

## Motivation, fear and trust

**In this first conversation, George discusses and explores three of the key themes in our Leadership Dynamics programme: motivation, fear and trust.**

### Leadership from the inside

Of the many different characteristics effective leaders demonstrate, one universal trait is the motivation to succeed. Indeed, the will to succeed fuels so much of our work; generating impulses inside us that move us towards purposeful actions and behaviours. Derived from the Latin word *motere* 'to move'; motivation is, in its broadest sense, a preference for particular and desirable outcomes.

How, then do successful leaders instil this in others? Can leaders actually motivate their teams? Work attitudes have clearly changed, particularly in a global context, with employees in hitherto compliant and acquiescent cultures now seeking and expecting much greater participation and increasing opportunities for self-development. In this changing environment, leaders need to acknowledge this self-interest in people, yet still enable them to remain adaptable and committed to the organisation's goals.

The old aphorism that "*you can lead a horse to water ...*" raises a recurring leadership dilemma as to whether motivation is more intrinsic or extrinsic in its origins. If it does stem from more extrinsic sources then "*we simply have to make it thirsty first!*" But there is, however, a more compelling view; and this is when leaders start to see their people as being largely self-motivated. Transformational leadership, in this context, demonstrates a leader's ability, not just to create an understanding in people of what needs to be done, but more fundamentally, to be able to tap into their intrinsic desire to want to do it. Therefore, if we can really begin to understand what intrinsically motivates people, we have at our command the most powerful tool to do so. Among the myriad of books and literature that surrounds the question of motivation and the intrinsic / extrinsic debate, a simple question remains and may serve to keep our own personal motivation on track:

**"Does my leadership behaviour serve my goals?"**

Fear, on the other hand; although a recognised emotional state, is often viewed as an unwelcome emotion, caused by the threat of danger and thereby regarded as an obstacle to success. However, its function as a vital, life-saving force should also be acknowledged, with the fear of failure proving a survival instinct amongst many successful leaders. Indeed, fear itself may act as a powerful motivator. "There is no courage without fear", and pushing through the 'fear barrier' may be less frightening than living with our underlying and long-term fears.

However, due to its shifting context, fear remains a difficult emotion to define, particularly since no two people have quite the same experience or response to any given situation. The word itself derives from the old English word 'faer', meaning "a sudden calamity or danger" and is recognised, unlike phobia, as a normal emotional response to an active or even imagined threat. Biological impulses drive our emotions, with our brains 'hard-wired' to release chemical impulses that enable us to feel before we think, and although anxiety is a recognised cognitive state, we are not necessarily at any risk. However, due to the nature of the human mind, we can occasionally anticipate dangers or threats that do not exist; what we might refer to as '*advanced worrying*' and to which Mark Twain once remarked: "*I've experienced many terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened!*" It is more the threat of danger that most often primes the stress response. It makes fear "a wonderful servant but a terrible master".

Managing fear in a leadership context is extremely challenging, but in the same way that effective leadership comes from experience and learned behaviour, much of what we fear in an organisational context is



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also learned. This can evoke, among others, the fear of rejection, failure, shame or social disapproval. However, once we confront our fears determinedly, we have, at least, the capacity to diminish them. We can also recognise a key relationship here between fear and trust: To diminish our fear is to develop more trust in our own ability to handle whatever pressures may come our way.

Trust may be the key component in all successful teams as the evidence clearly shows that successful teams do feel that they can trust each other. When trust is present we are usually able to create team work. If it is missing, we will not. Trust may even be a competitive asset in a company as we continuously invest in trust to overcome the negative cost of low trust and even mistrust. Trust, if you like, is our wager on the future contingent actions of others and becomes a crucial strategy for dealing with any uncertain and uncontrollable outcome. As Warren Bennis claims: *“Trust is the emotional glue that binds followers and leaders together.”*

Believing what we hear rather than simply hearing what we believe is a stepping stone to building trust and without ‘believability’ we are neither heard nor trusted. Only in an environment where we can be real, open and honest, and where we feel free to disagree, can we build and sustain genuine trust. However, people in organisations will refer to trust in different ways. There is the **strategic trust** that we have in the people running our companies. There is also a **personal trust** that employees will have in their own managers. Then there is the **organisational trust** that people have in the company itself. So if organisations are fuelled by trust, then we should ask ourselves this key question: How many managers are good at creating it? Many companies seem to continue operating on the old Tennessee Williams tenet: *“We have to distrust each other. It is our only defence against betrayal!”* Trust is important in this context because it means letting go of a certain kind of control.

The high cost of mistrust results in so many organisational inefficiencies as we create webs of intrigue, hierarchies, miscommunication, misperception, anger, blame and cynicism that consumes our fiscal and intellectual capital and the goodwill and

energy of people; compelling us to draw up elaborate bureaucratic procedures for even the simplest of transactions. The building blocks of trust are deep rooted in values such as integrity, clear communication and a willingness to confront awkward questions. The enemies of trust are inconsistent messages and standards, misplaced benevolences, false feedback and a failure to trust others. Leaders have to be consistently against these in order to build, maintain and restore it when damaged. Miscommunication is so often the cause of a breakdown in trust and with virtually every aspect of our lives dependent upon communication and trust, ultimately, it is more about us trusting ourselves enough to trust others. It is the most fragile yet perhaps the most essential attribute of leadership, only becoming ‘mutual’ when it can evoke reciprocity in people that will define the depth of their relationship. Trusting relationships alone can mean the difference between success and failure.

Although trust may account for many of the reasons why we believe what someone says; in itself, trust is not a leadership objective. A trusting environment does not create value unless there are excellent ideas, strategic actions and sustainability that emerge from it. And if trust is the key component in teamwork, then it must define the importance of our interpersonal relationships. It is impossible to estimate how many good ideas are abandoned every day as a result of difficult-to-manage relationships. *“Madness is the exception in individuals but the rule in groups,”* wrote Nietzsche and we must have the will and the courage to deal with potential conflict that can stem from a lack of trust. Groucho Marx once famously quipped, *“Whatever it is – I’m against it.”* and we can become resigned to this view. Yet when there is trust, conflict can become productive. The free flow of conflicting ideas and feelings is critical for creative thinking and for discovering new solutions that no one individual could have come up with on their own.

So much of leadership comes from within. As the poet, Robert Frost, said at the inauguration of John F Kennedy; *“something we were withholding made us weak, until we found it was ourselves.”* Enabling others to overcome their fears by tapping into their own intrinsic motivation can enable them to

unlock the personal power that lies within us all. So, when people have the desire to take more control of their working environment, we must place more power in their hands by trusting their decision making capabilities as far down the line as possible. Put simply; it becomes the transfer of power from managers to employees. By giving away power, it can judiciously make us more powerful. It's about releasing power, not about giving it up.

Robert Frost also said that the brain is an organ that starts working the moment we get up in the morning and doesn't stop until we get into the office. Motivated and trusted employees 'bring their brains to work' and use them both to learn and to grow. Learning, however, is not an event but a process and although '*many of us know, few of us do*' and having the motivation to act upon what we know is probably the key challenge for leaders. Many managers are reluctant leaders, in that they have the raw materials but are limited by those intrinsic fears and don't see themselves in leadership roles. Great leadership, however, comes through our own self-knowledge, an embracing purpose, personal resilience, renewable confidence, the control of our fears and the celebration of our achievements, as well as the inner drive to explore 'the art of the possible'; not just for ourselves but for others too. It forces us to challenge our existing thinking and reflect upon what we could do differently to make a real and lasting impact in our roles as leaders.

The dynamics of our social interactions and the willingness to work in harmony with others form the more deeply-rooted seeds of any meaningful leadership initiative. '*When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear*' claims the famous maxim; speaking out to all of us as '*lifelong learners*'. In truth, we are all in the never-ending process of becoming leaders and the kind of leaders we become relates not only to our own experiences but also to those we share with others. We face similar challenges yet often chose to operate in isolation from one another. The motivation and courage required to face up to our fears, coupled with mutual trust and mutual support, can help us all become 'Boards of Directors' for one another's problems.

Great work starts with great feeling, and emotions are what motivates us to remain in constant pursuit of our goals. Emotions have long been considered of such power that in Latin they are described as a '*motus anima*' meaning a spirit that moves us. A few lines from Goethe's '*Faustas - A Dramatic Mystery*' summarise the essence of our personal motivation:

**“What you can do, or dream you can,  
begin it.  
Boldness has genius, power and  
magic in it.  
Begin it now.”**

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