



AIM for a Thriving Planet

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The first article in this series introduced Team Mindfulness using the AIM model and explored how the application of the model in practice addresses important areas of organisational life, including purpose and the quality of participation, both of which impact performance. A second article looked at how the AIM model helps to create organisations that are more fully human.

This article takes another turn and addresses squarely one of the most pressing issues facing organisations today: how do we create organisations capable of acting both wisely and successfully on our fragile and finite earth?

The Earth is in distress. This fact is no longer seriously contested. We refer here not just the problem of global warming, with its detrimental climate consequences, but also the wide range of earth systems science research on the stressing of a connected series of systems on which planetary health depends.

What's the problem?

The Stockholm Resilience Centre (SRC) has done excellent analytical work on the nine planetary processes that regulate the stability of earth's ecosystem. This work, first published in 2008, identifies and quantifies the "safe operating limits" for human impacts on each of these planetary systems. The work, which has continually been refined and improved, sets out to establish clear quantified limits within which human life can flourish for generations to come. Any significant breach of these boundaries raises the risk of catastrophic, sudden and irreversible changes that would have adverse consequences for society and for wider living ecosystems. An update on the quantification, published in Science in 2015, showed that the safe boundaries on climate change, biodiversity loss, the nutrient cycle (which regulates the balance of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus) and land use, have all passed beyond safe limits. In each of these domains life on Earth is under threat.

Despite the clear empirical evidence, key decision makers seem to be slow or even reluctant to do anything address the situation.

It is difficult for corporate leaders in particular to know what they can do.

In our work we have often met leaders who are painfully conscious of the environmental situation but who feel stuck on how to play their part in addressing it well. The problem feels "too big", and its resolution does not feel as if it is within the grasp of the boardroom – or at least in any way that will make much of a difference.

This is a classic example of a "wicked problem": problems in which we are implicated, but where solutions lie beyond the control of the implicated parties acting alone.

The application of a Team Mindfulness approach does not make this problem easier to resolve, but it can resource you to take the challenge seriously and it provides a rigorous way of improving the way you approach the issue ethically and creatively. This article suggests how.

A reminder of the AIM approach

We don't assume that everyone has read the earlier articles in this series, so for anyone who needs it here is a summary of the AIM model.

Allowing is the practice of recognising reality for what it is. We all spend so much our time living in a "what if" world. When we are stuck in an attitude of wishing things weren't like this or an attitude of denial, there is very little choice available to us. It's fruitless to spend

time wishing the world were somehow different. When you're able to allow things to be as they actually then possibilities emerge.

Inquiry is the practice of disciplined interest in opening things up. So much of creating the future involves moving beyond the ways of seeing and acting that have brought us to the problem we're in. The ability to address the problem creatively demands that we see the world another way. We can only see another way if we are willing to look through fresh lenses. This is where nurturing a team's ability to inquire really matters.

Meta-awareness is the ability to look at the team from an 'outsider' perspective and see the behaviour of the team as it is happening. It is like looking down at the swirling patterns of people moving around a busy railway station from a high up balcony. The team learns to see itself in action. It sees what is going on its own collective behaviour and its own patterns – what it is doing while it is actually doing it.

As we discussed in our previous article, the three fundamentals of AIM – allowing, inquiry and meta-awareness – can all be learned and nourished. Let's now see how they work in the context of the challenge of creating a more human organisation.

Applying the AIM model to this problem

The first step is **Allowing**.

The most fundamental step is to acknowledge what is going on, right now, in respect of this challenge in your organisation and team. You might need to acknowledge that this issue isn't even on your corporate radar, or that you are at a very early stage in addressing it. You may also need to accept that there is disagreement – perhaps this is an issue that not everyone in the team accepts as being important for the organisation. Whatever it is, allow it.

The most important thing is to start from where you are, not to wishfully assume that everyone sees the issue in the same way with the same degree of importance. You can work with whatever level of interest and energy that exists, (including none!), but you cannot make a realistic start until you allow it to be what it is.

You will certainly need to allow the genuine emotions that arise to be acknowledged. In one organisational team we are working with, a colleague said, "my head hurts to think about this, it is so big – I am tempted to just get my head down and focus on my targets". Another said, "this feels terrifying". It is necessary to allow these feelings to be part of the work. There are deeply uncomfortable, sometimes painful things to face.

You will more than likely have to allow that there is, at least to some degree, a conflict between the way you do business and your espoused desire to contribute towards making a healthy planet.

For some of us the challenges will be quite fundamental. If your business is very carbon intensive, or directly uses chemicals on the land, you will already be wrestling with some of these issues. But if you run hotels, are in the food supply chain, or make cosmetics – to take just a few examples – you are just as tied-into these same issues although you may feel further away from them.

Compliance with environmental regulation will not be enough unless regulation becomes much bolder in intent. You may need to leap well beyond compliance and ask "how do we reinvent what we do so as to be a positive contributor to earth systems?". The harder the question, the bigger the potential gain from innovation. The starting point is allowing the question to be asked. Failing to ask it is in fact a threat to the existence of the organisation.

You will also find that some people in your team and organisation feel guilt, or unfairly burdened and blamed. The situation is not fair. The gains and pains are not evenly distributed and there are some uncomfortable truths that will have to be addressed (including really hard questions about colonialization and exploitation, which may be arriving right on your boardroom table, particularly if you are a global company. You may feel that you're being blamed for history, or that you're being asked to solve problems caused by earlier generations. Again, allow the feelings, talk about them, then use these feelings as invitations to become more fully informed.

Above all, we all need to allow ourselves to accept that we do not know the answer. The Board, the exec, the consultants you turn to, no one really has a reliable answer. No one yet knows how to be thriving and successful companies, living well on a flourishing planet. We face the ultimate exploration. There is massive learning to do. Allowing ourselves to accept that we are at least partially ignorant is an important stage in starting to find things out.

This then opens the way for **Inquiring** – the act of asking better questions can be in a catalyst for deeply radical change.

One of the first areas for curiosity is to explore relationships. As a member of the executive or leadership team, becoming curious about your organisational relationship with the planet is a great starting point. Ask: do we even care? What is the evidence that we take the viability of the earth seriously in our thinking and actions? You might choose to look at your executive agendas and your KPIs: to what extent does the needs of the living system of which you are part feature in any way in these? Be interested in what you see, and why, and see how this sits with your aspirations.

It will also be important to become curious about your organisational relationship with money and how this presents itself in your targets, and in the prioritisation between one target and another when they come into conflict.

We know at least one global company with a growth target and a net zero target, and it is plain to see which target gets backed by investment and incentives, and which one is a lower priority.

We have worked with very environmentally intelligent and committed executives who have found themselves feeling powerless to challenge harmful growth plans, one literally saying “if I tell the investors that they’ll have to accept a lower dividend, they’ll replace me as CFO in a heartbeat”. This is clear evidence that you have the wrong investors. If you find your investors cannot bear your environmental targets, you need to get curious about why you have allowed the firm to be funded by this money. There are investors looking for environmentally sound organisations: get curious about the investors you appeal to and why. It is a strategic choice to accept investors: you do not have to accept money from investors who have the wrong intent for your business.

You will also need to ask bold questions about certainties you perhaps cherish. Some of your established ways of doing business may not be future friendly. Some of your existing leadership practices may be unviable. One company we know has a clear Net Zero target – but its top executives remain reluctant to hold virtual meetings. Why? Because they find it hard to imagine their own role if it isn't travelling the world to visit sites. You may need to start some difficult (and creative) conversations about what leading well looks like in an earth-sensitive business. Some cherished ways of acting and being will have to be reinvented, particularly for some very senior roles.

And we will have to find some new language in which to do it. Much of our organisational language is trapped in an unhelpful “machine-like” way of speaking. One of the most powerful things to do is to become curious about the language you hear (and use) and about its consequences. Organisations are full of machine-speak: “stepping up a gear”, “a cog in the machine”, “oiling the wheels” and so on. Other language can simply be earth-negligent: every time we “throw something out” we are assuming that there is an

“out” to throw it. When we ask about the efficient of “resources” we are turning aspects of the planet into “things” to be used. None of the language is without consequences. Become interested in how things get said and in what the implications are of that language. Words make worlds, so explore what other ways of speaking about business might be possible.

The good news is that you don’t have to do this alone. Once you open your sights to new learning there is a world of help available. You might find yourself spoilt for choice and facing some confusion – but allow that and explore the options. Perhaps even use the range of options as a team learning opportunity. Invite your colleagues to find out all they can about different ways of creating planet-intelligent business. Have your team explore the concepts of circular economy, doughnut economics, Blueprint for Business and the B-Corp movement. Then have a process of sharing the findings and inviting people to get excited about imagining the different ways in which the insights might be used to make your organisation flourish. Sometimes inquiry is a really effective way of involving people in participative action to make something new spring into being.

As you go, keep your eye on how you are doing it. This is where meta-awareness comes in – paying attention to how you are thinking and acting while you are doing it. It is difficult to predict what you might notice as you are doing this work, but it could include patterns that support or hinder your work, include some people and views, exclude others, and open some windows to insight, whilst keeping others firmly closed. We counsel that you look out particularly for the following:

Try to notice your habitual **framing**. It is extremely likely that you will need to check-in, quite often, on the issue of “how are we framing this question”? Every way of framing something is also a way of not framing it another way. When we think about our world “this” way, it stops us considering “that” way. Try to become aware of which ways of seeing are so commonplace that you don’t see their limits.

Do pay attention to what is happening in terms of **participation** – who do we allow to be in this conversation with us? Notice the patterns of who gets included in these conversations, and whose voice carries most weight. Whatever patterns of power, inclusion and difference exist in your organisation, they will play out in these conversations. Sometimes the voices you most need to hear will be the ones you include least in the conversation – or the ones you include but who present their story in ways that are more difficult to hear. Notice this and work hard to include and hear. This also applies to kinds of **data**: you may notice patterns in what data even get considered as relevant in our organisation. The boundaries of the data we admit and accept are always influenced by the limits of our worldview. Noticing what we filter out can be an important part in allowing a richer way of seeing.

You may also notice that you have regular, even stuck, patterns when it comes to issues of identity – pay attention to how this thinking may limit your scope for creating new outcomes: For example, you may find yourself assuming that your company can’t exist if it isn’t like this. We are limited by the way we define identity – and sometimes it can be fatal. The famous old story of “we are in the book business not the computer business” is still a salutary lesson.

Meta-awareness can be difficult to build on your own. This is where peer scrutiny and team coaching can be a very valuable asset – helping us all to notice the things that are hardest to see. But it is absolutely a learnable skill. The more you apply yourself to the practice, the greater the fruits.

A few closing words

There is no greater challenge before us than the opportunity to recreate our world of business so as to contribute to a healthy and viable planet. Whilst it is not “our fault” that

we are in this position – where we are now is the cumulative effect of generations of flawed understanding and resulting action – but it does fall to this generation of leaders to be part of creating a wiser way of business. This article cannot of course lay out all of the issues that need to be addressed, but we hope that it has shown that, however you choose to play your part in making the future, the practices and approaches of Team Mindfulness and the AIM methodology will help you to do the work.

Forthcoming articles in this series will explore the application of mindful work to good practice in virtual and flexible working, and the application of the AIM model to achieving fairness in diversity and inclusion in organisations.