

Research culture is complicated:

EMPATHY DOESN'T COUNT.

But it still matters.

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What does empathic and inclusive research leadership look and feel like in higher education?

16 research leaders · 32 researchers

creative workshops · in-depth interviews · reflexive thematic analysis

Empathy is

Not a trait or abstract. A practice.

Notice strain. Respond to vulnerability. Acknowledge difference. Act with care.

Researchers feel its presence and absence.

Empathy shows up in everyday moments.

being heard

being asked,
not assumed

being
acknowledged

being able to
disagree

being seen
beyond the
output

And those moments are not small. They shape researchers:



Confidence

Do I feel taken seriously here?



Belonging

Do I feel like I belong here?

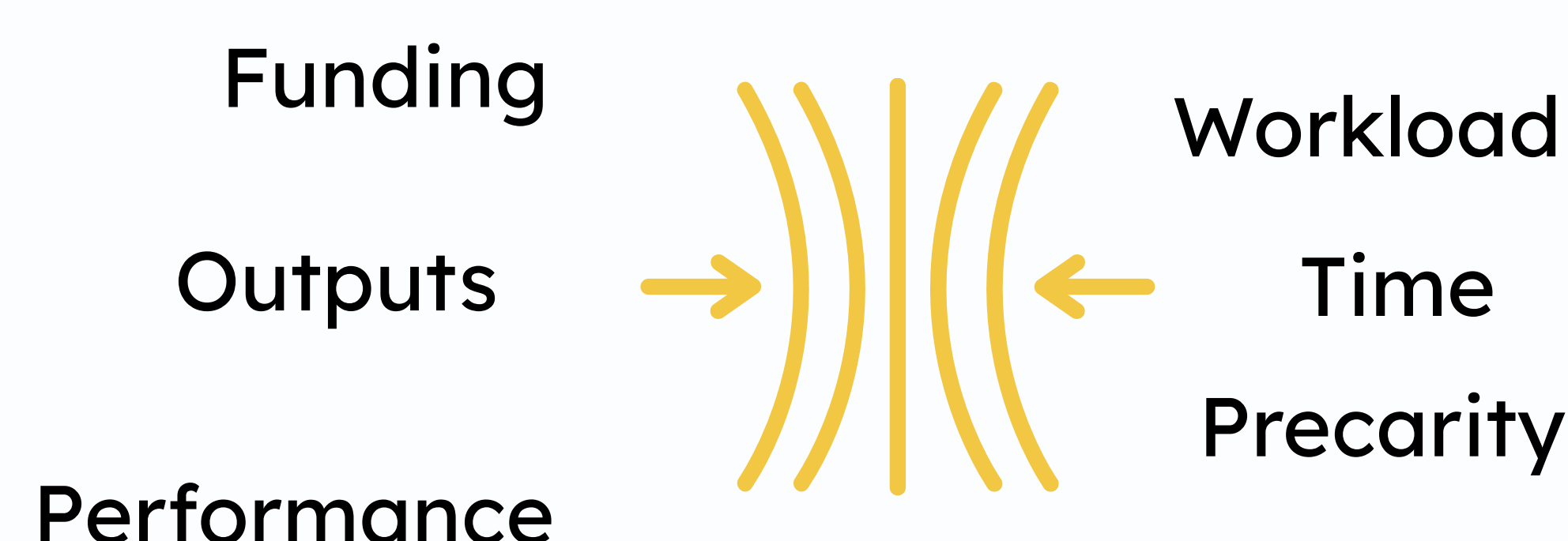


Resilience

Can I keep doing this?

This is not a bad leader problem

Many leaders wanted to lead with empathy. The problem is whether the system gave them the time, support and incentive to do it.



And this is where research culture gets complicated

“People management is not in my promotion metric...There's no incentive for me, other than goodwill, to do right by them.”

We count:

REF · Outputs
Funding · KPIs
Performance

We talk about:

Collaboration EDI
Empathy
Inclusion Belonging
Culture Psychological safety

The mismatch:

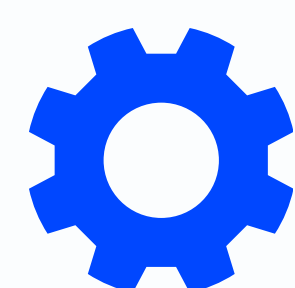
If empathy shapes who contributes, who belongs and who stays in academia, why doesn't it count in how we recognise good leadership?

So what needs to change?



RECOGNISE IT

Make relational leadership visible.



DEVELOP IT

Give leaders space to learn, reflect and practice.



ENABLE IT

Give leaders time and support.