against a large gap, it becomes denial.
Learning	The person makes sense of the gap: what it is, why it's there, what it asks of them.	Opens the way to building fit
Defending or leaving	The person resists, digs in, disengages or exits.	Erodes

LEARNING IS THE HINGE

Absorbing doesn't change anything, and defending pushes the gap away. Learning is different. Once people understand the gap, they have a real choice about how to close it, and they can close it in two directions:

- **Adjusting myself.** Changing how I think or work: building a new skill, letting go of an old habit, revising a belief about what I'm capable of. Piaget called this accommodation.
- **Shaping the space.** Changing the work, the role or the conditions: crafting tasks, negotiating, speaking up, redesigning how things are done.

The Theory of Work Adjustment described something similar decades ago, distinguishing **reactive** adjustment, changing yourself, from **active** adjustment, changing the environment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). Adaptive Fit builds on that insight and asks a further question: what decides whether people learn and adjust at all, or defend?

So the sequence at the heart of the model is:

> **Disequilibrium → learning → adjusting myself and/or shaping the space**

Good fit comes from both directions. People who only ever adjust themselves eventually wear out or lose themselves. Organisations that expect people to adapt but never adapt in return lose them.

All of these responses, absorbing, learning, adjusting, shaping and defending, are forms of behaviour. This is where the chain from the previous section comes in: the peg and the space shape which response a person makes, and that response, repeated over time, is what builds fit or erodes it.

What decides the response

SAFETY: GROWTH OR DEFENCE

The same gap can lead to learning or to defending. What makes the difference is **safety**: whether it feels safe to try, to get things wrong, to ask and to speak up.

When it does, a gap is treated as a challenge, and people learn. When it doesn't, the gap is treated as a threat, and people protect themselves instead. In teams, psychological safety is one of the best-evidenced drivers of learning behaviour: asking questions, seeking feedback, admitting and discussing mistakes (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017).

Safety is not the only thing that matters. Skills, time, workload and resources also affect whether people can learn and adapt. But without safety, the others are rarely put to good use, because people spend their energy protecting themselves rather than learning.

WHY SAFETY HAS THIS EFFECT

The likely mechanism is well described. Lazarus and Folkman's work on stress showed that people appraise any demanding situation twice: first, is this a threat or a challenge? Second, do I have the resources to deal with it? (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The same event can be appraised as either, and the appraisal shapes what happens next. A challenge appraisal comes with engagement, problem-solving and effort. A threat appraisal comes with self-protection.

Safety shifts the first appraisal. When mistakes are treated as information and questions as normal, a gap looks like a challenge. When mistakes are punished and questions are risky, the same gap looks like a threat. Inner resources shift the second appraisal: people who believe they can cope are more likely to see a challenge in the same situation that someone else experiences as a threat.

The consequences of threat appear at every level. Staw and colleagues found the same pattern in individuals, groups and whole organisations: under threat, information processing narrows and control becomes centralised. People and organisations fall back on their most familiar responses (Staw, Sandelands & Dutton, 1981). That is the opposite of what adapting to a new situation requires. Positive experiences have the opposite effect, broadening the range of thoughts and actions people consider (Fredrickson, 2001).

One of the clearest demonstrations comes from hospitals. Edmondson set out to show that better-led nursing teams made fewer medication errors. She found the reverse: the better-led teams *reported* more errors. They weren't making more mistakes; they were more willing to talk about them, and so more able to learn from them (Edmondson, 1996). In the less safe teams, errors were still happening, but they were hidden, and nothing was learned. Safety doesn't remove gaps. It brings them into the open, where they can be worked on.

Crossing the amount of disequilibrium with the level of safety gives four situations:

	Low safety	High safety
High disequilibrium	**Defending:** rigidity, conflict, disengagement, people leaving	**Adapting:** learning, adjusting and shaping. Fit is built.
Low disequilibrium	**Holding on:** compliance, heads down, little energy	**Comfort:** pleasant, but little growth

The goal is not the most comfortable place. Comfort feels good and builds little. One study even found that a strong sense of psychological safety can, in some conditions, go with people putting in less effort (Deng et al., 2019). The goal is the top right: real challenge, with enough safety to meet it.

Edmondson describes a similar grid, crossing psychological safety with motivation and accountability (Edmondson, 2019). Adaptive Fit's second axis is different. It asks not how hard people are pushed, but how much doesn't yet fit. That makes it a model of development and change, not only of performance.

MEANING: A REASON TO STAY AND ADAPT

Adapting takes effort. People put that effort in when the work matters to them. Meaningful work is consistently linked with engagement, commitment and persistence (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Allan et al., 2019). Without meaning, the easier response to a gap is to leave, physically or mentally.

AGENCY: WHICH WAY FIT CAN BE BUILT

Agency decides the direction. With room to decide and act, people can shape the space as well as adjusting themselves. Without it, they can only adjust, absorb or withdraw. Agency is what makes fit two-way (Spreitzer, 1995; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Safety, Meaning and Agency are often discussed as three good things to have. In Adaptive Fit, each does a distinct job: Safety decides whether a gap leads to growth or defence, Meaning provides the reason to persist, and Agency decides whether fit can be built in both directions.

THE PEG MATTERS TOO

Safety, Meaning and Agency exist inside people as well as around them. Someone who carries a strong sense that it's safe to be themselves, that what they do matters and that they can make a difference brings resources to every gap. Research on personal resources, such as self-efficacy, optimism and a sense of control, shows they help people make the most of supportive conditions and cope with difficult ones (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Hobfoll, 1989).

These inner resources do more than buffer. They shape how a gap is seen in the first place: the same change can look like a threat to someone who doubts they can cope and a challenge to someone who believes they can. They also shape what people do next. People who believe they can make a difference are more likely to try shaping the space, rather than waiting for it to change.

Inner resources are built slowly, through experience over a lifetime, and they travel with people from place to place. That is why two people in the same team can respond very differently to the same change, and why improving conditions helps most people but not all. It is also why individuals have their own part to play: noticing the beliefs they bring, and choosing how they respond. It is the peg and the space, not one or the other.

WHEN THE GAP IS TOO BIG

There is a ceiling. When too much doesn't fit at once, people can't see where to start, and learning stalls even when they feel safe. Complexity thinking offers a useful lens here. The Cynefin framework describes how the right way to act changes as situations move from clear (called "simple" in Snowden & Boone, 2007), to complicated, to complex, to chaotic (Snowden & Boone, 2007). In clear situations, you apply what works. In complicated ones, you analyse. In complex ones, you run small, safe-to-fail experiments. In chaotic ones, you act first to create some stability, then sense what happens and respond.

Read through Adaptive Fit, the lesson is that very high disequilibrium doesn't call for more analysis. It calls for **any action that creates a feedback loop**: a small step whose result tells you something, so learning can start again. Big gaps are closed in small, visible steps.

Cynefin describes the nature of a situation, while disequilibrium describes how much of it doesn't yet fit a person or team. The two are related but not the same, so Cynefin is used here as a useful lens, not as part of the model itself.

Fit over time: upward and downward spirals

Because behaviour feeds back into conditions, fit rarely stands still. It tends to move in spirals.

The upward spiral. A person meets a gap in a safe enough setting and learns. They adjust, and they shape something about their role. Their success builds their belief that they can handle the next gap, and their visible learning makes it a little safer for the people around them to learn too. The conditions improve, and the next gap is easier to meet. Research has described similar dynamics: success can raise self-efficacy, which raises performance, which raises self-efficacy again, at the level of individuals, groups and organisations (Lindsley, Brass & Thomas, 1995). Resources tend to build on resources, in what Hobfoll called gain spirals (Hobfoll, 2001).

The downward spiral. A person meets a gap in an unsafe setting and defends. They hold on to familiar ways of working, keep problems to themselves, or quietly withdraw. Their defending makes the setting less safe for others. Problems surface late, when they are bigger and more threatening. The next gap is harder to meet. Losses build on losses (Hobfoll, 2001), and eventually the person concludes that they "don't fit" and leaves, or stays and disengages.

Two points follow for leaders.

- **Small things compound.** The way a single raised problem is handled, or a single mistake is treated, nudges the spiral one way or the other. Fit is built, or eroded, in ordinary moments.
- **Spirals can be reversed, but it is easier early.** The earlier a downward spiral is noticed, the smaller the gap, and the easier it is to make safe. This is one reason to measure conditions regularly rather than once.

Fit at three levels

The same process works for a person, a team and an organisation. At each level there is a peg, a space, and the same choices about how to meet a gap.

Level	The peg	The space	Adjusting the peg	Shaping the space
Person	The individual	Their team and organisation	Learning a new way of working	Crafting the role, speaking up
Team	The team as a unit	The organisation, its customers, its market	Changing how the team works together	Changing what the team is asked to do, its resources, its boundaries
Organisation	The organisation	Its sector, community and wider world	Changing strategy, structure or ways of working	Influencing partners, the sector or regulators

FIT IS A TEAM PROPERTY

Fit belongs to teams in two ways.

First, **a team adapts as a unit.** Teams have to work together, and when their environment changes, they can change their approach, change their environment, or defend. Research on team adaptation describes this cycle of noticing a change, making sense of it, adjusting and learning (Burke et al., 2006; Maynard, Kennedy & Sommer, 2015).

Second, **fit within a team emerges from how its members affect each other** (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Each member's behaviour is part of the conditions for the others. One person defending raises the disequilibrium and lowers the safety of everyone around them. One person learning openly makes it safer for others to learn.

THE TEAM EFFECT: LIFT AND DRAG

This gives teams a **team effect**. A team can lift its members, achieving more together than they would separately, or drag them down, achieving less.

- **Weak lift:** the team does better than its average member would alone.
- **Strong lift:** the team does better than its best member would alone. This is rarer, and it is what great teams do.
- **Drag:** the team does worse than its members would on their own.

Research on group performance has studied these gains and losses for decades (Steiner, 1972; Larson, 2010), and on what makes some groups collectively smarter than their members (Woolley et al., 2010). In Adaptive Fit terms, we expect lift to come from teams that meet gaps with learning, and drag from teams that meet them with defence. That is one of the predictions we are testing.

Fit across the employee journey

If fit is built rather than found, every stage of working life looks different.

HIRING

The match view asks: does this person fit us as we are? Adaptive Fit asks two further questions. What resources does this person bring for building fit, such as a sense that they can learn, that their work can matter, that they can make a difference? And will our conditions let them use those resources? Selecting for similarity can feel safe, but as Schneider's work suggests, it can also make an organisation less able to change. Selecting for the capacity to adapt, and then creating conditions that use it, is a better bet.

ONBOARDING

The first months are a period of intense disequilibrium, and research on newcomers shows what helps them through it. A large meta-analysis found that newcomers adjust well when three things develop: **role clarity**, **self-efficacy** and **social acceptance** (Bauer et al., 2007). These map onto Adaptive Fit's three dimensions, two of them closely: social acceptance onto Safety, and confidence to act onto Agency. Role clarity, knowing what the role is and what it is for, sits closest to Meaning, though less neatly. Newcomers who actively seek information and build relationships adjust faster, which is shaping the space from day one.

CHANGE AND RESTRUCTURES

Organisational change is disequilibrium on a large scale. The model suggests why so many change efforts stall: they create big gaps in conditions that feel unsafe, give people little say, and explain the reasons poorly. People respond with defence, which is then labelled "resistance to change". The alternative is to treat change as a shared gap to be learned from: be open about what is changing and why, keep it safe to raise concerns, give people room to shape how the change works locally, and move in steps that create feedback. People support change they help shape (Lines, 2004).

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

A new leader changes the space for an entire team overnight. Their early behaviour, how they respond to bad news, to disagreement, to mistakes, sets the conditions the team will work in. Leaders in transition are also in disequilibrium themselves. They need safety, meaning and agency as much as their teams do.

WHEN PEOPLE LEAVE

Sometimes fit can't be built, and leaving is the right outcome for both sides. Adaptive Fit doesn't say every gap can be closed. It says that before concluding someone "doesn't fit", it is worth asking whether the peg was given the chance to adjust, whether the space was allowed to change, and whether the conditions made learning possible.

How Adaptive Fit compares

Adaptive Fit builds on several established models. This table sets out what each explains and what Adaptive Fit adds.

Model	What it explains	What Adaptive Fit adds
Person–environment fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005)	That fit between people and work matters for satisfaction, commitment and retention	How fit is built and changes over time
Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984)	That people adjust to work by changing themselves or their environment	What decides whether they adjust or defend: safety, meaning and agency
Job demands–resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)	How demands and resources drive burnout and engagement	Disequilibrium as the starting point for development, not only strain
Psychological safety and learning zones (Edmondson, 1999, 2019)	Why safety enables learning, and why safety without challenge leads to comfort	Disequilibrium, not accountability, as the second axis; meaning and agency as distinct roles; the peg as well as the space
Job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001)	How people reshape their work	Crafting as one direction of a two-way process, and the conditions that make it possible
Team adaptation (Burke et al., 2006)	How teams adjust to change	The same mechanism at person, team and organisation level, linked by behaviour

The distinctive claim is not any one of these elements but how they fit together: fit is built through behaviour over time, safety decides between learning and defence, meaning and agency do distinct jobs, the same Safety, Meaning and Agency exist inside people and around them, and each person's behaviour becomes part of the conditions for others.

What this means for leaders

1. Stop treating fit as a hiring decision. Selection still matters, but most of fit is built after someone starts. The question is less "did we hire the right person?" and more "are we creating the conditions in which people can grow into their roles, and roles can grow to fit people?"

2. Expect gaps, and make them safe. Change, new roles and new expectations will always create disequilibrium. That is not a sign something is wrong. The leader's job is to make the gap safe enough to learn from: to make it normal to ask, to try, to get things wrong and to say when

something isn't working.

3. Don't aim for comfort. A team that is safe but never stretched will be pleasant and stagnant. The aim is real challenge with enough safety to meet it.

4. Let people shape the space. If people can only adjust themselves, fit is one-way, and over time it wears people out. Room to decide, to craft roles and to change how work is done is what makes fit two-way.

5. Remember your behaviour is someone else's conditions. Every leader is part of the space for their team. What a leader does when someone raises a problem, admits a mistake or disagrees shapes whether the whole team learns or defends.

6. When the gap is overwhelming, take a small step. Don't wait for a complete plan. Take an action that creates feedback, see what happens, and learn from it.

7. Ask what a change will do to conditions. Before introducing a new policy, process or structure, ask: will this make it more or less safe to speak up? Will it make the work feel more or less worthwhile? Will it give people more or less room to decide? And ask regularly what could be removed to make conditions better.

And not only for leaders. No one's behaviour is neutral. Every person in a team is part of the space for the others, and every person can notice the beliefs they bring, choose how they meet a gap, and shape their own corner of the work. Leaders carry more weight, but fit is built by everyone.

What we are testing

Adaptive Fit draws on well-established research: Lewin's field theory, Piaget's work on development, the Theory of Work Adjustment, person–environment fit, psychological safety, meaningful work, empowerment and team adaptation. What it adds is a way of putting these together into one account of how fit is built. That account makes predictions that can be tested:

1. Under high safety, disequilibrium leads to learning, voice and shaping; under low safety, the same disequilibrium leads to defence and withdrawal.
2. People with stronger inner resources adapt more under the same conditions.
3. Where agency is high, people shape the space as well as adjusting themselves.
4. Under sustained disequilibrium, people with stronger meaning persist and adapt rather than leave.
5. A leader's behaviour predicts the conditions their team experiences.
6. Teams that surface their gaps under safe conditions and act on them build better fit, and better outcomes, over time.
7. Team-level fit predicts team outcomes beyond the fit of individual members.

We are testing these through action research in real organisations: measuring conditions, inner resources and behaviour; working with teams and leaders to act on what they find; and measuring again. Each cycle improves the practice and tests the theory. Future papers in this series will report what we find, including where the model needs to change.

Limits and open questions

Adaptive Fit is a model in development, and it is worth being clear about what it does not yet claim.

- **It is a synthesis, not yet a tested theory.** Each building block has strong evidence behind it. The way they fit together, and the specific predictions above, have not yet been tested as a whole.
- **Disequilibrium is hard to measure directly.** Possible approaches include the gap between the conditions people aspire to and those they experience, and recent change events such as a new role, a restructure or a new leader. Which works best is an open question.
- **The ceiling is not yet defined.** The model says very high disequilibrium can overwhelm learning even when people feel safe, but where that point lies, and how it varies between people and teams, is not known.
- **Not every gap should be closed.** Some misfits are useful: the person who doesn't share an organisation's assumptions may be the one who sees what it is missing. The model needs to distinguish gaps that should be closed from differences that should be kept.
- **Context matters.** Most of the underlying research comes from North American and European workplaces. How Safety, Meaning and Agency are experienced, and what behaviour builds them, may differ across cultures, including in Aotearoa New Zealand. This needs testing, not assuming.
- **Power is underplayed.** Who can shape the space depends on position and influence. A more complete account will need to address how power affects whose adaptation is expected and whose shaping is allowed.

> ***Fit isn't found. It's built: by the peg, by the space, and by what happens where they meet.***

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