

## **Manage breakdowns powerfully and fuel your team's growth**

What happens when the unforeseen happens? A mailout goes awry, there's a last-minute hitch at a board meeting and someone raises concerns they didn't mention before and the board needs to postpone signing off the strategy, your keynote speaker gets delayed in transit and you have to re-work your event programme late in the evening...and so on and so on.

These situations, familiar to us all, are examples of breakdowns. What was supposed to happen did not and, instead, we have to manage last-minute changes or urgently re-navigate our course of action in a fast-developing situation. The unexpected elements, the curve-balls, the tight deadlines to get things presentable again and ready in time: it all adds to the stress and it calls for the team to be agile and on the same side to pick up the pieces and re-assemble them effectively.

### **Operationally straightforward? Emotionally less so!**

Sometimes achieving this reset is relatively uncomplicated and quick, requiring a cool head (or heads) and a re-tweak of a few arrangements. The operational part is the easy bit. It's the emotional part in a breakdown that often gets overlooked: people are upset and disappointed things didn't go to plan, a manager had all the parts under control and then a technical glitch happened and the message went out before the final edits were incorporated (which happened to me last week in my video message to all of you!).

In the rush to put things right – understandably the priority in view of deadlines and to meet expectations of stakeholders – the conversations that could help to restore connection and trust are often left until later on (“when we get everything finished, we'll sit down and talk about what happened”). In reality these conversations often don't take place soon enough, or even at all, because the pace of work shifts the team's focus onto other urgent matters. This is not a balanced and sustainable way to work, even if it is sometimes unavoidable in the short-term.

### **Handling common reactions**

Breakdowns often lead to a polarising of opinions over what happened, a self-righteous focus by some on how it could have been avoided, individuals rushing to cover their backs out of fear of being blamed, analysis of what should have been done differently and so on. This is all coming from a position of analysing what is now in the past, as if watching the game rather than playing it.

In this scenario, your people are adopting a victim position, preferring to analyse and justify their positions rather than to step up and be responsible for taking action to move forward in the new situation.

## **Intervening to shift mindset and boost action by example**

Part of the leader's job is to be with their people as they respond to the shock of a breakdown and sound off while the change sinks in. The skill is to listen and to invite them asap to shift perspective from a spectator position (analysis of the past) to a player position (create a future action step) by distinguishing these different mindsets and – as the leader - committing to a bold action yourself to set an example others can follow.

## **What's mentionable is manageable**

How your team comes together at difficult times like this and how you as a leader act is critical for informing your working culture, team wellbeing, productivity, motivation to continue to go above and beyond. Getting the tone right and accepting a breakdown has happened and that we cannot change what happened is a powerful first step.

If the leader truly accepts that, rather than just saying the words, it communicates to the team that you know they've done their best and that mistakes can still happen.

Creating space for team members to experience that mistakes do happen and that this is part of reality, inviting them to express authentically anything they need to say in a compassionate and responsible way e.g. "I'm so disappointed we sent the previous version of the message out by mistake, because I've really enjoyed working with you all on getting the message into such a good final shape." This is normal and proof of how we may feel contrary emotions simultaneously.

## **Putting out constructive messages to acknowledge the changes**

In the example of the conference keynote speaker being stuck in transit and arriving late to the event, thanking the speaker for being flexible, letting them know that we're sorry their plans have been messed up and we're really looking forward to having them with us a little later than planned, being upfront early on with our delegates about when the keynote speaker will be joining the conference, providing reassurance that the team are on top of things and appreciate the flexibility of our other speakers in changing their speaking slots to accommodate the changed situation, etc. All of these responsive communications, delivered at pace, helps build a sense of momentum and confidence, reframing the new situation into one which we can manage: "it's going to be different but we've turned the corner, we're in this together and we're going to make it a success".

## **An inspirational leadership opportunity**

There's a saying from the late Maya Angelou, American poet, author and civil rights activist, that comes to mind here: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."



One opportunity with breakdowns - if you as the leader can own them – is that you can use them to show your compassion for your team as well as being rigorous in acting boldly and urgently to turn things around. That compassion helps make people feel valued and supported, while your rigour can inspire your team by example to step up and take urgent action.

With this approach, you are sending the powerful message of your confidence that your team is agile enough to pivot and manage whatever difficulties arise, no matter if not everything is repairable. Progress not perfection. And, at a public event, you as leader have the opportunity to acknowledge your team and all participants for how they've gone above and beyond to steady the ship and get it back on course. What started out as a dilemma can transform into a resounding victory of spontaneous leadership over circumstances which will remain long in the memory. Your team powerfully strengthens its sense of “we” and grows from knowing that breakdowns can become a development opportunity if well handled.

In handling sensitive situations, I as a leader can choose between focusing on my own concerns and responding to those that are going to impact others. In a team effort it's critical to keep private concerns in the background during the tense moments and maintain confidence and calm by showing the way and giving the team the support they need to perform, including the knowledge that I am behind them and with them. Facing the music, pun not intended coming from me (!), means focusing not on how I as the leader can come out of this looking good, but on how I can acknowledge my team for all that they are doing to turn something around. That way, we can all get on knowing we have each other's backs.

### **How's your team's breakdown process?**

So, if your team has an effective process in place for managing breakdowns, that is something to celebrate. If not, creating a basis for addressing how people can feel supported in difficult situations, as well as when all is going well, is a challenge worthy of your time and effort that will pay dividends when the chips are down.

### **Get in touch**

If you want to recalibrate how you manage and empower your team during moments of breakdown, book a call on my Calendly [here](#). We will explore your challenges together and what interventions could make a real difference.