

PART THREE:

Leadership by Design

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One question has increasingly shaped our thinking over the past decade.

Why do equally capable people perform so differently under different leaders?

We have come to believe that the answer is surprisingly simple. Great leaders do not directly determine how people perform. ***They create the environment that shapes how people perform.***

Everything else follows from that.

During more than three decades in corporate leadership, followed by a decade establishing the Trust-Based Leadership Academy, I have worked alongside hundreds of leaders and thousands of employees.

Some leaders left people feeling smaller than they really were. Confidence diminished, initiative disappeared and people complied because they felt they had to.

Others had exactly the opposite effect. They challenged people, stretched them, held them accountable and expected excellence, yet somehow people left those interactions believing more in themselves than they had before. They created environments in which the best version of other people naturally emerged.

When we ask leaders attending our programmes to reflect on the best and the poorest leaders they have worked for, a remarkably consistent pattern emerges. The great leaders were not remembered because they were the smartest, the most charismatic or the most technically capable. They were remembered because ***they were deeply committed to the success of the people they led.***

That observation has shaped almost everything we teach about leadership.

Jim Collins famously encouraged organisations to get the right people on the bus and into the right seats. I have always found that to be a powerful image.

Over the years, however, another question has increasingly occupied my thinking. ***“What kind of bus are we asking people to travel on?”***

Two organisations may recruit equally talented people.

One creates fear. The other creates trust.

One encourages compliance. The other encourages contribution.

The people may be equally capable.

The difference is the environment the leader creates.

That has become the central question of our work. Not which leadership style is best. Not whether leaders should be charismatic or quiet. But rather: **What experiences should leaders intentionally create if they want people to naturally contribute the very best version of themselves?**

There are many excellent leadership theories, and we have no desire to argue that one is superior to another. We believe every leader should develop an authentic leadership brand, that reflects who they are, rather than attempting to imitate someone else.

Our contribution lies elsewhere. Our contribution is to help leaders understand how people respond to the experiences they create.

Leadership styles differ enormously, yet human psychology is remarkably consistent.

People do not experience our intentions; they experience our behaviour.

From those experiences they subconsciously decide whether we are trustworthy.

Those ongoing assessments shape how they respond to us, how safe they feel, how openly they contribute and, ultimately, how they perform.

That raises an important question.

How do leaders intentionally create those experiences?

Over the years we have come to believe there are two primary windows through which leaders shape the experience of those around them.



The First Window: How I Pitch Up

Leadership begins long before the first decision is made. It begins with how we consistently arrive. Some leaders naturally connect with people; others need to become much more deliberate.

Ironically, highly charismatic leaders sometimes connect deeply with the people they naturally enjoy while unintentionally neglecting others. More introverted leaders often discover that because connection does not happen automatically, they become highly intentional about creating it.

Neither personality is better. ***Intentionality is.***

In our programmes we ask leaders to list every person who reports to them. Then we ask a deceptively simple question. "What experience does each of these people have of me?"

Not what do I think of them, not what leadership style am I trying to demonstrate, what is their experience of me? That question changes everything.

It shifts the leader's attention from intention to experience. From activity to impact. From personality to purpose. Every action is designed to create experiences that gradually build trust.



The Second Window: Leadership Moments

The second window is found in the moments that test us as leaders. Performance problems, conflict, mistakes, disappointment, accountability.

These moments rarely arrive at convenient times, nor do they come with an instruction manual.

Every leadership moment is different because every individual and every situation is different. That is why we do not teach scripts - We teach principles.

Over many years we have developed The Fourteen Commandments of Leadership Moments, a practical framework that helps leaders think clearly when there is no perfect answer.

These principles include ideas such as *never walking past*, a leadership moment, using thoughtful questions rather than accusation to build accountability, standing beside people during difficult moments instead of adding to their pain, and protecting a person's dignity while addressing behaviour honestly.

The principles are not recipes. They are guides for thinking well when leadership matters most. Handled well, these moments strengthen trust. Handled poorly, they quickly erode it.

Pulling It All Together

Our experience has led us to a remarkably simple sequence.

Leaders create experiences. -> Experiences build connection. -> Connection builds trust. -> Trust earns influence. -> Influence creates psychological safety. -> Psychological safety allows the best version of people to emerge.

Ultimately, how people experience that environment shapes how they perform. Poor leadership can also produce results. It often achieves them through fear, compliance and control. People comply because they have to.

Trust-based leadership is fundamentally different. People contribute because the environment enables them to do so - They think, they challenge respectfully, they take ownership, they innovate.

The results are no longer limited by the capability of the leader. They are multiplied by the capability of everyone on the bus.

In this article we have focused on the leader and the environment they create.

But buses do not travel with one passenger.

In part four in this series, we will explore what happens when an entire team travels on a bus built on trust, influence and psychological safety, creating what we describe as Teams with Superpowers.

References

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