



Am I thriving as an executive?

Circles of Venn

*My mission in life is not merely to survive,
but to thrive, and to do so with some passion,
some compassion, some humour, and some
style.*

Maya Angelou

Three scenarios

At the Monday team briefing, Harry sensed he was in trouble. He also knew that his team knew he was in trouble. Harry felt the tension in the room as each team member went through the motions of providing a progress update and summarising their priorities. At one level, the tone was professional, but the body language in the room indicated a mix of scepticism and hostility.

It was clear that the social media team had stalled; critical projects were way behind schedule and the team was under increasing pressure from key stakeholders. Three months ago each team member would have made suggestions to rethink work processes and offer help to those colleagues facing particular challenges. Now, heads were down as each team member outlined the problems they were experiencing. Harry knew the team blamed him for the current situation. He could find any number of reasons to explain the issues - not least a dysfunctional organisational structure - but he recognised that he was a large part of the problem. He was out of his depth, taking on a level of complexity he wasn't equipped to tackle.

Harry glanced at his watch. At 11.30 he has a catch up with his manager. Positioned as an informal review, he knows the reality: this is part of his performance appraisal. Harry feels the anxiety building up. What should he say to his manager?

Oksana, in a rare moment of reflection, looked back at the last quarter. Regional manager for a mid-market hotel group, she was pleased that her region had performed against financial target. She accepted that a few customer metrics had dipped, and the H.R. stats looked a bit worrying, but overall she was holding her own against her peers. At the next management meeting she knew she wouldn't be the focus of the public humiliation her boss relished.

Oksana also remembered the comment her partner had made last week: "I never see you these days." It highlighted the reality of 70 hour weeks, long evenings, catching up over weekends, and holidays interrupted by calls. It was an unsustainable life style, and it was now affecting her relationships, not just with her partner, but with her wider family and friends.

Oksana asked herself, "Why am I having to put in so much effort for so little gain? So much input, for what output? Maybe I'm just not that good at this job. What do I need to do to change this work pattern and raise my game?"

The strategy away day was not going according to plan. "Too many dull PowerPoint presentations", thought Theo - the Chief Financial Officer of a NHS Foundation Trust - "and not enough hard thinking and challenging debate."

With a career in one of the blue chip management consultancies, Theo had joined the Trust two years ago, and impressed the executive team with the speed with which he had taken on a difficult set of problems, the legacy of his predecessor. His contribution had restored the reputation of the Trust, performance across a range of indicators had improved, and the mood of the organisation had been transformed.

As he prepared for his slot, Theo announced to the executive team, "I've decided to change things a bit. Rather than running through this deck, I thought it might be better if I share a few thoughts about my experience over the last two years and some ideas for the future of the Trust, and we just open up the conversation."

"Truly inspirational" the CEO said warmly at the end of the discussion. "We really have the beginnings of a blue print for the future, a strategy that focuses priorities and one that will resonate with staff."

Back home, Theo's partner asked how the away day had gone. "Very well. You know what? I'm really loving this job."

Executive life and the circles of Venn

Are we about to go under? In a hole that we continue to dig deeper? Just about surviving? Or thriving, enjoying executive life and making an exceptional organisational impact? Which factors make the difference?

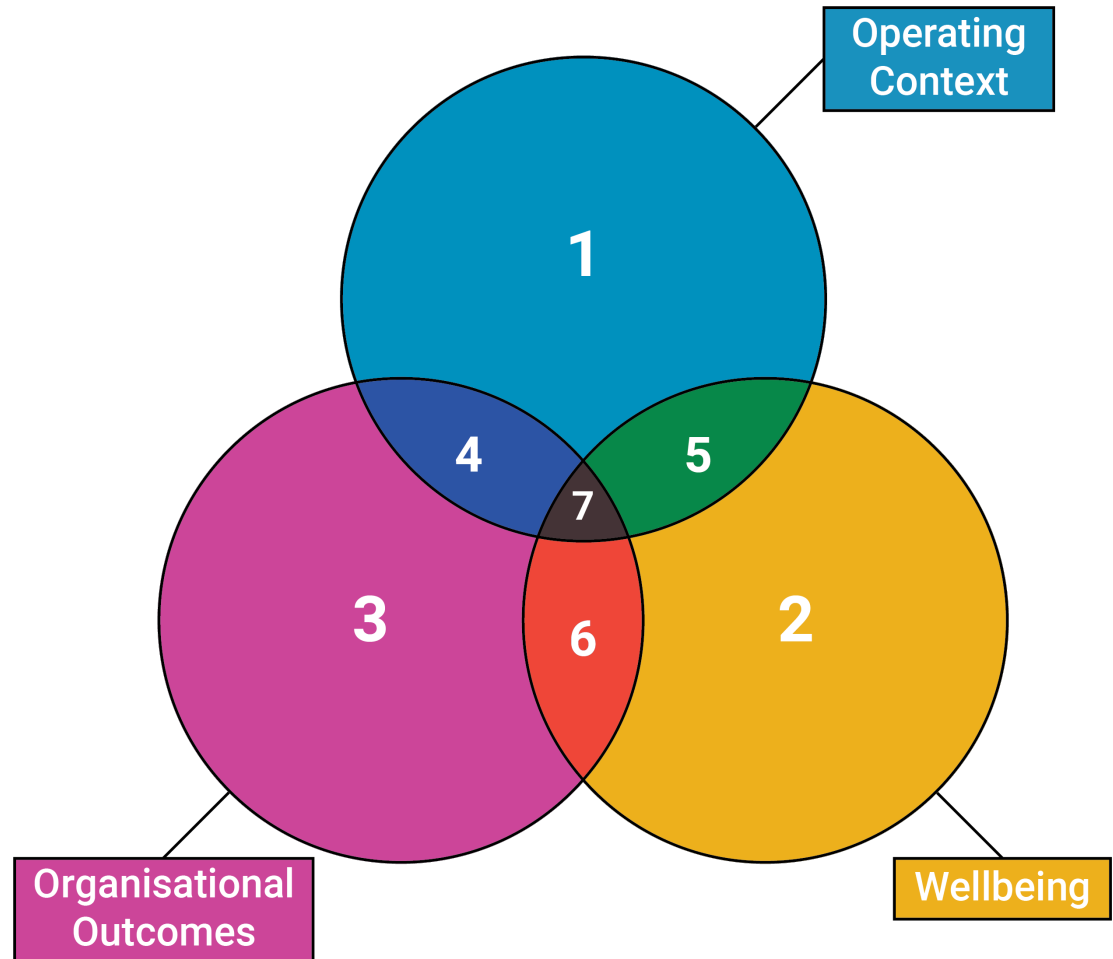
This Venn diagram is based on three dimensions:

Operating Context. Are we facing a headwind in which an array of factors make executive life difficult? Or a tailwind and a range of situational factors - strategic, structural, cultural – are providing an easier experience?

Wellbeing. The attributes and dynamics of physical and mental health to manage the stresses and strains of executive life. This is emotional maturity to maintain high levels of purpose, energy and enthusiasm. The alternative: fatigue and anxiety.

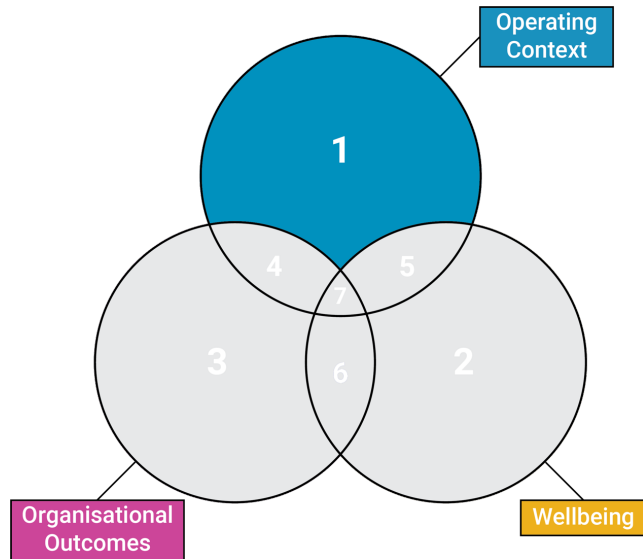
Organisational Outcomes. This theme asks the question: are we struggling to make a consistent and sustainable organisational impact? Or, operating at exceptional levels of performance to make outstanding business gains?

Seven executive patterns emerge.



1. Precarious

A high Operating Context, but low Wellbeing and low Organisational Outcomes



This is the executive who fails to see and exploit a good thing. The business environment is relatively supportive but results are not achieved. The possible reasons: incompetence, dysfunctional behaviour, emotional difficulties.

In the short term this executive relies on the glow of the organisational halo effect. There is however a sense of trouble ahead. The individual becomes increasingly anxious, knowing they will become exposed when the environment shifts to more demanding times.

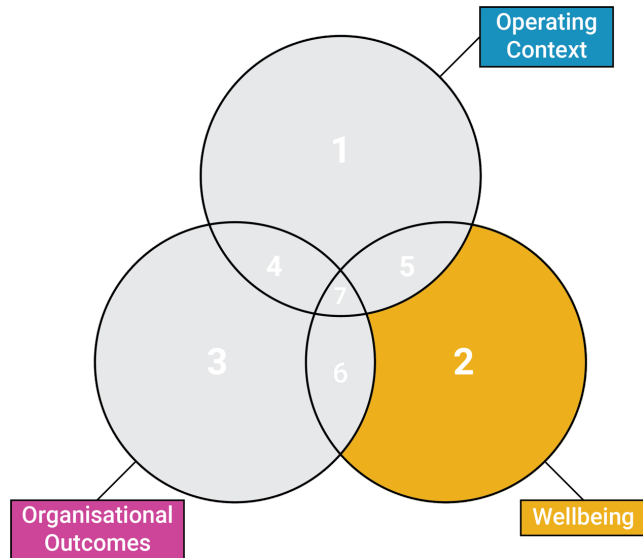
A bad leader can take a good plan and destroy it, while a good leader can take a bad plan and make it work.

John Maxwell



2. Delusional

High Wellbeing, but low Operating Context and low Organisational Outcomes



This is the scenario in denial of reality. The business environment is troublesome and results are not achieved, but the executive remains upbeat. It may be that this positive outlook energises others in the expectation of a better future. Alternatively, impression management can only go so far.

This is often the executive as the ostrich with its head in the sand.

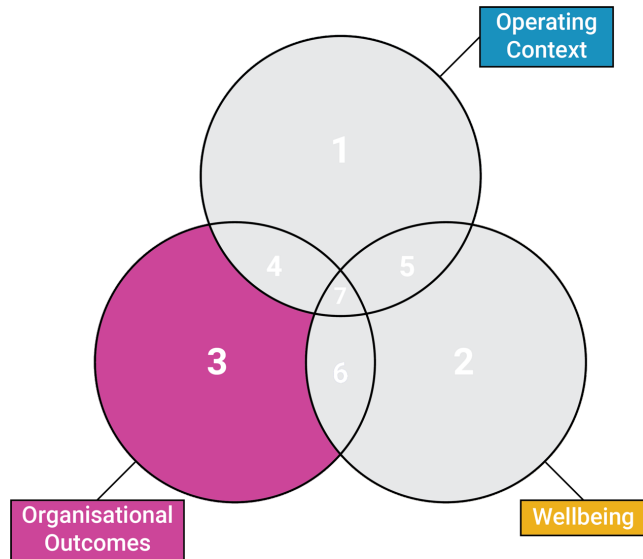
*You cannot wipe reality out,
but reality can wipe you out.*

Ray Dalio, Bridgewater



3. Adversity

High Organisational Outcomes, but low Operating Context and low Wellbeing



The executive who rolls up their sleeves to trouble shoot the problems that colleagues may be ignoring. It makes an organisational impact, but there is little joy in this experience personally or for others. Leadership life is gruelling. This is the executive in survival mode rather than prospering.

Over time - if difficult business conditions continue - exhaustion follows.

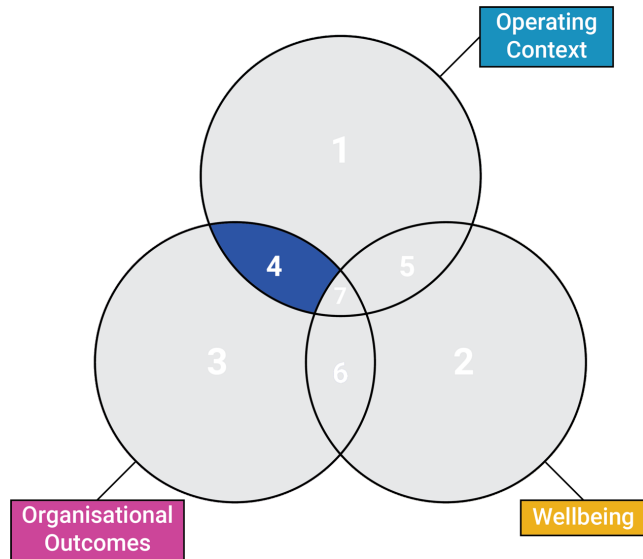
A well-adjusted executive: the balance of pep pills to tranquilisers leaves enough energy for a weekly visit to the psychiatrist.

Vince Packard, The Pyramid Climbers



4. Dissatisfied

High Operating Context and Organisational Outcomes but low Wellbeing



There is a tailwind of positive business circumstances that combine with the achievement of organisational results. But this executive remains unhappy. At best, this individual aspires for more, restless in the pursuit of greater success. Conversely, the executive who fails to enjoy the present, finding it difficult to celebrate success and instead focuses on the failings.

It may set increasingly demanding expectations for themselves and others. It may also run out of creative energy.

At a party given by a billionaire, a friend informs Joseph Heller, that their host, a hedge fund manager, had made more money in a single day than Heller had earned from his wildly popular novel Catch-22 over its whole history.

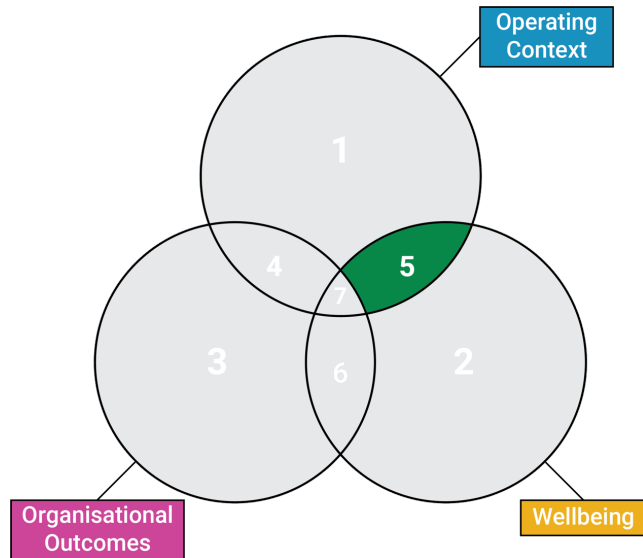
Heller responds: Yes, but I have something he will never have: enough.

Kurt Vonnegut



5. Complacent

High Operating Context and Wellbeing, but low Organisational Outcomes



At first sight this is a promising situation. Business circumstances are positive. And the executive mood is upbeat. But results are not forthcoming. Why? This may be the profile of the emerging leader whose optimism has still to be translated into a track record of consistent achievement.

Or, the executive who is now coasting and looking back to a happier yesterday rather than deliver today. .

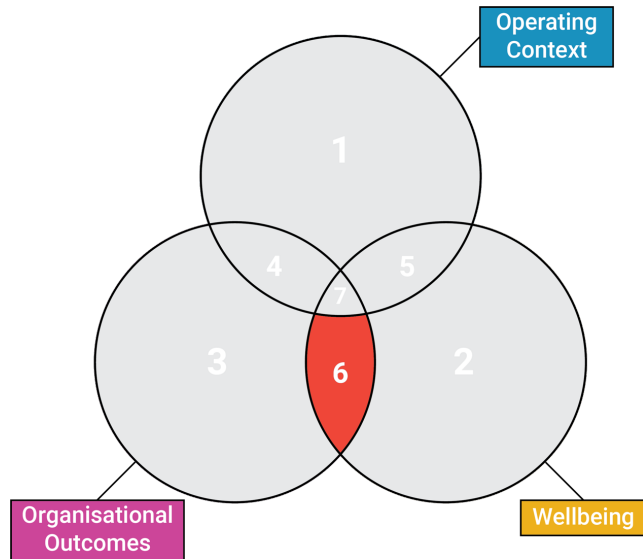
In a bull market, one must avoid the error of the preening duck that quacks boastfully after a torrential rainstorm, thinking that its paddling skills have caused it to rise in the world.

Warren Buffett



6. Stoical

High Organisational Outcomes and Wellbeing, but low Operating Context



This is the executive perspective to recognise that few things are as bad as they seem. And few things are as good as they first appear. Adverse business circumstances are demanding, but reframed can represent an opportunity vis a vis competitors who are less resilient.

The hazard: the operating environment continues to be tough and motivation declines.

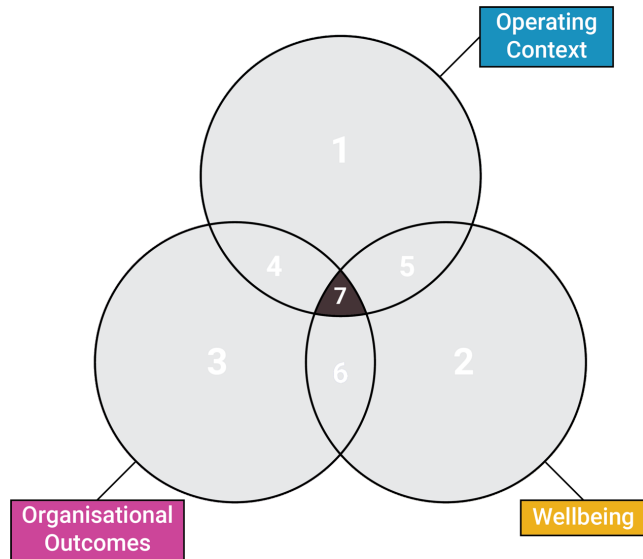
There's a fine line between character building and soul destroying.

Colin Hay



7. Flourishing

High Operating Context, Organisational Outcomes and Wellbeing



The sweet spot for those executives who thrive through resilience to take advantage of positive circumstances for consistent results for the long-term. This builds an exceptional track record for the executive. A virtuous cycle is created in which opportunities are identified and exploited for further gain that is energising: personally and for others.

The risk: an arrogance based on past success that derails.

There will be fat years and there will be lean years, but it is going to rain.

Don Draper, Mad Men



So what?

There is a tension in executive life. On the one hand, Viktor Frankl provides an important insight: *when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves*. On the other, Warren Buffett makes the astute observation: *should you find yourself in a chronically leaking boat, energy devoted to changing vessels is likely to be more productive than energy devoted to patching leaks*.

Each executive finds themselves in a specific time and space reflecting a mix of business, organisational and personal circumstances. And some executives seem destined to fail. This is that grouping which Woody Allen describes: *the only thing standing between me and greatness is me*.

Most of the time the key question is how much of our operating environment can we influence through our own personal and professional development? If the answer is very little, then a savvy executive changes their situation to move to more supportive circumstances to allow them to thrive.

It is never too late to be what you might have been.

George Eliot



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