

PART SIX

One Experience at a Time – A Personal Reflection



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People respond to the environment their leaders create with trust or distrust. Everything else follows.

I recently found myself thinking deeply about organisations and the extraordinary impact leadership has on the people who work within them.

Over the past few months, I have had the privilege of working alongside a large and highly successful organisation, coaching a number of very senior leaders as they navigate a significant leadership transition.

As I listened to their stories, one theme emerged repeatedly.

For many years the organisation had been led through fear, control and close supervision. Results were achieved, but they came at a cost. The lived experience of many employees had been shaped by caution, compliance and self-protection.

Today, under a different leadership philosophy, the organisation is working hard to rebuild trust.

What has struck me most is that changing a strategy is relatively easy. Changing the lived experience of an organisation takes much longer.

People who have learned not to trust do not suddenly begin trusting because a new vision is announced or a different set of values is printed on a wall.

Trust has to be rebuilt. - One experience at a time.

That journey caused me to reflect on more than three decades in corporate leadership and the past decade developing leaders through the Trust-Based Leadership Academy.

It reminded me why this work matters.

Over the past five articles we have explored many different ideas.

- Trust.
- Influence.
- Psychological safety.
- Leadership moments.
- Teams with superpowers.
- Leadership cultures.

Yet, as I reflected on them, I realised they all point back to one remarkably simple principle.

People respond to the environment their leaders create with trust or distrust. Everything else follows.

That simple observation has increasingly become the foundation of our work. People do not experience our leadership ***philosophy***. They do not experience our ***intentions***. They experience what it is like to work with us. That lived experience shapes whether they trust us, whether they contribute their ideas, whether they become intrinsically motivated and, ultimately, whether the best version of themselves arrives at work each day.

Looking back, I realised that we have really been answering six questions.

1. What is trust?

Trust is not something we demand. It is the natural response to the lived experience people have of us over time.

2. Why does trust matter?

Because trust creates influence. When people trust us, they allow us to influence how they think, grow and perform.

3. How do leaders build trust?

By deliberately shaping the environment they create every day. Every conversation, every meeting, every difficult discussion, every leadership moment.

4. How do extraordinary teams emerge?

When connection, competence and increasing autonomy create the conditions in which intrinsic motivation flourishes.

5. How do organisations sustain this?

By deliberately developing leaders and aligning their systems, processes and culture so that great leadership becomes the normal way of working.

That is why, more than a decade ago, we established the Trust-Based Leadership Academy. Not simply to teach leadership, but to help organisations develop leaders over time. If leadership is a craft, it cannot be mastered through a single workshop or by reading one book. It develops through deliberate practice, thoughtful reflection and consistent application. In fact, I was reminded of this only recently.

A week ago, I asked a group of leaders attending one of our leadership academies to pay particular attention to the leadership moments they encountered during the week.

Their only task was to consciously practise applying the principles we had discussed, particularly the ideas contained within The Fourteen Commandments of Leadership Moments.

When we met again, something fascinating had happened.

The conversation was no longer about leadership theory.

Leader after leader described real situations they had encountered, the choices they had made, what they had done differently and, perhaps most importantly, how differently people had responded.

Leadership had moved from their heads into their daily practice.

While having a coach or facilitator to guide the journey is enormously valuable, lasting leadership development comes from something much deeper. It comes from leaders consciously reflecting on their own behaviour, applying new ideas, learning from experience and repeating that process over time. It is this rhythm of practice and reflection that gradually transforms individual actions into enduring leadership habits.

Those habits eventually become the lived experience of the people they lead.

That, ultimately, is why we believe leadership development is not an event.

It is a lifelong practice.

So where does this journey end?

Perhaps it doesn't. Perhaps it simply begins again tomorrow morning. Not with another leadership model. Not with another strategy document. But with one simple question.

What was it like to work with me today?

If we ask that question honestly, and if we are willing to learn from the answer, we will gradually become better leaders. One conversation at a time. one leadership moment at a time, one experience at a time, because people respond to the environment their leaders create with trust or distrust. - Everything else follows.

References

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