

DEAR F-WIT

A PRACTICAL LEADERSHIP GUIDE

# DON'T CONFUSE FEAR WITH RESPECT

How to build authority without making  
people afraid to speak.



WORKPLACE LESSONS NOBODY WAS BRAVE ENOUGH TO SAY

# Fear can look remarkably like respect

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People arrive on time. They follow instructions. They rarely disagree. They laugh at the appropriate moments. Nobody brings you bad news.

It can feel like leadership is working. But silence is not necessarily agreement. Compliance is not commitment. And a team that never challenges its leader may not be respectful. They may simply be careful.



## GORDON SAYS

**A quiet team is not always a confident team.**

# What fear looks like at work

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Fear is not always shouting, threats or intimidation. It can be created through small, repeated leadership behaviours.

- People agree publicly but complain privately.
- Bad news is softened, delayed or hidden.
- Minor decisions wait for your approval.
- The room becomes quieter when you arrive.
- People apologise excessively for small mistakes.
- You are copied into emails as protection.
- Ideas arrive polished rather than early.
- Questions are carefully worded.
- Reasonable risks are avoided.
- Energy goes into managing perceptions.

## GORDON SAYS

**Ask what happens when people disagree with you - not whether they are afraid of you.**

# Fear and respect behave differently

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Respect is not the absence of challenge. It is trust in your intentions, competence and use of authority.

## FEAR

- Compliance while you are watching
- Silence when decisions feel wrong
- Mistakes hidden or minimised
- Bad news arrives late
- Standards depend on your presence

## RESPECT

- Influence when you are absent
- Challenge offered constructively
- Mistakes raised early
- Difficult facts shared directly
- Standards guided by shared purpose

# The fear-respect test

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## WHEN SOMEONE DISAGREES

**FEAR** They become vague or wait until you leave.

**RESPECT** They explain the concern and accept the final call.

## WHEN SOMEONE MAKES A MISTAKE

**FEAR** They hide it, minimise it or assign blame.

**RESPECT** They raise it early and help correct it.

## WHEN YOU ASK FOR FEEDBACK

**FEAR** You hear reassuring generalities.

**RESPECT** You receive specific, uncomfortable examples.

## WHEN YOU ARE ABSENT

**FEAR** Decisions stall or standards slip.

**RESPECT** People use judgement and uphold expectations.

# Five behaviours that accidentally create fear

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01

## REACTING BEFORE CURIOSITY

A sharp reply teaches people what is unsafe to discuss.

02

## PUNISHING THE MESSENGER

Blame and embarrassment train people to delay bad news.

03

## TREATING QUESTIONS AS DISLOYALTY

Challenge may reveal a risk you have not considered.

04

## NEEDING TO WIN EVERY DISCUSSION

When seniority must always be right, meetings become performances.

05

## BEING UNPREDICTABLE

People can handle high standards. They struggle with shifting reactions.



# Six ways to build genuine respect

01

## BE CLEAR ABOUT STANDARDS

Safety and accountability can coexist. Make expectations consistent.

02

## EXPLAIN YOUR REASONING

People may not like the decision, but they can understand how it was reached.

03

## RESPOND WELL TO HARD INFORMATION

Pause, ask questions and thank the person before addressing the problem.

04

## ADMIT MISTAKES SPECIFICALLY

Name what you did, its effect and what you will change.

05

## INVITE CHALLENGE EARLY

Ask for the strongest argument against the idea before committing.

06

## FOLLOW THROUGH

Respect grows when words and behaviour remain aligned over time.

# Five questions to ask your team

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**01** What is something people find difficult to tell me?

**02** How do I usually respond when someone challenges my view?

**03** When have you felt safest disagreeing with me?

**04** Is there a problem we are avoiding because the conversation feels uncomfortable?

**05** What is one thing I could do differently to make honesty easier?

**GORDON SAYS**

**Do not debate the answers. Listen, thank people and look for patterns.**

# A seven-day leadership reset

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**DAY 1**

**OBSERVE**

What happens to the energy when you enter the room?

**DAY 2**

**ASK**

What could I do to make disagreement easier?

**DAY 3**

**PAUSE**

Ask three questions before reacting to a problem.

**DAY 4**

**ADMIT**

Acknowledge one mistake without an excuse.

**DAY 5**

**INVITE**

Ask a quiet voice what they see differently.

**DAY 6**

**CLARIFY**

Review one expectation causing unnecessary caution.

**DAY 7**

**COMMIT**

Choose one behaviour to practise for a month.

# Personal reflection

People are most likely to become cautious around me when...

When somebody disagrees with me, my first reaction is usually...

One behaviour I may have mistaken for respect is...

The difficult information my team may be withholding is...

One thing I will do differently this week is...

You can be decisive without being dismissive. You can expect accountability while remaining open to challenge. The goal is to become a leader people can be honest with.

