

Cycles of Learning to Action (COLA)



Learning Seminar - 'Learning is part of the work'

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Facilitated by National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP)

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Session Outline

1. Cycles of Learning to Action Recap
 - a. What is COLA?
 - b. Why is COLA important?
 - c. Linkage to Place-Based Systemic Working
2. Approaches
 - a. Psychological Safety - Leicester Example
 - b. Building a Culture of Curiosity – East Riding Example
3. Close



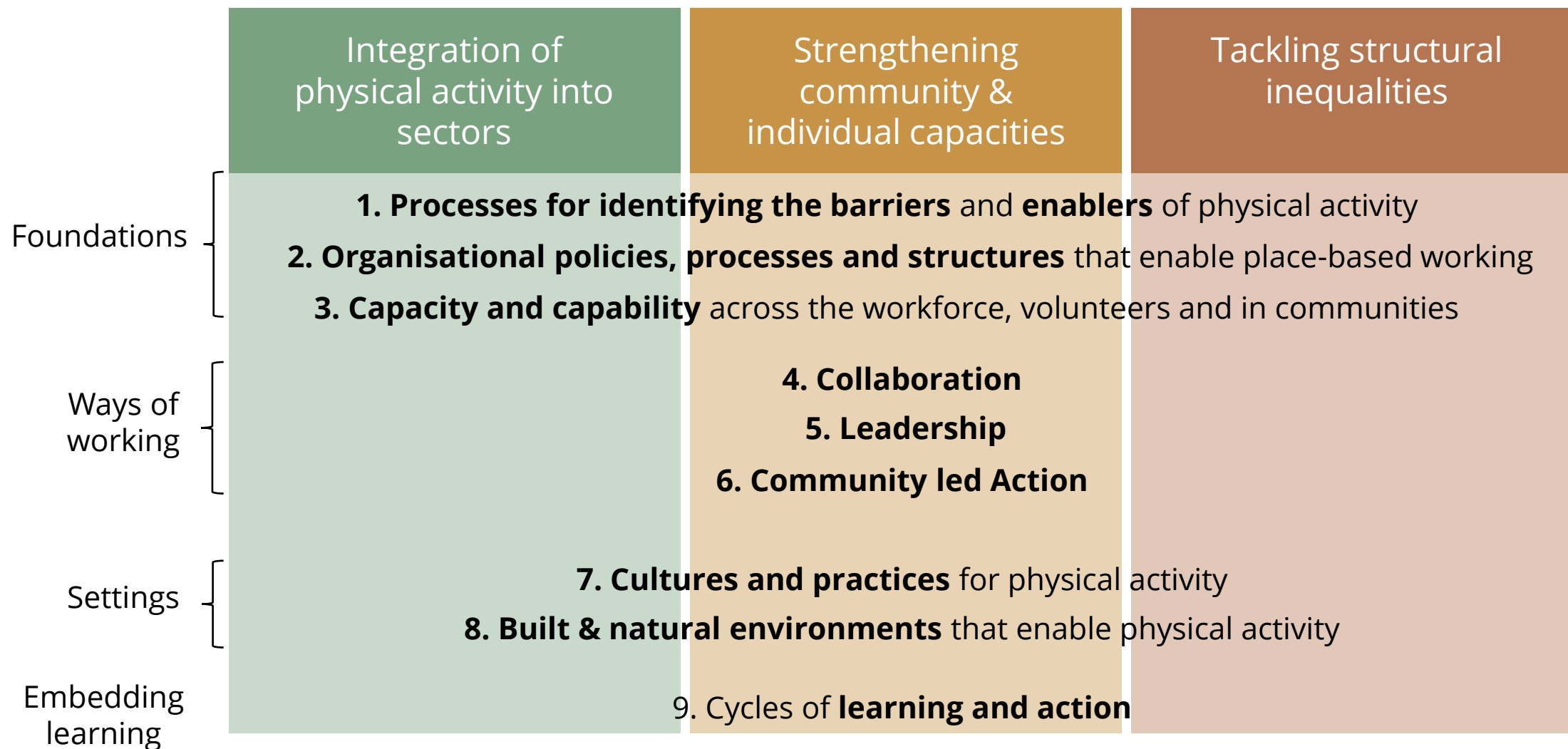


National Evaluation and Learning Partnership

- The Sport England Strategy *Uniting the Movement* aims to tackle stubborn inequalities in physical activity
- Addressing inequalities requires public services, residents, voluntary organisations and other stakeholders to take coordinated action across multiple influences to address the causes of inactivity - *Place-based Systemic Approaches* (PBSA)
- The National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP) works with Sport England, local partnerships and communities to support learning and evaluation, to develop understanding of how to address inequalities in physical activity.
- Over 100 Place Partnerships are now funded by SE and supported by NELP
- In Autumn 2025, 63 places participated in our Configurational Comparative Analysis evaluation



System Maturity Conditions for Place-based Systemic Approaches to Physical Activity Inequalities





Seminar Message: Learning is the work

What do we mean by Cycles of Learning to Action?





What do we mean by Cycles of Learning to Action?

Condition Definition:

'There are appropriate methods in place to learn from experience and, over time, improve place-based working to address physical inactivity.' (SMM, 2025)

Sub-Condition Definitions:

- A. Learning Culture
- B. Embedded Learning Processes
- C. Evaluation uses appropriate methods for place-based working

System Maturity Matrix:

You can access the full [System Maturity Matrix](#) via our website – **www.evaluatingcomplexity.org** - for a more detailed explanation of how these conditions.

For more information on Cycles of Learning to Action (COLA) you can check out our [essence document](#) which is also available via our website.



What does **learning culture** mean in your place?

Why are COLA important for Place-based Systemic Working?



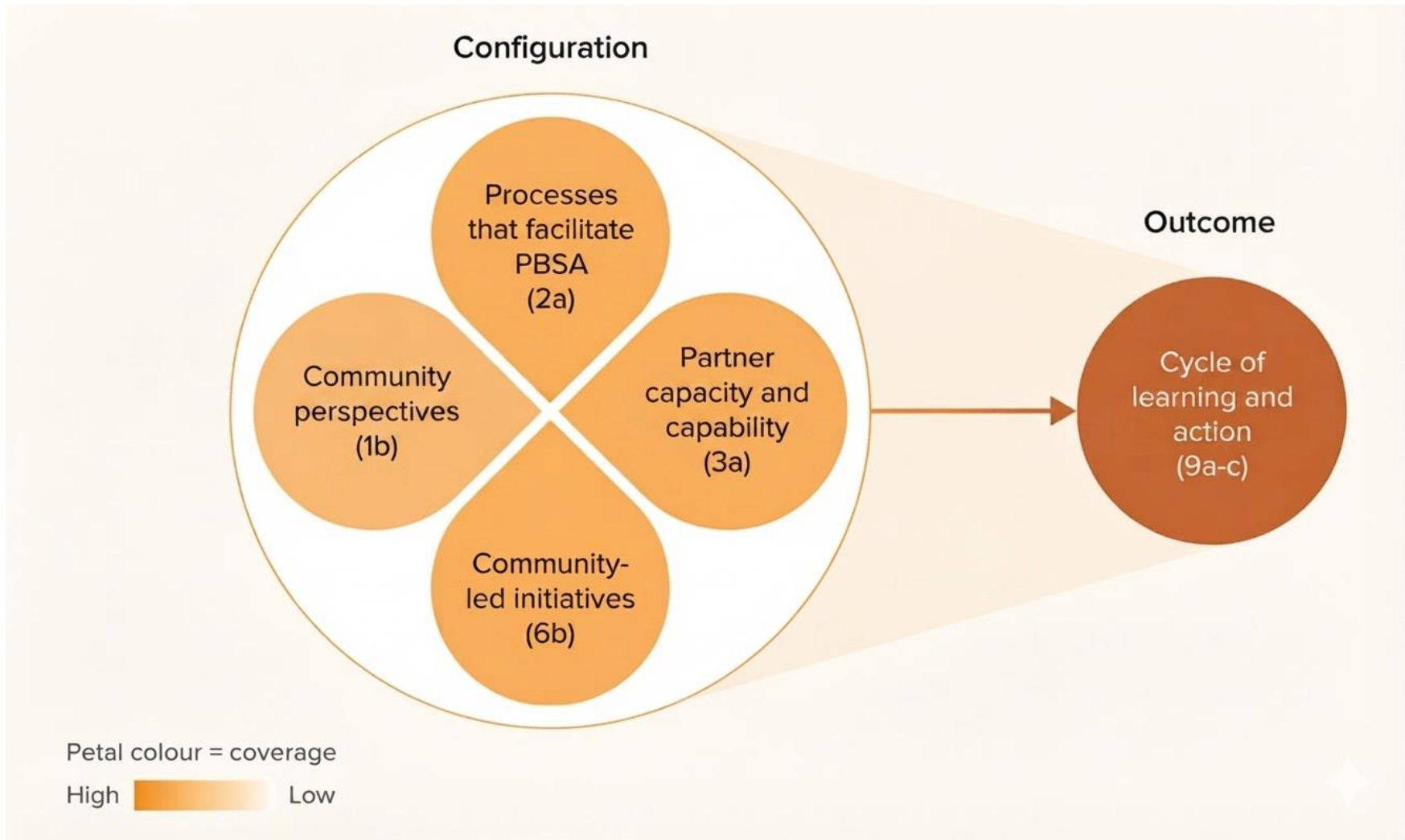


Why is COLA important for Place-based Systemic Working?

Principle	Why it matters for PBSA	Examples
Learning is the work	Reflection is embedded into everyday work rather than treated as a separate activity.	Weekly reflective meetings, process learning meetings, reflective sessions/debriefs.
Action generates knowledge	Trying things in practice provides evidence about what works, for whom, under what conditions.	Test and learn, adapting approaches.
Multiple forms of evidence matter	Decisions are informed by multiple forms of data and insight.	Stories of Change, qual/quant data.
Learning is local and ongoing	Continuous feedback/reflections helps interventions remain responsive to changing local contexts and communities.	Stakeholder-led insight and reporting.



Configurational Analysis – Cycles of Learning & Action



Cycles of learning and action (9a): Maturity 2025, 20 Places

Understanding COLA in Practice





Understanding COLA in Practice

What are Active Ingredients and Pathways?

Active Ingredients are the core actions and behaviours that actually make change happen in a place.

Pathways show the journey - they map out how different conditions connect to embed a culture of learning. We identify these patterns and continuously refine them as we gather more insight.

What informs these examples?

We are constantly developing our understanding of PBSW across our work. The examples and 'in practice' material in this learning seminar is shaped by our most recent data collection – the E&L Spring 2026 Reporting together with the CCA analysis based on Autumn 2025 data.

Creating Safe Spaces for Honest Reflection



Active Ingredient

Psychological Safety. Changing the way evaluation is framed so people are not afraid of failing.

IF: systems invest staff time (**Capacity - 3a**) into creating regular, informal spaces for partners and residents to share struggles as well as successes (**Processes - 2a**)

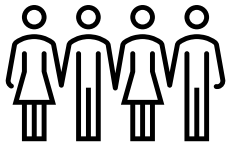
THEN: reflective practice becomes a daily habit rather than a dreaded audit (**Cycles of Learning - 9**)

BECAUSE: people feel safe enough to admit when something is not working, allowing the system to adapt quickly to support true community needs (**Community-led Action - 6b**)

In Practice

Places have set up informal or shared reflection spaces and funding partners' time to attend, focusing on 'what we learned' rather than 'what went wrong'. Partners felt safe to adapt their approaches and better support local initiatives

Enabling Communities to Test and Learn



Active Ingredient

Reducing administrative barriers. Using system staff to support with the complex paperwork so communities have the freedom to *test, fail, and learn*.

IF: a dedicated support team (**Capacity - 3a**) simplifies rules and offers easy-to-access small grants (**Processes - 2a**)

THEN: communities are empowered to immediately test their own physical activity ideas (**Community-led Action - 6b**), generating rapid, real-world insights (**Cycles of Learning - 9**)

BECAUSE: removing intimidating paperwork and the fear of making a mistake gives residents the freedom to experiment and learn what actually works for their neighbourhood.

In Practice

Place used their core team to navigate complex council rules on behalf of local groups. They paired this with simple micro grants. Because the administrative burden was removed, residents quickly set up their own local activities and freely shared their feedback, creating a fast-paced "test and learn" environment.

Connecting Staff Across Sectors



Active Ingredient

Workforce integration. Positioning staff across multiple sectors so that knowledge is shared rather than kept in isolated silos

IF: a system changes its structure (**Processes - 2a**) to position workers across multiple sectors, such as health, local councils, and community groups (**Capacity - 3a**)

THEN: learning and evaluation naturally travel across the whole system (**Cycles of Learning - 9**)

BECAUSE: these workers act as human bridges, carrying authentic insights from grassroots community action (**Community-led Action - 6b**) directly into high-level strategic meetings

In Practice

Places intentionally positioned staff within primary care networks, schools, and community hubs. These staff members became the connective tissue of the system, ensuring that learning from the community, such as a local walking group was immediately shared with health commissioners

Valuing Community Experiences as Real Evidence



Active Ingredient

Capturing Community Perspective. Treating resident stories and daily experiences as highly valuable, strategic data

IF: organisations establish formal ways (**Processes - 2a**) to capture and validate resident stories and lived experiences (**Community Perspectives - 1b**)

THEN: the system roots its learning and evaluation rather than chasing numerical targets (**Cycles of Learning - 9**)

BECAUSE: treating community voices as real evidence ensures that subsequent funding and support are directed toward activities the community wants to lead (**Community-led Action - 6b**)

In Practice

A place shifted away from only looking at attendance numbers. They began systematically collecting "Stories of Change" from residents and made these stories the centerpiece of their strategic board meetings. By treating these narratives as vital data, they learned how to design support that fit the local culture



Break – 5 mins

Leicester

Building Psychological Safety



East Riding

Building a Culture of Curiosity



EAST YORKSHIRE PLACE PARTNERSHIP

Building a Culture of Curiosity

What our evaluation found about passivity, curiosity and what it takes for learning to become part of the work in East Yorkshire



Picking up where the session left us

The question underneath it: those cycles don't turn by themselves. Something has to make reflection feel safe enough to be honest in, worth doing under real pressure, and connected enough to actually change what happens next.

What EYPP set out to understand: across East Yorkshire, what was actually enabling that — or getting in the way? Not as a theory to be applied, but as a pattern that kept emerging from the evidence.

This is a feedback of that learning — drawn from realist evaluation across three very different communities.



A pattern, not a framework

What we kept seeing:

Organisations delivering programmes, hitting KPIs, attending meetings and writing reports — but rarely asking how it was working, why something wasn't landing, or what the people they were serving were actually experiencing. Evaluation was a compliance task, not a learning one. The activity was real. The curiosity loop wasn't firing.

Why reflection doesn't happen:

In the dominant culture, reflection isn't counted as real work. Stopping to ask 'how is this working?' feels like a distraction from delivery — or worse, a risk. If you raise a problem, you might inherit the job of fixing it. So the safer move is to keep delivering and report what was done.

This is what curiosity changes: when inquiry becomes part of the work — valued, protected, expected — the loop can complete.



Why we stopped calling it "learning"

We changed 'learning' to 'curiosity'. 'Learning' carried the weight of school — of being taught, assessed, corrected. People heard 'you're doing it wrong', not 'we're interested in what's happening'.

The problem with "learning"

It asks people to admit what they don't know — which feels like exposure when you are already delivering under real performance pressure.

What "curiosity" does instead

It invites anyone connected to the work — delivery staff, community members, commissioners — to ask 'how is this working?' and 'why?' No expertise required. And crucially, that's not a fixing conversation. It's the starting point for one. It invites interest in what's being observed, not judgement of what's been done. No admission required — just attention to what the evidence is actually saying.

In a system already under pressure, the words we use decide whether people bring their honest picture or their best-looking one — and whether they feel entitled to ask 'why' at all.



A continuum, not a switch

This line operates at every level — individual, team and place. The same person can sit at different points depending on context, safety, and capacity. The job is to understand where energy is getting stuck, and why.



PASSIVITY

COMPLIANCE

CURIOSITY

Delivering and reporting without asking how or why it's working — inquiry isn't counted as part of the job

Doing the reflective activities, but insight doesn't complete the loop — it never quite reaches the people or decisions that could act on it

Inquiry is part of the work — insight reaches action, and practice visibly changes as a result

This isn't fixed. Trust, fear, and permission move a place along this line — in either direction — week to week. External conditions matter too: restructuring, burnout, and system-level instability can pull individuals and teams back toward the left — not because of passivity as a culture, but because capacity to do anything outside default mode has run out.



Two ways of working, in constant tension

Our research found that the pull toward passivity isn't just internal — it comes from the interaction between how the system is set up and how EYPP is trying to work. People move between both, constantly.

THE DOMINANT WAY OF WORKING	↔	THE APPROACH EYPP IS DEVELOPING
Metrics and targets drive decisions		Relationships and trust drive decisions
Success is measured, difficulty is hidden		Curiosity about difficulty is welcomed
Showing initiative risks 'being given the job'		Contributing ideas is separate from delivering them
Expertise signals competence — not knowing is a weakness		Not knowing is a starting point — anyone can ask why
Accountability = who is responsible		Accountability = learning together

The dominant way of working has a gravitational pull — returning to familiar patterns takes no effort. Working differently requires active relational investment and permission.



Two loops, reinforcing themselves

THE PASSIVITY LOOP



↳ loops back and reinforces the pattern

THE CURIOSITY LOOP



↳ loops back and reinforces the pattern



Where this is developing in our place

HIGHEST TRACTION: EVALUATION AS LEARNING

In PACE spaces and Evaluation Mash-ups, community members are co-interpreting evidence rather than receiving findings. Reflection is happening in real time — not as a compliance report, but as a shared act of making sense. This is what the curiosity loop turning actually looks like.

Reflection built into practice

EYPP reflection spaces, Systems Soirées and Public Health Reflection sessions are establishing a rhythm — with explicit endorsement to share what isn't working, not just what is.

Learning loops are closing

Process learning reports are informing decisions, not sitting in a folder. The insight from one cycle is reaching the next. That closing of the loop is what moves curiosity from an intention to a practice.

Psychological safety present

The team has built the conditions where people can sit with discomfort, question co-production, and challenge assumptions. These are the preconditions the curiosity loop depends on.



What's still fragile

The passivity loop is still dominant beyond our spaces

The curiosity loop is firing within the EYPP team and in EYPP-hosted spaces. In the wider system, the default is still deliver-report-repeat. KPIs are being met — but whether the work is achieving its intended outcomes is rarely asked.

The system protects busyness over inquiry

Output pressure fills the space curiosity needs. Reflective spaces get cancelled. Dedicated time to ask 'how and why' is treated as a luxury — even when the evidence that would change practice is sitting there unused.

Evaluation as compliance, not learning, remains the norm

Across the wider system, evaluation is still predominantly used to evidence what was done, not to understand what it achieved or why. Until the purpose of evaluation shifts — from accountability to inquiry — the curiosity loop can't complete at system level. Performance culture makes this harder: when the numbers look fine, there is little permission to question whether the right things are being measured.

How much to share — and with whom

One of our live challenges: how to surface learning in ways that spark curiosity in partners rather than overwhelming them. This is the tension card 8 dynamic — people can see the value and not know where to start. We don't have this fully resolved.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR PLACE

Three things to carry away

1

Passivity isn't absence of activity — it's activity without inquiry

Organisations can be busy, delivering, reporting and hitting KPIs while the curiosity loop is entirely absent. The question is not 'are we doing things?' but 'are we learning anything from them?'

2

The language you use decides who can participate

When evaluation signals compliance, people produce compliance. When it signals curiosity, people bring their honest picture. The shift isn't tone — it's about who feels safe enough to say what's actually happening.

3

Curiosity is how learning becomes part of the work — not an add-on

In the dominant culture, reflection isn't counted as real work. Curiosity is what changes that: when asking how and why is valued and protected, inquiry stops being a task bolted on after delivery and becomes the thing that makes delivery worth doing.



Condition Community



Plenary



Close