

The Maverick Organisation

Abstract

In recent years, Australia has faced several volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic, floods, fires, and a changing geo-political context. Consequently, it is timely to explore strategies that enable public organisations to respond to VUCA situations (OECD, 2020). Public service leaders must balance risk in ways that facilitates testing, learning, and adapting, thereby developing the skills and responsiveness needed to excel during the next crisis. Mavericks have uniquely aligned attributes such as values-based decision making, creative thinking, goal focused, and boundary pushing behaviours of (Jordan et al., 2021) which could pose a solution. This research is guided by the novel position that as “deep learners” (Gardiner & Jackson, 2015, p. 731) maverick’s can be harnessed at the organisational level to improve innovation, learning and responsiveness. Using Bourdieu’s practice theory as a theoretical framework, this qualitative study applies thematic analysis to examine how maverickism is enabled or constrained within a military organisation. The findings reveal how the social environment within the field influences the propensity for maverickism. These insights offer opportunities for organisations to address barriers to maverickism and provides guidance on how to reshape the environmental conditions towards a maverick organisation that fosters innovation, learning and responsiveness.

Aims: The thesis purposes that maverickism through positive deviance and non-conformity provides a set of dispositions that foster learning change and innovation. In summary, the research:

- Contributes to existing literature on the phenomenon of maverickism;
- Explores the environmental conditions (field, capital, habitus) that promote or constrain maverick behaviours;
- Puts forward new conceptual insights about the phenomenon of maverickism;
- Develops practical insights and methodologies enabling maverickism to be leveraged to challenge the status quo and improve organisational learning.

“If we look at in times of conflict or military innovation... you do need to have maverick thinkers out there. Otherwise, you become repetitive and stale in an organisation... there needs to be maverick thought, I think (it) needs to be encouraged and recognized.”

(Participant 2005)

Research Question

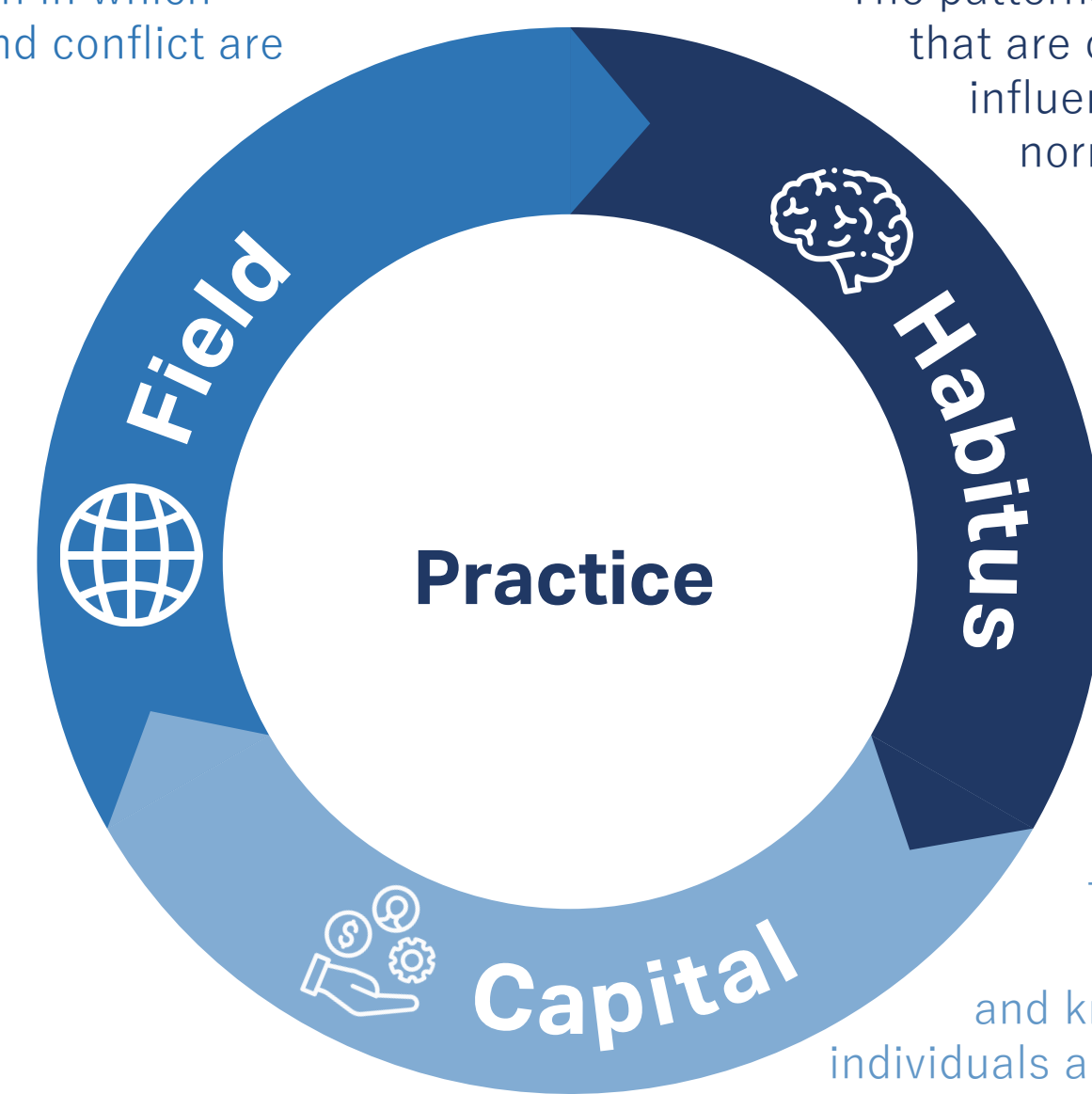
“How do the environmental conditions (field, capital and habitus) and power relationships enable or constrain successful maverick behaviours which seek to improve innovation, responsiveness, and learning?”

Methodology

Pierre Bourdieu (1990) theoretical framework develops three epistemological tools—field, capital, and habitus.

Bourdieu describes these interactions between the field, capital, and power, using the analogy of a game of football, where the actors within the organisation are described as ‘players’, who’s skills are their valued capital used to play the game within the ‘field of play’ (i.e., organisational culture). The players who hold greater skills (capital), within the socio-political arena can gain more influential positions of play, thereby gaining power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Jordan, 2019).

The domain in which strategy and conflict are pursued.



The patterns of behaviour that are created by the influence of culture, norms, and social structures.

The resources such as skills and knowledge that individuals and groups use to maintain or improve their position in the social order.

Figure 1. Bourdieu’s epistemological tools: field, capital and habitus

To analyse the data, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis is iterative and continuous process in which new data are compared to previous data and various sources to identify broad conceptual categories from which theory development can emerge and to validate themes across data sets.

The ‘eight metaphors’ identified by Alvesson (2003) provided a reflexive theoretical framework for the researcher to question and challenge assumptions

Research Design

Document Review
195 publicly available data sources such as government documents, defence publications, articles, news media and webpages.
Aim: To analyse espoused values, valued capital, structures and emerging needs.

Senior Leaders
9 senior leaders semi-structured interviews.
Aim: To identify emerging capital needs and what kind of transformative habitus could aid in meeting these needs.

Management Staff
23 management level staff, each undertaking approx. one hour semi-structured interview.
Aim: To analyse environmental conditions, valued capital and power relationships on maverick behaviours.

Operational Staff
20 operational level staff, each undertaking approx. one hour semi-structured interview.
Aim: To analyse environmental conditions, valued capital and power relationships on maverick behaviours.

Results

The field of power is the source of the hierarchical power which structures the field (Jenkins, 2002). Initial analysis of the field of power identifies several key positions which wield influence within the field. Figure 2 demonstrates how each of these positions influence the field differently through lobbying, public influence, policy, regulations, reviews, and funding. The cascading effect demonstrates the power dynamics within the field, with the Australia public and media influencing government, government influencing Defence and then the sample group.

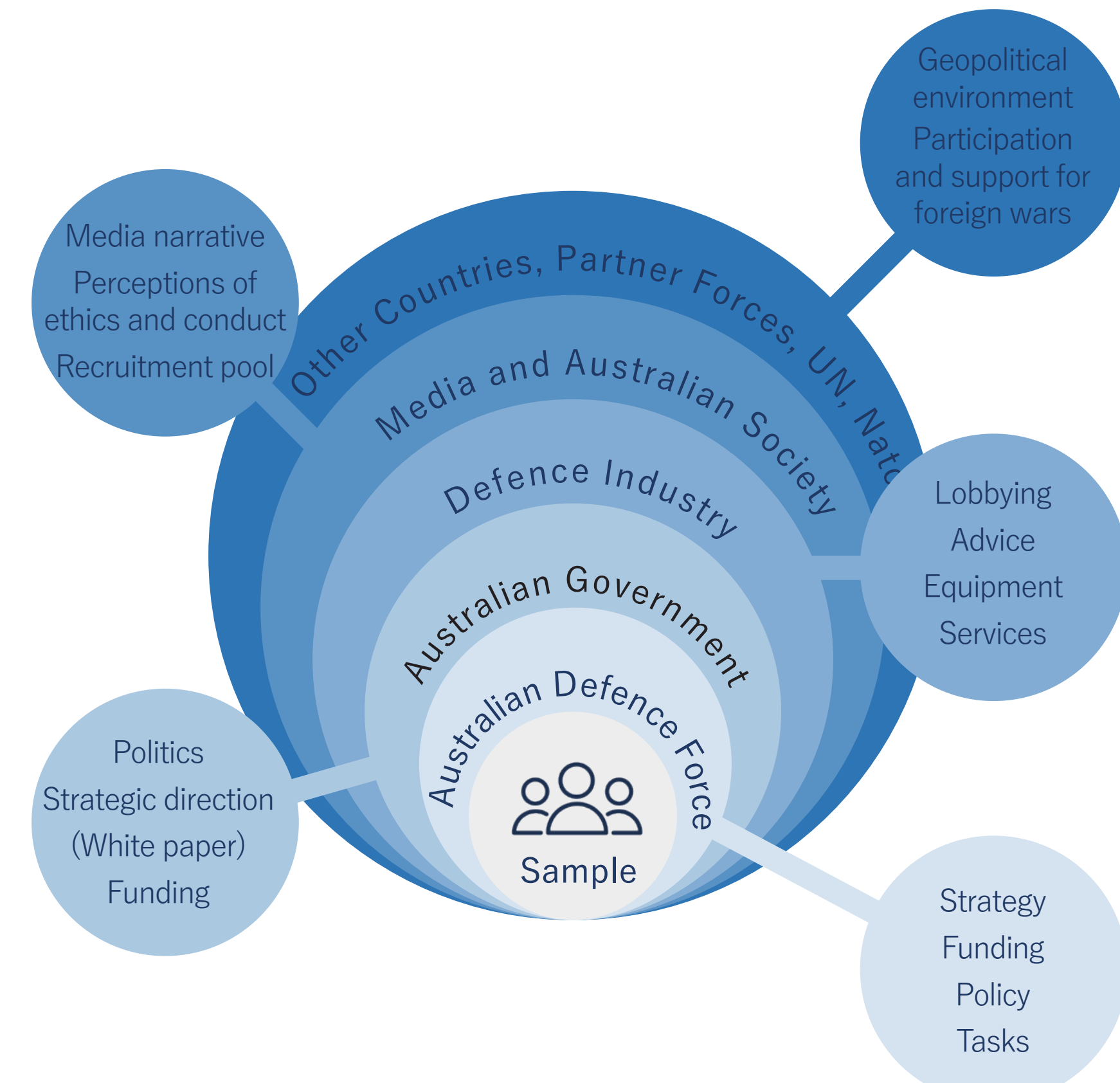


Figure 2. The field of power

Figure 3 highlights how this flow of power influences practices in the field in a two way flow. The example follows the ADFA Skype Scandal, an incident where a student filmed themselves and another student having sex without their permission and shared the footage with classmates. This incident was spread by the media, which resulted in public outcry, resulting in the defence minister announcing 6 reviews into defence and its culture. From these review Pathways to change provided a program to implement recommendations from the reviews, increasing accountability frameworks, oversight and reporting requirements.



Figure 3. The ADFA Skype Scandal field of power flow

The findings identified explicit rules of the game as: act with purpose; be adaptable, innovative and agile; collaborate and be team-focused; reflect, learn and improve and be inclusive. Comparatively implicit rules identified: service and commitment (50); follow the rules (143); respect authority and your place (165); excellence - fear of failure (49). This comparison highlighted a tension exists between these competing sets of rules, creating inconsistencies that impact organisational functioning and individuals practice of maverickism. As Bourdieu (1990) attests practices are not merely individual actions but are embedded in and perpetuated by the social context. When the social context has a misalignment, several issues can occur. The tension manifest in frustration, mistrust, change resistance, and inconsistent behaviours (Hoogervorst et al., 2004).

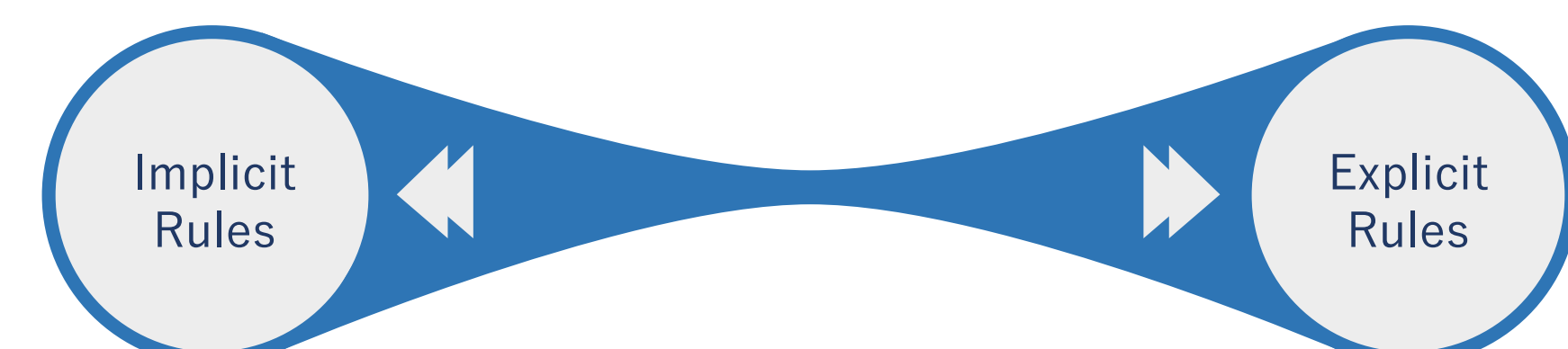


Figure 4. Tensions between implicit and explicit rules of the game

“This paradox of desiring innovation yet suppressing the consequences of actual innovation produces a culture of convergent thinking, adherence to written and unwritten rules, and a risk avoidance mentality where only those ideas that already nest with existing constructs are welcome.”

(Zweibelson, 2024 p.1)

Figure 5 illustrates the environmental conditions that constrain the practice of maverickism in the field. These constraining features act as a reinforcing cycle, resisting change and perpetuating existing power structures through symbolic violence. Existing literature confirms that environments that place high value on conformity are not conducive to maximising maverick potential (Cheverton et al., 2000; Jordan, 2019; Jordan et al., 2023). Jordan et al. (2021) advises that for organisations to benefit from maverickism, traditional management structures need to temper their constraining practices. This includes “the predominant culture” which “enforces social conformity” (Jordan et al., 2021, p. 128).

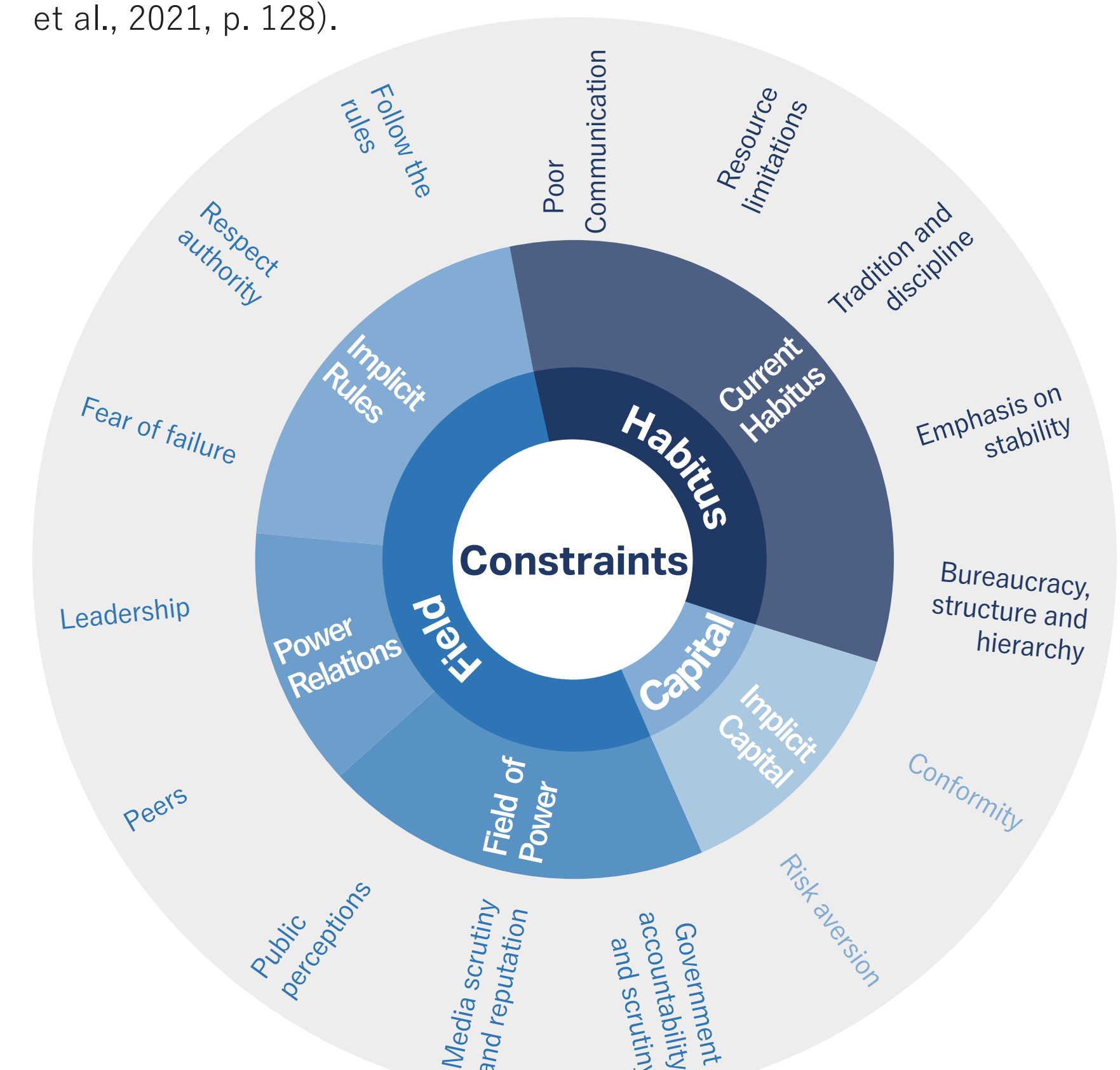


Figure 5. Reinforcing power structures constraining maverick behaviours

At all levels of the organisation, participants stated that ‘maverick enablers’ such as supportive leadership or peers, assisted in their ability to push boundaries, make changes, or challenge rules. As Participant 3006 stated:

“It’s important if you want to change things. You need some level of authority in this organization because it’s very hierarchical. It’s very difficult for a junior person to change things. Unless they’re empowered to do so.” (Participant 3006)

Bourdieu acknowledges the capability to “make the world, to preserve or change it” (Wacquant & Akçaoğlu, 2017, p. 57). To create change, environmental conditions which enable maverickism need to become more prominent in the field. These maverick enablers are identified at Figure 6.

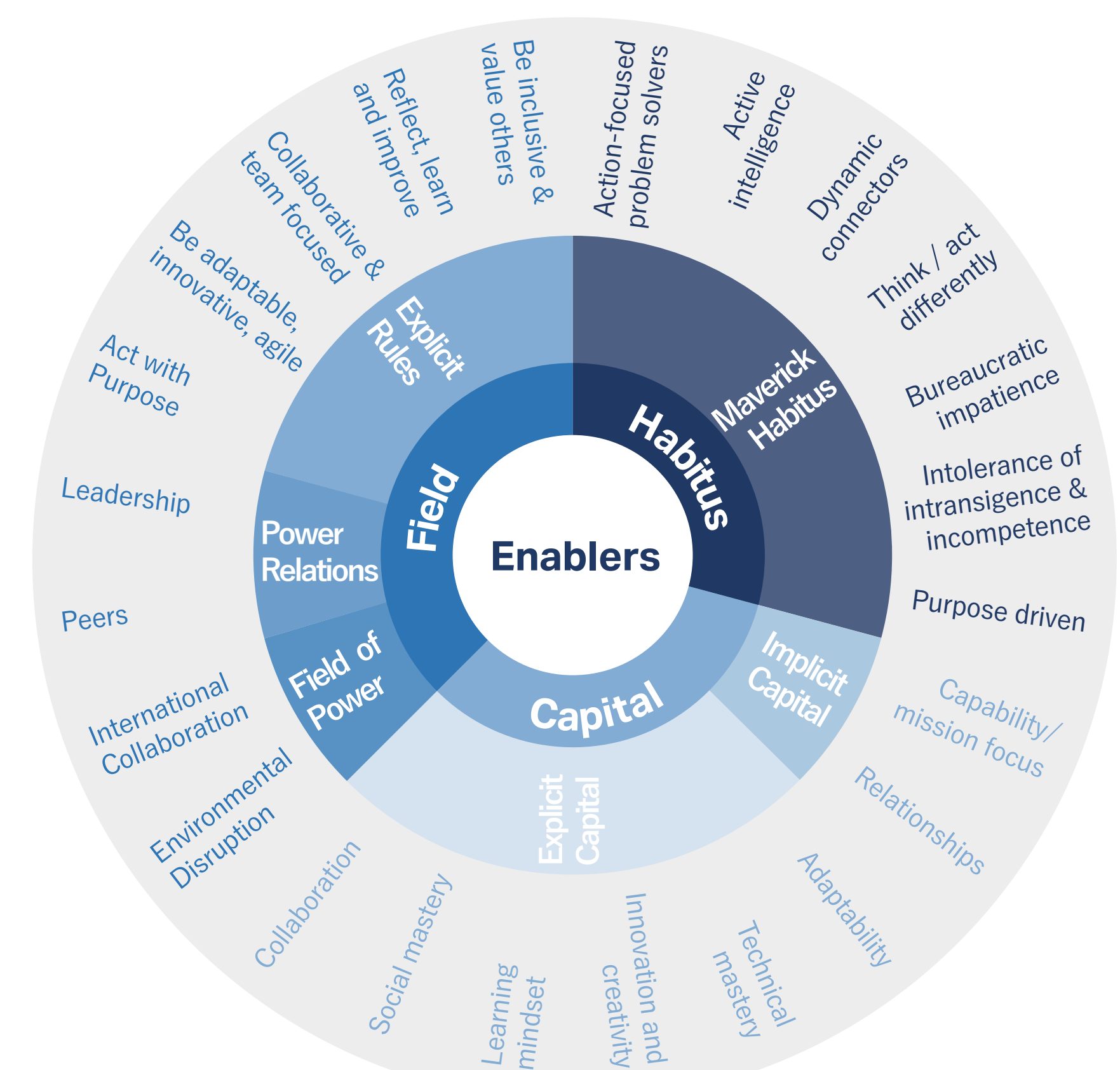


Figure 6. Maverick enabling environmental conditions

Discussion

Participants indicated that their propensity for maverick behaviours was dependent on the social environment. As such, this research has identified these enabling and constraining features of the social environment. Through changes in the social environment to support maverickism, public sector organisations that operate in VUCA environments can increase maverick behaviours and benefit from unique maverick dispositions which improves learning, innovation and responsiveness.

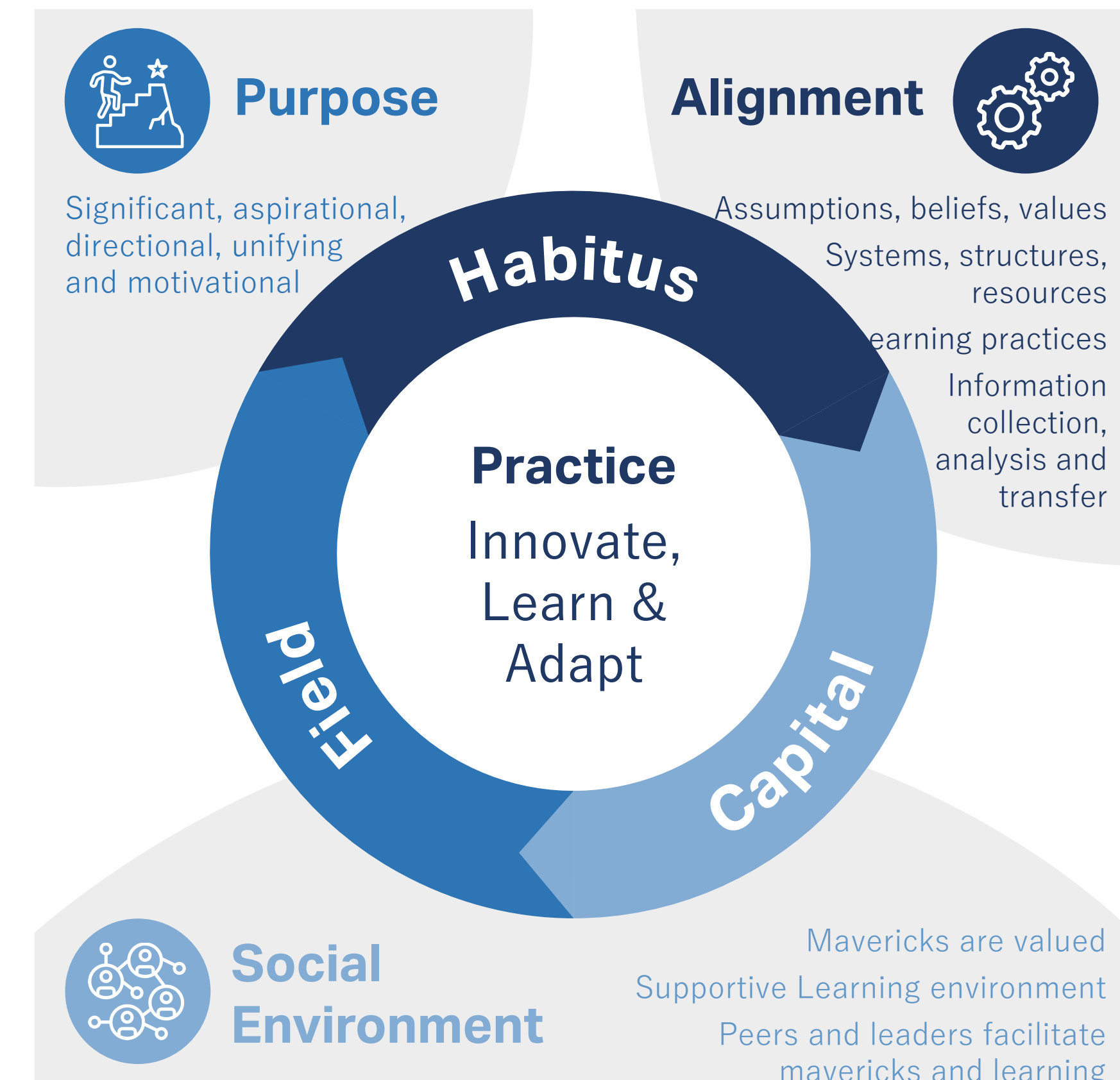


Figure 7. Conceptual model of a maverick organisation

Beyond just identifying the enabling conditions, I take inspiration from existing research by Schein (1990); Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008); Jordan (2019) and the findings to propose a new conceptual model (see Figure 7.) which provides a framework on how to implement an environment where maverick innovation and learning can flourish. This model is based on the following conclusion that emerged from the findings:

Purpose + Alignment + Social Environment = The maverick learning organisation (practice = innovate, learn, and adapt)

This model addresses the need to guide maverick behaviours with clear purpose and values, while aligning the structures, systems and assumptions to facilitate learning. The final step is creating a supportive social environment where individuals can share ideas, and be supported to pursue innovation and learning.

This research has extended our knowledge of maverickism and proposed practical solutions to public sector organisations burden by bureaucracy and stagnation. By embracing a maverick disposition, organisations can foster innovation, learning and adaptation.

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