

EHAND-BOOK

GIVING

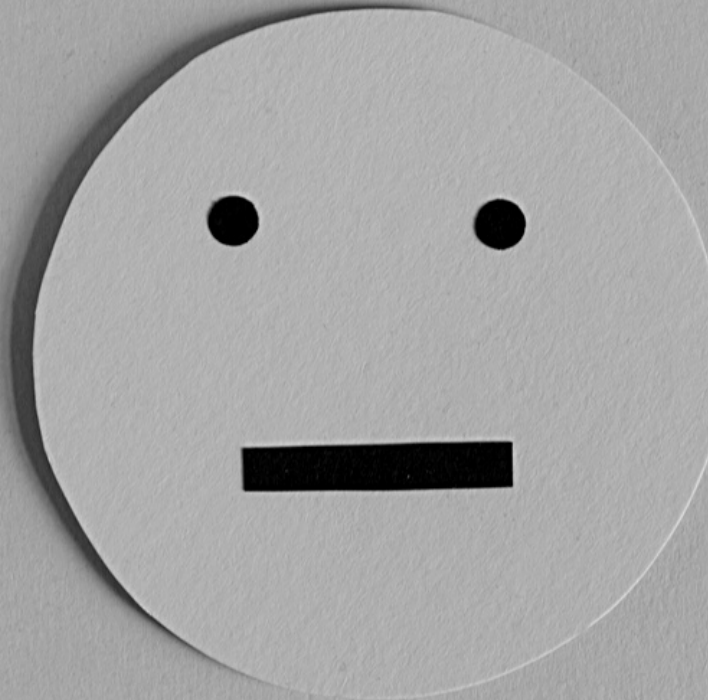
HARD

FEEDBACK

FOUR STEP PROCESS TO
MAKE THE TOUGH
CONVERSATIONS MORE
EFFECTIVE



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BY DANIEL MURRAY

Dark characters of Feedback

Have you had, or maybe been, a Jekyll & Hyde Leader? Someone who is nice, warm, friendly and empathetic most of the time, but then when something goes wrong and they need to provide corrective or disciplinary feedback, they change.

When giving hard feedback they become harsh, clinical, calculative and unemotional. All the flexible kindness is replaced by rigid compliance.

This often comes out when a leader needs to give their people feedback. Giving feedback is a critical role of leadership, yet the way in which it is given can leave the person on the other end feeling confused.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the recipient of the feedback feels like their Manager goes from being their best friend into their feared high school Principal in seconds. Has this happened to you?

The laughter and banter vanish and the dark clouds of impending doom descend over the meeting room. This is generally a horrible experience for both the receiver and giver of the feedback.

It too often has a devastating impact on the interpersonal relationship, limited



effect in improving behaviour and, most worrying of all, erodes trust in leadership.

After finding themselves on either side of this negative experience, we often see people change.

They turn into one of these persona's you might recognise:

- Jekyll & Hyde,
- The Drill-Sergeant, or,
- Mr Nice Guy.

Jekyll & Hyde

As mentioned, this type of leader fluctuates between your best friend and your worst nightmare. Leaders become unpredictable. People don't know what to expect and find themselves holding back, cautiously sharing thoughts without commitment for fear of the monster appearing.

This uncertainty is one of the most challenging types of persona for any of us to work with. Trust is almost impossible to build. The tentative nature of people means everyone avoids conflict that might unleash the beast.

The Drill-Sergeant

Some leaders take on the hard persona all the time, avoiding any signs of friendship or kindness so people always come to expect their Drill-Sergeant approach.

This lack of human connection and relationships impacts on engagement and encourages people to be robotic in their work.

We know this doesn't work. People are not fully engaged, they only do the bare minimum of work and in times of trouble, they flee the ship.



Mr Nice Guy

Some become leaders who choose to avoid giving hard feedback, never wanting to experience that situation again.

Mr Nice Guy beats around the bush, gives subtle hints and even complains to people about the stress their people are causing. But the complaints are to allies, never to the culprits.

They create rumour-mills and secret cliques. The biggest problem is that avoiding feedback

leads to friendly chaos. People aren't able to grow because they are not being told about their issues. In the short term it feels nice, but long term it is disengaging and can destroy team performance.

So what is the answer?

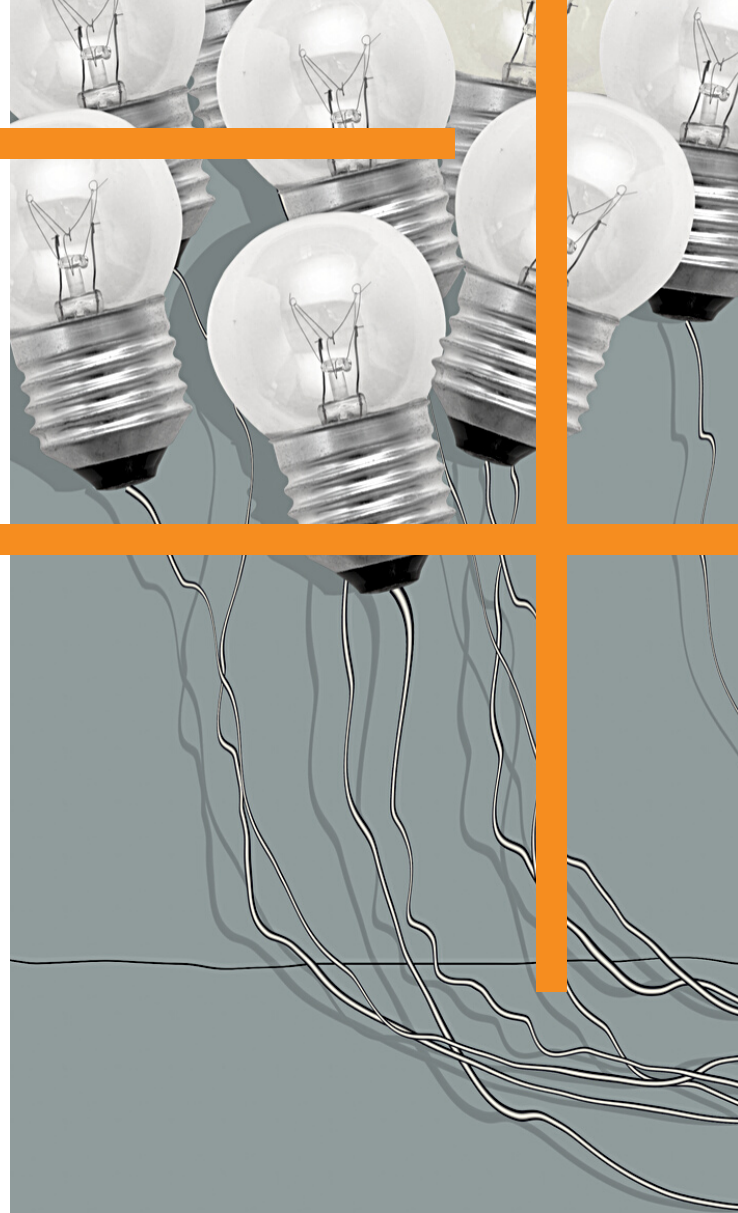
High-performing teams thrive on feedback. While this includes encouragement and positive types of feedback, the reality is, sometimes we need to give and receive hard feedback.

When people fail to deliver on their responsibilities, step outside the behavioural expectations or sabotage the team, leaders must act.

The ability for a leader to give their people hard feedback remains a critical skill. So, how do we give hard feedback while avoid becoming one of those Managers we have experienced in the past?

Some of the ingredients might surprise you. There are four key parts to give hard feedback in a positive way. Clarity, Empathy, Consequences and Actions.

The reality is, most hard feedback ends with one, or sometimes both, people feeling bad and no change being made to change the future outcomes.



Based on adaptations to the teachings of Petrea King (which I highly recommend all people to explore), these four elements are vital to ensuring your feedback is targeted on the issues, founded in shared understanding and provides clear and actionable next steps for future performance.

You can do all of this effectively while building trust, but the key element is understanding based on empathy.

The remainder of this handbook breaks down the key steps. Enjoy!

Four Step Feedback Model

1/ Create Clarity

The first step in giving hard feedback is to ensure you are clear on the specific, objective behaviours or actions that require attention.

This is critical to ensuring future actions and adjustments can be made. If the receiver doesn't know exactly what the feedback is referring to, they will doubt the validity of the feedback and the need to change.

This step is most simply completed by stating objective facts. Avoid adding opinions or assumptions of intent.

For example, if you were to say: "I saw that you were late to the last 3 team meetings", this is an objective fact, they either were or they were not late to the last 3 team meetings.

However if you were to say: "You are always late for meetings" or "You are bad terrible at being on time", these sweeping statements can be rebuffed or dismissed by the receiver.

They might be late 4 out of 5 times, but that is not always. They might be great at being on time in their personal life, just not at work.

As much as possible, be clear, specific and objective in the actions. If there are multiple instances which have built up, ensure you can give some specific details here.

This is not to grind them into the ground, rather just to ensure they agree with the problem before you move off step 1.



Some examples for common problems are:

- I notice you didn't have your safety equipment on in the warehouse yesterday
- I see you didn't complete the steps in the agreed process last week
- I need to talk to you about the language you used in the meeting with the client on Thursday
- The paper you submitted for the project had a number of grammatical errors

In each case, there is little emotion involved and you might be thinking that they don't seem very EQ heavy. The EQ you need to practice in this step is self-regulation.

Too often, leaders start feedback by giving emotionally charged opinions. This emotion immediately puts the receiver in a defensive position and can create uncertainty.

Don't let your emotions derail the feedback. Be calm, specific and create clarity on the focus of the conversation.

One final thing to consider here that I will repeat often: You are giving feedback to a human being about the actions or behaviours, you are not giving feedback about them as a human being. Play the ball not the man as they say.



I emphasise this because too often hard feedback descends into a slanging match. Not openly, but behind the curtains of avoidance, both parties are waving hostile flags of frustration and resentment.

This is no place from which to build a strong relationship. It is no place from which to build a high performing team. It is unhealthy and destructive.

If you feel there is anger, frustration or resentment in the relationship already, you might need to address this first. Step 2 might also help.

2/ Engage with Empathy

Now that we are clear on the what, it is to create space for understanding why.

Sometimes we avoid this step for fear it can be messy and uncomfortable, but be clear, if you don't create space for the why, you miss a chance to build empathy that leads to trust.

Engaging in empathy should not be mistaken with accepting excuses. This is not a step of acceptance nor resolution. Here we just want to open the door to find out why.

For example, you might take the case that someone was late to the last 3 team meetings. You might say:

"I noticed you were late to the last 3 team meetings. I'm sure you are very busy and have a lot of priorities, is that the case?"

Here you are offering a genuine reason why you think it might have occurred. You then allow space for them to share their reasoning. They might simply nod and agree with your reason, they might run up a laundry list of various reason or descend into a long, emotional story about the reasons leading up to the issue.

Whichever path they take, it is your job to listen with empathy to understand.

The mistake people make in this step is to assume they need to have an agreed and justified reason for why. The lack of this agreement can lead to the conversation going around in circles and coming to no resolution. Instead, use this as a time to listen and empathise, do not feel the need to form an excuse or justification.



Let the person speak. Acknowledge what they have said and empathise. You might offer condolences or support for the person going forward, but you need again to be self-aware and self-regulating in your approach.

Now is not the time to look for a solution to their problems, we haven't yet given the most crucial elements of feedback.

For step 2, the objective is simply to build your understanding of why the issues have occurred. Here are examples building on those in the first step:

- I notice you didn't have your safety equipment on in the warehouse yesterday, and I'm guessing you simply forgot trying to work faster, is that right?
- I see you didn't complete the steps in the agreed process last week, maybe you were unclear on the need for these?
- I need to talk to you about the language you used in the meeting with the client on Thursday. I imagine you have been frustrated by their constant changes, what else is going on?
- The paper you submitted for the project had a number of grammatical errors. I am guessing they were just typos because you were in a rush?

This might take some time, but be clear, people who think they have not been heard are less likely to listen. Your job as a leader is to hear their reasons.

It is not to necessarily agree or use them as justification for their actions, but you must truly hear them.

Your objective at this stage is to create a space of understanding from which you can move forward. It is your job as a leader to support your people, understanding is key.



3/ Explain Consequences

One of most critical parts of feedback is ensuring the receiver knows why the feedback was required.

So often, the recipient feels like they are being picked in, unfairly vilified and this is often because the expectations and consequences have not been clearly explained.

The real question here is, why is the action you are giving feedback on so important to address?

Generally, the reason you are giving this type of hard feedback is because a continuation of the type of behaviour will cause damage to the team's performance.

It may put people in danger, break legal policies, frustrate fellow workers or harm customer relationships. It is often a behaviour that is explicitly outside the discussed expectations and there are clear reasons why these expectations were created.

While these may be obvious to you, don't skip this step!

While they might have already mentioned some consequences, don't skip this step!



This is your precious opportunity to ensure they know exactly why this conversation is taking place, because it is important.

Make sure there is no ambiguity as to why this behaviour is not acceptable and the consequences for the person, and the team, if this isn't addressed.

Be explicit here, firstly to the impact this behaviour has on the team and performance. Explain exactly why

this must be discussed, understood and changed. Don't leave it to chance.

One of the biggest problems with policies and rules is that they too often exist out of context or reason.

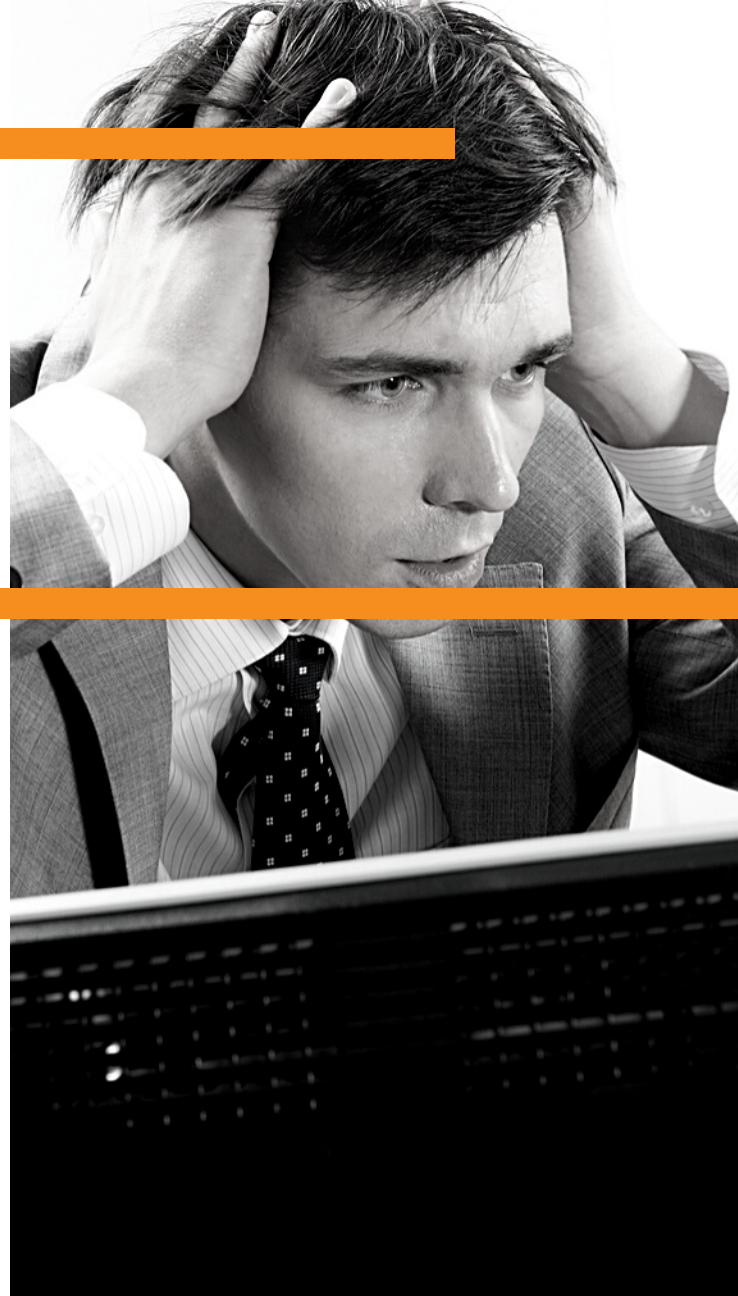
If you were like me, as a kid you were constantly told not to do things, which immediately after being told, you wanted to do more than anything else.

Often for me, this was because the best explanation I received for not doing it was "because I said so." Sound familiar?

Your people are not there to serve you, they are there to be part of your organisation's purpose and strategy. They are there to support customers, both internal and external, to support their team mates and to work in coordination with others to have a greater impact.

Your role as their leader is to be the custodian of the larger impact and performance of the group. Whether you are leading 3 people or 3,000 people, they don't work for you, they work for the cause. You are there to help them achieve this cause.

The reason you need to give them hard feedback is because their actions or behaviours are outside of those the



organisation has decided to successfully deliver on this cause. When you set out a strategy then build this into a set of policies, processes and an operating model, you are intending for this combined set of structures to deliver an outcome.

Similarly, when you agree a set of values then through our actions and attitudes form these into our organisational culture, this is to ensure the team deliver on desired outcome.

When you are giving hard feedback on behaviours or actions that are outside of the strategy or values, it is not because you don't like them, it is because you know they will jeopardise our ability to reach our desired outcome.

The strategy and values should be the bedrock of the expectations you set for the organisation and these expectations, once clear, need to be maintained.

When you are setting out consequences, ensure you are clear on which of the expectations you are holding them accountable to. Explain how their actions have failed to meet the agreed expectations.

Explain why these expectations are so important to the organisation and the outcomes they are putting at risk. If you value safety and someone has acted dangerously, they may be putting lives, including their own, at risk.

If you value quality and someone has been sloppy in their work, they may be putting the reputation of your organisation at risk.

If you value strong relationships and someone has misled or cheated an unsuspecting customer, they are putting client relationships at risk.

At this step, irrespective of the reasons for the behaviour in step 2, you must be incredibly clear on which of their actions are not acceptable and why.

This is a critical step in the process. If, at this stage, the person wants to offer further reasons or debate the



reasons, you might choose to return to step 2. But once you have taken the time to hear out their reasons, reiterate step 3.

Make sure the receiver has fully heard the consequences of this behaviour continuing and the impact it will have on the team. If this message isn't clear, we lose impact for our need to create change.

I would recommend you to have notes for this if you need. Don't risk missing this step. You can use a simple table below to help.

There are a few examples from our list above to help understand the process:



	Behaviour	Expectations	Impact
1	Safety equipment breach	Safety equipment always used	Can cause injuries or death to team
2	Didn't complete steps in process	We always follow the process	Errors can lead to large losses for the business
3	Bad language in meeting	We always act professionally	Clients will not work with us if we are not professional
4	Grammatical errors	We have high quality standard	Errors erode trust in our customers

In sentence form, we now get to:

1. I notice you didn't have your safety equipment on in the warehouse yesterday, and I'm guessing you simply forgot trying to work faster, is that right? As you know, everyone here needs to wear safety equipment all the times in the warehouse. Without it, we run the risk of injuries or worse to you or your team mates. It is not acceptable to not have your safety equipment.
2. I see you didn't complete the steps in the agreed process last week, maybe you were unclear on the need for these? It is critical we follow the steps and I need to be really clear on this. Any errors in the process can lead to large losses for the business and we can't afford mistakes. It is imperative that all steps are followed to the letter.
3. I need to talk to you about the language you used in the meeting with the client on Thursday. I imagine you have been frustrated by their constant changes, what else is going on? Professionalism is one of our sacred values, there is no good reason for us to stray from this in our organisation. If we are unprofessional, it will impact our relationships with clients which is critical for our success.
4. The paper you submitted for the project had a number of grammatical errors. I am guessing they were just typos because you were in a rush? As you know, we strive to uphold the highest standards in quality in everything we do. Grammatical errors aren't acceptable. If these landed on our client desks, it would erode their trust in our work and jeopardise our future contracts.

Here we also need to be very clear about what the feedback is, and what it is not! You are telling them that their actions or behaviours is unacceptable, you are not saying the person is unacceptable. Too often we point the finger at the person, not the behaviour. We tell them it is them that we are criticising when we should be focusing on their behaviour. You must still care for the person, you must still accept the person, you must still lead the person, but you do not accept their behaviour.

We all dislike feedback that feels like a personal attack on us as a person. We must learn to differentiate between the feedback at a person versus feedback on behaviour. Finding this difference often comes from the tone, body language and relationship you have built over time.

There is no fancy wording that I can offer that will make this work for you. Deep down, in your heart, are you still supporting them as a person while you give them hard feedback on behaviour? If so, you are on the right path.

4/ Agree Actions

We are now at the final step of the process and by now you might be feeling like the message has already been delivered, but this is where the work really starts.

The reason you are giving feedback is because the person needs to change their behaviour. Don't leave this to chance. I have experienced before a barrage of criticism for my work without any clear suggestions or guidance on what I should do next. It leaves the recipient feeling both disappointed and lost.

When we give hard feedback, ensure the final comments provide a path towards the agreed next steps that will be taken to get back on the right path. It should be a sign of hope. Despite the feedback pointing out unacceptable behaviours or actions, this is likely not the end of their life! They, like all of us, have and will make mistakes.

No one is perfect and demanding perfection is a sure way of burying future issues under a blanket of shame. When you make issues and errors a taboo, you are dooming your organisation to a slow death.

You've discussed the problems of the past, now it is the time to build a pathway to a better future.



What are the clear instructions you both need to agree to take to rectify any outstanding issues or ensure the team will improve performance in the future?

This might be as simple as a direct instruction: **I want you to ensure you always wear your safety equipment on site.**

It might be a more collaborative discussion: **I want to discuss how we make sure the steps are clear so you follow them all in the future.**

It might be action required to support a change: **I want to help you be successful, I am sending you on communication training to develop your skills.**

It might require a more dramatic change: **I want you to be successful, but your skills just don't meet the expectations of this role. How might we help you find a role that better suits your skills and ambitions?**

Your approach may change depending on the type of issue, strength of relationships or previous history of the person. You must use your judgement but remember, you are there to lead and support them to

be successful and the team to be successful.

Don't hang them out to dry. If they are not able to meet the expectations of the team, it is still your job to support them. Maybe this is an action plan to improve, training & development or support moving to a role that better fits them. Whatever the next step is, it is your job to help lead them there.

The final element here is agreement. What ever action you put forward, it needs to be agreed to by the receiver. This might take some reiteration of the above steps, it might require more explanations as to the reason the expectations exist and why they are important, it might take a few attempts to let the steps be understood and sink in.

Whatever it takes, they must agree with next steps, otherwise your feedback is incomplete.

A good way of talking to this might be: **I really want to make sure we are on the same page going forward and we both want our next conversation to be different. I'm committed to supporting you. Are you committed to these next steps?**



The Wrap

You need to know that giving Hard Feedback is important and challenging.

The tips above won't prepare you for all the issues than can arise along the way. You will likely come across some shocked looks, frustrated responses and even a few tears. Some of these will come out of the recipient and some might come from you. Don't worry.

You won't remember this, but when you were a baby, you made noises that weren't words. You babbled and booed, dribbled and cackled. Luckily, you weren't afraid of getting it wrong so you kept on trying. You improved and got better. Now, you if you are lucky, you have a voice and need to use it to lead your people.

Try the four steps:

1. **Create Clarity** - what is the objective behaviour you are giving feedback on?
2. **Engage with Empathy** - why did the person do what they did?
3. **Explain Consequences** - why is this unacceptable and what will happen if it continues?
4. **Agree Actions** - what are we going to do going forward?

I suggest planning your feedback before you go into a conversation. Don't have a script, but make sure you know what needs to be shared. If these steps work for you, help others to develop these skills. If



you are really struggling, reach out and I'm happy to offer some support.

The bottom line is this: **You role as a leader is to support your people and team to be successful.**

Don't let your fear or lack of skill in delivering feedback hold you back. It will hurt you, your people and your customers.

Getting good at hard feedback will help you develop a culture of openness, support and high performance. Never avoid an opportunity to foster this in your culture.



ALIGNED LEADERSHIP

BUILDING YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Our program is designed to be delivered across 6 months to embed the skills, systems and processes that will build a high performance leadership team..

We will engage your people to implement core skills, management systems and an operating rhythm to lock in long term success. These include:

1. Leading with Empathy

Exploring the shortcuts used by the brain, we identify how assumptions and mental models shape our perceptions. We then explore the power of empathy and perspective taking through simple, practical processes.

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We build the tools to support leaders with strategies to be more engaged listeners. We then develop skills to respond, not react in conflict situations and tools to provide powerful, thoughtful feedback.

5. Embedding Operational Rituals

Actions shape reality. This focus provides leaders with the critical skills to identify misalignment as individuals, a team and an organisation. It helps embed individual commitments and shared accountability for outcomes.

3. Curious Leadership

To succeed in a complex world, modern leaders need to explore with curiosity. We focus on improving the ability for open challenge and exploration of business drivers and cultural influences on performance.

4. High Performance Culture

Leaders are the custodians of the values in action. Our focus here is to break down and embed the key elements of high performing teams. Fostering the trust, understanding and curiosity required to develop a high performance culture.

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"Fantastic both in content and delivery. I was looking for someone to open up other ways of approaching leadership and looking at our business environment and they delivered!- Michaela Flanagan, Head of Branch Operations, Swiss Re

"I can honestly say it was one of the best sessions I have been a part of. The content was unique & very interactive. I highly recommend Empathic Consulting to build empathy & understanding to drive performance."

- Daniel Markovski, Group Sales Manager, Nova

"They engaged people who I didn't think would ever respond, let alone take away actions. Post this session, I observed genuine behaviour changes . This was one of the best things I have done for the team."

- Rochelle Eldridge, Executive Manager, CBA

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