

THE MIDLIFE
MISTRESS

CAROLYN
HOBBEY

NO MORE PEOPLE PROBLEMS!

**6 SIMPLE STRATEGIES FOR
INSPIRATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

You want to be an inspirational leader. Who doesn't?

Yet, when 87% of workers “either feel disengaged or enraged by [their] jobs” (Hari, 2018), we know we've got a problem. We cannot pretend that these figures belong to some other leader. That our employees are in the other 13%. On the back of the pandemic, however - and a whole other sh*t shower of issues we've now got to contend with - what great leadership looks like is different to what has gone before.

With a plethora of people 'problems' laid before you as a leader, how do you remain successful and set yourself apart? The answer is **SIMPLE**. That is, my 6 straightforward strategies to make you an inspirational leader in the face of today's workplace people challenges.

After 25 years as a senior Human Resources professional, I got tired of the traditional HR bullsh*t. I wanted something practical. No-nonsense. Think: less 'Human Remains', more Remaining Human.

Less effort for you.

Less cost to the business.

More ROI from your people time.

Built on a combination of professional knowledge, research and lived experience, **SIMPLE** is a people-centric approach that meets employee expectations as they are today and for future generations; providing marketability to you as a leader and any company you work on behalf of.

Stop training leaders. Start nurturing humans.
SIMPLE is your new normal.

- **Self for Success**
- **Improvement with Impact**
- **Measurement without Micromanaging**
- **Performance through People**
- **Leading by Listening**
- **Environments that Engage**

Why has people management become so challenging?

"I feel like a social worker for my team!"

I hear this - or some variant of it - from line managers all the time. Frustrated by the volume and complexity of people 'problems' that stop them from getting on and doing the work that needs to be done to hit targets, make profit, and collect their bonus. Simply trying to stay afloat and be successful.



THEN CAME THE PANDEMIC.

THE WORLD SHIFTED ON ITS AXIS.
THE WORKPLACE FORCIBLY CHANGED.
THE LATEST 'INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION'.



Whilst we have returned to some kind of normality, we also haven't. Many forecast that the full wave of the post-pandemic 'hangover' has not yet fully crashed over us.

What occurred over the last couple of years has changed businesses, and their people, irrevocably - in no other way than the employer-employee relationship. The 'psychological contract' - the one of trust, safety and shared values - is back on the table and in need of re-examination.

Almost 17% of the UK adult population were already taking anti-depressants in 2018 (www.gov.uk, 2022) and then demand for this medication "grew exponentially... in 2020" (BusinessWire, 2021); it is unsurprising that the number of people issues is increasing.

Talk of work-life balance is on the wain.

The leveller that was lockdown accelerated the recognition that we are one person. From clerk to CEO, confinement, separation, denial, and sudden change inflicted harm on the mental health of us all.

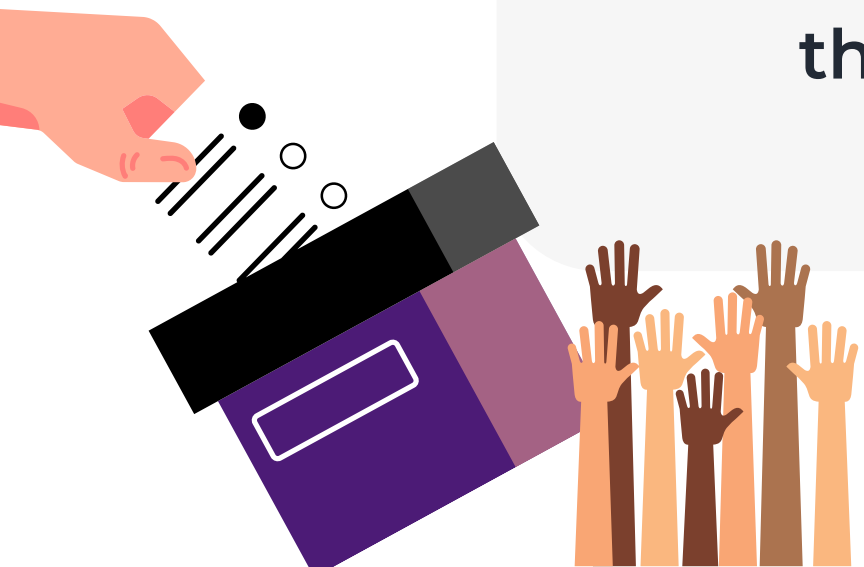
We acknowledged that we're holistic beings and that work impacts home, which impacts work... and so on; it's all the same 'life'.



“... as many as 47% of [employees] could leave if you don't meet their expectations” - Lattice, 2022

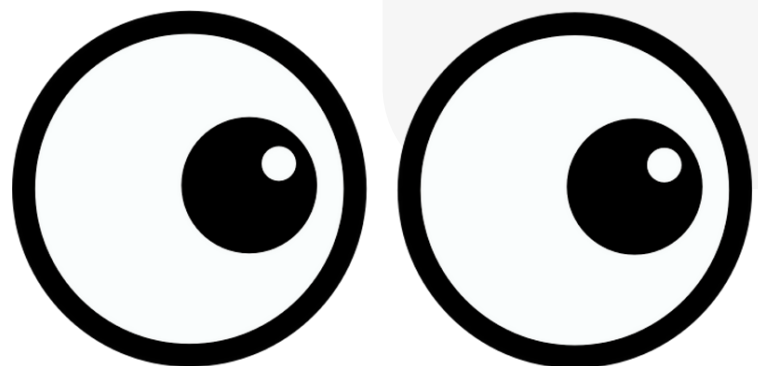
Then came a new set of pressures - political upheaval (twice!), constitutional change, global unrest, rising costs and economic crises - the landscape through which leaders must guide their employees continues to shift.

What these changes have altered in the workplace is expectation. The post-pandemic workforce now expects their employer to understand them as individuals and safeguard their wellbeing like never before. They expect leaders to do this whilst simultaneously creating the environment for them to progress their careers. This goes beyond their rights as employees. Your people are driving this change; organisations and governments must catch up.



As an HR professional I can feel leaders' eyes rolling.

Let's not forget that you've managed to navigate the innumerable policies, procedures and legislative hurdles that have been thrown at you up until this point. You've been doing pretty well at this people management stuff so far. Now, however, the rules of the game are changing. In the spirit of 'what got you here, won't get you there', we know it's time to do something different. It's time for a different kind of people leadership.



“Toxic work cultures are the latest pandemic.”
- Matt Phelan, The Happiness Index

Here are just a few workplace stats from the last year:

- 52% of employees have experienced burn-out (Indeed)
- 44% increase in Employment Tribunal cases citing bullying (LinkedIn)
- 36% report being discriminated against (CIPHR)
- 29% state they have been bullied at work (YouGov)

We can debate the validity of statistics. We can argue whether bullying really is on the rise, whether employees have become less resilient or less tolerant.



We know that if you ask an employee whether things could be improved in their workplace they will, of course, say “yes”. Aside from the numbers, however, it is undeniable that the conversation about toxic workplaces and employee expectation is getting louder. The Great Resignation/Great Reassessment has morphed from being a postulated fear to become a real thing.

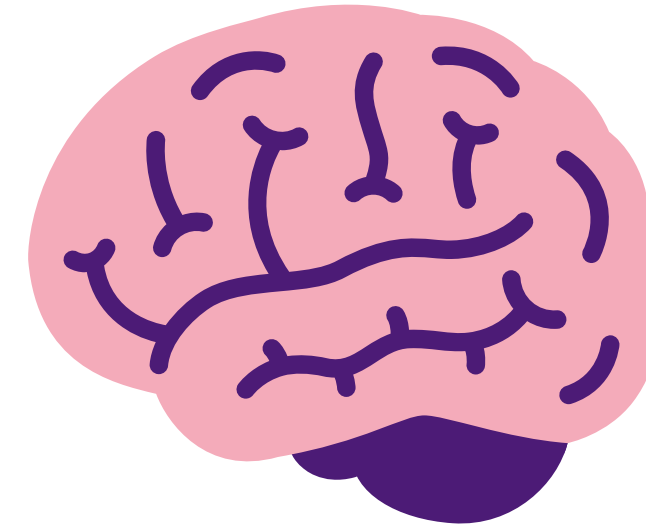
Then along came ‘Quiet Quitting’ - just to freak us out some more. Opinions are split about whether this is unproductive presenteeism, lack of discretionary effort or employees setting boundaries and working to their contracts... whichever, it hardly leaves you with a warm fuzzy feeling as a leader. Just like the phrase ‘war on talent’, quiet quitting is making leaders everywhere shudder. Add to this that the emerging generation of employees want their work to contribute rather than detract from their lives, and it’s easy to get disheartened by the present-day requirements of people leadership.

“People have always and will increasingly look to their jobs to supply meaning and narrative to their lives, and the companies that win will be the ones who can help them do exactly that.”

- MIT SMR/Glassdoor Culture 500, 2022

Now, there is a new wave of leadership theories being pushed and postulated:

- Transformative Leadership
- DEIB Leadership
- Trauma-informed Leadership



I don't know about you, but these new theories make me want to scream, "STOP! Enough already!". Arrghh! When data and demands are already driving us relentlessly, I want less to do, not more. I wanted simplicity. I discovered that theory, practice, and experience didn't exist in one **SIMPLE** model, so I created it.

What will **SIMPLE** people management do for my leadership success?



SIMPLE makes you a Corporate Athlete.
It places you in the top 10% of leaders who are
effortlessly excellent today and leave an
aspirational legacy for future generations.

“Happier employees are more productive, more creative, sell more and create better financial outcomes for their organisations.” - Matt Phelan, The Happiness Index

We were schooled by the leaders that went before us. Our role models operated against the tickbox tenets of ‘success’ that still perpetuate across society today: job, house, family, cars, holidays, pension and bonus schemes.

These leaders encouraged us to strive hard with a gratitude based on merely having a job. Whilst many of us have this mindset baked-in, we know that current employee perspectives are not the same.

If we’re going to cultivate and inspire the generations that follow us, it is imperative to create a bridge between former mindsets and future expectations.

Well-trodden people solutions need to be replaced by adaptable, individualised responses; these are what will make companies - and the leaders that shape them - successful now and future-proof.

Stripping back leadership, focusing on our innate human skills and reducing the incidence of people problems is what **SIMPLE is about.**

Less processes.

Less stress.

Less cost.

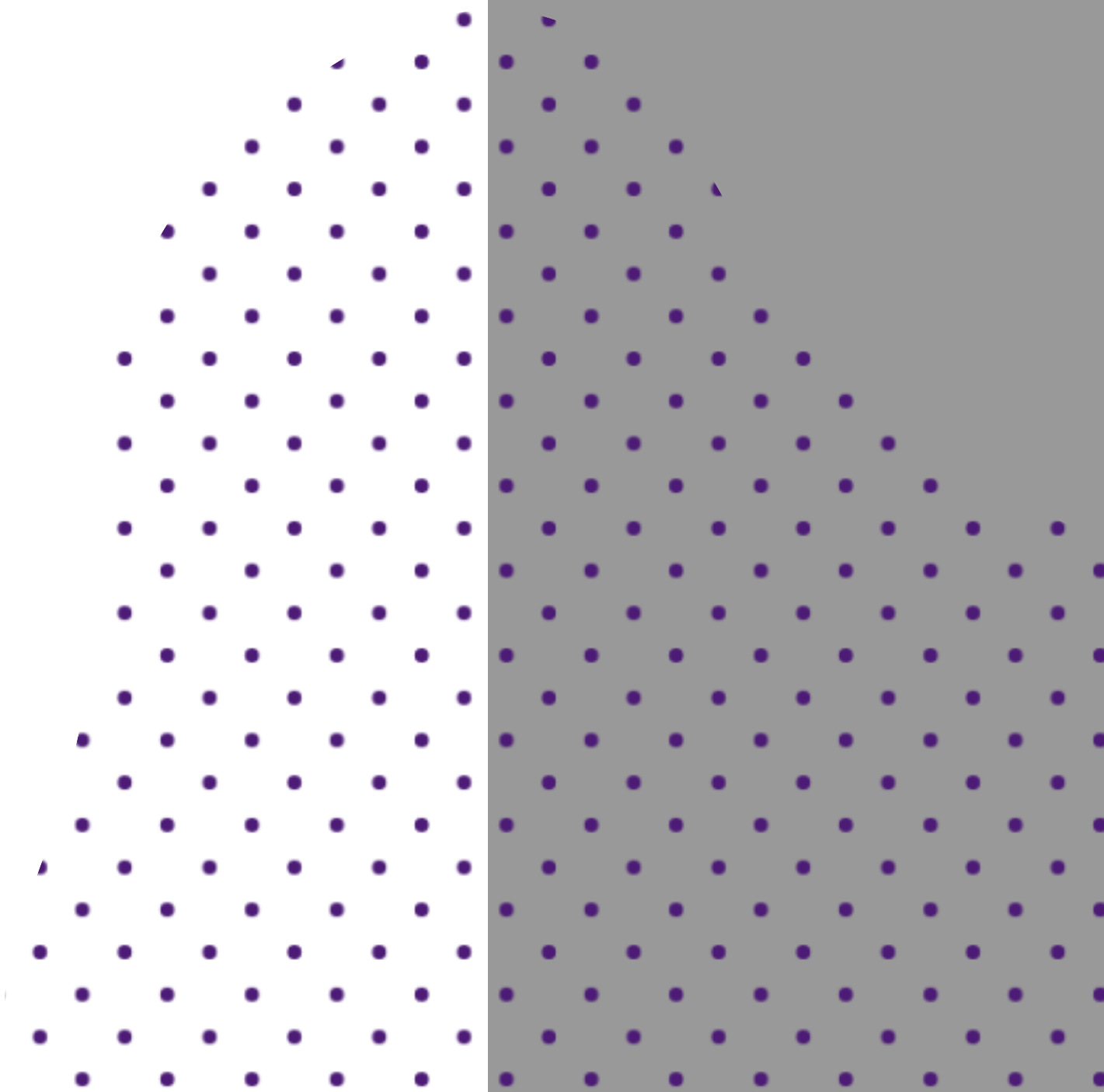
More quality time.

SIMPLE stops training leaders and starts nurturing humans.

Think: less 'Human Remains', more Remaining Human.

This delivers:

- Maximised performance
- Reduced absence and unproductive presenteeism
- Increased engagement
- Inspiring the next generation of leaders
- An end to the resignation/recruitment cycle
- Workplace communities
- Your leadership legacy



Self for Success

An environment free from fear, where everyone can participate at their best.

- Awareness of your impact on others
- Confidence to deal with the unfamiliar and uncertain
- Courage to show up as you

Improvement with Impact

A relentless pursuit of betterment, achieved reasonably.

- Making decisions at the right level
- Embracing change fearlessly
- Working on the right things, at pace

Measurement without Micromanaging

A set of lived values and behaviours that everyone is accountable for upholding.

- Meeting expectations through goals and milestones
- Feeling in control of work delivery
- Managing upwards as well as downwards

Performance through People

Everyone understands their role and is encouraged to leverage their skills.

- Ensuring delivery through role clarity
- Allowing your team to get on with their work
- Hiring and nurturing the right talent

Leading by Listening

From self to CEO, every employee is a role model.

- Facilitating challenging conversations
- Consistently building trust and influence
- Leveraging team strengths and overcoming weaknesses

Environment: How to build a Community

A community invested in collective success through valuing individual difference.

- Creating a community where everyone belongs
- Having meaningful meetings, not more meetings
- Feeling energised through positivity-management

Using tried and tested approaches, bringing together the best of the best practical people management methods...

It's like Top Gun for leadership! You choose whether you want to be Maverick, Goose or Iceman.

How do I know that this works? To start with, it's just common sense. Positive people are productive people - in any walk of life. Beyond that, we know of the endorsement that companies get that are values- and purpose-led, and where they put their people first:



These are but a few, both young and long-established businesses and of varying sizes.

Most of all, however, I've worked in both negative and positive employee environments. I've dealt with the endless stream of issues and grievances. I've felt the warmth where people are valued and respected.

Nothing beats first-hand experience with people to be able to tell you, "this works".

What is *wrong* with people? Why are there so many problems?!

We have long since known that when we commoditise our people and treat them like an amorphous mass, we instantly lose the battle for their hearts and minds; replacing it with resentment and resistance. Through established people practices and well-intentioned legislation, we have moved, possibly inadvertently, to a fit-for-no-one template of people management.

No longer will this 'cookie-cutter' approach - from line managers or HR - make an employer desirable. Prospective employees can now find out more online about what it's like to work for an organisation than the leaders themselves find out by working there; the battleground to attract, hire and retain good people is not conducted in the workplace at all.



“Ignoring the people dimension, treating people as simply cogs in the machine, results in the full contribution they can make being lost.”

- The Work Foundation

Employees want their leader to recognise their individuality and listen to them. Don't misunderstand me, in a crisis situation no-one expects to be asked whether they feel like exiting the burning building. Day-to-day, however, today's employees expect a breadth of leadership tools that create a diverse and inclusive culture; this has become the distinguishing feature between undesirable and inspirational businesses and the people that lead them.

Then, beyond that, Warren Buffett said, "There seems to be some perverse human characteristic that likes to make easy things difficult ". This is true in business, where we are frequently seduced by the 'sexiness' of complexity (David Shedd, 2011) because we think that something can only be high quality if it is challenging. In reality, we risk creating work environments that are hard to navigate, inflexible and uninhabitable for their wrung-out employees. Equally, stressed-out and overworked line managers with a bias for action - based on the 'work hard = success' formula - are forced, through workload pressures, to abdicate their people matters to the HR function because these issues get in the way of them getting work done. Meanwhile, HR professionals valiantly attempt to sort those problems out off-line using unsatisfactorily standardised approaches in an increasingly litigious, trial-by-social-media society. They pass back to the manager a patched-up people problem, which ingrains the manager's perception that people leadership is not a core part of their job and the belief that these issues cannot be solved without external, specialist intervention. Around we go again with no advancement in leadership or HR capability, minimal adaptability to employee needs and almost zero organisational learning about the issues created by developing functional/technical skills at the expense of behavioural ones.

"To survive and thrive in today's market, a healthy corporate culture is more important than ever."

- MIT SMR/Glassdoor Culture 500, 2022

How do we currently handle our people problems?

We all want to be more than just a 'good' leader. We want to be great leaders. Inspirational. Engaging. That leader that future leaders refer to as the person they try to emulate. How do we achieve that?



Traditional methods of people leadership have involved encouraging, 'motivating', and demanding employees knuckle down and work harder, especially during tough times. As we head into an economic downturn, this will be the go-to choice for some. A review of policies and procedures, doubling down on them, introducing additional ones, and (re)training managers on how to implement them will be the default response for others. Expect a rash of new 'performance management' software to enter the marketplace as technology seeks to provide solutions to control, monitor and coerce a hybrid workforce into doing what businesses need. Battle lines on pay awards will be drawn as bonus schemes get a cursory re-vamp, whilst town hall meetings are held to rally the troops. A lick of paint in barely-attended offices, a home-delivered gift to employees, and a send-to-all email from the CEO will ensue in an attempt to signal that companies care. Third-party suppliers will be rubbing their hands together as businesses scramble to put in place out-sourced welfare facilities, as the number and variety of helpline posters in restrooms will likely double so we can signpost employees to somewhere else entirely separate from their line manager or the business that they can go to for support.

I am being deliberately provocative.

Despite my tongue-in-cheek description, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with doing any of these
- except that they each will quickly lose their lustre as they miss the point for employees:
these don't address the root cause of the problems they have.

Why is what we're currently doing not working?

We know from experience that deploying expensive removal strategies for those who don't respond in the desired ways to performance management procedures, ill-delivered feedback and disingenuous engagement programmes, will not instigate the required shift in culture from indifference to inspired amongst our workforce. We need to remember, too, that leaders are also employees. You may recognise within yourself - or others - that the last few years has altered you too; that you had an "is this it?" moment about your working life. Abandoning the commute, being present for children's mealtimes, online meetings that ran to schedule, and the freedom to get outdoors in the middle of the working day were game-changers not just for employees, but for their leaders. Leaders like you who had spent years - maybe decades - feeling pushed to the limit by and trapped on the corporate-life hamster wheel.

*"You cannot maintain success if your body is wrecked or if everybody around you hates you."
- Brendon Burchard: High Performance Habits*



People managing during lockdown was far from plain sailing. Leaders came under pressure to interact with employees in new ways, and to handle the holistic work/home lives of their teams as these employees faced unprecedented demands from all sides. Managers were required to invent and implement alternative methods of tackling previously familiar ways of doing tasks, and - frequently - to communicate these from afar. In this new regime, leaders had to attempt to understand who was performing and who was not - whilst faced with previously unchartered reasons why - when traditional appraisal processes could not be utilised or actual working observed. Overnight, leaders became mental health first-aiders, employee assistance programmes, technology specialists, business acrobats and, yes, even more like social workers. The policies and procedures on which companies had previously relied were, in many cases, rendered null and void by this upended situation.

Suddenly, without warning, the rug was ripped out from beneath leaders' feet and two years on it hasn't been returned. Nor will it be. The threads from which our understanding of leadership used to be stitched have unraveled, and a new tapestry needs to be constructed to depict today's employee needs.



Asking leaders and HR to keep doing more (typically, with less resources) isn't sustainable.

Taking a blanket approach to employees will no longer suffice. Outsourcing employee wellbeing to third parties won't work when a human-connected environment is expected. Leadership programmes based on policy implementation, form-filling, rule-enforcement and damage limitation forged from risk aversion, have had their day. 'Hoping' line managers will be okay with the people stuff will not serve those leaders or their teams. In short, if too much of a manager's time is spent dealing with people 'problems', then the business has a problem. There will always be people matters to attend to, but they don't have to, by definition, be 'problems'.

There is another way and it's **SIMPLE**.

*“[there are] limitations of an approach which regards the workforce en masse as ‘human resources’ leading to a monolithic and one-dimensional view of people”
- MacLeod, 2009*

Far from making leadership more complex, taking a human-centred approach to people management brings simplicity by its very nature.

When you stop trying to push square pegs into the round holes of 'standardisation', you instantly reduce the number of corners you spend time rounding off - usually painfully and unsatisfactorily. By re-connecting with employees at a human level we begin a chain reaction; a positive one. They begin to re-connect with themselves and with other colleagues; this ripples beyond our leadership and the workplace. The desire for this connection is what lockdown showed us we need.

“Terrible leadership at work has terrible implications at home.”
- Jeffrey A Kottler



How can I make people leadership SIMPLE?

In the post-pandemic era a deeper level of relationship is needed to engage employees; businesses need to meet their people at the heart of their emotional wellbeing. This starts with leaders connecting to their own humanity: “How would you like to be managed?”. Of course, what works for you won’t necessarily translate to meeting another’s needs, but re-connecting with ourselves instantly increases our ability to be empathetic. It is about recognising as leaders that we have people management capability exactly because we are human beings.

*“Don’t fix sickness, create health.”
- Dave Nyss*

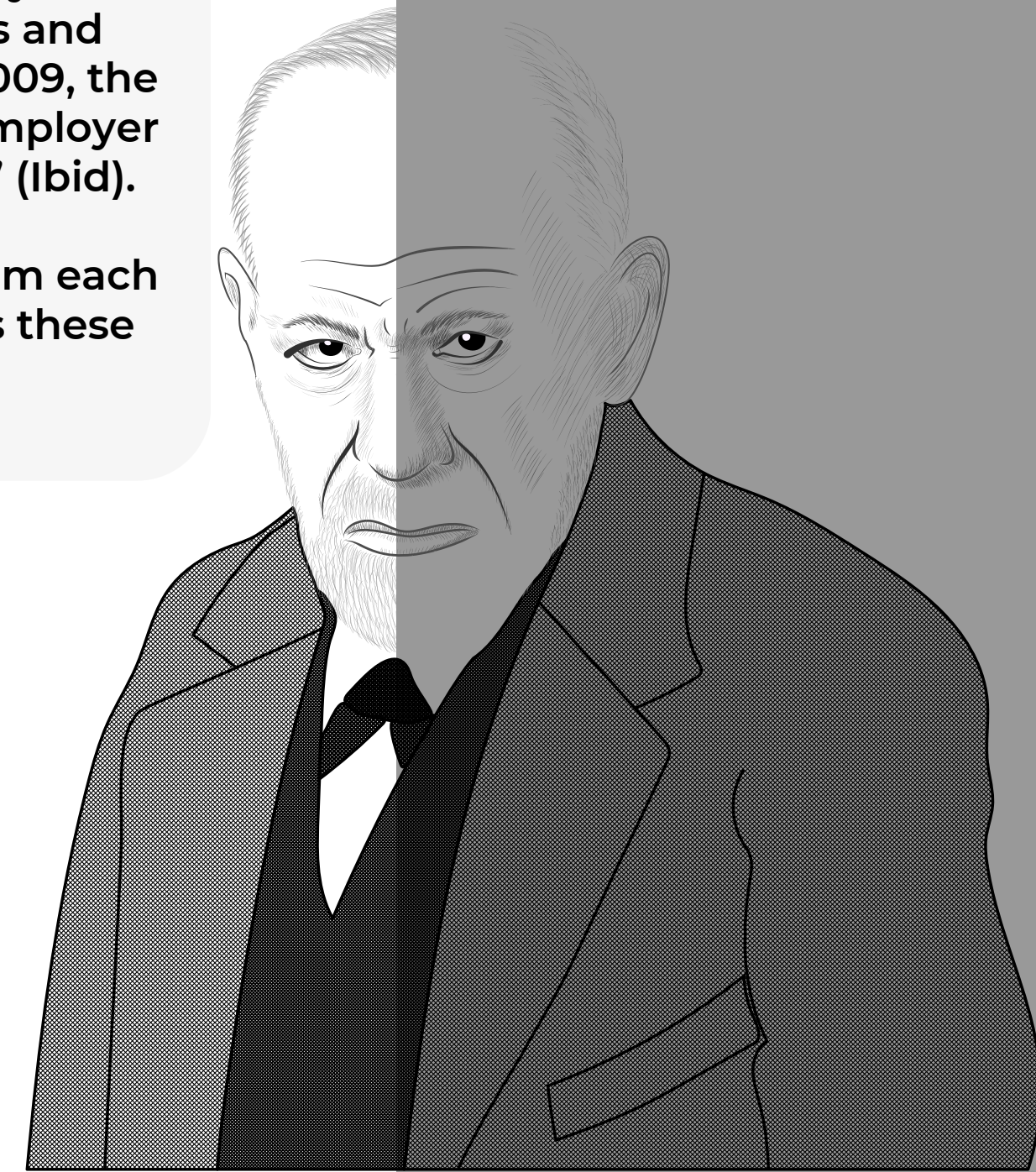


This new way of managing has been coming for some time.

The pandemic was merely rocket fuel that accelerated the process. Back in the 20th Century psychologists - initially Sigmund Freud and then Eric Berne - introduced Transactional Analysis and postulated that healthy, productive relationships are based on treating each other as adults. In 2009, the Macleod report proved the link between business profitability and the quality of the employee-employer relationship. He described it as, "... a blindingly obvious but nevertheless often overlooked truth" (Ibid).

In our present, traumatised world, a fresh set of issues arises. The impact of our disconnection from each other is a rise in anxiety and depression. In his book, *Lost Connections* (2018), Johann Hari places these into nine causes:

- Cause 1: Disconnection from Meaningful Work**
- Cause 2: Disconnection from Other People**
- Cause 3: Disconnection from Meaningful Values**
- Cause 4: Disconnection from Childhood Trauma**
- Cause 5: Disconnection from Status and Respect**
- Cause 6: Disconnection from the Natural World**
- Cause 7: Disconnection from a Hopeful or Secure Future**
- Causes 8 & 9: The real role of genes and brain changes**



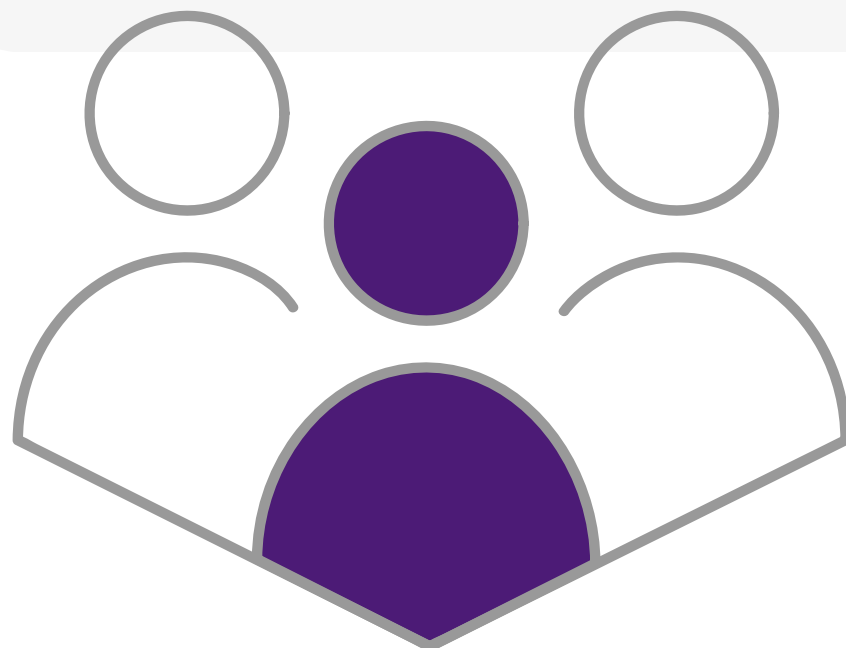
If we want to engage and inspire as leaders, to win hearts and minds, to resolve the people problems we currently face, then these disconnections are how we meet our employees where they are. Positive workplace cultures are fostered from addressing six of these nine disconnections[1].

It is these disconnections, and how transformational reconnecting them can be on businesses and culture, that is why I brought together the **SIMPLE** model.

Self for **S**uccess (Disconnection from Other People)
Improvement with **I**mpact (Disconnection from a Hopeful & Secure Future)
Measurement without **M**icromanaging (Disconnection from Meaningful Values)
Performance through **P**eople (Disconnection from Meaning Work)
Leading by **L**istening (Disconnection from Status and Respect)
Environments that **E**ngage (Disconnection from the Natural World)

NUMBERS 4, 8 AND 9 ARE
ROOTED IN ASPECTS THAT
EMPLOYERS CANNOT - AND
WOULD BE ILL-ADVISED TO
ATTEMPT - TO INFLUENCE.

As leaders, we understand that how we behave and the environment we create at work as individuals fundamentally impacts our teams. Our behaviour is why 87% of workers “either feel disengaged or enraged by our jobs” (Hari, 2018). That isn’t someone else’s problem. As leaders, it’s ours. It’s our duty to create conducive environments for employees to thrive. Ordinary people are what inspire us. People being human. It’s **SIMPLE**.



“Every workplace is a community, whether you nurture it or not.”
- Cara Brennan Allamano: Lattice, 2022

Why might making things **SIMPLE** be hard?

The word 'change' strikes fear into our hearts. We're conditioned to be wary of it, despite the fact that we adapt constantly. Change requires us to 'lose' something: a relationship, a friendship, a long-held belief, familiarity. Despite whether what we must shed to welcome in the new is good or bad, the loss of the safety of what we know, coupled with the uncertainty of what is replacing it, makes us feel vulnerable. We don't like to place ourselves in positions within which we feel threatened - physically, mentally or emotionally.

This mindset has been hard-wired into our psyche since our predecessors were roaming the Savannah, when anything or anyone unfamiliar could be the difference between life and death. Our brains have not evolved much; this same fear of the unknown remains as the 'fight or flight' response today. It is no surprise that a change in people leadership approach will encounter some resistance.

*“Those who never change their mind, never change anything.”
- Winston Churchill: The Darkest Hour*

One of the greatest challenges to enacting this alternative people approach will be the reaction of employees. Change at a leadership level will take time to be seen and trusted by them.

“Is this a one-off?”

“Is it a trick?”

“What does this mean for me?”

As leaders, you have to accept that it will take numerous attempts before your efforts are noticed, believed and rewarded. Employees are going to take some convincing that any new leadership style is sincerely meant. As leaders, navigating through this will involve wobbles, failures, doubt and triumphs. Plan for your failures and make discussing your mistakes part of the learning process with your people.

“Success comes from keeping things simple and focusing relentlessly on the few critical issues that need to be resolved to drive the success of the business.”

- David Shedd, 2011



Will the gain be worth the pain?

It is always essential to keep down business costs. A **SIMPLE** approach to leadership reduces absenteeism, increases employee engagement, brings greater productivity, creates ease of hiring, lowers employee attrition and improves business results. These employee behaviours are all indicative of the health of your workplace culture.

Current employees are more demanding. Potential employees are more discerning. Future employees are more vociferous about wanting a workplace experience that is different from what they observed through their parents. There is nowhere to hide for employers. Your 'people' business reputation is now as essential as your reputation with clients. We're already aware of the risks of getting it wrong.

A **SIMPLE** approach is about having the courage to be human. Creating work spaces where our successors want to be leaders because it is a role steeped in the privilege of inspiring others.

Don't learn more. Do less. Be human. It's **SIMPLE**.

*“There’s something much bigger than the business case for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging [at] work. It’s the human case.”
- Brene Brown, 2022*

CAROLYN HOBDEY

CREATOR OF CORPORATE ATHLETES | SPEAKER |
JOYFUL REVOLUTIONARY | AUTHOR



With 25 years of Human Resources experience, I know a thing or two about people. Bringing a 'no bullsh*t' approach to leader development, I can show you how to resolve your workplace people problems. Less cost. Less time. Less stress. More productivity. In 6 **SIMPLE** strategies.

As an expert in professional and personal change – not out of a textbook, but based on real life – I can guide you using simple STEPs to Being Unapologetically YourSELF. From Midlife onwards. Your Legacy. Your Terms.

From Management to Midlife. From Self-Confidence to Selfishness. And numerous topics in-between. I love to chat! Whether on podcasts or public speaking, I'm the conversational catalyst to enliven and engage at your event.

Ok, so I write books with the word 'Twat' in the title! But I'm more than a one-trick pony. Whether it's a business audit report, a thought-piece or a magazine article, you can be sure of plenty of candour, a smattering of sass and a dollop of humour.



WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?

Contact info@carolynhobdey.com to start your **SIMPLE** journey to Inspirational Leadership



If you want to discover more about my **SIMPLE** ways to take your leadership to the next level and reduce the number of people problems in your team, find me here: <https://www.carolynhobdey.com/the-leaders-lounge/>

Why the 'Midlife Mistress'?

If you're over 40, then you're in Midlife. Sorry if that comes as a bit of a blow.

It's a phase historically associated with 'crisis': the thought that we perhaps have more time behind us than ahead, can create inner turmoil, identity questions, and the feeling of being at a crossroads. More recently, 'midlife' has had a bit of a makeover. That's not to say those mixed feelings don't remain, but it is being seen as a time of opportunity and options, with a lot of life still left to live. Taking control of your future- whether as a leader at work or a role model at home - and leaving the legacy you want in the world, means it's time to Make Your (mid)Life Matter. I'm here to walk (ok, strut) with you on that journey. No nonsense. No bullsh*t.

And why the Mistress? I'm a woman. It's that **SIMPLE**.