



ORGANISATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY INTELLIGENCE

Working Paper Series

What Is Organisational Sustainability Intelligence?

Towards a Conditions-Based Understanding of Sustainable
Organisational Performance

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Get Unstuck

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BE-WELL™



Note: This working paper represents the first publication in the Organisational Sustainability Intelligence (OSI) Working Paper Series. It presents an emerging perspective informed by leadership practice, existing organisational research and early and limited observations from the BE-WELL™ pilot programme. Its purpose is not to establish definitive conclusions, but to contribute to an ongoing conversation about how organisations understand and sustain performance.

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Abstract

Organisations have become increasingly sophisticated at measuring performance. Yet measuring organisational outcomes and understanding how those outcomes are sustained are not necessarily the same endeavour. Outcomes such as engagement, wellbeing, burnout and performance provide valuable information, but they often describe organisational reality without fully explaining the conditions through which that reality is created.

This first working paper introduces Organisational Sustainability Intelligence (OSI) as an emerging interpretive approach to understanding sustainable organisational performance. The proposition explored here is not that organisational conditions interact, a relationship already recognised across systems thinking, the Job Demands–Resources model and related organisational health frameworks (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), but that this interaction can be examined through a structured, repeatable interpretive methodology capable of supporting richer organisational conversation. In this respect, OSI is intended to support a discussion about organisational conditions rather than to produce a rating: the interpretive layer described in this paper is designed to prompt reflection, not to rank or benchmark individuals or organisations against one another.

The paper traces the origins of this perspective from recurring observations in leadership practice through the development of the BE-WELL™ Framework and the questions that ultimately led to a broader programme of investigation. It introduces the conceptual foundations of OSI, presents the OSI Interpretive Cycle, and outlines the rationale for a conditions-based approach to organisational interpretation.

This paper is intended as the first publication in an evolving working paper series. Its purpose is not to present definitive conclusions, but to establish the research question, provide a conceptual foundation for subsequent papers, and invite continued discussion, critical reflection and empirical investigation.

Keywords: Organisational Sustainability Intelligence, organisational sustainability, sustainable performance, organisational conditions, systems thinking, leadership, organisational diagnostics, interpretive framework.

Why This Question Matters

This question originated in practice rather than in the literature; its origins are described later in this paper. Over the past three decades, organisations have become increasingly sophisticated in how they understand and evaluate performance. Advances in organisational psychology, leadership research, evidence-based management and people analytics have significantly expanded the range of information available to leaders. Today, organisations routinely measure financial and operational performance alongside employee engagement, organisational health, leadership effectiveness, wellbeing, customer experience and, increasingly, environmental and social sustainability (Rousseau, 2006; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; OECD, 2022).

These developments have transformed organisational decision-making. Leaders have access to more data, more sophisticated diagnostic tools and a broader body of research than at any previous point in modern management practice. Together, these advances have deepened our understanding of many of the factors that influence organisational performance and human functioning at work.

Despite this progress, organisations continue to face persistent and costly challenges. International research consistently reports high levels of burnout, increasing psychosocial risks, declining employee engagement, growing work intensity and rising organisational complexity (World Health Organisation, 2019; ISO, 2021; OECD, 2022). These findings suggest that while organisations have become increasingly effective at measuring important organisational outcomes, understanding how those outcomes are created and sustained remains an ongoing challenge.

This observation leads to a simple but important question.

How do organisations sustain performance without quietly degrading the organisational conditions required to maintain it?

This paper does not propose that existing organisational theories or assessment approaches are inadequate. The fields of organisational behaviour, leadership, organisational health, employee engagement, psychological safety, wellbeing and systems thinking have each contributed substantially to our understanding of organisational effectiveness. Rather than replacing these perspectives, this paper explores whether they may be complemented by a more explicit focus on the organisational conditions that make sustainable performance possible.

The central proposition of this paper is that organisations may benefit from systematically interpreting organisational conditions alongside the outcomes they already measure. While outcomes describe **what** an organisation is achieving, organisational conditions

may help explain **how** those outcomes are being produced and whether they are likely to remain sustainable over time.

To explore this proposition, this paper introduces **Organisational Sustainability Intelligence (OSI)** as an emerging interpretive approach. OSI is not presented as an established theory, nor as a replacement for existing organisational models. Rather, it represents a working perspective that proposes organisations may gain additional insight by interpreting patterns of interacting organisational conditions rather than considering individual organisational conditions in isolation.

Throughout this paper, a clear distinction is maintained between established academic research, contemporary organisational evidence, observations emerging from the early development of the BE-WELL™ framework, and the propositions introduced by the author. This distinction reflects a deliberate commitment to intellectual transparency. The purpose of this paper is not to defend a framework or promote a methodology. It is to investigate whether a conditions-based interpretation of organisational life contributes meaningfully to our understanding of sustainable organisational performance.

A note on positionality: the author is the developer of the BE-WELL™ framework discussed throughout this paper, and this working paper series is published alongside its ongoing commercial pilot programme. This relationship does not, in itself, invalidate the propositions explored here, but it is disclosed so that readers can weigh the paper's claims with that context in view.

Why Now?

The question explored in this paper is not entirely new.

Leaders have always sought to understand why some organisations sustain performance while others gradually lose it.

What has changed is the organisational environment in which that question is now being asked.

Over the past decade, organisations have gained unprecedented access to data. Engagement surveys, wellbeing assessments, operational dashboards, people analytics and AI-powered reporting now provide leaders with more information than at any previous point in organisational history.

Paradoxically, the growing abundance of organisational data has not necessarily made organisational interpretation easier.

Leaders are increasingly able to observe organisational outcomes.

Understanding how those outcomes are being produced—and whether they can be sustained—remains considerably more difficult.

At the same time, organisations are operating in environments characterised by increasing complexity. Hybrid working, rapid technological change, persistent skills shortages, accelerating organisational transformation and rising psychosocial expectations have all increased the number of interacting conditions influencing organisational performance.

These developments suggest that the challenge facing leaders is no longer simply obtaining more organisational data.

It is developing better ways of interpreting the relationships between the organisational conditions they already observe.

Organisational Sustainability Intelligence is proposed as one possible response to that challenge. It asks whether organisations may benefit not from measuring more, but from interpreting differently.

Where the Question Began

The ideas presented in this paper did not begin with an assessment, nor with an attempt to develop a new organisational model.

They began with a recurring observation.

Across years of leadership practice, executive coaching and organisational conversations, the same underlying organisational challenges appeared repeatedly. While the language varied between individuals, teams and organisations, the themes themselves remained remarkably consistent.

People described struggling to maintain balance.

They spoke about feeling empowered or constrained to influence their work.

They discussed workload, the gradual depletion of energy, the importance of continuing to learn, and the influence of leadership on almost every aspect of organisational life.

Although these conversations arose in different organisational contexts, they consistently returned to the same underlying conditions.

Gradually, it became apparent that these recurring observations could be organised into six organisational conditions that appeared fundamental to an organisation's capacity to sustain performance over time:

- **Balance**
- **Empowerment**
- **Workload**
- **Energy**
- **Learning**
- **Leadership**

These conditions did not emerge from theory alone. They emerged through repeated observation and were subsequently examined against existing organisational research to understand how they aligned with current knowledge.

More specifically, these six conditions were not derived from a formal coding process or a structured qualitative study. They emerged inductively, over years of one-to-one leadership coaching and organisational conversations, as the underlying conditions that kept surfacing behind a recurring set of symptoms: strained communication, slipping delivery, eroding trust, a drift towards silo working, and a personal toll on employees and leaders alike. The same six conditions kept reappearing behind these different symptoms in different settings, which is what first suggested they were conditions in their own right rather than a list of unrelated problems. The author's role in this process was primarily one of naming: recognising that a single underlying condition was contributing to several visible symptoms at once and giving that condition a consistent label. This is best understood as practitioner-derived pattern recognition rather than a validated research method. It is offered here as the origin of the framework and as a starting point for the more structured investigation that follows, not as a substitute for it.

Over time, another pattern became visible.

The six conditions did not operate independently. They naturally organised themselves into three interconnected organisational layers, each representing a different aspect of organisational sustainability.

- The **Foundational Layer** comprises **Balance** and **Empowerment**. Together, they influence the stability upon which sustainable contribution depends. Individuals who struggle to maintain balance or who experience limited autonomy often find it increasingly difficult to sustain performance over time.
- The **Operational Layer** comprises **Workload** and **Energy**. These conditions reflect the day-to-day relationship between organisational demands and the human capacity available to meet them. They influence whether performance is

achieved through sustainable operating conditions or through increasing organisational strain.

- The **Capability Layer** comprises **Learning** and **Leadership**. These conditions influence an organisation's capacity to adapt, develop and sustain performance over longer time horizons. They shape not only current effectiveness but also future organisational capability.

Together, these six conditions became the conceptual architecture of the **BE-WELL™ Framework**. They are presented here as the current working architecture of that framework, rather than as a definitive or closed set of organisational conditions and remain subject to ongoing empirical investigation and refinement as the pilot programme develops.

Only after the framework had begun to take shape did a practical question emerge.

If leaders seek to strengthen these organisational conditions, **how should they approach that task?**

This question led to the development of three practical principles that continue to guide the application of the framework:

- **Model. Master. Measure.**

These are implementation principles rather than structural components of the framework.

- **Model** emphasises that leaders influence organisational conditions through the behaviours they consistently demonstrate. Sustainable organisational change begins by making those behaviours visible before expecting others to adopt them.
- **Master** recognises that meaningful behavioural change depends on the creation of lasting habits, built through repetition, reflection and practice. New leadership behaviours only become organisational capabilities once they are sustained as habits rather than treated as isolated interventions.
- **Measure** asks a deceptively simple question: are the organisational conditions becoming stronger?

It was this third principle that fundamentally changed the direction of the work.

At first, the intention appeared straightforward.

- Measure progress.
- Measure improvement.
- Measure success.

Yet each possibility immediately raised another question.

Measure... what?

- Should progress be judged through higher engagement?
- Improved wellbeing?
- Greater resilience?
- Higher organisational performance?

Each represented an important organisational outcome.

None fully answered the underlying question.

If leadership genuinely strengthens an organisation's long-term capability, **what should we expect to see changing?**

This question marked the transition from developing a coaching framework to investigating a broader organisational proposition.

The focus shifted away from measuring leadership interventions themselves and towards understanding whether the organisational conditions that support sustainable performance could be observed, interpreted and ultimately strengthened.

That investigation became the starting point for what is now described as **Organisational Sustainability Intelligence**.

The State of Current Understanding

The question explored in this paper does not emerge from an absence of organisational research. On the contrary, it emerges from the richness of an increasingly mature body of knowledge. Over recent decades, organisational psychology, leadership studies and management research have significantly advanced our understanding of how organisations function and how leaders influence organisational performance.

Employee engagement research has demonstrated the relationship between engagement, organisational performance and employee outcomes, providing leaders with practical methods for understanding the quality of employees' connection with their work and organisation (Gallup, 2025). Research into psychological safety has highlighted the importance of creating environments in which individuals feel able to contribute, learn and challenge constructively without fear of negative interpersonal consequences (Edmondson, 2019). The Job Demands–Resources model has further demonstrated how the interaction between work demands and available resources influences motivation, well-being, and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

This body of work has continued to develop rather than settle. A decade-on review of the Job Demands–Resources model confirms the health-impairment and motivational pathways originally proposed while extending the theory to person-by-situation effects, multilevel dynamics and proactive job crafting (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2023). Cross-national evidence continues to support psychosocial safety climate as an organisational-level driver of working conditions and wellbeing, while also cautioning that its explanatory power varies across cultural and regulatory contexts (Loh et al., 2025). At a policy level, occupational health bodies have continued to treat psychosocial risk as a governance issue rather than a purely individual one, reflected in the European Union's ongoing programme of work on psychosocial risk and its 2026–2028 Healthy Workplaces Campaign (EU-OSHA, 2025). These more recent contributions reinforce rather than unsettle the picture drawn from the earlier literature, but they are included here to avoid resting the argument solely on sources now approaching two decades old.

Similarly, research into burnout has established that chronic workplace stress can progressively reduce energy, effectiveness and engagement when insufficiently managed (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; World Health Organisation, 2019). Systems thinking has encouraged leaders to understand organisations as dynamic systems in which relationships, feedback loops and interdependencies often shape organisational behaviour more profoundly than isolated events (Senge, 2006). More recently, evidence-based management has encouraged organisations to integrate research evidence, professional judgement and organisational data into decision-making rather than relying solely on tradition or intuition (Rousseau, 2006; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

Taken together, these perspectives provide a sophisticated understanding of many important dimensions of organisational life. They have fundamentally changed how organisations think about leadership, employee experience, organisational learning and sustainable organisational performance.

This paper does not challenge those contributions.

Instead, it asks whether they also reveal an opportunity to examine organisational performance from another perspective.

Most existing approaches understandably focus on understanding particular organisational constructs: engagement, psychological safety, burnout, organisational health, leadership effectiveness or learning. Each represents an important area of enquiry, supported by extensive research and practical application.

This paper proposes that an additional question may also deserve systematic investigation.

What happens when organisational conditions are interpreted collectively rather than individually?

This is not, in itself, a new proposition. The Job Demands–Resources model already examines how demands and resources interact; systems thinking already treats organisations as interconnected wholes; composite organisational health indices already combine multiple measures into a single view. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a structured, repeatable methodology for translating those interactions into individual and organisational narratives that can inform direct conversation and action. That gap, rather than the existence of interaction itself, is the proposition this paper explores.

- The distinction is subtle but important.
- An engagement score describes one aspect of organisational experience.
- A measure of psychological safety describes another.
- Burnout indicators describe another.

Viewed independently, each contributes valuable information.

Viewed together, they may also describe broader organisational patterns that are less visible when each condition is interpreted in isolation.

Organisational Sustainability Intelligence is proposed as one attempt to close that methodological gap: a working approach for interpreting organisational conditions collectively, developed alongside existing research rather than in place of it.

Whether this perspective ultimately provides additional insight remains to be established.

- The purpose of this paper is not to answer that question conclusively.
- It is to explain why the question itself may be worth investigating.

From Question to Investigation

If Organisational Sustainability Intelligence is understood as an emerging interpretive approach, a practical challenge immediately follows.

How can such a proposition be investigated?

Conceptual models alone cannot answer this question.

If organisational conditions are to be interpreted systematically, they must first be observed systematically.

This required the development of a practical instrument capable of gathering consistent observations across individuals, teams and organisations.

The result was the BE-WELL™ framework.

Importantly, the framework was not developed to prove the propositions presented in this paper.

It was developed to investigate them.

This distinction is fundamental.

The assessment is not the contribution proposed by Organisational Sustainability Intelligence.

It is the mechanism through which observations can be collected consistently and interpreted within a common conceptual framework.

As the framework evolved through successive design iterations and pilot programmes, its purpose also became clearer.

Initially, the framework was developed to support leadership and organisational coaching by providing a structured way of understanding the organisational conditions influencing sustainable performance.

Over time, it became apparent that its greater value lay elsewhere.

Rather than simply producing scores, the framework was beginning to generate different organisational conversations from different configurations of organisational conditions.

Participants with broadly comparable overall profiles did not necessarily receive identical interpretations.

Instead, different combinations of organisational conditions, supporting indicators and emerging patterns generated different narratives and different coaching conversations.

This observation suggested that the assessment was functioning less as a traditional measurement instrument and more as an interpretive system.

- The assessment collects observations.
- The framework organises those observations.
- The interpretive model examines how organisational conditions interact.
- The resulting narrative supports leadership reflection and organisational conversation.

Put simply, observation and interpretation are doing different work here. The observations describe organisational reality as it currently stands; the interpretation seeks to explain how that reality is being produced and sustained. The BE-WELL™ assessment supplies the observations; the OSI interpretive cycle supplies the explanation.

It is this four-step progression from observation to organised interpretation to conversation that this paper proposes as OSI's central methodological contribution, rather than the six conditions themselves. This progression is summarised in Figure 1. The purpose of this interpretive process is not to categorise individuals or organisations. Nor is it to prescribe standardised solutions.

Its purpose is to support richer organisational understanding by recognising that similar organisational outcomes may emerge from different underlying organisational conditions, and that apparently similar organisational profiles may therefore require different conversations.

Early observations from the BE-WELL™ pilot programme have been encouraging in this regard.

Across successive individual pilot reports, participants with comparable dimension profiles frequently generated different interpretive narratives because the wider configuration of organisational conditions differed. While these observations remain preliminary and require further investigation, they suggest that an interpretive approach may offer additional insight beyond the description of individual organisational conditions alone.

At the time of writing, individual pilot work has been completed, and the first organisational pilot is underway. These pilots are not intended to conclusively validate the propositions presented in this paper. Rather, they represent the beginning of a structured process of observation through which the propositions of Organisational Sustainability Intelligence can continue to be refined, challenged and, where necessary, revised.

Identifying six organisational conditions also introduces a practical challenge.

While each condition can be described individually, organisations do not experience these conditions independently. Balance influences workload. Leadership influences learning. Empowerment influences how operational pressures are experienced. Organisational conditions, therefore, function as an interconnected system rather than a collection of isolated variables.

Investigating those interactions required more than an assessment capable of describing individual conditions. It required a structured process capable of transforming observations into meaningful organisational interpretation.

The interpretive cycle introduced in Figure 1 was developed to support that transition.

Its detailed logic, together with the methods used to identify organisational patterns, is explored in a subsequent working paper.

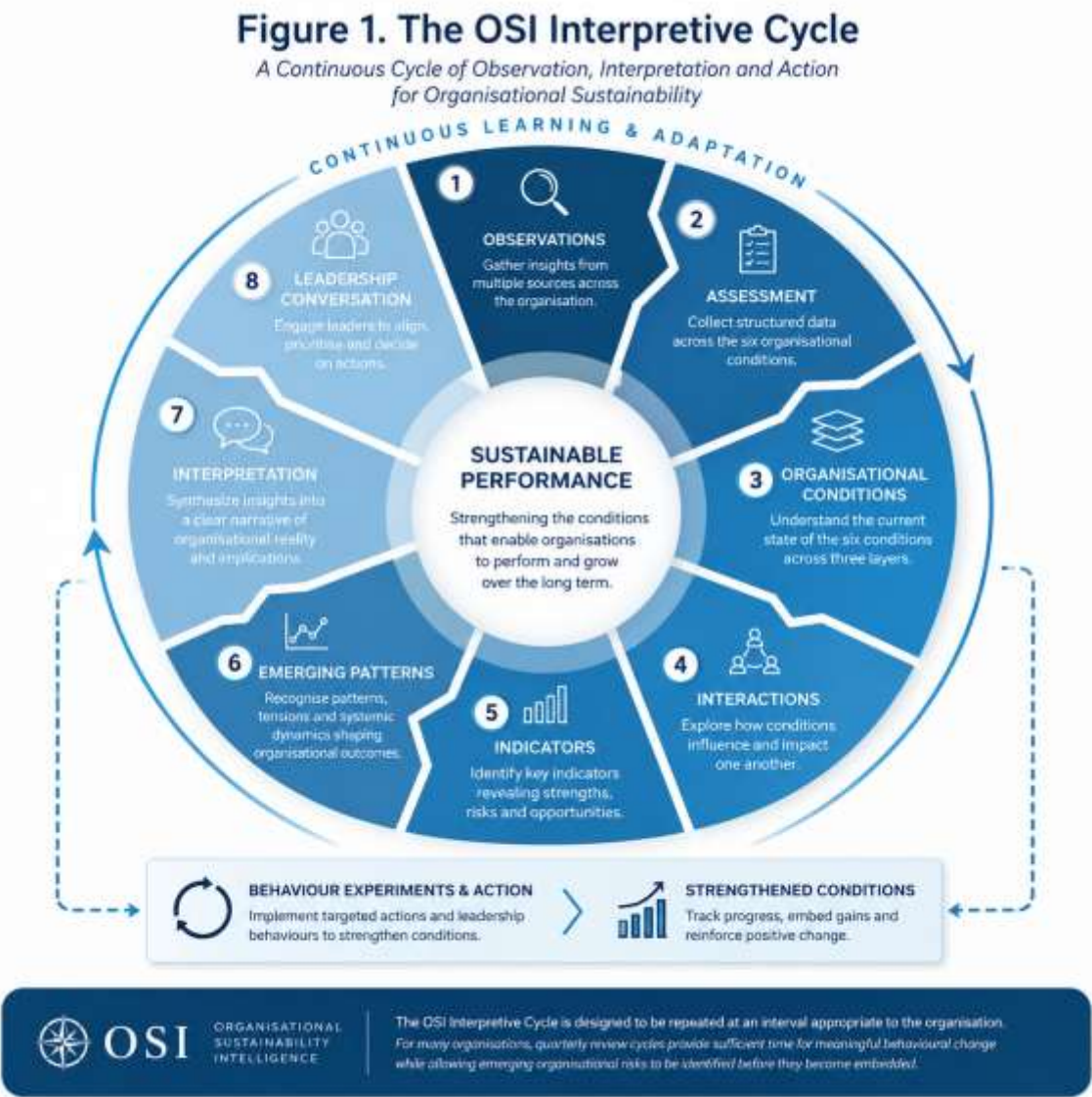


Figure 1: The OSI Interpretive Cycle: A Continuous Cycle of Observation, Interpretation and Action

Limitations

This paper's claims should be read alongside several limitations, consolidated here for clarity.

- The six organisational conditions are drawn from practitioner observation rather than a documented, replicable derivation process; the detailed method by which they were identified and checked against existing research is not yet specified.
- The evidence offered in support of OSI is limited to early individual-level pilot observations, described qualitatively rather than through a formal evaluation design; the first organisational-level pilot is still underway, and its results are not yet available.
- The literature engaged with in this paper is illustrative rather than a systematic review; a fuller account of the current evidence base, including more recent work on psychosocial risk and organisational health, will strengthen the propositions advanced in later papers.

These limitations do not undermine the paper's central purpose, which is to open a line of enquiry rather than to close one. They are noted here so that the propositions advanced above are read with an accurate sense of their current evidential weight.

Closing Reflection

This paper introduces Organisational Sustainability Intelligence (OSI) as an emerging interpretive approach for understanding sustainable organisational performance.

It has not attempted to establish a new theory, nor to replace existing organisational research. Instead, it has proposed that the interactions between organisational conditions already recognised in principle in existing research can be examined through a structured interpretive methodology that supports richer organisational conversation.

Whether this perspective ultimately proves valuable remains an open question.

That question, rather than any predetermined conclusion, is the starting point of this body of work.

If organisations can better understand the conditions that sustain performance, they may also become better equipped to strengthen them. That possibility, more than any conclusion reached so far, is worth taking seriously.

The papers that follow will explore this proposition further through conceptual development, continued engagement with existing research, and evidence emerging from the ongoing development and pilot implementation of the BE-WELL™ framework. The next paper in this series will present the first pilot-based observations, including how

independently derived interpretations of individual-level data compare with the framework's own organisational-level aggregation.

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