Leading Culture Change

Insights from five Leadership Conversations

Contents

Chapter 1

Connect
not convince

"If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you ..."

If, by Rudyard Kipling, *circa 1895*

These are the first two lines of Kipling's poem **If**, written in a style of giving advice to his son John on the challenge of becoming a man.

In so many ways, they capture one of the key virtues that leaders are occasionally called on to display: the ability to draw on their courage to demonstrate calmness at a time of crisis.

It is this capacity for calmness that can enable an outstanding leader to let the blame of others float above them.

In so many crises and emergencies where leaders have achieved a powerful connection with others, what they have spoken about afterwards has been their **state of being** rather than what they said.

As Captain of the ship, the leader's role is sometimes to act as **Chief Reassurer**, steering the ship through turbulent waters, offering an authoritative and calming presence when others are pressing the panic button.

In this situation, the leader is called on not to convince those who are "losing their head" that they've got it wrong, but rather to embody the calmness and focus that the situation calls for.

This achieves a connection with others that enables them to take their finger off the panic button.

"If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too ..."

Kipling's If

We know that many leaders have a high degree of self-trust. The challenge is in knowing when our levels of self-trust are actually too high and lead to us becoming **over-reliant** on what our intuition tells us.

Whenever this happens, we can easily find ourselves unable to check ourselves if we are actually in the process of making a mistake.

This danger is compounded by the fact that others tend to hold back from challenging us when they see us as heavily reliant on our sense of intuition.

Why take on anyone who has already made up their mind that they're right?

This is why it is so incredibly important that we stress - time and again - how much we are up for being challenged.

Having freed ourselves from any need to convince others that we are right, we should be in a strong position to welcome genuine challenge.

We can draw insights from the "doubting" of others and in the process model one of the key behaviours essential to creating an open and vibrant culture.

"If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat these two imposters just the same ....."

Kipling's If

We drew a lot from these lines, and they helped us to understand why some Fellows who strike the rest of us as successful are so reluctant to describe themselves in this way.

We have all been in situations heralded by others as a triumph, and yet viewed by ourselves through the prism of "could have been better".

Similarly, we have surely all lived through moments that some others described as disastrous - and we know could have been a lot worse than they were!

Both terms can so easily become imposters whenever we fail to link them to the insights and lessons that they offer us.

The hyperbole of triumphs and disasters can be positively unhelpful, which is why one Fellow said that "*success comes not through what we do but through the* **learning**".

Rather than seeking triumphs, why not just aim for ongoing movement forward?

This way, we can focus more clearly on the scope that always remains for self-improvement, whether we are part of a near-triumph or a near-disaster.

"Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story ..."

Desiderata, Max Ehrmann, *1927*

In the very buzzy WhatsApp group that we set up after this Leadership Conversation, we reminded ourselves of the resonance between our discussions and Max Ehrmann's famous poem Desiderata.

Our emphasis on leaders being calm and serene evoked his famous opening phrase, "*Go placidly amid the noise and the haste*".

His words about speaking our truth quietly are especially relevant to our theme of connect not convince.

They make so much sense once we see our mission as being about engaging with others and listening hard to what they have to say, rather than winning converts to our cause!

One Fellow reminded us of the importance of "slow looking" in the visual arts. It is this skill of slowing down the pace sometimes, and probing more deeply, that is so key to outstanding leadership.

The more we speak our truth quietly and clearly, the easier it is to focus our attention on others doing the same.

*"Let me tell you
again why I'm
right"*

*"I feel as if I'm just
about to be run over
by a steamroller"*

We include this exchange above because we had a powerful discussion about the danger of some of us developing "steamroller-like behaviours".

This theme enabled us to confront head-on the challenge that some of us face when others feel flattened by the force of our energy!

It is a particularly strong challenge for leaders who can become really passionate during debate and argue their case with such force that others find themselves switching off.

In these moments the passionate leader can either keep going, on the basis that they are just being "true to themselves", or slow down and talk more quietly, on the basis that they have lost their connection with others and want to re-establish it.

When we view this from the standpoint of connect not convince, there isn't really much of a choice, is there?

We step out of our steamroller.

The fact that we didn't intend to flatten anyone should make it easier to think again about how we might best adjust our style in order to reconnect.

"Thank you for all of your ideas this afternoon"

"She really listens, doesn't she"

"Whatever she decides, I'm up for it!"

In so many situations, we seem to make the assumption that we need others to agree with us for them to do what we are asking of them.

Whilst this might sometimes be true, there are many professional situations where the opposite is the case!

Senior leaders will say that they would rather be part of a minority that has been listened to, and respected, than part of a consensus that depends on them pretending to agree with what they actually believe to be wrong.

Once we choose connection over conviction, it is easier for teams to come together as one, knowing that they hold different views and defer to each other at times on the basis that the honesty and integrity of their relationships come first.

Once we are connected, we can act as one, knowing that in any team it matters to each of us that we understand where the others stand.

Otherwise, people can so easily feel pressurised into appearing to agree with others for the sake of it being claimed that everyone is of the same mind.

"Let our *brightness* shine!"

In this Conversation, one of our themes was that as leaders we have a responsibility to "*let our brightness shine*".

In giving ourselves permission to shine, and "*play bigger*", we make it easier to challenge those around us who might feel that it is safer to remain in the shadows and "*play small*".

This challenge is immeasurably more effective when it comes from a place where we suspend any need to convince and instead commit to active listening and genuine engagement.

We are not seeking to convince others that they must now play bigger.

We are sharing with them our intention to do so and our invitation to join us on this path from a position of real connection.

giving ourselves
permission to **shine,**
and **play bigger**

Connect *not* convince

It feels so respectful of others.

It sets us on a path from which we can truly reject the imposters of triumph and disaster.

It provides the bedrock for a way of engaging with others that is all about shared learning and development.

If we really live connect not convince, we discover the true force of the Buddhist proverb that "*when the student is ready the teacher will appear*".

We referred to this more than once during the Conversation, and delighted in the experience of achieving exceptionally high levels of mutual trust - and naturally becoming each other's teacher!

Possibly most important of all, connect not convince enables us to create a culture in which we step into more authentic relationships with each other.
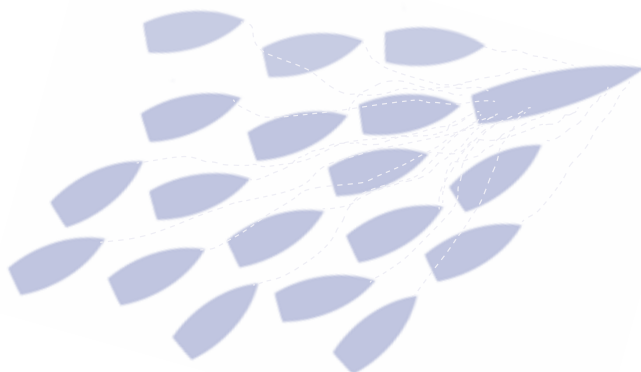
How exciting is that!

"I'm not convinced"

"That's fine ... tell me more!"

Chapter 2

Enter the flotilla!

Challenging two key assumptions

Assumption 1   *A strong culture is a single culture, and sub-cultures should be resisted because they can undermine the unity of a common culture.*

Breakthrough in thinking   **Sub-cultures can be healthy. Rather than posing a threat, they can be of real value so long as they are connected to the rest of the organisation through shared values and a common purpose.**

Enter the flotilla

The analogy of a flotilla can help a lot in developing our thinking. Each boat has its own identity and ways of working, but under clear leadership, all keep on course to a common destination.

Any boat that becomes isolated from the rest of the group would be in difficulty. Without the flotilla, the boats would be disconnected and adrift of clear direction and purpose. Knowing this, and sometimes being reminded by the leader, each boat stays connected with the fleet.

The flotilla benefits from the unique perspectives, experience and creativity offered by each boat, so long as there is an overriding connection with achieving its purpose to reach a single destination.

Assumption 2   *Strong leaders have no doubt about the behaviours needed to achieve the organisation's purpose. They convey certainty and are seen to be resolute and steadfast.*

Breakthrough in thinking   **As leaders we need to be clear about our organisation's purpose and values. At the same time, we need a culture that defines itself by its openness to questioning and challenge about how we can best achieve our purpose.**

We need to drive this culture by example. If we want staff to feel able to question themselves and challenge others, we need to be relaxed about occasionally demonstrating uncertainty about the best way forward. This means being prepared to question openly our own assumptions as well as inviting challenge from all levels in our organisations.

Our leadership is defined not just by the strength of our resolve, but also by the quality of our thinking, our openness to fresh ideas and the latest evidence as we weigh up the best decision at any point in time.

X

Characteristics of a healthy culture

When we use the phrase 'culture change' we are not referring to a one-off event, but an on-going process of learning and development. This process of learning defines our organisation's culture as much as its values and purpose.

A statement of intent pinned to a wall won't do. Our people need to feel they have our permission and support to share their doubts and uncertainties as they puzzle over the best way forward.

The process of change within healthy cultures feels inclusive, pacey and geared to continuous improvement.

These characteristics apply equally to organisations that are boats and those that operate as flotillas; form doesn't matter. Similarly, whatever the size of our organisation, leaders need to create and nurture the following conditions for their culture to grow and thrive.

Characteristics of a healthy culture 1

Our organisation's purpose is always clear to everyone working within the organisation.

The more complex the process is to meet our purpose, the more important it is to keep it in sight. When staff are concentrating only on one part of the process it is easy for them to forget our overall objectives.

Staff and Board members need to feel confident that what they are doing is not just excellent in its own right but also helping the organisation achieve its purpose.

The culture grows *through the high visibility of leaders (including Non-Executive Board members) to staff.*

As leaders of culture change, we need to be seen and heard frequently as authentic and sincere by those we want to influence.

There needs to be an emotional connection that leaves no doubt about our commitment to achieving the purpose of our organisation.

We need to avoid using ambiguous, abstract or clichéd words and phrases, and instead use simple phrases that we can imagine our staff taking on and making their own.

X

Our staff need to feel that we are talking to them personally and they can connect with what we're saying.

The best communication is pacey, short and frequent, whether in person or using technology – videos, mobile and computer apps.

Characteristics of a healthy culture 2

We constantly proclaim our organisation's full and wide reaching ambition. Our ambition is outward looking: it is about the impact that our organisation has by achieving its purpose.

As leaders, our role is to ensure staff and Board members co-own our organisation's ambition.

We measure our success in achieving our purpose by how far the organisation is fulfilling its ambition.

The culture grows *through honesty about the distance that needs to be travelled to fulfil the organisation's ambition so that it is not perceived as a pipe dream but as achievable.*

Alongside an uplifting 'call to arms', leaders need to demonstrate empathy so that staff feel we understand how it is to be in their shoes. The challenge for us is to create a conviction throughout our organisation that our ambition is within reach.

We use external regulation, compliance, and quality assurance as tools to assure our standards and keep our organisation's purpose in plain sight. In this way we ensure that they don't weaken our staff's ownership of our ambition and standards.

X

Everyone in our organisation knows that our purpose won't be achieved if we concentrate on internal dynamics without keeping our ambitions at the fore. External assessment is of course to be welcomed, NOT as a way to keep assessors happy, but more as a way of helping us to achieve our ambitions.

To create flex and attitudinal change amongst our staff, we like the idea of replacing job descriptions with job profiles.

Job profiles not only set out the skills required of a job-holder, but also the flexibility and connectivity essential in helping achieve the organisation's purpose.

The profiles should be regularly assessed to ensure that individuals and teams can see the links between their own responsibilities and tasks, and the organisation's wider ambitions.

Characteristics of a healthy culture 3

We are disciplined in concentrating on making one or two really significant changes. We select the changes because they are challenging, will be quickly visible and will help us to create the culture necessary to achieve our purpose.

Before determining the key challenges that we want to take on, we share our thinking with colleagues at all levels in the organisation. We encourage challenge and debate about our proposals and explain openly why, after weighing up various options, we have selected these challenges.

As leaders, we demonstrate how these changes require us to work differently alongside everyone else, in leading by example.

We set the pace following through the changes and embedding them, making a point of assessing our progress at regular intervals.

As soon as we have evidence that the changes are being adopted within our overall culture, and taking us in the right direction, we proclaim the progress that is being made, to help create the confidence and momentum necessary to take on other challenges.

The culture grows *by permitting ourselves to use 'good enough' as our starting point, and not letting the perfectionist in us hold us back from beginning a process of change.*

Our style is to improve as we go, inviting constructive criticism to enable us to move from good enough to excellent at pace.

We want to be known as a learning organisation, with innovation and development at the heart of what we do to achieve our purpose. We support our staff in experimenting with new ideas and taking managed risks knowing that, whatever the outcome, we will learn.

Characteristics of a healthy culture 4

As leaders we demonstrate candour and openness in sharing with others what might be holding us back from achieving our purpose and ambition as an organisation. We are willing to question ourselves and encourage others to challenge their own thinking.

With our organisational purpose and ambition in sight, we encourage our staff and Board members to work through issues where there is no single right answer. Our culture values everyone as a problem-raiser, whatever the problem, with the caveat that all are up for having a go at being problem-solvers too.

The culture grows *by concentrating on 'what' not 'who' is holding the organisation back. We work at creating a culture in which people do not bottle up their frustration but are supported and given the vocabulary to speak their truth.*

'Questioning the questioner' is recognised throughout our organisation as a coaching technique.

As leaders, we acknowledge openly how sensitive we need to be in questioning the questioner and speaking our truth, because everyone hears what is said differently.

We work at ensuring our tone and body language are relaxed.

What we are saying or asking needs to be easily understood by the listener without them becoming defensive.

We lead by example and recognise that we may need coaching ourselves or need to coach others to feel confident about the language we are all using - and how we are using it.

Using narratives can be helpful too, especially using the viewpoints of those who the organisation wants to serve, and who feel they have been failed in some way.

Narratives need to focus on what's failing rather than who, so that everyone who has been 'part of the problem' feels that they can step free from their past role without feeling a finger of blame being pointed at them.

Sub-cultures can be an asset

So long as these conditions are being met, we champion distinctive sub-cultures as a real asset of our organisation.

As leaders, we don't assume our organisation's culture is under threat by the existence of sub-cultures, whether we're captaining a single boat with some 'change terrorists' on board or a large flotilla with some singular vessels within our fleet.

We recognise that at first sight they can appear to be blockers of culture change.

On closer examination, however, they can prove to be the grit in the oyster needed to sharpen up and strengthen our overall offer as an organisation.

A healthy culture celebrates the diverse range of identities and behaviours that make up our Boards and organisations, so long as all can sign up to shared values to achieve a common purpose and ambition.

Those unable or unwilling to do so may need to be left behind.

The importance of connectivity within the organisation needs to be stressed to ensure that individuals or groups don't become cut off and isolated.

Everyone needs to understand that the value of their contribution depends on it being bound with that of others to achieve the purpose of their organisation.

A deeply personal process

For all leaders, culture change is a deeply personal process. It requires us to understand the sort of leader we are, and how others perceive our leadership behaviours.

As leaders, we understand the tension between encouraging everyone to co-own a shared purpose and ambition and, at the same time, allowing the space for individuals and groups to feel free to express their own identity.

We chart a course that allows room for individuality and innovation to flourish, while being strong enough to keep our common purpose always in sight.

What we must be is authentic: 'the real deal'.

This doesn't mean everyone always likes what we say and do. But they do feel we are honest about who we are, and the purpose and ambition that we want to achieve for our organisation.

Don't be fooled by what you see

Appearances can be deceptive. For example, it is easy to believe that a single large boat is more likely to have a healthy culture than a flotilla of small boats.

But the point about a healthy culture is that it isn't about appearances. It's about what goes on inside an organisation, hidden from view. A flotilla can have a culture that is less or more healthy than that of a single boat.

No surprise, really, given that culture - like so much else - is unavoidably linked to the quality and strength of leadership.
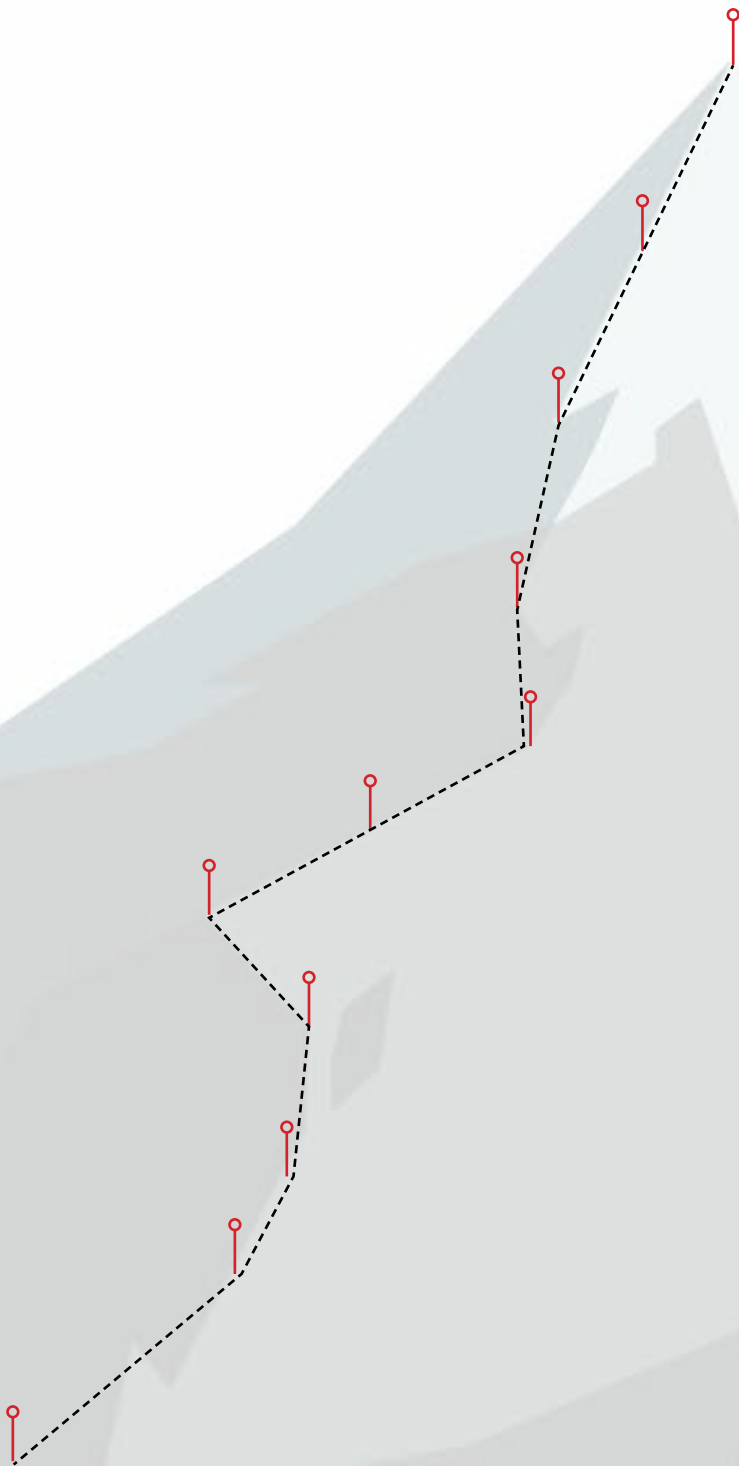
Chapter 3

Eleven steps to change culture

Changing Culture for the Better

STEP 1

The bedrock: We need to offer passion *and* vision

These are two essential requirements for lasting culture change.

One can't work without the other:

- passionless vision will fall flat

- visionless passion will be a flash in the pan.

We need both:

- passion that feels personal and REAL, expressed in language that people expect us to use as leaders and as far as possible from that of management textbooks

- vision captured through a core message expressed in plain English, using short phrases and words of few syllables that people can take on and make their own.

STEP 2

The reality check: Passion and vision are not enough

Vision provides the context for culture change and passion provides the energy and drive.

They get us started – and do no more than that!

- Clarity of vision can never deny the reality of the many unknowns that all businesses face.

- Passion that feels personal and REAL, expressed in language that is personal to us as leaders and as far removed as possible from that of management textbooks.

We need more, a lot more.

- This is where our persistence and tenacity as leaders come into play.

STEP 3

Constructive conversation

We need to hold the space for constructive conversation.

In all discussions about culture, it's important that we start by explaining the case for change.

We can then ask people to say whether they feel in any way threatened by what we have just said.

- Everyone needs to believe that we genuinely want them to speak their truth and that whatever they say will be listened to and respected.

- In this way, we should be able to "surface the difficult stuff" as well as reassuring people that the process for developing a new shared culture is truly open and consultative.

We are then in a position to challenge our teams to think ahead and join up the dots:

- *"Let's rethink our plans for future working and ask how they need to change to reflect the new culture that we are going to create together".*

STEP 4

Contradictions and tensions

We need to challenge the contradictions and tensions within our current culture.

So often there is a culture of denial about the real barriers in the way of positive change. This is why it is important that we identify the contradictions and tensions within our current culture that are holding us back.

The very act of naming them, without anger or aggression, makes it easier to bring them out of the "shadows" where their capacity to do damage is at its greatest.

For example, many commercial organisations imply that the quest for profitability is completely in line with their higher purpose. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't.

In these situations, choices need to be made.

- It is the refusal to acknowledge these choices that can do so much to weaken the integrity of a culture.

- The more generous we can be in the way we refer to contradictions and tensions within our current culture, the easier it will be for staff to "own" them and share our ambition to leave them behind.

STEP 5

Cynics and saboteurs

We need to engage with the cynics and would-be saboteurs.

We all have an inner voice that has the capacity to be cynical, and so it's never too difficult to know what the cynics are thinking.

- Our role needs to be to draw them out and encourage them to share their cynicism, so that they might be asked to let it go – and at least become sceptics.

One way to draw people out is through asking *"how could we make this fail?"*

- In the process, we will find out who has genuine concerns and might yet be won over to supporting the new culture, and who intends to act as a blocker and saboteur.

We need to weed out the blockers and would-be saboteurs sooner rather than later, and do so in a way that is visible and decisive.

Once we have shown that we won't tolerate behaviours designed to block change, we are in a stronger position to convert some of the cynics into powerful ambassadors for culture change:

- *"At first, I didn't get the case for change, but I can now see how these proposals really will improve things …."*

STEP 6

We're all disruptors now

Culture change involves disruption - and that means us acting as disruptors.

A vital dimension of culture change is about how we behave in the moment, when we experience teams acting in ways that reinforce poor patterns of behaviour.

● In these moments a leader needs to be ready to act as a disruptor, knowing that sometimes others will get the point we are trying to make, and learn from it, and at other times they won't.

Whenever we behave as a disruptor, we are taking a risk that others will understand why we're behaving in the way that we are.

If they don't understand what we're getting at, we're bound to feel awkward.

● Being prepared occasionally to feel awkward is part of what's required of us as disruptive leaders.

No awkwardness, no risk.

No risk, no culture change.

STEP 7

Less doing

The challenge for so many of us is that more coaching and culture changing require less doing on our part.

Culture change involves leaders spending more time creating an environment in which more people can succeed to a greater degree than they have ever done before.

- This requires us to invest more time in our roles coaching, supporting, cajoling, affirming and stretching.

- To do this, we need to rethink the balance between the time we spend doing and the time we spend coaching.

So often, there is also a need to increase the pace of work. Some resist this on the grounds that more speed equals less quality.

Yet the truth is that greater speed and higher quality tend to go together as one, so long as we have good feedback systems in place.

- Pace can drive higher quality because it shortens feedback loops.

With less doing and more coaching on our part, the result can be more doing - and higher quality doing - all round.

STEP 8

No more workarounds

To succeed in sub-optimal cultures, we've all got used to creating workarounds.

This is something we're all now pretty good at.

If, say, we think that our approvals process is too slow, despite various decisions by various bodies to speed it up, it is bound to be tempting to short-cut this bureaucracy when we want something approved urgently.

If we really want to change culture, we need to do this less – and challenge poor practices more.

We can't create a healthier workplace culture if we look the other way when others don't do what they say they're going to do.

● Workarounds are so often our way of avoiding culture change.

● They reinforce silo mentalities because they're about us creating our own little "bubble" in which we make our own rules.

The moment we say "no more workarounds" is the moment we know we really are serious about culture change.

STEP 9

Words matter

So often the language that we use gets in the way of what we're trying to achieve.

Healthy cultures are those in which there is a practice of "plain speaking", so that we all feel free to "say it as it is", whilst assuming the best of each other and never seeking to be ungenerous.

Yet the language that we use is sometimes so abstract and jargonistic that it creates barriers that prevent others from identifying with the message we're seeking to share.

- We should be prepared to stop using terms such as "strategy", "resilience", "collaboration" and "market segmentation" that have lost their meaning through over-use and misuse.

If we say that we want to cut out acronyms and jargon and "tech talk", that will be quite a challenge for some. Bring it on!

STEP 10

Rewarding behaviours

It is time for us to look more closely at how we can reward behaviours that help to foster the culture that we are seeking for our organisations.

One idea is that there should be a "behavioural threshold" that staff need to cross before they can benefit from the bonus system.

- If we were to pick just two behaviours that are key to building the new culture, and all staff had to exhibit to be eligible for a bonus, this could make a big difference.

The knack is to focus on a small number of behaviours and express what we expect of staff in very simple language. (Perhaps one of them could be linked to a contradiction or tension that we have been naming, in line with step 4.)

Assuming that these behaviours become the norm in, say, two years, another consultative exercise could be undertaken at that stage to identify the "bad habits" that are undermining the organisation's culture.

And so the process could be repeated, with everyone knowing that they have to break these "new" bad habits to be eligible for bonuses.

STEP 11

Contemplating our own departure

To be successful in leading culture change, we need to envisage the culture thriving without us.

In so many ways, culture change is personal. People look to their leaders to model the behaviours they ask others to adopt, and are quick to condemn those leaders who say one thing and do another.

Whilst our role in modelling behaviours is important, we also need to be careful to do all that we can to share "ownership" of key cultural behaviours as widely as possible.

- The more widely the new culture is shared, the stronger it will be if and when one of its primary advocates moves elsewhere.

- This is why it can be very helpful for us all to challenge ourselves about how important we ourselves are to the culture that we are seeking to promote.

If we tell ourselves that our aim is to make ourselves redundant, we might find that we work harder as agents of culture change.

Think you're at the top?

Don't forget

"The top of one mountain is always the bottom of another"

(Marianne Williamson)

Chapter 4

Think today, reflect tonight, act tomorrow

Five Insights

1 As leaders, too many of us become "speed junkies!"

We can all look at the phrase "Think today, reflect tonight, act tomorrow" and think how wise and helpful it is. And yet, for many of us, the most exciting words are about acting tomorrow!

One of the main reasons we enjoy being leaders is because we enjoy doing things and making things happen. The more we can make happen in as short a period of time as possible, the better.

This is why we tend to regard thinking and reflecting as a means to an end, which is to get on and do things, and do them fairly smartly too, so that we can speed up and become that bit busier.

Welcome to the world of the leadership speed junkies! If someone tells us that we're belting along at 100 miles an hour, what will our first reaction be?

Will it be that we know we should slow down – or that we would like to speed up a little more?

For those of us hooked on living in a state of almost permanent "busyness", we know the answer.

Like all addicts, we might say that we want to break our addiction to freneticism.

In our next breath, we tell ourselves that in our positions we have no choice.

Just like junkies, the world over.

2 Too often we validate our significance through what we DO rather than how we use our thinking time

In organisations where the leaders are seen to be hooked on doing, and the speed of doing, those who work for them are bound to think that if they are to find their own route to the top they need to become speed junkies too.

And so the circle of people at the top getting their "fix" from driving change and "kicking arse" gradually increases. When they pause briefly to catch their breath there's just enough time to say how everyone needs to speed up a little more, before racing off again.

The only way this will change is if the leading speed merchant says to those around them that they now realise they have devalued their own thinking time.

It is time for less rushing and racing and chasing, and more prepping and thinking and reflecting instead.

At this sort of moment, a phrase such as *"What are we trying to prove?"* is a very effective way to signal that it is time to become less manic and slow down.

For the top speed-lover to admit to this heresy can lead to a collective sigh of relief, as others feel that they too have permission to take their foot off the accelerator.

3 Reflecting more isn't just about a style of leadership. It's part of a wider value system that requires us to work at becoming "consciously more considered"

When we talk of "Think today, reflect tonight" we're not talking of creating precise time zones during which we stop what we're doing and have 15 or 20 minutes for some thinking time and reflection.

The reflective leader is "consciously more considered", and works at ensuring that this mindset influences every aspect of their role as a leader.

In the way they ask questions of others, reflective leaders are open to pausing and taking stock and then asking further questions if the answer is in any way unexpected.

The "consciously more considered" leader appreciates the importance of giving time to considering and evaluating options carefully, and then sharing their thinking with others before assuming that they know what is the best thing to do next.

They know that they might still end up doing what they would have done anyway, without carving out the time for some thoughtful reflection. But the point is that they have a value system that tells them that to rush into doing something without considering the possible implications first is to take a risk, and unless there is an imperative for taking such a risk they shouldn't do so.

This value system imposes a sense of discipline on the leader who is "consciously more considered". It is this discipline that gives them extra authority and cutting edge.

4 Too many leaders who see themselves as "reflectors" tend to reflect on their own. When this happens, reflection can easily become a dysfunctional control behaviour that lessens the bonds between a leader and their team

We all know leaders who will announce that they don't want to come to a decision about something yet on the grounds that they are a "reflector" and need some more thinking time first.

The problem is that they nearly always prefer to go off and reflect solo, and then come back and deliver their verdict about what the decision should be once they have made up their mind.

It's no surprise that reflectors tend to be seen as rather individualistic leaders, who might talk of the virtues of collaboration but often find it difficult to explore problems in an open way with other members of their team.

This is why it is so important to think of a reflective process as something that a team can share together. It can be truly creative and developmental for the whole team, with everyone feeling that they are learning more about how their peers think and what matters to them the most.

For major decisions there can always be an opportunity for members of the team to take away a tentative decision and "sleep on it" before coming back together again to take a final decision.

This individual reflection time can then feed into the team having time for further reflection and exchange before their decision.

5 "Your people deserve it!" This should clinch it for a leader wondering about becoming more reflective

As we think about the sorts of behaviours of a leader who is "consciously more considered", it is very striking how different is their engagement with their people around them.

Instead of rushing through conversations to move on to the next mountain to be conquered, they approach every conversation on the basis that they want to draw something extra from it, that will make them better informed and more insightful than they were before they started the conversation.

How they engage with their people really matters to them.

Of course, they are still hungry for results and are looking to ensure that business performance improves, year on year. But they also want to ensure that if the person they are talking to comes up with some fresh angle on their business they are in a position to put this to good use, by one means or another.

They are not just after confirmation of the decision that they have already taken. They want more from their people than this.

This is why the insight seems so significant.

The simple truth is that far too many "speed merchant leaders" take their people too much for granted.

Even while they are talking to them and pretending to listen to what they have to say they're almost certainly thinking about two or three other things at the same time!

5 *continued*

Consciously more considered leaders, on the other hand, make a point of listening hard to their people. Sometimes they will miss a key message, because like all leaders they have large parts of the day when they can't clear their mind as much as they would like to be able to do to focus on the situation that they're in.

Nevertheless, their aim is to glean as much as they can from the person they're talking to.

They are hungry not just for loyalty but also for extra intelligence and feedback. In the process, they make their staff feel special.

Hence this proposition that staff deserve leaders who are consciously more considered than those who just want to get from A to Z as quickly as possible.

After all, it's the consciously considered leader who is most likely to say:

> *"I'm not sure we need to go all the way to Z. If we just travel to T next time, that could well be good enough. What do you think?"*

Creating a more reflective culture

For those of us who need to "do", there's lots that we can do to create a more reflective culture.

Here are six ideas that together should have a real impact.

You might be acting on some of them already, in which case we hope that the ones you haven't taken up yet will be even more useful.

▌ Creating special time for "colleagues"

A growing number of organisations have this practice and use different language to describe it.

Some simply use the word "colleagues" to describe the meeting. Nothing else.

This is a slot of usually one or one and a half hours when the team come together for some quality time, without an agenda.

There are no papers and you are careful not to let anyone use the slot for an "information dump".

You ask how you can use this time for colleagues to support each other more, seek advice and share anything that they're worried about.

- This is perfect time for reflecting on how you are working together as a team - and, as team leader, sharing where you feel you are really strong as a team and where you would like to become stronger still.

If there are tensions among the group, you can acknowledge them and say that they need to be sorted out and left behind.

This leads on to the second idea:

2 Putting "on the table" what needs to be left behind

This idea is that every now and again you start off one of your agenda-free colleagues' meetings inviting members of the team to "put on the table" any "baggage" that they think is getting in your way as a team, and should now be left behind.

For this to succeed, you need to agree two key groundrules up-front:

1 Any member of the team can name any behaviour or habit of another member of the team, that triggered an unhelpful situation that still rather rankles with them, so long as they do so in a spirit of generosity. They need to be reminded that if they speak up they need to be ready to **let this moment go now**

2 If a member of the team finds that a behaviour of theirs is identified in this way, they are not allowed to justify it. You ask whether or not they intended to cause the upset/ disagreement that took place, and so long as they **didn't** they should – in the spirit of this exercise – be willing to let go of their part of the "baggage".

If either party isn't yet in a position to agree this, maybe you or another member of the team need to facilitate a private 3-way discussion.

● Things go wrong in all teams in all work settings. The teams that are the strongest are the ones that are able to acknowledge that something has gone wrong – and then get on with leaving it behind them, without having to engage in some sort of introspective post mortem.

The purpose of the reflection here is to agree that for some issues it is best to be able to draw the line and move on!

3 Linking reflection time to Board discussions about strategy

So often any reflective discussions among a Board tend to come when a major project has reached a natural conclusion. By then, there is little that the Board expect to do with the reflections and the brief discussion tends to be little more than a superficial appreciation of what was achieved.

Suppose you took reflection out of this context and instead made it an integral part of the **early stages** of Board discussions about your plans and ambitions for the future?

You ask the question:

● *"What lessons do we need to take from what we have done before to ensure that we really can chart out a strategy that is both ambitious and achievable, because we are playing to our strengths?"*

This sort of reflection enables you to honour past achievements and also share some "home truths" if necessary to ensure that as a Board you learn – thoughtfully - from past mistakes.

You ground your future thinking as a Board so much more in your shared assessment of the greatest – and not so great – moments in your past.

● The very openness of this question offers the Board a symbol not only of your trust in them but also your confidence in yourself, as a leader.

4 Asking your front-line teams what THEY think

When did you last ask your front-line teams what they think you should all be doing to improve your performance – and impact – as an organisation?

We don't mean when did you last issue a staff survey, or despatch a member of your top team to give some speeches and then answer questions.

Instead, the idea here is that you say to your front-line teams:

- *"Take an hour or so out for a team conversation, and ask yourselves what you would like to see us all doing differently to ensure that our clients and customers get a better deal out of all of us. Then please let us have any ideas that you come up with."*

This sort of reflective discussion could be incredibly valuable.

It could be a good idea to talk to your team leaders about whether they would wish to facilitate this themselves, or whether some of them would prefer another member of their team to take the lead.

You might then offer a preparatory session for team leaders and facilitators to think through the best ways of drawing out team members and encouraging reflective thinking.

- Across your teams, you should be able to draw out **so many creative ideas** that remain buried in work cultures that are "busy, busy, busy".

5 A note every other Friday, with some personal reflections

There are some Chief Executives who have sent a "Friday note" round their Board members and staff teams for years, and gained enormous benefits from this – for themselves and their whole organisation.

If you're not already doing something like this, how about trying out this idea every other Friday?

In this note you would share some of your latest reflections as a leader, offering the good and the not so good, so that what people read from you is **real** – unlike the sort of thing they would expect to see from a "happy-clappy" PR person.

This act of leading by example really can change culture across your organisation.

Your staff experience you taking them that much more seriously.

As they appreciate that sharing your thinking with them really matters to you, so will they – in response - feel able to take their own reflections that much more seriously and want to share them with team colleagues, and with you.

6 "What is it like to be on the receiving end of me?"

Isn't this a fabulous question for every CEO to ask your direct reports every now and again, and Executive Directors to ask members of your teams.

You could be walking down the corridor with a key member of your team, or driving them to a meeting, and just lob in this question in as natural a way as possible.

If you have been highly stressed and almost impossible to work for, they might just say something like "rather hard work".

Whatever they say, the door is now open:

- *"Haha, that's a bit of an understatement – and thank you for being so generous! I reckon I've been a nightmare these past few weeks and am truly grateful for the way you have just got on with things. I think there are one or two people I've wound up - and I need to start building bridges with them. Tell me, who do you think I've wound up the most?"*

Through a dialogue like this, that is intentionally informal and really quite personal, you can learn so much that could otherwise be "stored" for months.

Key is that your opening question, *"What is it like to be on the receiving end of me?",* comes across as pretty off-the-cuff.

It needs to be a bit of a "bounce", because the quicker the answer, the more useful it will be.

There's less time for any code and weasel words to creep in!

Time for colleagues

*Anything
we
need
to
put
on
the
table,
to
leave
behind?*

How long have we got?

Chapter 5

Farewell, impatient bus driver!

*"So what would
Maureen have said?"*

Creating space for people to let go

Picture yourself as a Chief Executive, having been appointed nine months previously and discussing with a group of stakeholders your plans for the coming year. *"I wish Maureen was still here"*, says one.

You **want** to say that your predecessor is enjoying her retirement and if anyone else mentions Maureen's name again soon you will scream.

Instead, you try to smile as much as you can - through gritted teeth - and say, *"So, if Maureen were here now what do you think she would say?"*

This story was told by a Leadership Fellow at this Conversation. It reveals the sense of **loss** and **grief** that many people experience when a leader leaves their organisation after a long time in post.

This demonstrates so well the principle that leaders committed to culture change need to create space for staff to let go of past loyalties. If they feel we can't see them, they're that much more likely to reciprocate by resisting us when we get out our "fresh broom".

They want to be on our bus, but they also want it to be okay to grieve for the loss of Maureen. Not too much to ask for, surely.

"When anyone disagrees with you, you never seem to take on board what they have to say. Can you tell me why it's not okay for you to be wrong, at least once or twice? I'm wrong loads of times!"

Calling out unhelpful behaviours

We all agree that culture change should involve us in calling out behaviours at odds with the values of our organisation.

Many of us say that whilst we like this in theory, we tend not to do much about it ourselves because we don't want to seem too critical of others and risk an upset that could lead to "*unintended consequences*".

When we look at this more closely, we know that calling out behaviours should **not be** about offering criticism and judgement.

The best way of ensuring that it isn't about "storing things up" is to call out bad behaviours as and when they happen, in a way that is informal and conversational - and respectful.

We offer our comments in a spirit of generous challenge, on the basis that everyone on our bus has behaviours that we need to leave behind.

We stress that this is all part of our commitment to creating a healthy and vibrant culture.

Indeed, we see this process of calling out unhelpful behaviours as a way of everyone on this bus **supporting each other more**.

31

Generous challengers!

"The moment you think I'm not living our values, please say!"

Inviting others to challenge us

Whatever we say about not wanting to be seen to be critical, we know how some people respond when anyone challenges any of their behaviours. "*Who are they, **sitting up on high**, telling the rest of us how **we** should be behaving?*"

Part of our leadership challenge lies in demonstrating the sincerity of our view that calling out behaviours really is about **all of us** striving to be better, and not just a few sitting in judgement of everyone else.

So, how about saying at a meeting of your top team that you would like **their advice** about which behaviours of yours they find unhelpful?
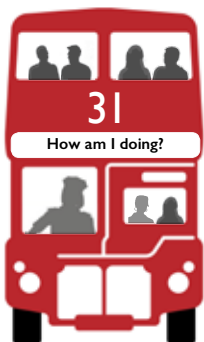
Perhaps also say that rather than them writing this down and paying for a consultant to read out a few anonymous soundbites, you would much **prefer it** if there could be the honesty between you that means they tell you this face-to-face. You will learn so much more this way.

You assume their best intent, just as you ask them to assume this of you. And you think it will be a happier bus if we all share this responsibility between us. **So, who's going to speak first?**

31

How am I doing?

*"What do you think I should stop, start or continue?"*

Conversations for renegotiating behaviours

So, you have invited feedback from members of your top team, thanked them for their honesty and asked them to tell you when you repeat these behaviours, because it can take weeks and sometimes months to break some longstanding habits.

You have modelled a behaviour you want others to adopt. How?

One idea is that every now and again your team should have a conversation in which each member asks the others which behaviours of theirs are most important for **achieving the goals of the team** and which ones sometimes **get in the way** of the team being as good as it could possibly be.
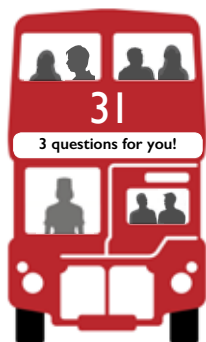
Every few weeks or so you each ask the others, in team meetings and/or one-to-ones: what would they like you to **start doing, stop doing** and **continue to do**?

People are bound to be hesitant at first, but after a period of time trust should build quickly and everyone should feel that on their bus they're able to be **more real with each other**.

"If we need these systems for our clients, shouldn't we use them with our staff, too"

Using our customer IT tools for the benefit of our staff, too

In recent months our Fellowship has been strengthened by the appointment of a range of leaders from some major global corporate players. Some have highly sophisticated IT systems for assessing and tracking their customers' needs and expectations.

"So I suppose you have super-duper *systems for tracking staff needs as well,"* asked another Fellow when we were discussing their IT systems for customers. *"Oh no",* came the reply, *"they're **super basic**!"*

The moment that was said, light bulbs went on across the Vicars' Hall! *"I think we should flip this",* said one. *"What we use to understand our external customers should also be used for our internal customers!"* *"That's right,"* said another. *"Whatever is good enough for our clients should be good enough for our staff team."*

So, for leaders who want to understand more about how those on board are thinking, don't just rely on personal conversations and what your HR team are telling you.

Your customer services team might well have a few other tools that are getting rather dusty!

31

Let's flip this!

"I need to stop trying to live an impossible week!"

Creating space for ourselves to hold space for others

At this Leadership Conversation we started off by asking ourselves about one of the most important outcomes from a previous session on this theme, which was that one of the key roles of a culture change leader is to "*hold the space for constructive conversation*".

When we engaged with this question in small groups, we quickly came back with the answer that a good number of Leadership Fellows simply don't have the **time** to hold space for constructive conversation. We are all so fixed on pouring as much into our working life as possible that many of us are on constant overload.

So the message here is simple, isn't it. If we are to have the option of stepping forward and engaging with staff outside of the scheduled meetings booked in for months ahead, we first need to stop trying to "*live an impossible week*".

Maybe we just need to dub this as an unhelpful habit and invite others to challenge us on this. "*If you know I'm in the office when I should be at home with my kids, please turn the lights out.*"

Stop the bus, the boss needs to get off for a while!

31

Create some space!

A double-edged sword

Impatience is such a double-edged sword for leaders.

In many ways, it's an essential dimension of high energy leadership. Yet through this series of Leadership Conversations we have seen times when undue impatience has got in the way of a leader achieving their strategic objectives.

The area of culture change provides one of the best examples of where many leaders would benefit from curbing some of their restless impatience.

Whilst this might be truly challenging for some, the simple truth is that leaders who wish to achieve lasting culture change first need to achieve a significant connection with staff at every level of their organisation.

This requires perseverance and empathy and generous-spirited challenge.

There is no guarantee that this will result in the culture that you seek.

What is pretty certain, though, is that if you **lack the patience** for this you should expect to join the ranks of those leaders who lament the poor culture of their organisation.

Do they blame themselves for this?

Hardly ever.

If they had any idea of how much they could have really changed their culture, wouldn't they have worked harder to curb their personal impatience?

Vacancy

Bus driver, patience essential!