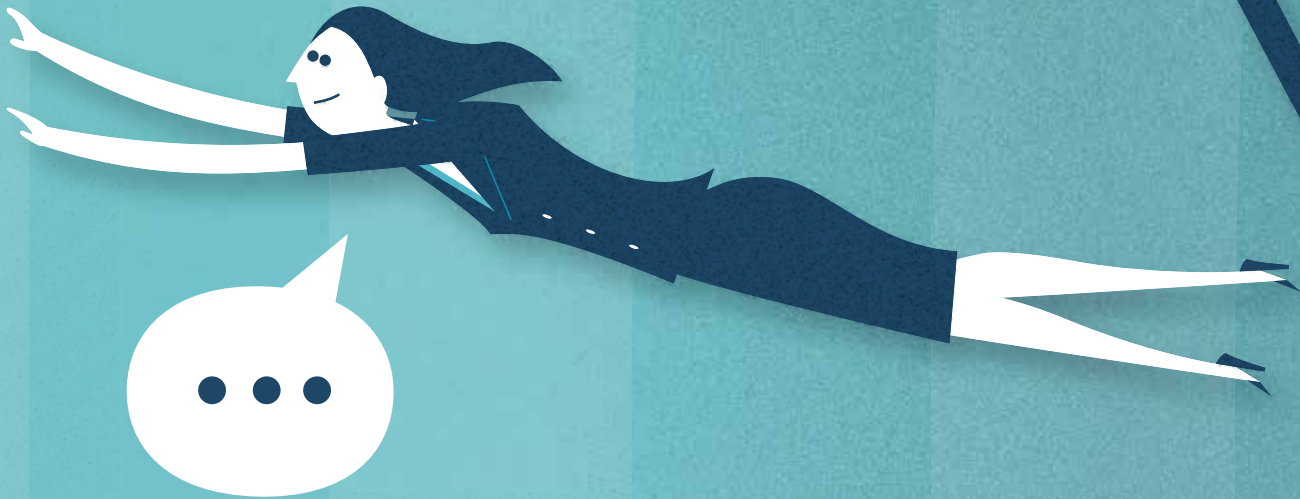




# TRUST ME, I'M A LEADER

Being a leader is a balancing act – you need space to think about big decisions, but you need to stay within touching distance of your employees, especially managers. You can't expect them to trust you just because you're the CEO. As a leader, you need to give managers confidence that they can put their careers in your hands.

WORDS: ROB JONES



**T**rust in business is transitive. The effects of high and low levels of internal trust can be far-reaching. If middle managers trust leaders, it's likely that employees will trust managers. And if your employees don't trust leaders, your customers probably don't trust them either.

Right now, trust between leaders and managers is at a low point. Research by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) and Top Banana found that little more than one-third (36 per cent) of middle managers trust their leaders.

"I wish I could say it's a blip," says Ann Francke, CEO at CMI, "but our reports in preceding years found only one in five managers think their leader sets a good moral example. And it's endemic – public, private, third sector."

The new corporate world is driven by how we communicate – and leaders need to adapt if they want to build a loyal following.

"The CEO used to be the great man behind a desk," says Huw Wigley, client engagement director at Top Banana. "Now, not only are there more channels creating greater opportunities for leaders to open up, workplace culture has changed considerably in the past 10 or 20 years. There's an expectation from employees for leaders to be visible and put themselves at the centre of an organisation – and there's no good reason why leaders shouldn't want to do that."

There are obvious behaviours that build trust between managers and leaders: openness, honesty, visibility. Sometimes the strength of the relationship comes down to creating a level playing field for discussion, with leaders talking and listening to managers on an equal footing, one to one, rather than leader to manager.

"Leaders work extremely hard to get to the top, but too many forget what it was like being a middle manager," says Huw. "Good leaders find time to connect and listen, but I get that this isn't always easy." →



"I've worked with leaders with great integrity," says Deborah de Satgé, formerly head of internal communication for AXA PPP Healthcare. "They are consistent and do what they say, and those people have high-performing managers and teams who love working for them. Equally, I've known leaders who use fear, pass the blame and take credit for successes that aren't theirs. Working for those people is a nightmare. Your effort becomes focused on pleasing them and protecting yourself, rather than doing your job."

**Make managers feel involved**

An absence of transparency is sometimes at the root of mistrust. Leaders are often too busy to build meaningful relationships with managers or are under the impression everything is running smoothly and think, therefore, investing in that additional layer of communication is not a valuable use of time.

"I've seen a lot of situations where managers are in the dark about changes or developments," says Deborah. "Their leaders haven't spoken to them – not usually for malicious reasons, but because they haven't time or it simply hasn't occurred to them. The knock-on effect is that it is impossible for managers to share information with their teams."

"Middle managers just like to be asked for their thoughts," adds Huw, "and to feel that they have been involved in decisions affecting the business's future."



**MY GREATEST LEADER**

*Nominated by Deborah de Satgé*

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**JOHN MAJOR**

**"Having worked for John Major, he had many of the personal qualities I admire in a leader – vision, passion, humility, willingness to listen, charm, humour, appreciation. And he managed to achieve a lot, despite having to negotiate every step with a broken Conservative party."**

But it's not happening nearly enough. The CMI's research found the majority of managers are not being consulted. Only nine per cent said they had been asked to input on decisions or changes. This makes it hard for managers to relate to strategy, and communicate it to their teams. And when a big announcement is made, they are left feeling like lesser parts in the organisation's big picture. Why should managers have any confidence in their leader if he or she doesn't acknowledge managers' influence or value their understanding of success, failure, performance and engagement within the business?

Leaders who neglect managers are missing a trick, Ann insists. "Managers are the critical nexus between translating

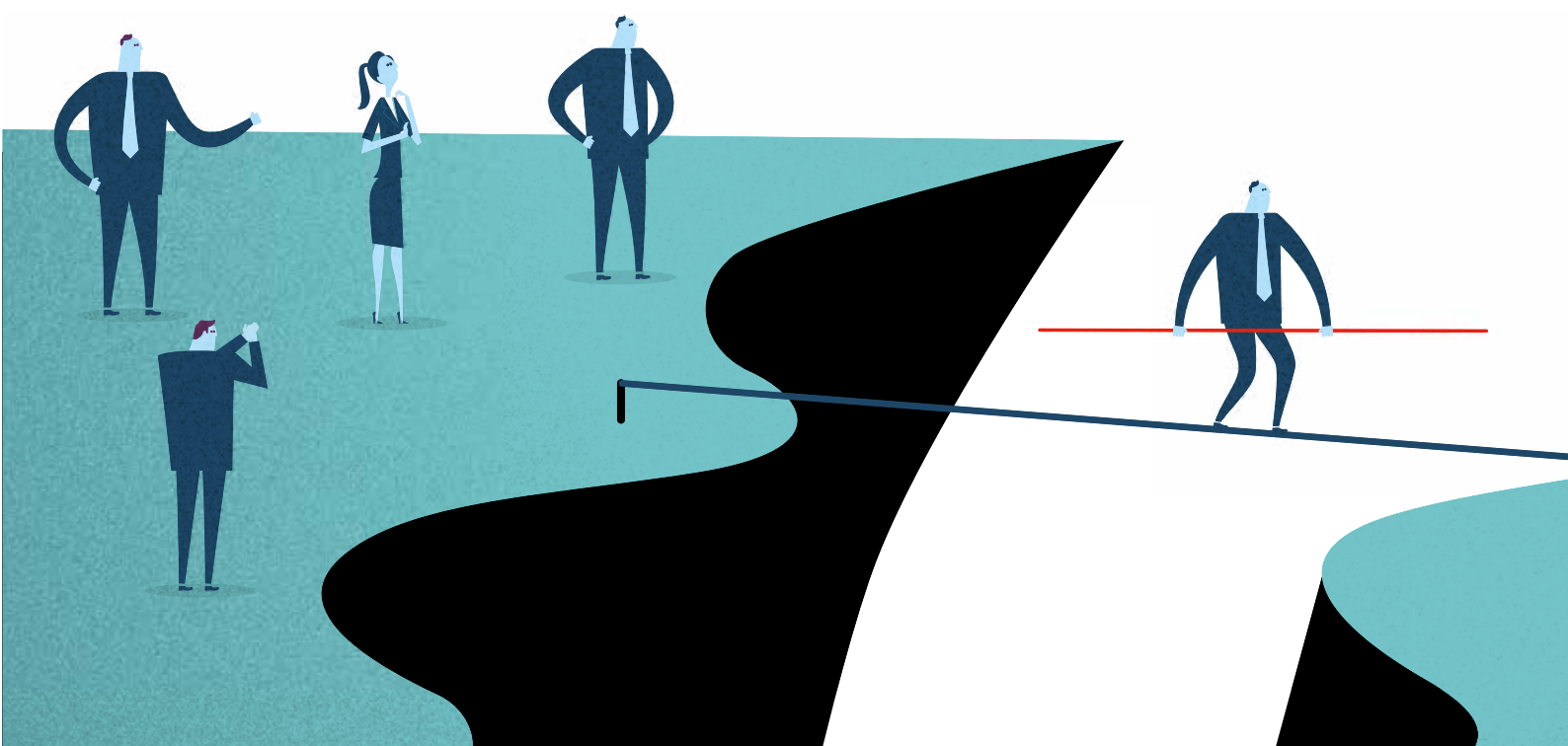
what senior leadership want and frontline opinion. If leaders let their managers become cynical eye-rollers who think, 'Here is another message from on high', it will hurt productivity. Internal comms teams need to work with leaders to provide the mechanisms for open and honest communications."

**Crossing the divide**

Research by the 30% Club suggests that the more senior you get, the less time you spend with your managers. And as managers progress up the career ladder, they are more likely to have career-development discussions with an outsourced coach and mentor. This implies that when employees reach a middle manager role, they can expect to receive less advice and support from a director or senior leader. The distance between the two levels increases at the point when it should be getting closer.

"I don't care if you're a chief executive or chairman, you can't hold people at arm's length and expect them to be getting on with things," says Ann. "That feeling that you can't engage on a human level is misguided. We know from recent external events and how leaders responded that people want to see leaders as human and sharing their thinking, admitting mistakes, being vulnerable."

Senior leaders need to get out of their bubble, adds Ann. "They have lots of people insulating them from what's going on and can feel pulled in multiple directions. If they



don't know something, they often think they are admitting a weakness, when actually the opposite is true."

Ann offers five leadership behaviours that engender trust. "First, share your thinking – how you're looking at a problem. Even if you don't have all the answers, tell people how you're going to find them. Two, admit mistakes. Say, 'Sorry, I got that wrong and here's what I'm going to do about it and how we can get it right.' That's how you manage a crisis, but it's the same with business-as-usual issues. Third, be visible. Give people permission to ask for help or come to you with a solution. Recent corporate crises have come about because people have been afraid to come forward.

"The last two are about being inspiring. Explain at every level how employees' work fits into the strategy and why it matters, because people need meaning and to know they're making a difference, otherwise they become disengaged. Finally, your personal and professional values should be one and the same – there should be no gap."

#### The fallout from a financial disaster

So what has caused this recession of trust? The financial crisis of 2007-2008 damaged a lot of people's faith in institutions – and not just banks.

"The effects of that crisis chipped away at people's standard of living and highlighted rising inequalities," says Ann. "When people see CEOs' pay dramatically escalating, while real wages are declining, it undermines trust. →



## CEO INSIGHT

# CANDIDNESS IS THE BEST APPROACH

SIAN BALDWIN, CEO, XOSERVE



I think there are three elements leaders need to build trust. They need to be candid, inspirational and authentic.

Leaders need to balance two things when being candid: firstly, the desire and genuine intent to care for the people around you; and second, how frank and detailed you are in your conversations. If you couldn't care less about people, but are direct, you come across as obnoxious and aggressive. If you care a lot, but can't say what you mean, you end up being ruinously empathetic. Neither of these breed trust. We need to find the sweet spot between caring deeply about people and being incredibly direct about the good news and the bad.

Many organisations find talking about the tough issues difficult. Employees are more resilient than we give them credit for; as leaders, we have an obligation to help build resilience, which we can't do by parenting.

I'm open and transparent and I encourage others to be. This may mean I share things other leaders might not and it means I must be prepared to receive candid feedback in return. But there are times when I can't discuss everything with everyone and that's when quick decision-making becomes important.

The second element to building trust is the need to be inspiring, especially during change. In my experience, people want to go on a journey. But some people are more comfortable with change than others. This is where a leader's ability to bring the future to life, to make it exciting and help everyone believe they can play a valuable part, is key.

My third element is authenticity. Leaders need to make it easy for people to bond with us. To do this, we need to be prepared to give

something of ourselves away. If we want to be trusted, we must put something on the table that can be judged, that shows our vulnerability and puts us at personal risk. I am an intensely private person, and so I have struggled historically to bring my personal self into work conversations, but I've learned to do it when it's appropriate. You might only feel comfortable showing a tiny amount, but it'll go a long way.

Before I send out any messages, I run the idea past my internal comms manager. She is so connected into the emotional state of the organisation that she can give me a quick heat check about how I should handle something. She offers advice and tells me when I need to do more. She pulls the organisational vibe to me and I'm open to hearing it.

Bring your authentic style to work, but don't crush the organisation's existing culture. I am trying to bring about much-needed change at Xoserve and that means bringing in new ideas and new ways of working, but I am acutely aware that I cannot simply impose myself on the organisation. To help me get the balance right, I undertook induction days and one-to-ones with around 50 people at all levels of the organisation. I watched how employees interacted and what is important to them; and I still do daily. I ask them why they like working here, what they are hoping I will do and, most importantly, what they hope I won't do.

I am someone with a lot to say, but I try to listen carefully too. If I am not listening, I will miss the candid feedback that is directed at me. I frequently ask my direct reports how well I landed a conversation, how people perceived what I was trying to say and what I should do better next time. As leaders, we don't do that enough. There's a false perception that it will look like weakness and we'll lose respect. But this is a fallacy in my experience – candidness is always best.

There are also constant political changes – about which everyone is free to have their say on social media. You can end up reading many different stories and creating your own version of the truth. While social media exacerbates the challenge of sustaining trust, it also makes it all the more important to do it in order to have a healthy workplace culture.”

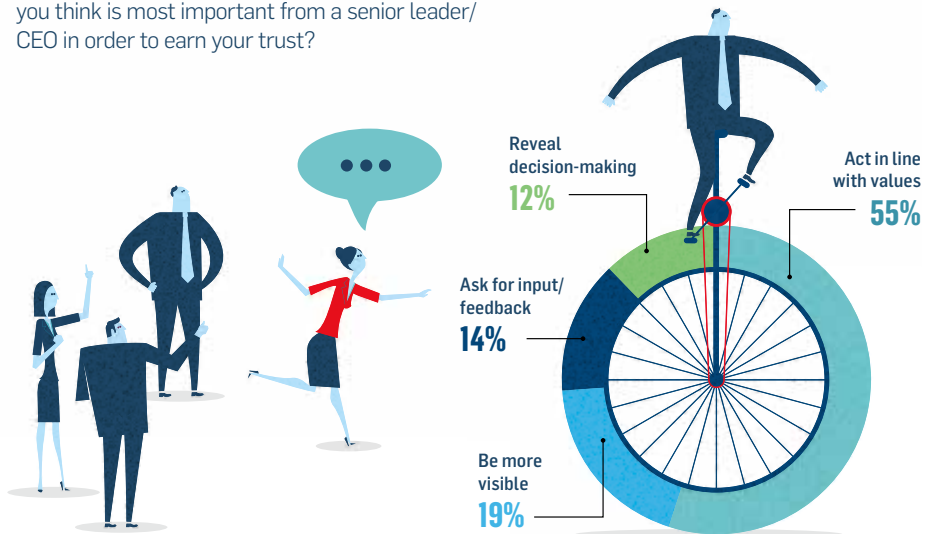
Andrew Thompson, content and insights manager for Central Bank of Ireland, agrees that a breakdown in trust often occurs in extreme and challenging times. He recalls one occasion earlier in his career, when he worked in communications for a publicly listed financial organisation, when a rogue trader disappeared with half the company’s profit for one year.

“At that time, the technology wasn’t available to get messages out quickly to a specific segment of the internal audience – in this case middle management,” he says. “This created issues because managers didn’t have enough time to understand the message and explain it to their teams. People at all levels in the bank got the message at the same time, which wasn’t ideal, but we had to live with it. The alternative was staff being informed by the media.”

Timing, tact and common sense is everything. “At one bank, we were releasing a report to the press and we sent it out to

## AND OUR SURVEY SAYS

**WE ASKED:** Managers, which of these behaviours do you think is most important from a senior leader/ CEO in order to earn your trust?



staff first at 3.45pm, but this was just as branch employees were finishing work, so some didn’t see it until the next day,” says Andrew. “We got negative feedback from staff who heard the news on the radio. After that, we put a timestamp on announcements so that, if someone got it later, they could see the CEO had tried to get the information through before

the story broke externally. For us, it was about common courtesy.”

### Dedicated channels for managers

Leaders often don’t appreciate the impact of not briefing managers properly, says Andrew. “The damage is done when staff ask managers what is going to happen and managers don’t know. They feel undermined.

## RESEARCH

# SEEING IS BELIEVING

Research shows leaders need to be more visible and open to gain the trust and confidence of managers.

Middle managers are “the missing link” in organisational cultures. Overwhelmingly, they feel they are important to building trust, but aren’t made to feel valued by leaders, according to a report by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), in collaboration with Top Banana.

Nearly 1,500 CMI members were surveyed and interviewed for the research into trust in organisations. The report, *The Middle Manager Lifeline*, highlighted a significant trust gap between middle managers and leaders.

The findings suggest managers have a firm desire for openness from their leaders – it was the single most important driver of trust – and to understand the motivations and reasons for their leaders’ actions. However, only a little over one-third of middle

managers say their leadership team is transparent in its actions and decisions.

The research also suggests that leaders are seeing trust in their organisation through rose-tinted glasses. More than half of CEOs, executive directors and partners think people in their organisation trust the leadership team “to a great extent”, whereas only 25 per cent of managers believe this is the case.

It is perhaps no surprise that high-trust managers tend to be in growing businesses, while low-trust managers are usually found in declining organisations. Only 30 per cent of low-trust managers see their business leader often or very often, compared with 71 per cent of high-trust managers. High-trust managers use words like “empowering” and “accessible” to

That damage can be felt for years. Staff think differently of their manager if they feel they are not in the loop.”

Internal comms teams need to look at managers as a separate audience and understand how they want to be informed, says Andrew. The Central Bank of Ireland hosts regular events, including monthly briefings where middle managers have direct contact with leaders.

“Some of the messages from leaders are for onward communication to staff. Others are just for the management group,” explains Andrew. “We have also provided managers with dedicated areas on Sharepoint, where documents and Q&A material can be shared in confidence. We also regularly survey managers about communication channels and content – and shape what we do accordingly.”

It’s a challenge to get the balance right – to enable people to talk openly and honestly, while keeping one eye on a company’s external reputation. Andrew recalls one company that saw critical comments on an internal blog post reproduced the next day in a national newspaper.

“Technology is not always the answer,” he says. “If you put a story on the intranet and ask for comments, you can’t censor or edit those comments. And if you insist on people providing their names, you can find that people are less willing to state their



**MY GREATEST LEADER**

Nominated by Andrew Thompson

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**FEARGAL QUINN**

**“Feargal Quinn grew Irish supermarket Superquinn from humble origins into a chain employing 5,000 people through amazing customer service, innovation and community involvement. Quinn as a leader was active – always on the shopfloor – positive, but realistic, with incredible attention to detail. His philosophy of ‘I listened, I learned, I discovered’ remains relevant today to CEOs and managers alike.”**

views. Being in the same room and talking has advantages.”

Ann Francke agrees: “Leaders at every level need to hear the employee voice – and not the airbrushed, sanitised voice.”

Lessons have been learned. Leaders are becoming increasingly aware of their manager audience. But there’s a crisis around every corner that can catch out a leader and flatten good intentions. Managers need to understand that there

are some things leaders can’t talk about.

“We’ve seen it lately with politicians who are uneasy about talking,” says Andrew. “If they explained why things are happening, they would earn more respect. Sometimes you can build the trust back by apologising, and through the quality of messages you send back. Be honest. Just saying, ‘There are some things I can’t go into detail on, but as soon as I know I’ll tell you’ can really help build confidence.”

Middle managers just want to understand the sentiment behind leaders’ thinking. Yes, some decisions are made behind closed doors, but you can avoid people speculating by explaining your reasons.

“Of course, there are things you can’t share,” says Ann. “So work on the things you can.”

Deborah de Satgé believes that, in some companies, fear of litigation has gone too far, with some leaders abdicating responsibility for thinking for themselves and using their own discretion.

“They prefer to follow guidelines, which can make them seem remote or cold. And they are so determined to be legally right that clarity often goes out of the window. I remember having to read a redundancy script that was so convoluted I had to concentrate really hard, which meant I couldn’t look at the person I was speaking to at all – it felt incredibly inhuman.” →

describe their organisation, while low-trust managers describe the business as “authoritarian” and “bureaucratic”.

The report, published in September 2016, stressed that business leaders’ visibility must be meaningful if they want managers to believe in them – they must engage and it must be natural. One respondent suggested their business leader may simply be trying to present an image of openness, rather than being genuinely interested in what managers have to say. Just over a fifth say they’d had no meaningful interaction with their business leader in the previous 12 months. One respondent said: “We only see our leader at fire alarms.”

**i** View the full report, *The Middle Manager Lifeline*, on the CMI website at [managers.org.uk/insights/research](http://managers.org.uk/insights/research)

**Communication is key to building trust**

When it comes to leaders and managers talking, there’s no such thing as too much information.



**36%**

Britain’s middle managers who trust their business leader to a great extent.



**32%**

Middle managers who do not think they are given opportunities by their senior leadership team to provide feedback and challenge the organisation’s approach.



**64%**

Middle managers who say lack of information from the top of the business prevents them from building trust in their own teams.



**48%**

Middle managers who believe their leadership team makes communication with line managers a priority.

Source: The Middle Manager Lifeline, CMI/Top Banana report



### IC in the middle

Internal comms teams can inflame the problem by always doing what senior leaders tell them to do, rather than challenging their thinking. If IC practitioners don't honestly reflect back the mood of an organisation and reiterate the implications of a decision on the workforce, it perpetuates leaders' desire to keep their cards close to their chest. The barriers to trust stay up. How can leaders know the harm their behaviour is causing if no one tells them?

"Internal comms is stuck in the middle and we can make ourselves very unpopular in the process," says Deborah. "I've known projects disappear because I've asked leaders the difficult questions – the ones that I think employees will ask – and they have had to rethink."

Deborah says IC teams must find ways to bring managers and leaders together.

"Sometimes it's as simple as getting a leader and a manager in a room. You can feel like a marriage guidance counsellor, trying to get each to understand where the other is coming from. Ironically, technology often hinders communication. It's very odd, but perfectly normal people come into work and then seem to forget how to communicate if it's not by email or PowerPoint presentation. It's much easier to resolve mistrust if you just talk to each other."

And the two-way conversations have to be believable, says Huw Wigley. "We talk a lot about being visible. Leaders sometimes feel they are walking the floor and being seen, but is it doing anything? Be seen and heard – but also listen."

Encouraging leaders to be active on Yammer or do regular Q&A sessions can be a simple and cost-effective way of managing communication. Even films or roadshows don't need to be high production. Face-to-face contact is usually of greatest value in building trust – particularly when leaders are happy to deviate from the script and let down their guard.

"Just allowing people to talk openly is often the best option," says Andrew Thompson. "In presentations and town halls, the interesting material is often not

connected to the subject you got together to talk about – they often emerge in the questions at the end."

Of course, there are inspiring examples of leadership. Many CEOs are eager to invite managers' opinion and are finding novel ways of doing so.

"I've seen CEOs, especially when they are new to the business, call a 48-hour period when they invite people to email them what's wrong with the company," says Ann. "Employees won't know how to fix things, but everyone will know when things are wrong and be willing to share that."

"Benno Dorer [chairman and CEO of The Clorex Company] uses reverse mentoring – millennials and employees from other parts of the organisation mentor him so he can interpret how younger people see things."

Deborah likewise describes one of AXA PPP's senior team, Glen Parkinson, as an exceptional leader.

"He is incredibly dedicated and detailed, and takes time to get to know people," she says. "He doesn't have a desk quite

deliberately – he sits wherever there is a free space so he can meet employees and managers. He listens and is constantly learning. He sets high expectations for managers, but is generous in recognising their work. He took over a subsidiary that was demoralised for many years. I couldn't believe the comments from his area that came in from the last engagement survey – everyone said they have felt much more positive since he came on board."

### Leading from the top

Leaders create the environment for change and must act in line with the values – but it takes two to build trust. The onus typically falls on the CEO to prove they are trustworthy and make the first move to build faith and loyalty and engage in conversation. But isn't that just playing to the old cliché of an unapproachable leader pompously sat behind a desk doing all the legwork? Sometimes, line managers need to take the initiative, find their inner self-belief and demonstrate that they can be relied upon – that they have the information leaders should be tapping into.

"I've worked specifically on line manager communication and have found a lot of managers think they don't have the permission or ability to take action," says Deborah. "One group said they had a shy boss who shuts herself away, which was damaging the team's relationships with other teams. There was horror when I suggested they could do something about it themselves. It's up to everyone to build relationships with the people you need to work with – even if that's by having conversations over coffee or asking for their help. It's never down to just one person, one leader."

In an organisation of thousands, it's easy to think that as a middle manager there is little difference you can make.

"The leadership team, with the support of internal communications, needs to give middle managers the confidence, information and support to help drive change," concludes Huw. "Sometimes, it's a game of patience. Managers and leaders shouldn't be put off if there's no immediate change. It takes a long time to build trust, but it's easy to lose it overnight." 