# Leading a winning team

## *Insights from four Leadership Conversations*

**Society of Leadership Fellows**

St George's House, Windsor Castle

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# Chapter 1

# A Queen Bee wants a fresh start

# "Please allow me to introduce myself..."

*This is my second post as CEO. I have a successful reputation. I turned around my past company and doubled its turnover. I'm known as a dynamic inspirational leader with an obsession for being the best.*

That's my public persona. Privately, I know when and where I could have done better if I'd done things differently. In particular, I recognise that I developed a relationship with my old Executive that meant that I became the Queen Bee with my top people acting as drones!

They produced what I asked from each of them without question – which, of course, sometimes was not what I needed at all!

The responsibility for their behaviour was largely mine. My strength and drive meant that they saw me as always knowing what needed to be done. Challenging this perception was painful for everyone: **you can't talk yourself out of what you've behaved yourself into**.

Before I left, I changed my behaviour and the team did begin to strengthen.

In this job, I want to make it clear from the start that our success is not all about me! Walking the walk, I give you my aide memoire for my first 100 days!

# Tough on myself

I need to be a lot tougher on myself in the ways in which I work with others. If my top team can't see in me the values and behaviours I want from them, why should they make the effort? In particular, I will:

## Be more liberal with my praise

It is easy to forget that we all want recognition when we've done something well, whatever our status. I've always affirmed top team members in their roles, and I know it meant a great deal to them.

What I didn't do enough was congratulate my top people when they moved out of their comfort zone to support another member of the team. I want to make a point of recognising individuals when they support the team by using their expertise to sharpen up a bigger picture in ways that every team member understands.

## Be less of a manager, more of a leader

In the past, my relationship with my top people tended to be transactional: "I need this"; "Can you give me a forecast for that?" Of course, I explained the purpose but my approach was to assume this was what I needed, and their response was to comply.

At the time, it appeared an efficient way of driving forward. But it had unforeseen consequences. Sometimes, they gave me what I asked for but it was not what I needed. And nobody felt they could question me.

This time round, I want to make sure that the top team are clear about the organisational challenge we're facing, and ask them to pitch in with their expertise about ways forward. I want them to know that when I ask questions they're about what they think, rather than asking them to provide something for me because I'm the one doing the thinking.

The message I need to get across is that we're all responsible for driving the organisation forward.

## Stress that challenge is 'good'

I know my 'can do' energy is enormously potent. The downside is that people can find it difficult to disagree with me. I need to invite challenge in a very direct way, when any of the team feels that I've got something wrong, or that there is a better approach.

I want to get across to them that challenge feeds my creative energy.

In the past, I haven't put enough thought into how to build in opportunities for challenge in meetings. Standing items on our agenda, together with my last minute one-line additions, didn't put us in the right mindset for an open debate.

I want to structure, say, one in three of our meetings for creative debate on a specific issue. Beforehand, I will draw up a briefing paper so that we can spend our time together creatively (rather than getting up to speed) – and I will ensure that every one learns that I'm open to changing my mind. If this is to work, what I can't be is defensive in what I say, and in my body language!

## Remember pressing send doesn't always hit the mark

I am a text and email person. I like the written word and I feel that people can pick up my communication as and when they're free to do so.

But I've learnt this doesn't work for everyone. Some of my top team really appreciated me picking up the phone. They felt that just me talking things through with them was an affirmation.

I found this difficult at first. It was way out of my transactional comfort zone. But it was amazing how much of importance I learnt by chatting to them.

I want my top team members to think why they're sending an email. If it is because it's less challenging than talking directly, then ditch the email and pick up the phone!

## Make clear that silo working is not an option

I have been told that two of my top people are brilliant in their silos of expertise but are not team players. They need to understand that their work is most valued by me and their colleagues as an important element of the big picture, not as something that stands alone. If I can get this across, then we at least have a platform for team working.

From what's been said, I think our starting point is establishing a common language. They need to communicate in ways the team can easily understand – and the team needs to be prepared to stretch in understanding them.

Of course, as part of a team I want individuals to be themselves. The twist is that I want them to share the best of themselves working with each other. That is their challenge.

## Shift the balance of reward

In my last CEO role, we did reward team performance, but that was always a small part of our bonus system. The lion's share of anyone's bonus was all about their personal performance.

This time, I'm going to experiment and make three-quarters of the bonus system about team performance. It feels risky, but it isn't set in concrete. I can always finesse the balance. What's important is to get a very clear message across that team working isn't 'a nice to have' but core to our success.

The criteria could be around service to colleagues. How well they support each other in understanding each other's perspectives, offer their expertise and demonstrate a sense of shared accountability?

This will need to be worked through thoroughly, but I can see its potential as an organisation-wide reward system.

# Not all about me

I know that my behaviour will influence that of others, but what I don't want is just a strong relationship between my top people and myself. What I need is a strong relationship between them.

In my old role, I didn't work hard enough to build trust among the team. They worked pretty well together when I was present, but when I wasn't around they started bickering. Supporting each other in achieving a shared goal was an ambition that stayed on the page!

## Building lateral relationships

This time round my priority is to build lateral relationships and trust, starting with my top team. They need to know what my expectation is of them - that they work as a team, whether I'm present or not.

This will involve a fundamental shift in the way people work with each other.

They won't be working within the familiar hierarchical framework for praise and criticism. Instead they will need to create a new framework for support and challenge.

In order to work creatively as a team, they may need to understand more about, and even stray into, each other's 'territories'. This will mean team members sharing with colleagues what's not working so well under them.

As a winning team, all will need to recast their loyalties and build the trust needed to feel that they are not in competition with each other, but there to support one another, and watch each other's backs.

I see it as my job to create the conditions to make this shift in working possible and then pass the baton and give responsibility to those in the team to make it work.

## Making it OK to challenge each other

There are two types of challenge involved in team working. One is about challenging each other's views. By openly inviting challenge in my thinking, I will be demonstrating how I want it to happen within the top team.

I'm also going to introduce occasional 'support and challenge sessions', in which one of the team (starting with me) will share some aspect of their leadership style that is not working as well as it needs to, and ask for support and advice in becoming a better leader. This should do a lot to encourage openness and trust.

The other type of challenge is about behaviours. We've all been in a team with at least one cynic, point scorer, shirker or information withholder. They affect the energy and morale of a team.

At first, it IS difficult to challenge colleagues over whom you have no authority about their behaviour. This is where placing greater value on team rather than individual performance bonuses may pay dividends by boosting motivation to challenge.

## Giving space for experimentation

I don't expect my top team to produce winning ideas in the blink of an eye. They need time to build their relationships as well as develop their thinking, and time needs to be factored in for them to do this.

In my mind, success isn't just about coming up with a result, although this is important. It is also about people building trust so that they are relaxed about saying they were wrong or they don't understand what's being said.

My responsibility is to create the space in which the team are able to experiment and stretch thinking.

## Making sure the team does not become a clique

The last thing I want to happen is that the stronger members of the team batter others into toeing a line and we end up with grey 'group think'. Winning behaviour is about getting the right balance between collaborative ideas building and allowing individuals to shine in their own right.

When I get to know my top people better, I'll be able to see more clearly whether this is a danger.

I'll be confident that we're working as a team when there is a collective sense of reponsibility at times when things go 'belly up'. And I hope when things go really well, we will all want to give special recognition to the one or two individuals who went the extra mile.

# Getting personal

As a leader, I want everyone in the organisation to feel that they have a personal stake in our business and that I have a personal stake in their success. Individual accountability for their performance is at the core, but this doesn't preclude building relationships across the organisation, starting with my top team.

Winning teams are inclusive. I've seen that when their members connect with others it has a ripple effect. Their behaviours become the norm. If they are not defensive, their staff will become less so. If they don't blame other people for failure, those working to them will know that this approach is unlikely to work.

We need an inclusive culture if we're going to be the best. I will drive this to create the ripple effect, though as an international and multi-sited business of around 1,500 staff I will need my top team alongside me.

These are the most important cultural characteristics I want to embed in the organisation:

## Listening

I want my top people to understand the value of listening to staff at all levels and not just relying on what's said by those they work most closely with.

Together with my top team, we will make diary commitments to each spend informal time with groups of staff at least once every 6 weeks. The sole purpose of meeting them is to get to know a little about them, ask how they feel it's going and what more support we can give them. Between us, we will be able to cover everyone in the company in a year.

We will also book to go in on different team meetings, at least once a month. As well as listening, we can use this opportunity to bounce ideas around with those who may well be responsible for implementing them.

## Smiling

I have a thing about people blind sighting each other in shared workspaces: in reception and moving from one department to another. I believe personal recognition is the foundation for building working relationships.

I will lead by smiling, nodding at everyone I pass, maybe even have a brief conversation with someone going the same way as me – and expect my top team to do the same.

Some people seem to think this is a bit idiosyncratic. I think it's about people feeling recognised and belonging.

## Getting it right – next time

Often mistakes or failure to get something done are hidden or blamed on someone else. The risk of failure stops people from trying to do something in a different way. This impacts badly on the business.

I want my top team to spread the message that no one gets it right first time, all the time. The quicker an issue is dealt with, the less of a problem it is.

Throughout our organisation the message will be: "Share what's happened with those who can help because you have the potential to get it right next time - and if not next time, the time after that".

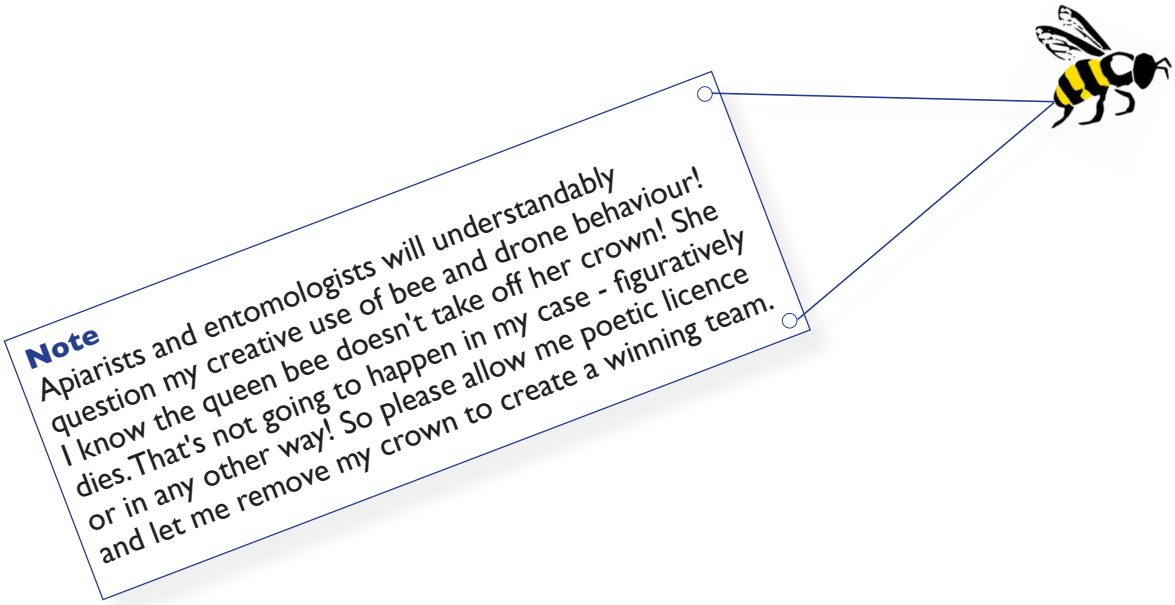
# It's only rock and roll, but I like it

Yep, I am a Stones fan – that's why 'let me introduce myself' makes me smile every time I say it. My rock and roll is this business, and I don't just like it, I'm passionate about it and making it the best in our sector.

"You can't always get what you want" is another smile maker, because it makes me remember when I thought I knew what I wanted and then realised it wasn't what I needed at all. This is why I am going to try this time to get what I need – a winning, challenging, strong team, "oh baby"!

"Time is on my side". If only that was true. A great sentiment but we need to achieve results. What I've got to hold on to is that we'll achieve better results with me as part of a strong team, not as a queen bee.

So what I need is for my team to see me as one of them. What we want will change. There are no rigid certainties. There is no fixed winning line. Time might not be on our side, but so long as we're on each other's side, we'll be the winning team I want us to be.



# Chapter 2

# Fairness, shields & accountability

# Facing our fear of unfairness

We nearly all say that we want to be fair leaders. Of course, who wouldn't want to be fair?

When we drill down into this term, we find that many of us are driven by a fear of unfairness.

It is this fear that becomes our shield.

We often hide behind it, and use it to justify to ourselves why it's a good thing to avoid a difficult conversation with someone who has in some way under-performed.

"*Can't risk being unfair*", we think. "*Let's just hope they don't make any more mistakes or we'll have to say something.*"

If and when things do go wrong again we feel we have no choice. We have to put down our shield and say there's a problem.

# "That's not fair!"

Instead of being thanked for not having said anything before, we find ourselves immediately on the defensive:

*"I thought everything was okay and now I find you've been building up a case against me, behind my back. How can I trust someone who lets me believe everything is okay when it isn't?"*

We tell ourselves that we had nothing but the best of intentions, and now our motives are being entirely misconstrued.

Yet the truth is that we were so keen **not to be unfair** that we rather compromised ourselves by witholding our concerns about this individual's performance.

## Skewing our judgement

So many of us make this mistake, pretty regularly.

We let our fear of being unfair become such a powerful shield that it skews our judgement as leaders.

In the process, "fairness" becomes our all-purpose justification for trying not to upset anyone!

Not only does it fail in this purpose, but it sometimes backfires - spectacularly.

Hence the importance of reminding ourselves that fairness in leadership is not about avoiding upsets. Nor is it about decisions by committee.

It's about being fair across a number of fronts: to individuals, to teams, to ourselves and to the organisation.

It **is** fair to ourselves and the organisation to tell someone when they let us down.

So long as our spirit is one of **assuming the best**, what could be unfair about that?

Assuming the best, we **want** our concerns to be proved wrong!

# 2 Being prepared to stop and listen

Someone comes into your office in a rage. They've been let down and it's incredibly unfair.

You are up to your neck in work and this surprise interruption is, to say the least, unwelcome.

Do you stop what you are doing and ask them to explain the problem?

Or do you say it's not particularly convenient at the moment and would they mind fixing a time with your PA?

In this situation, some of us are quick to say that unfortunately the time isn't right, but later on next week should be easier....

For good measure, we add that it will be better to talk when they've had a chance to calm down.

We're then surprised when they walk straight out, without saying another word!

# Timing is key

In this sort of situation, it is so very easy to forget one important principle: in matters to do with fairness, timing is key.

The person who has invaded our space has a clear sense of grievance and wrongdoing.

For them, this is **personal**.

They have been let down or judged unfairly. And they need to tell us how they feel.

How we respond in this moment could determine their view of us as leaders for a long time to come.

This is now about more than fairness.

It's about whether they feel taken seriously and how much they **matter** to us.

If we let that moment pass, and ask them to leave without making sure that we fix a time to talk one-to-one, ideally within hours, that moment will almost certainly go with them for ever.

They needed to share their story, and what did they get?

They were blanked. Given the cold shoulder. Told to join the queue for a date in the diary.

## Our need for control

Ironic, isn't it! We tell ourselves how much we don't want to be unfair, and yet in these moments we so often let our need for control and order take precedence over a colleague's need to be heard.

We know they're almost boiling over and yet we convey the messsage that this is **their problem.**

What's fair about **that**?

# 3 Giving the ranter time to rant

Those of us who fear the idea of being seen to be unfair know that this isn't the only fear in our being! Far from it.

Another one that many of us share is the fear of argument and confrontation.

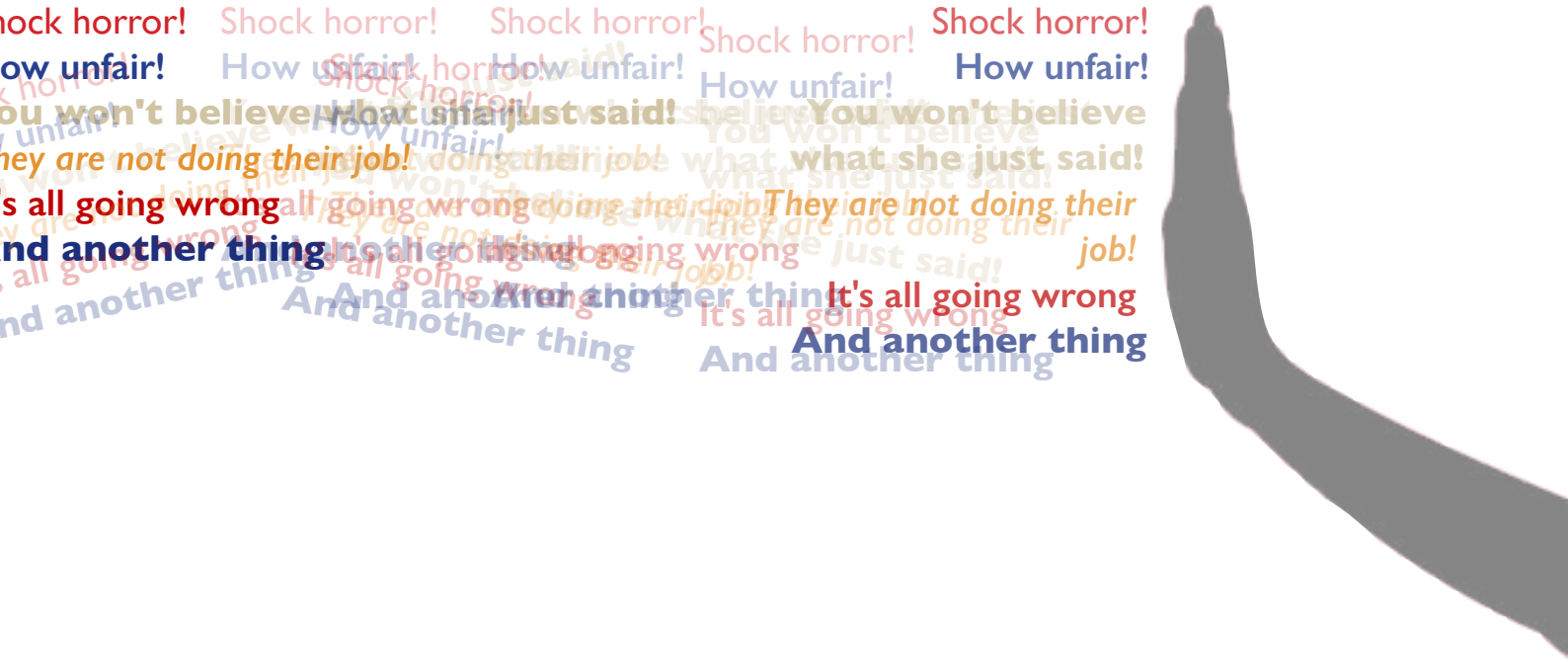
The idea of someone coming into our personal space at work and offloading their angst and anger can almost make our blood run cold!

We might well be busy, but we know that this is really just an **excuse**!

The simple fact is that we don't like arguments and we have no desire to get drawn into a confrontation between two other people.

If only we can **release ourselves** from this fear of confrontation, it becomes so much easier to create space for someone to let go of some of their negativity.

We don't have to take on their rant and make it our own. We just have to **listen**!



# No need to offer an instant fix

The leaders who don't like others "having a rant" tend to be the ones who need to interrupt and correct any inaccuracies.

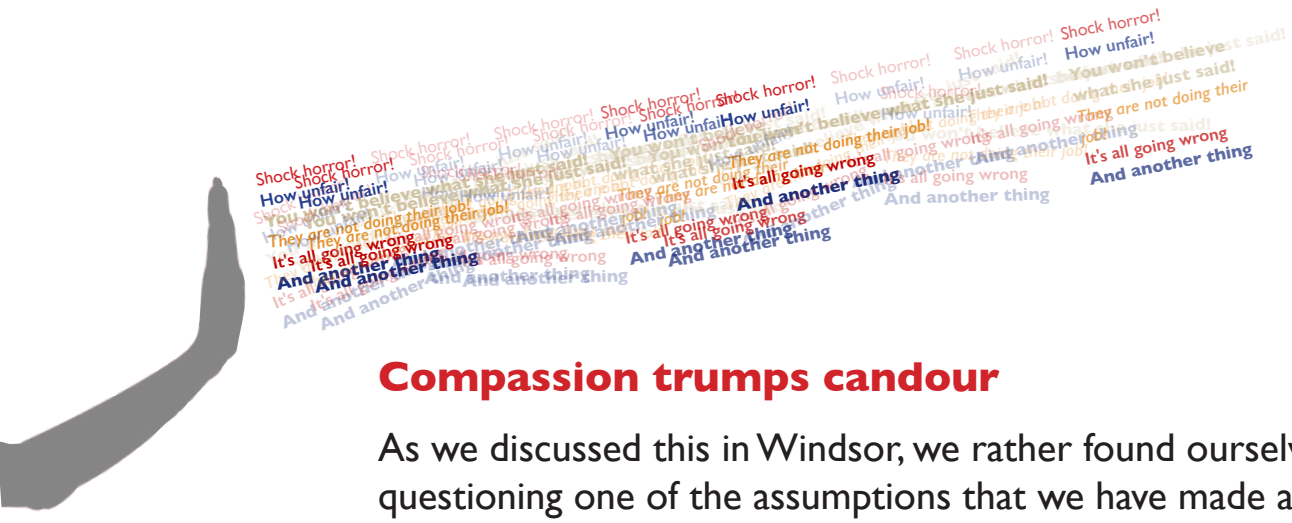
They seem to find it impossible to hold back and say nothing.

Yet so often this is all the ranter is asking for.

They hardly ever want an instant fix. They just want to get off their chest why they feel they have been treated so unfairly.

Once they have said their piece it is possible to say how useful it would be to reflect and perhaps consult with others.

But the ranter needs to dump some of their stuff first!




## Compassion trumps candour

As we discussed this in Windsor, we rather found ourselves questioning one of the assumptions that we have made at many Leadership Conversations, where we have put the desire for candour right at the top of our list of leadership qualities.

Our thought was that in this sort of situation, what we're really being challenged on is our compassion as leaders.

We need to be mindful of our personal assumptions and biases, and be careful to put ourselves in the shoes of the person in front of us.

What we're being called upon to show is some **respect and compassion**, so that we can gently encourage them to hope for an outcome where the negativity of the situation can be left behind sooner rather than later.

# 4 Key work accountabilities

At this Conversation, we were very clear that fairness is about **context**.

In so many leadership situations, the key to getting context right is to define individuals' accountabilities.

- What are they responsible **for**?
- What are they expected to **achieve**, by when and with what support?
- What are the **tracking systems** in place for ensuring that where targets aren't being achieved and support isn't forthcoming, action is taken to get back on track?
- Where individuals and teams fail to meet their agreed targets, what are **the consequences** - in terms that can be understood by all concerned **before** they find themselves being held to account?

# Defining consequence is key to fairness

It is the failure of some leaders to deal with under-performance issues that gives rise to charges of unfairness.

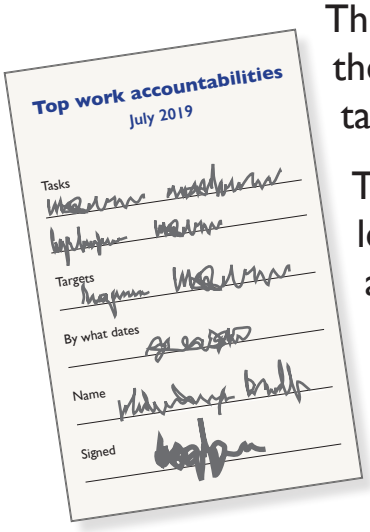
In so many organisations where performance is medium to good, high performers have two consistent laments:

1. They are under-recognised for performing above the expectation of their Board and top team
2. The under-performers are not being held to account in the way that was previously agreed.

In short, the desire of the leadership team not to be seen to be unfair in the eyes of under-performers results in top performers feeling under-appreciated and not properly seen.

This sense of unfairness on the part of the top performers can do considerably more damage to the overall performance of the organisation than a defensive sense of not being understood on the part of the low performers.

## Consequence counts




This is why it's so incredibly important that leaders define the consequences of success and failure in meeting agreed targets.

There will, of course, be exceptional circumstances when leaders need to use their discretion and perhaps moderate the consequences of failure or go the extra mile in rewarding success.

The principle remains, however, that fairness requires leaders to hold their people to account for their performance.

Consequence counts.

Without consequence there can be no real accountability.

**Without accountability there can be no real sense of fairness.**

# 5 Resetting our own moral compass

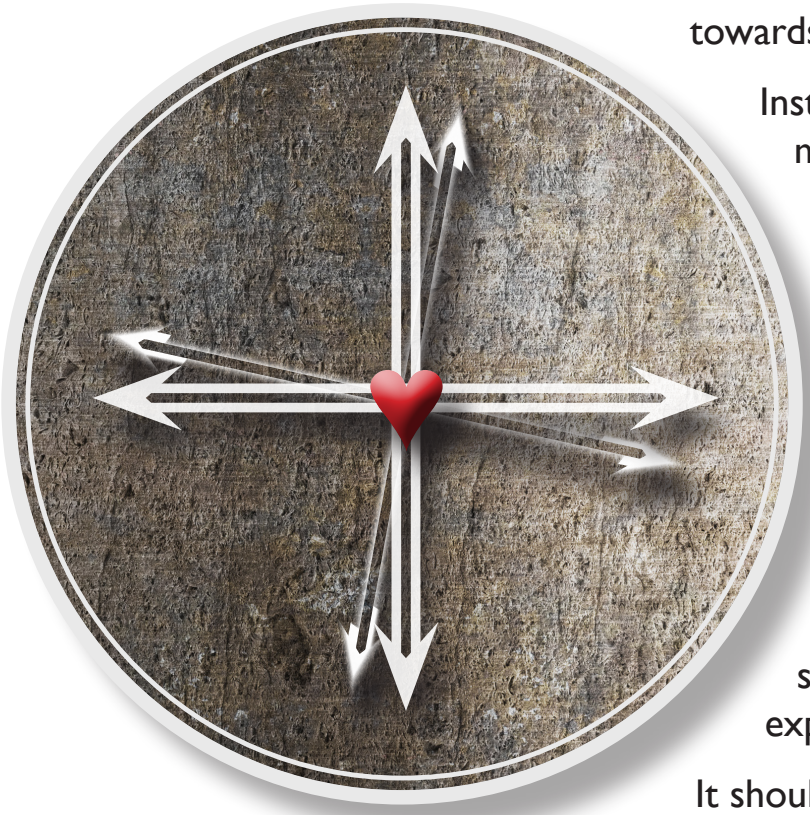
We started this report with the image of the shield because it seems to reflect the way fairness is viewed within many workplace cultures.

For many leaders, their quest for fairness is driven largely by their desire **not** to be seen to be unfair.

The difficulty with this approach towards fairness is that it takes a concept that is already highly subjective and defines it primarily through the eyes of others.

At this Leadership Conversation, our sense was that we need to let go of this "shield".

It just gives us the illusion of protection, because it is about our fear of others becoming negative towards us.



Instead, we need to reset our own moral compass to help us take stock of our overall direction of travel as leaders.

This should provide a **broader context** within which we can set our standards of fairness and integrity.

This should strengthen us in offering others greater clarity of accountability, and being ready to show compassion whenever they experience a sense of unfairness.

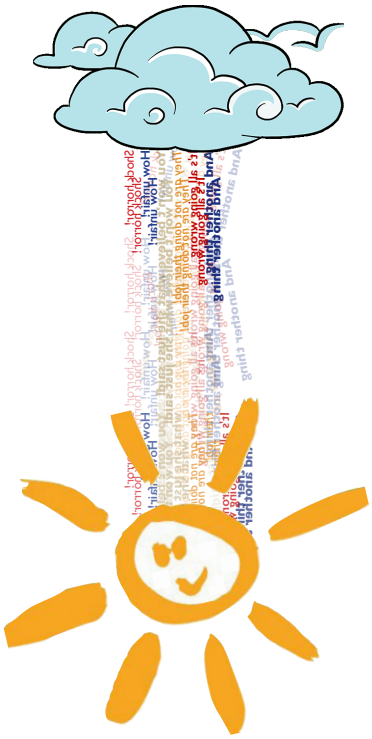
It should enable us to see unfairness as **a state that we occasionally help our teams, and ourselves, to pass through.**

# Passing through unfairness:

## our leadership of others
## *(and sometimes ourselves!)*

*occasional rants*
*sense of grievance*
*wrapped up in self*

*focused forward*
*carrying little "baggage"*
*assuming the best*



# Chapter 3

# Defusing the 'F bomb'!

# Our frustration turns into a bomb!

Ask a Chief Executive - or Executive Director in a large organisation - to talk about their top team, and what's the one word that often comes to mind after they have been speaking for 30 seconds?

Frustration!

As the stories are told of how and when the team didn't measure up, and how their combined efforts didn't seem to make as much difference as they should have done, we can feel the frustration around us.

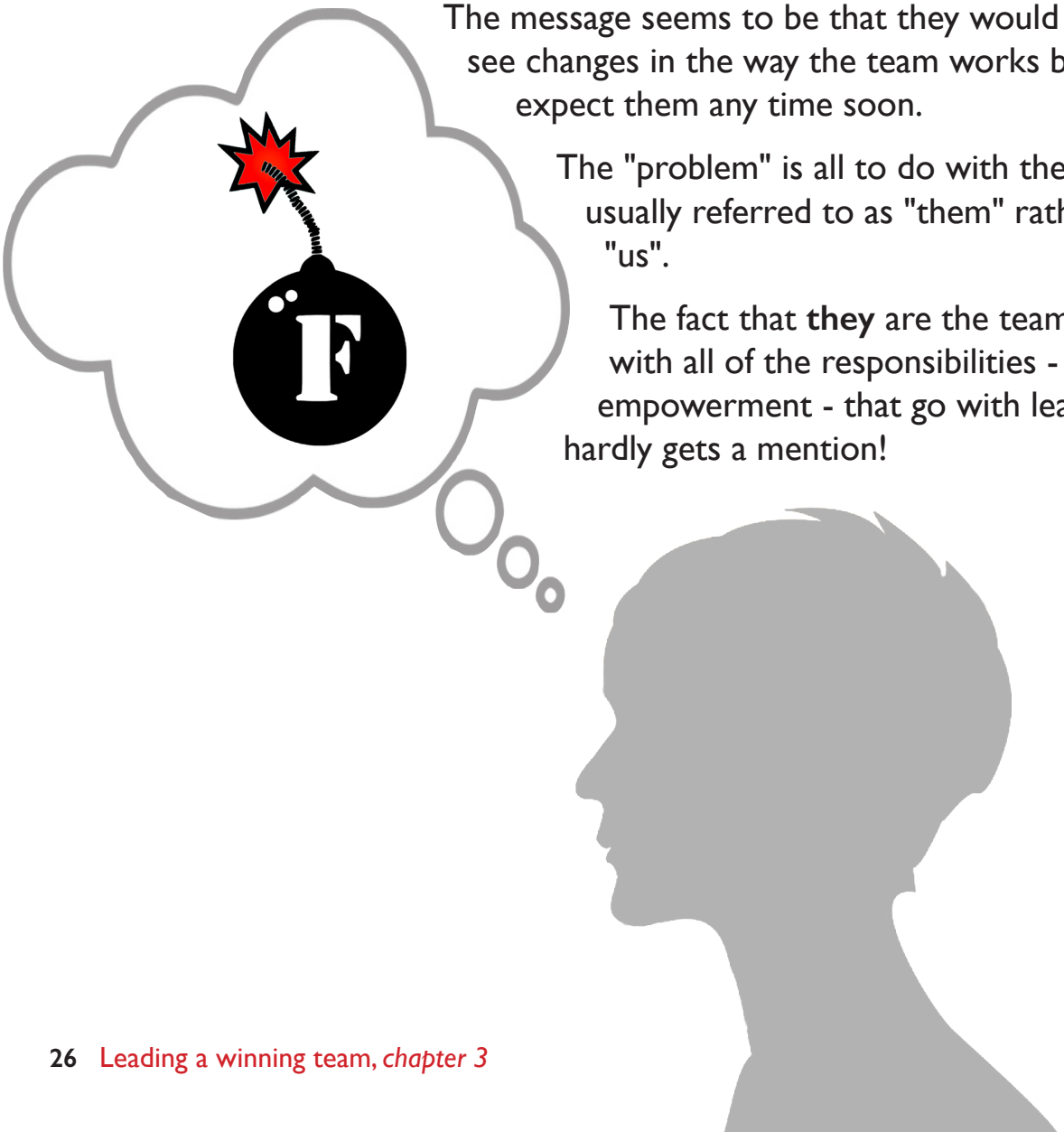
It's strong and getting stronger.

Also, it comes across as really rather **disempowered**.

The message seems to be that they would love to see changes in the way the team works but don't expect them any time soon.

The "problem" is all to do with the team, usually referred to as "them" rather than "us".

The fact that **they** are the team leader, with all of the responsibilities - and empowerment - that go with leadership hardly gets a mention!



# We've become the bomber!

It is remarkable, isn't it, how leaders who generally have an empowered and confident manner can switch quite easily into a relatively disempowered and "done unto" mode when they talk about what they expect from their top team.

They become more and more frustrated to the point where one day their frustration literally explodes during a team meeting.

Someone in the team says something that just pushes them over the edge, and ...BAM!!

It's as if a bomb has gone off.

This is why one Leadership Fellow spoke of her "F bomb"!

In calling it a bomb she was trying to recognise the damage that her levels of frustration can inflict on the team.

At a time when she knows she should be offering positive leadership, reinforced by constructive criticism to tackle under-performance, she ends up demoralising everyone including herself.

Such is the build-up in her levels of frustration that she just reaches a point where she has to let it out.

## Owning our "stuff"

The truth is that leaders with strong energy, and a capacity to become more and more frustrated, can easily find that when their 'F bomb' goes off in the middle of a meeting everyone loses out.

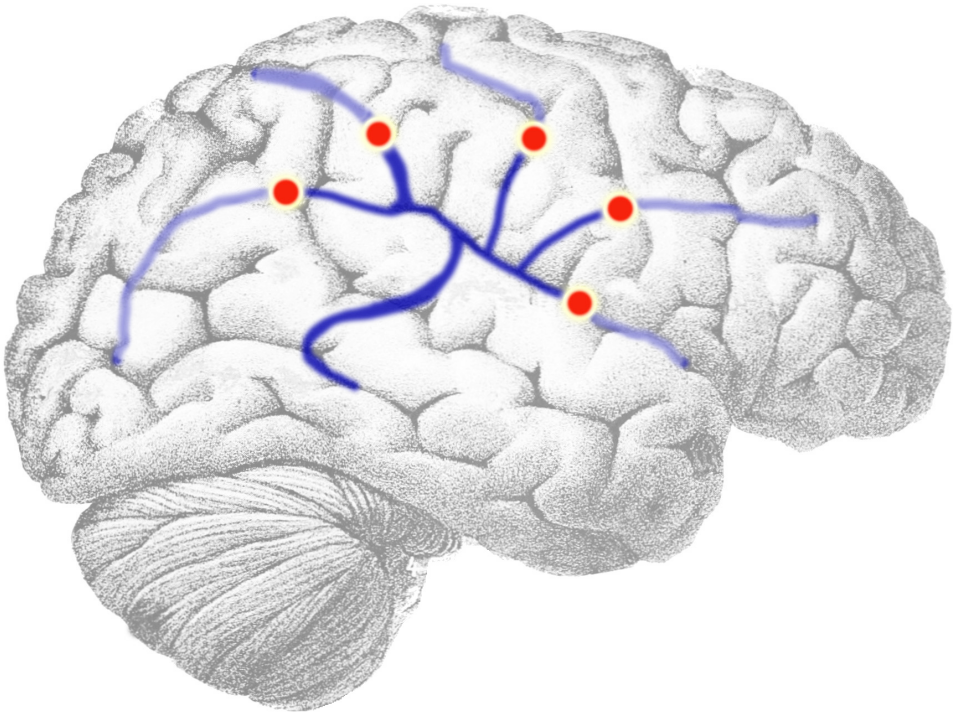
This is one of the reasons why it's so important that we all own our "stuff", and say something as soon as we find ourselves **beginning** to feel frustrated.

As well as challenging others, we also need to challenge ourselves on what it is about **us** that could be getting in the way of the team's performance.

This is what the rest of this chapter is about.

It's key to defusing the F bomb!

# Understanding our inner "blockers"



There are the two key reasons for owning our frustration:

1. It is an important form of **'leading by example'**, sharing the truth that we want to end our habit of burying negative feelings until the moment when they burst out and we find ourselves rather dumping them onto others;
2. It creates an **imperative to reflect** on what's going on inside us that makes this frustration build up until the point where it just explodes.

As leaders, we have all sorts of "blockers" that contribute to us getting in our own way.

In the next chapter we concentrate on five of the "**bad habits**" that are shared by many teams and all have their origins in these internal blockers.

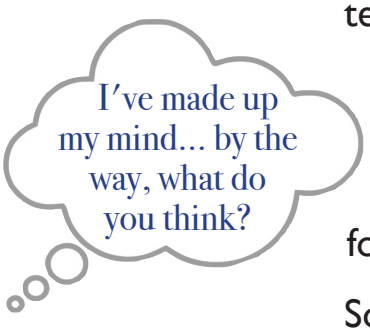
We create an exercise to support you and your team in discussing which ones you most want to leave behind and how best to support each other in doing just that.

# We don't communicate enough!

For so many of us, our number one blocker is our failure to invest enough time in communicating with members of our team and sharing ideas with them as and when they come up in our head.

Many of us like to have our ideas pretty well sorted out **before** we share them with the team.

As a result, when we get to the stage of communicating them the team knows that we're sharing what is virtually a **fait accompli**.




We are not particularly interested in their advice because by then we know what we want, and they're not particularly keen to explore our thinking because they know we're not really up for them influencing us.

So it's no surprise if the team are pretty half-hearted in delivering what they feel they're being **told** to do, with little sense of ownership of the problem or the desired solution.

## Talking ourselves out of things

During this Conversation one Fellow captured in just six words one of those blockers that can really limit a CEO's ability to inspire their team to go the extra mile:

"*We talk ourselves out of things!*"

Once we focus on this blocker, we can see how it contributes to the build-up of frustration.

If a top team see their CEO talking themselves out of things, think how easy it is for them to follow suit, compounding the frustration the CEO is already feeling about their own capacity to give up too soon.

Another step towards the F bomb going off!

# We don't see the "heavy lifting"

Some of the blockers that we discussed at this Conversation - such as the aversion that many of us have towards conflict and our need to be quite controlling - took us on to territory that we explore in the previous chapter as well as a range of other Insights reports.

One particular blocker came across very strongly, and it's one that we haven't sharpened up before. It came in one of those moments of real candour when one of our owner/ entrepreneur Fellows captured something that's powerful for many of us:

> *"I'm sure my team feel that I don't even* **see -** *let alone acknowledge - the* **heavy lifting** *that I expect of them.*
>
> *The truth is that I put so much of my time and energy into our client relationships that I have hardly anything left when it comes to dealing with my core staff team. I've cancelled more staff meetings than I care to remember, because I've been with clients".*

## Taken for granted

We all immediately knew why this tendency to over-focus on external client relationships can be such a blocker when it comes to team-building.

None of us perform at our best when we feel taken for granted.

Team members who feel taken for granted are hardly likely to want to demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm when their CEO asks them to do some more heavy lifting of one sort or another.

They are bound to think to themselves that once they say yes, this will be virtually forgotten by the CEO.

Frustration mounts all round, and the only question is whose F bomb will go off first!

# Embracing the power of intention

It really is remarkable how much we can all learn through occasionally varying the ways in which we work together!

In the final session of this Conversation we asked Fellows to construct their own "leadership walk". This involved them picturing themselves moving forward to three key stages in the future.

For each stage, they stepped onto a new bathmat:

1. On the first mat, they had moved forward to the date for our online video follow-up when we each report on progress in implementing our post-Windsor resolves: December 17, 2019
2. On the second mat, they had moved forward again by more than three months to March 31, 2020
3. On the third mat, they had moved forward again by exactly twelve months to September 24, 2020.

Before each Fellow went through this exercise, we asked them to focus on their **positive intentions** and then allow themselves to imagine that they had been successful in achieving them as they stepped on to each mat.

On the mat, they would tell us what they had achieved by then and how they felt about this.

At each stage, we encouraged them to live in the future as if it was **now**.

# Imagining our success

A number of Fellows were quick to say how strong was their sense of hesitation - and trepidation - at the start of their leadership walk.

We said that they just had to let themselves **assume the best** and share with us what they were **feeling** at each of the three stages of their leadership journey.

Without exception, the feedback from our Fellows was that they were more than pleasantly surprised by where they ended up!

Some were **positively excited** by what they felt was becoming possible for them, and also by how natural it felt.

In fact, this is what came across as the most striking outcome of this exercise.

Having said at the beginning of each of their walks, "*Think about the power of your intention as a leader, and then imagine yourself living that intention*", it was incredibly encouraging to witness each of them "climbing the mountain" and then feeling more than just a little proud - and relieved! - about that.

## Experiencing the power of intention

Once members of the group had set a clear intention, there was hardly any sign of them "**talking themselves out of things**".

They were also more confident about the prospect of encouraging their team to believe in what might become possible for them, because they were experiencing the reality of embracing this mindset **for themselves**.

At the end of their walk, a number of Fellows said that they had no idea at the beginning **how far** they would be able to move forward.

They had under-estimated the power of their own intentions as leaders.

# Thinking about our purpose

There was some real excitment among us about what we could make possible if we were to take this intentional mindset into a team discussion about the shared purpose of the team.

Think of the positive energy that could be generated among a team if their CEO/ Director introduces a discussion by asking the question,

> *"What do we see as our overriding purpose - and for each of us, which aspects* ***most excite us****?"*

How empowering and energising is this sort of question!

It can do so much to strengthen -and deepen - the engagement between the CEO/ Director and their team.

The fact that the CEO is asking it shows a clear desire on their part to **hear the answers** and act on them to create some significant outcomes together with the team.

The days when team members feel they are being asked to do all the heavy lifting, unseen, are no longer.

## Transforming engagement

The posing of this question by the CEO and the sharing of intention in this way transform the engagement between themselves and their team.

In the world of intentional leadership, engagement is such that the whole team is there to help each other mobilise their restless energy behind the power of their shared intention.

As this takes place, it becomes easier to support team members whenever they experience high levels of frustration and **convert these negativities into a new sense of positivity and shared purpose**.

We defuse
our
F bombs
through
the
power
of
intention

# Chapter 4

# Our habits as leaders: *Breaking bad*

# A framework

We can easily persuade ourselves that bad habits are part of who we are. Often we view them more as personality traits than unhelpful behaviours. The problem is that by defining ourselves in this way we persuade ourselves we can't change.

We might not be able to change how we feel, but we can change how these feelings make us *behave* when they reduce our professional impact.

This simple framework sets out a series of key questions and points of guidance that can support us in letting go of those habits that limit our potential as leaders and that of those around us.

## Identifying the habit - questions to myself

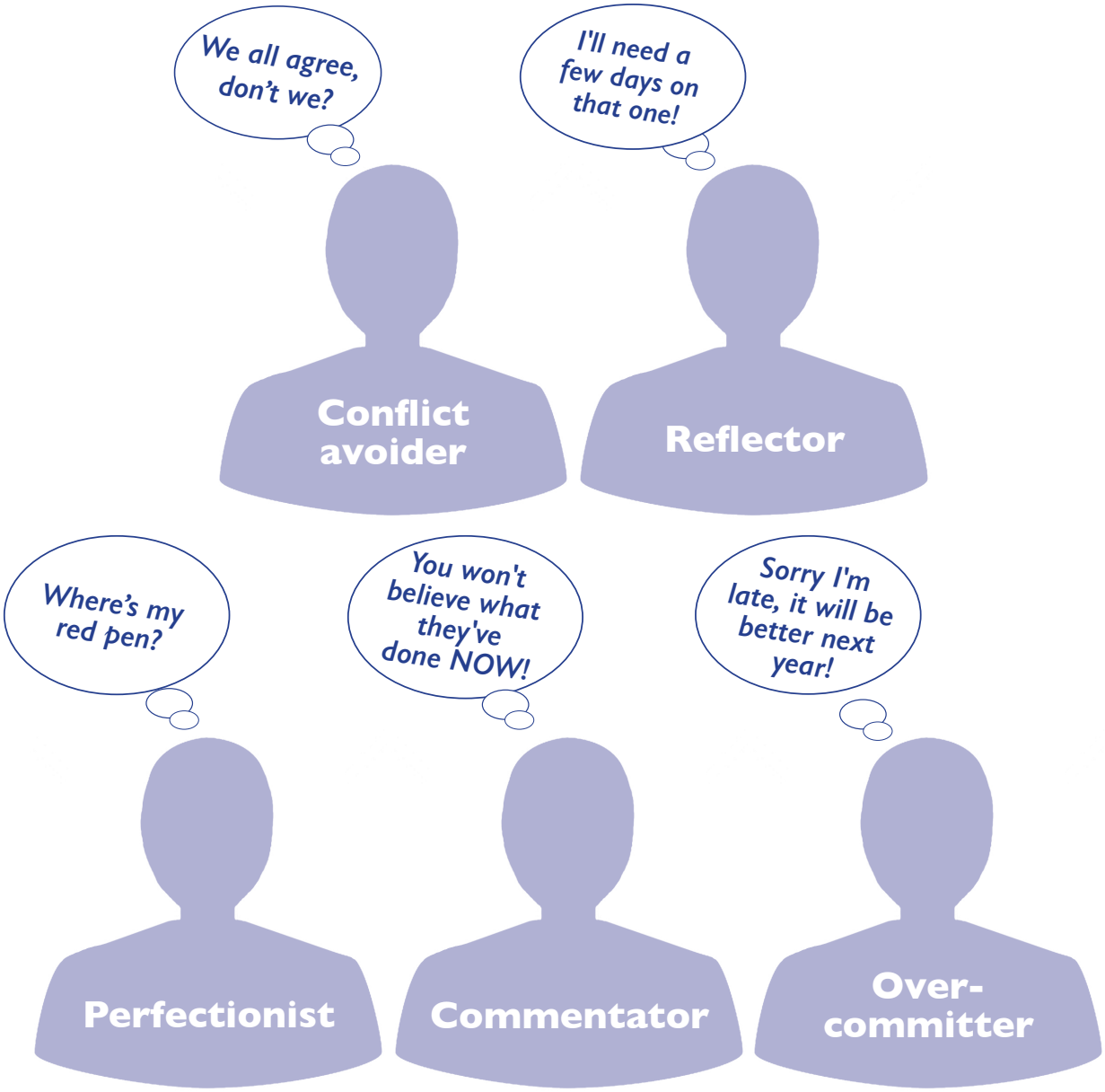
- Can I think of a habit that gets in the way of my effectiveness as a leader?
- Is this a habit that I've developed recently or can I track it back over the years? I might be able to pinpoint the root cause of this habit. But this is private and there is no need to share this with anyone at work. What matters is minimising any negative impact it could have on my behaviour as a leader.
- How could I be a better leader if I let go of this habit?
- Have I spoken to anyone at work about this? If I have, is there any advice I need to take into account?
- How will I feel asking others to support me in leaving this habit behind?

## Owning the habit

- Who does my bad habit affect the most – and could benefit the most if I can let it go?
- How can I describe the habit in a way that I feel comfortable with when mentioning it to colleagues?
- What is the most straightforward way of asking for support in freeing myself from the habit?
- How do I get the tone right when asking for support? I want colleagues to understand that my determination to lose the habit is about improving my leadership at work.
- Who can I try my thinking out on first?

## Leading by example

- Remember to thank people when they remind me that I'm slipping back into the old habit. I mustn't seem defensive – I've invited them to say something, and it's an act of generosity on their part.
- When I feel I'm getting on top of the habit, remember to ask colleagues whether it is making a difference.
- Draw on my experience to empower others and, with a light touch, ask them how I can support them in leaving behind habits that are getting in their way at work.
- Encourage the rest of the team to follow my lead in leaving behind habits that hamper us, on the basis that we're all there for each other.
- Discuss together how much we're improving performance as a result of our combined efforts.




# Five Tales of Breaking Bad

We give you five everyday tales that depict how bad habits can get in our way as leaders - and be left behind.

## The conflict avoider

### Identifying the habit

My worst habit is closing down discussion the moment I feel it's getting heated. I loathe confrontation of any kind. I know it goes back to a messy period in my personal life: the moment I hear raised voices, I want to head for the hills.

My fear of confrontation is getting in the way of me leading my top team. One of them said that they find my meetings more about ratifying decisions than discussing possible options. A couple of others have commented at times that they're not sure what we've agreed, because I sum up everything as a consensus.

### Owning the habit

I'm aware I'm losing the respect of the team. They know from what I say and my body language that I shy away from any serious differences in view.

I'm thinking that our meeting next week on the 3-year business plan could be an opportunity to change and let the discussion flow. I am going to propose that we have an open discussion that is regulated by groundrules rather than closed down by me!

The groundrule that will help me most as a facilitator is 'contribute not compete' as it makes it clear that we will value every comment and idea put forward.

Before the discussion, I'll ask the team to remind me if I slip into the habit of closing down debate. However messy the process, I will strive to keep an open mind about the outcome, knowing that whatever it looks like we all have a real stake in moving our thinking forward.

The idea feels a bit like taking the plunge into the unknown, but it does excite me too. I know that if I let go of this habit and let people talk, there should be much greater energy and a real sense of shared ownership in taking forward what we've agreed.

## The reflector

### Identifying the habit

Yesterday's meeting with my Finance Director ended badly. She left simmering with frustration saying that I never share what I'm thinking. I know that she's not the only one who feels uncomfortable with not being able to read me.

I've always felt it is a strength to keep my thoughts to myself until I make a considered decision. Once or twice in the past I've been badly burnt by making quick decisions that have had unforeseen consequences – which is why I need time to reflect before I make my move.

I wasn't aware that my silent behaviour can feel threatening, though I am conscious that sometimes when I announce a decision people can feel uncertain whether I've considered their views fully.

### Owning the habit

I've got to open up so that both my Board and Senior team feel that I'm engaged with what they're saying, without them thinking that I'm necessarily agreeing with everything they've said.

I've talked with my Finance Director to see if she could suggest how I can open up in ways that others will find helpful. She came up with some excellent ideas:

- Share my thinking at each stage: when I'm gathering ideas, weighing up the pros and cons of each, whether they could be combined, etc. Don't just listen and come back with a decision.
- Delve deeper into what people are saying by playing the role of devil's advocate so I give them a chance to sharpen up their own thinking.
- Be open about when I've changed my mind in the light of what someone has said. If I expect others to change their minds and take on new ideas that are stronger than theirs, I need to show that I'm up for it too.

What I want to do now is ask each of my team that they remind me when I go into silent listening mode. I'll ask them to make a point of saying to me directly: "*What's your thinking at this moment - knowing that you might want to reflect further*".

## The perfectionist

### Identifying the habit

I've just spent my weekend sharpening up and correcting team members' reports and proposals. I can't believe their sloppiness. But I had a 'road to Damascus' moment on Sunday. I think they don't even try to give me a finished product because they know I'll get out my red pen and improve on whatever they do.

I know that I am a perfectionist. My parents never praised my efforts; they always expected more. What I think I'm doing is repeating their behaviour and it's disempowering my team.

I want to try out other approaches so that they no longer depend on me to polish their work. Also, I want to let go of my instinct to use my words rather than theirs, when theirs are just as good.

### Owning the habit

At our team meeting in an hour's time, I'm going to be straight with everyone about my red pen habit.

What I want to say is that I'm de-skilling them by not giving them the opportunity to be more self-critical about what they produce. Selfishly, I've encouraged them to become too dependent on me acting as quality controller.

From now on, I propose that when they feel anything they've committed to paper is ready to share, I talk it through with them whenever time allows. And I'm going to do whatever I can to create the space to do this.

In our discussions, I will only ask questions if there is a lack of clarity about what they are saying. They will have charge of the red pen to make any amendments we agree. I'll also encourage them to ask each other to read through their work if they are concerned that they're not getting something across as clearly as they want.

I'm excited and nervous about this change. I see this as an opportunity to move from the standards being mine to becoming ours.

Quality and empowerment: we have to aim for them together now. And that's why I've just thrown five red pens in the bin and put one back in my drawer!

## The over-committer

### Identifying the habit

I can't believe I've committed to take on something else! I know I'm already overloaded, running late for meetings and missing deadlines, but I'm still never able to say "no".

I've always been this way. I like to be needed, and show I have the skills to do a good job. The problem is that I'm not meeting my own standards because I haven't time to do anything well.

People around me keep on telling me that I don't have to prove my worth by continually committing to take on more. Now I know that I have to take control by NOT volunteering. When asked directly by my CEO to take on a new piece of work, I need to be ready to say that if I take it on we'll need to re-prioritise or reassign some of my workload, because otherwise I'll be promising what I can't deliver.

### Owning the habit

I'm going to start owning the fact that I've been hooked on being needed. I'm addicted to others' confidence in me doing more and more, but I know I'm in danger of letting them and myself down by taking on too much.

Am I brave enough to say that? I feel uncomfortable just imagining saying it. I need someone I can discuss this with who'll bolster my determination to let the habit go.

There are three 'danger scenarios' in which I'm most likely to volunteer: Exec meetings, partnership meetings and one-to-ones with my CEO. There is a common message I need to share with others, but I want to nuance it so that they understand it is about me taking control and doing what I've already got on as well as I can. In the process, I need to make sure that I don't sound like an overworked victim!

I'm conscious that there is a growing culture in my Division of people promising more than they can deliver – and they know it. I need to say to my senior managers that they need to be honest with me about what they can take on. And if they're going to take me seriously when I say that, I've got to lead by example.

## The commentator

### Identifying the habit

I've just come away from a meeting with my Chair. As usual, he's got yet another new shiny idea. He never stops meddling – and that's so often the green light for others to join in too.

I know I allow it to affect me too much. It distracts me from what I should be getting on with. After three years, I still let the Board wind me up too much, and then I go and wind up the Execs about the Board. They must feel that I'm like a stuck record.

From now on my rule is going to be: if I have any issues with the Board about something, I will discuss it with them face-to-face first, before mentioning it to anyone else. This way I'll spend less time talking about people meddling and more time getting on with being a leader.

### Owning the habit

There are two colleagues I tend to vent my exasperation on. I need to tell them that when I start going on about the Chair or Non-Execs I want them to shut me up – and that goes for one-to-ones as well as team meetings. I've thought of a one-word code to use when I slip back into being the critical commentator. All they need to say is: "AND . . .?"

Also, I'm going to explore with my top team our business ambitions where we've yet to develop our thinking. There are a number for my Chair to get his teeth into. I just need to present them in a way that he finds exciting and will run with.

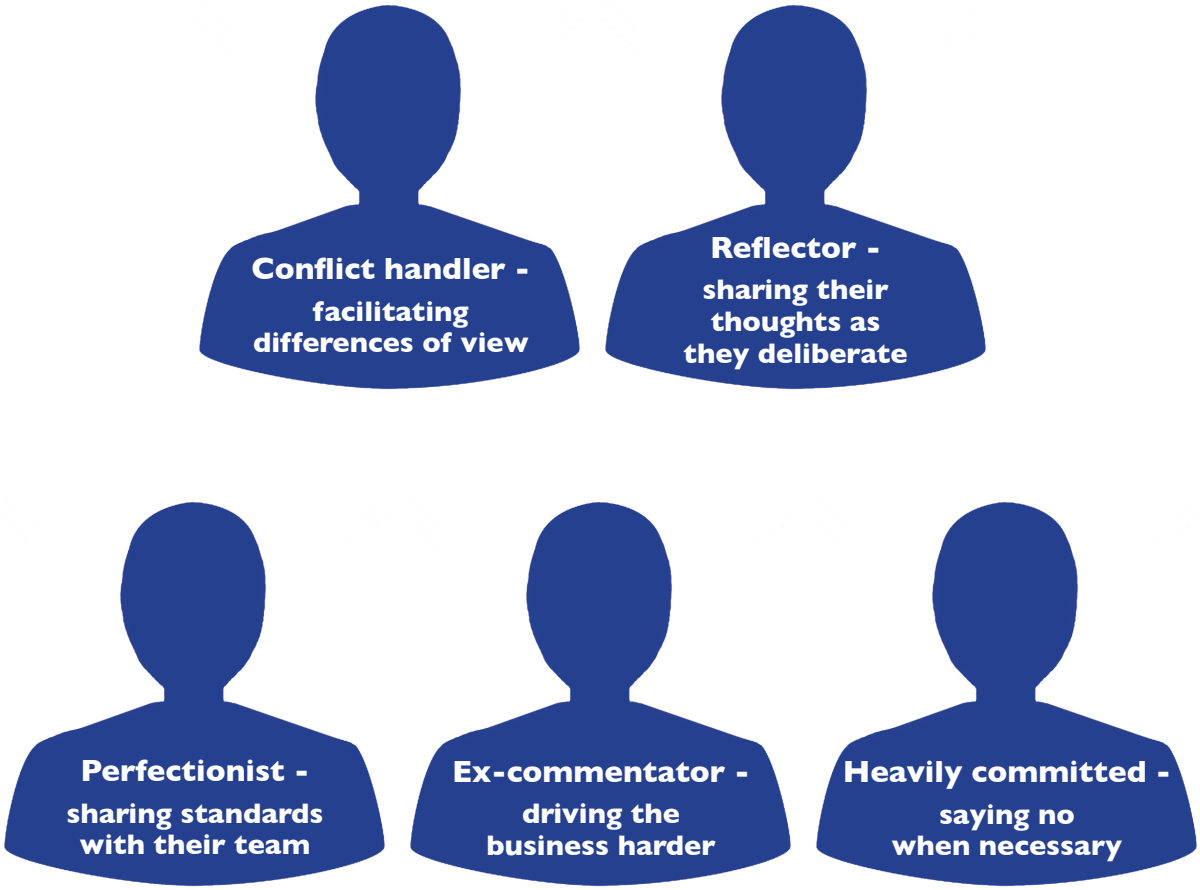
It's going to be difficult to drop the cathartic release of a good rant! But I know it undermines people's confidence in my leadership. And I need others to follow my lead.

We're a small outfit of about eighty people and, of course, there's gossip! The problem is that the gossip is often divisive, with members of one team criticising those in other teams.

I now realise that, unwittingly, I've given approval for this to happen through my habit of criticising the Board. So I will now explore with my team how we can leave this habit behind as an organisation.

# After Breaking Bad

Our behaviours move on, and so we are better placed to deal with other habits that get in our way as leaders.



## Leading through humility

Anyone who has tried to let go of a habit knows how difficult it is. However hard we try, it's so easy to find ourselves slipping back into behaviours that we want to leave behind.

Whilst our openness to freeing ourselves from a habit demonstrates the strength of our intent, it also demonstrates vulnerability as we acknowledge that our habits get in the way of our effectiveness as leaders.

What we can easily forget is that others are already aware of what we're taking on. They've had to work with (or around) our habit! Once we own it, and share our resolve to let it go, we will be showing a measure of real humility that is surely one of the most important characteristics of a successful leader.

Having opened up, we can ask others to give us their support. We can invite them to remind us whenever we slip, stressing that this will be an act of generosity on their part and much appreciated by us.

The example that we set can encourage others to do the same. And we can approach more easily those who are unaware of how a habit of theirs can impact on their colleagues.

If they can see how we have taken the plunge, it is far easier for them to give it a try.

The big prize of being part of a team supporting each other in this way is how this can radically change relationships.

It builds trust and sets the foundation for different ways of working that maximise our impact as leaders and support others in following our lead.