

How your habits and behaviours create your organisation's culture

'Do as I say, not as I do' is a well-known proverb. If you are saying it, it's usually because you are aware that what you are saying and doing isn't congruent. The trouble is, we are incongruent far more often than we realise, and that sends mixed messages to those around us.

Temps de lecture : minute

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This is an adapted book extract from *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* by Sarah Langslow.

Where our words and our actions don't match, it's almost always our actions that send the stronger message. I've lost count of the number of colleagues over the years who preach the importance of time off, of taking a mental and physical break. Yet, they always take their laptops with them on holiday and continue to answer emails and work while they're away. It's a confusing message. For anyone you manage, the safer option will always be to ignore your words and take their laptops with them too. Because whatever you say, what if you do actually expect me to reply to that email? To comment on that report? To answer that question? The risk of taking your words at face value and switching off is probably too high.

Think about the leader who knows the value of creating a psychologically safe team, who tells anyone who will listen that it's safe to fail and they support using mistakes to learn. But when push comes to shove and

someone makes a mistake? The leader gets frustrated, disappointed, and may even leave that person out in the cold, and stop giving them new opportunities. It doesn't really matter how many times you say something if your attitudes and behaviours don't back it up – because as a leader your habits and behaviours set the tone for everything. Are you paying attention?

We are always training people how to treat us

There's a layer deeper than this too: where our words and behaviours are incongruent in a more subtle way. A great example is being busy. Think about how often you've heard it, or indeed said it. 'How are you?' 'Good thanks, busy!' Busyness has become almost a badge of honour, a default state of existence. For many of us our to-do list is always longer than we will ever finish, and our days are scheduled down to the minute, with back-to-back meetings and finely calculated slots to fit everything in, whether personal or professional.

So on the one hand being busy is very real; it's our experience of the world. But it can also send a message of 'leave me alone' to everyone around us. It's not enough to say 'My door is always open' or 'Come and talk to me, anytime' because if your language constantly reinforces how busy you are, the perception that your door isn't really open will be stronger. Or, at the very least, that you'd rather no one took you up on your offer to talk to them. Another example that comes up a lot with my clients is fixing things.

One of my clients, let's call her Sophie, was constantly frustrated that her team, despite clearly being capable, didn't seem to step up and try and solve issues themselves. She wanted to support them to grow and develop, and ultimately work towards promotion. But to her they lacked initiative and didn't take ownership of any projects. They constantly came

to her with problems, apparently helpless, and often quite late in the process.

‘What do you do when they come to you?’ I asked her. ‘Well, it’s usually quicker to just sort out the problem myself. Especially because they don’t come to me early enough. I only find out when I chase them. Then it’s late, and I don’t think they can get it sorted before the deadline. So, I fix it.’

It’s a great illustration of where the two issues intersect. Because Sophie is always busy, her team try not to bother her with anything until they really have no choice. Then, when they do, Sophie takes over and sorts it for them. She has trained her team that when they bring her problems, she will solve them for them. And so it goes on, like Groundhog Day, the same pattern destined to repeat itself. Meanwhile, Sophie’s team never learn to solve issues themselves, and Sophie stays overworked, busy, and stuck dealing with things that are not really her job. Sound familiar?

The even simpler example is the frustrated parent, picking up a child’s (or, indeed, partner’s!) damp towel from the bathroom floor where it has been left, and hanging it on the rail to dry.

There’s a daily despair as to whether their child will ever do it for themselves. And, yet, from the child’s perspective, why would they? They don’t need to. Their parent has trained them that they will always do it for them, so they don’t need to do it themselves. When they return to the bathroom, there’s a dry towel waiting for them. And thus the cycle continues.

This is what the phrase *‘we are always training people how to treat us’* means. Our habits and behaviours become familiar to those around us, and those around us start adjusting their behaviour in response. Often neither party consciously chooses to do this; it simply becomes the way

things are done around here, the unwritten rules of the game that everyone plays along with. Whenever you find yourself frustrated with how your team is behaving, as a leader the first place to look is to yourself.

Sarah Langslow is an executive coach and leadership development specialist and the author of "Do Sweat The Small Stuff".

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Article by Sarah Langslow