

# Leading For Good with Jan Birtle

Living Well Together – People and Planet

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Living with risk. Ripples of fear & the power of connection – A view from Psychiatry.

**Elaine Herdman-Barker**, Chair of Global Leadership Associates and Partner for Mutual Growth and the search for the Common Good and **Dr Jan Birtle, Fellow and Specialist Adviser in Coaching and Mentoring to the Royal College of Psychiatrists** discuss what it means to get alongside people who are experiencing trauma and distress. They look at facing into one's own dilemmas and anxieties while stepping forward to make tough calls. Much of what Dr Birtle talks about is from the field of psychiatry yet it is relevant to us all as scapegoating, excluding and blaming are familiar tendencies in everyday life. So too is the strength we all garner by hanging out with people, in empathic, accepting and compassionate ways.

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**Hello. Today, I'm joined by Dr. Jan Birtle. Jan's worked as a Consultant Medical Psychotherapist, Psychiatrist, Medical Manager and Educator. She's now a Fellow and Specialist Adviser in Coaching and Mentoring to the Royal College of Psychiatrists... She supports executives and helps highly-traumatised people find their way forward in life. Jan's work is expansive! She also helps unsettled communities work through their tensions.**

**Today, we're going to be drawing on Jan's experience to consider several things... Our inner emotional lives; how, as leaders, we might better understand fears and vulnerabilities as we take difficult decisions... And how we might better lend support to others as they face into their own struggles. Welcome, Jan, it's great to be chatting!**

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Elaine, thank you so much for inviting me. I've enjoyed our conversations over the past few years. It's delightful to explore things with you.

**Thank you! Now, part of your work is to help people endure the world... To find ways through turmoil, then – hopefully – thrive in life. I always imagine that helping people cope with distress requires deep inner resources.**  
**What are those resources?**

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It's important for psychiatry to have good internal AND external resources. We hope those coming into the profession have strong empathy and compassion... But psychiatrists can get very caught up in patients' difficulties. That's particularly true early in their careers. So there's an important process of learning how to take yourself to work as a psychiatrist... I take myself to work; I take my personality. But I also listen to my patients; engage and empathise with them. And that requires some support and learning about how to do that.



## You say “take yourself to work”. Can you tell us more about how psychiatrists do that?

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For example, all psychiatrists in training now have to be part of a reflective practice group for a time. A lot of psychiatrists also have personal therapy. And therapists that see a lot of patients often find time to think about their interactions... They might leave a consultation and feel quite irritated or angry. So it's recognising that this emotion is happening, and thinking: does this belong to the patient? Is it something to do with me? Because we pick up feelings from others, and you need a space to digest that.

## How does that emotion get digested?

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One really important concept that's worth focusing on is emotional labour. It's important to recognise that this requires a lot of hard, emotional work – and to recognise the importance of refuelling. One way to do that is to have an ongoing process of reflection. That might be to talk privately with colleagues about their experiences... The emotional labour is draining, and we mustn't forget that.

**The preparation you're describing seems intensive, Jan. And I guess you also need a healthy dose of courage? Because psychiatrists make difficult decisions about the care of people, everyday. I also imagine the work is threaded with uncertainty! And with uncertainty comes risk. What helps your colleagues deal with their exposure to risk?**

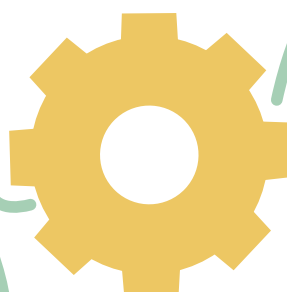
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It's important to think about the different areas that psychiatry touches on. Obviously, working with patients directly is one... But there's also a role in wider society to help keep society safe. So psychiatrists sometimes have to take tough decisions. Deciding that a patient is unable, for example, to make decisions in their own best interest.

## **In a formal way?**

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Yes – to deprive them of liberty using legislation. That's a really tough decision to make. Nobody wants to do that. I found that part of my training very uncomfortable – particularly the first few times. When making those decisions, it's important to weigh the dynamic very carefully... The conversation about it is useful. Of course – in the UK system – two doctors and a social worker have to agree to that application. It's helpful to have those independently made decisions, but that's a difficult one.





So all the preparation psychiatrists go through is an essential part of the job. **It helps them bring themselves into the process... To be in conversation; to be part of a support team. And yet even within that, there are moments – I imagine – when decisions are questioned? How do they cope with those moments?**

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I'm thinking about an example of that. Worrying, but from the lighter end; something that happened to me recently. I was waiting for a patient to arrive on a video call, and they just didn't turn up. They'd recently expressed suicidal thoughts, and I'd had no message from them. I had a huge anxiety: what's happened here? On this occasion, I did contact the person to check they were okay. They said they'd sent a message to cancel, and they were fine, so I had a huge moment of relief. But the concern was that this person might've taken their own life. I think a psychiatrist is somehow seen as responsible if a patient suicide occurs.

## Which you are saying is not the case...

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We have to remember that many suicides take place when people aren't engaged with services. When they *are* engaged with services, though, there's often a lot of analysis and investigation. Psychiatrists can feel hugely under pressure. They're almost made to feel responsible for this person... Who may have made a conscious decision to take their life, or who may have been very ill at the time. We all do what we can to try and prevent those events.

At the same time, it's important to recognise that individuals want to be autonomous. So there's a real tension around that decision... To detain somebody, for example, to assess what risk there might be of harming themselves.

**You're speaking here, Jan, of an out-of-the-ordinary event. Paradoxically, though, it's an intrinsic part of the psychiatrist's profession... Their day job. How do psychiatrists hold themselves and that tension together?**

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It's interesting. In many branches of medicine, you might expect patients to die of their conditions. Somehow – in psychiatry – we're expected to keep people alive, although they may die. So that's very difficult, and people feel quite uncomfortable with it. We all know to try and help people, and to help people find hope as well – that's an important part of the role.



It's arresting to hear more about the pressures psychiatrists are under. What about beyond the field of psychiatry, Jan? **Consider the day-to-day emotions in our world... For example, the COVID pandemic saw untold numbers of people living with pain and loss. And we saw big eruptions of blame and emotion, relating to its cause.** As it spread, we saw global anxiety and the need to identify an enemy... How do we make sense of that?

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Obviously, it was a very frightening experience, particularly in the early stages. That fear of the unknown is an important key... Often, a response to our fear is to project it onto other people in the form of hatred and anger. So China somehow becomes responsible for COVID because that particular pandemic arose there...


That ignited a lot of hatred and hostility of the Chinese culture. People experienced a lot of prejudice... Including attacks – both physical and verbal – as if they were representatives of COVID. That's been difficult for people to deal with. And if we hate on a massive scale like that, one of the things that happens is that we tend to deplete ourselves.

## Deplete ourselves?

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Right. We deplete ourselves of our own autonomy and way of thinking about things. Our hatred and difficult feelings are an important part of what we are, and what we're about! And it's important that we're able to digest and think about it.






**I'm hearing the words fear and hate. And it's difficult to say this, because it's something we don't like to associate with ourselves... But fear and hate are part of being human. How do we cope with things that we don't like to see in an organisation, or out in the world?**

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One of the things that's important is to own it a bit. If we all own a bit of our hatred, it's going to be – when it happens – a less massive eruption. So it helps to notice what you're thinking... "This is irritating me", say. "It hasn't got to hatred yet, but there's something irritating that's growing there." I also think being open to engaging with people. So if a person is getting under my skin for some reason, am I able to talk to them? To learn about them?



**Not to address the reason directly, though?**

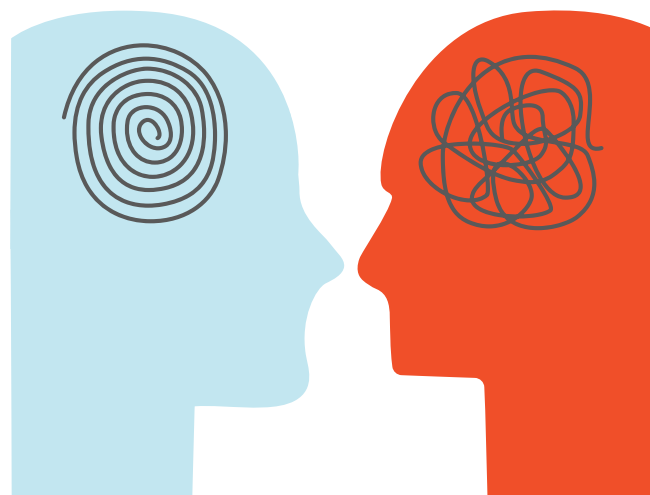
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Not necessarily, no. I mean – I could talk about the fact they're getting under my skin, if they're a colleague. But actually just spend a little time getting to know them. Sometimes that can shift things quite a bit. When there's significant unhappiness in a work environment, it's important to talk about that. Rather than let things build up to a point where it's not sustainable or manageable! It's better to think, "Okay, what can we do that's different?" And also, "What are the constraints on us at this moment in time?" Or "What are the limitations of what we can do to change things in the workplace?" The more people feel they can influence their work environments, the better they feel.



## Outside of psychiatry, how can leaders help ameliorate these emotions, Jan? Help people talk, rather than get caught up in the hubbub of intensifying emotions?

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One issue that sometimes crops up is that leaders tend to be vilified. They're seen very much as controlling organisations in a top-down way, so you can get into this 'tit for tat'. "This person is telling us to do this, we don't like it and, actually, we're not going to do it that way." That's a big drain on resources.

## Interesting. You observe people feeling 'ruled', or curbed in the environments you work in?

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Certainly. It happens an awful lot in the NHS, with which I'm most familiar. There's a command and control input there that sometimes cuts the legs off clinical leaders... The consultant psychiatrists; those actually leading the clinical enterprise. There can be tensions between managers and clinicians. Managers might look at the numbers of patients seen, for example. Clinicians, though, might be saying they need to spend a bit more time with patients to hear what they have to say. So what can leaders do about it? It's important to recognise that's there, and look at the different forces playing into that.

This is quite strongly felt in psychiatry. We're trying to take into account biological and social issues, as well as the psychological. There's often a commercial input as well. So rebalancing is part of it – and thinking about a market part. But we also need to better regard human values.

## How might we better regard human values? What might we learn from the field of psychiatry?

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It's important for leaders to engage with the people they're working with; the people they're leading. And to think about all the areas people are struggling with, and listen carefully. Listen up the organisation, and also try to appreciate the values. What brings people to work? Why have they come into that area? What's brought them there?

It's also important to allow and encourage people to develop in their work environments. Leaders are well placed if they think about who really wants to develop themselves... What attributes do they bring? How can they be supported in actually growing in work? Because if people are learning and growing, they tend to be much more satisfied.

## And what more can leaders do to better get alongside people? To give them the space to grow?

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One of the useful things that leaders can do is facilitate reflective practice groups with colleagues. To actually sit down with people; allow them to speak openly, and allow them to think about what's going on in an open, examined way. And one of the ways of doing that is to have some meetings, or maybe parts of meetings where there isn't actually an agenda: let's check in, let's see how people are. So many of us go to meetings with lots of agenda items and business to get through, which is very task-focused. Actually being able to step back from the tasks and having some thinking space helps people bring forward ideas and innovations. Not be so busy that they can't think.

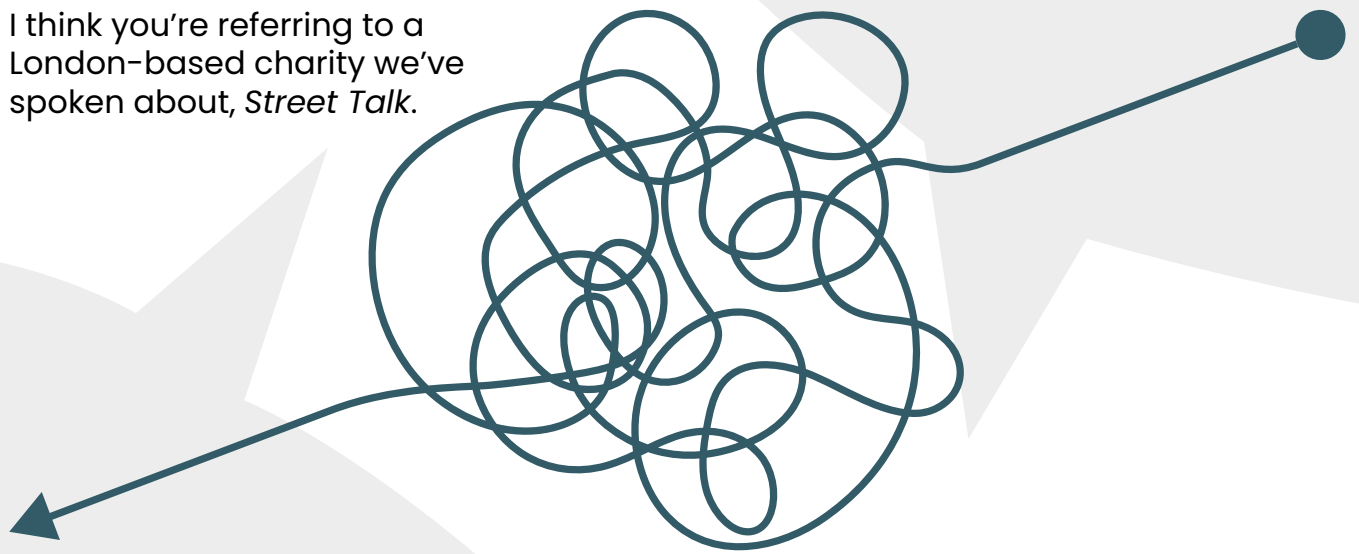
And really, that's where connections between people can emerge, which can be incredibly powerful. It's where distress can be expressed as well. The group working together can be so much more powerful than individuals: when people feel connected they can really make a difference.



**You used the word 'vilified' earlier, Jan. It called to mind a project you spoke about some time ago... A group of people were being vilified in society and needed support. The programme focused on helping them through the conflict and tensions they were facing...**

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I think you're referring to a London-based charity we've spoken about, *Street Talk*.



**Yes – the help came from getting alongside people and simply listening and talking. Can you expand on that?**

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Yes. I've been associated with *Street Talk* for some years now. They have some charitable funding to provide a therapy service for women working as street prostitutes. They're such a marginalised group of people. Many of them have significant mental health problems. Drug addiction features quite large in this group, and they have a very difficult life. Often, they've been abused, or traumatised. Or they've got into difficulties with the law for various reasons.

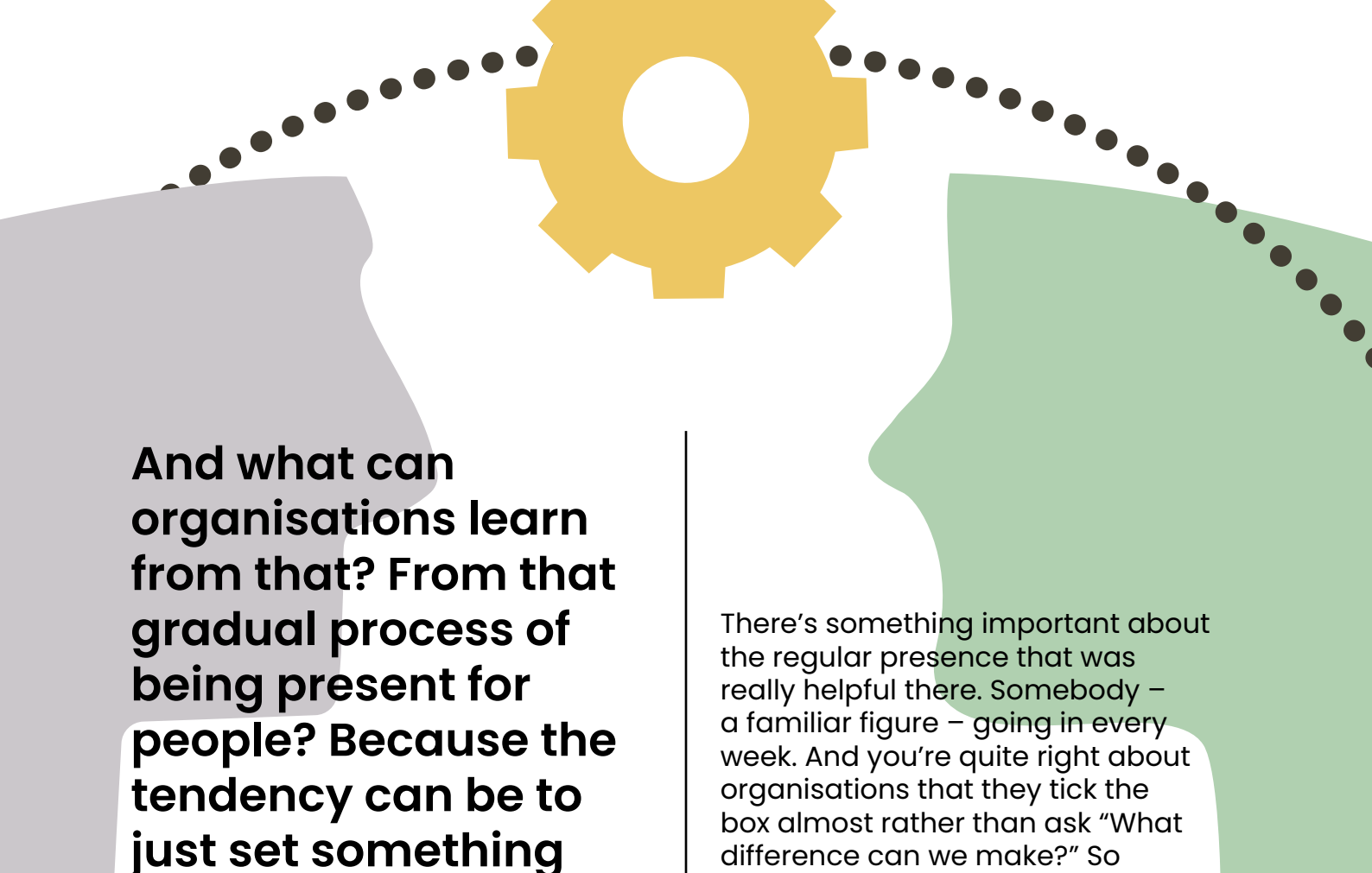
*Street Talk* is an amazing organisation, set up to engage them in therapy. A hugely ambitious project. And what they've found is that the process of engagement was a really long period...



## Compared with other people that come for therapy?

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Right. The therapists used to go into the probation hostels where these women stayed. They'd just hang around and be seen, and gradually become familiar figures. That way people were less frightened of them. Some then began to open up and work very effectively in therapy. So it's been noted as the therapy of presence... It's important to just be there for people in an empathic, accepting, compassionate way. A number of women who have come through that programme are now very effective, able people. They're contributing to society in various ways and doing well.



**And what can organisations learn from that? From that gradual process of being present for people? Because the tendency can be to just set something up... “Let’s create a new endeavour.” But what’s informative for the everyday-life in organisations? Those in which people, to a different extent, feel scapegoated? People for whom the home they thought they had in an organisation is now not so welcoming. Is there anything we can learn from *Street Talk*?**

There’s something important about the regular presence that was really helpful there. Somebody – a familiar figure – going in every week. And you’re quite right about organisations that they tick the box almost rather than ask “What difference can we make?” So thinking about the emotional labour involved in working with people in organisations is so valuable.

There’s a move towards, for example, trying to develop open dialogue in psychiatric practice. Open dialogue in organisations is hugely helpful. It’s important to hear what people have to say. People have thoughts, ideas, things they want to bring to fruition. And if we don’t listen, people gradually switch off. So it’s important to keep things alive; keep them moving. Helping people perhaps review the purpose of the organisations they’re working with... Is this fulfilling what I imagined when I first came here? Are we getting too bogged down in admin? Have we got enough creative time to work with people? It’s useful to think about how groups of people work together... And how they can help move things forward.



**Let's take your point about working together in groups. I wonder if there's a tendency to leave people on the edge sometimes? Marginalised? Because if THEY'RE on the edge, WE'RE not. Why is it that we leave people on the edge?**

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One of the ways of understanding this is the use of projection... Many of us take a part of ourselves that is, for whatever reason, not acceptable to us at a conscious or unconscious level. And we put it outside of ourselves. For example, hatred, or bullying. We have parts of ourselves which are difficult to own and we can project that into other people.

And to counter that, try to find out about them; be interested, be curious about people... Not just to let a situation like that lie – because eventually, if that person is a member of staff for example, they'll start to move out of the organisation and start to marginalise themselves. That person might then stop coming to work in a physical sense but also might stop bringing their person to work, in an emotional sense and may end up leaving the organisation.

So it's really important to engage with this in organisations and wider society. How do you engage with people on the margins? Think about their experiences, many of which are our own experiences projected into them. These experiences belong to us all. We need to own those collectively, and think about how we manage, digest and respond to them.

## **What's sitting behind the marginalising, Jan?** **The scapegoating that people experience in community and in organisation?**

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It goes back to something we spoke about earlier. It's about projection, about fear of the unknown. And there's a danger of us continuing and pushing people away by our own projections. If we don't get to know them, and listen to what they say, there's a danger they may be increasingly marginalised. Some people are more vulnerable to this than others.



## And vulnerable people are?

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People who are different in some way, who stand out in society... Hence the efforts to engage diverse people in groups, in different ways. It's also important to hear what they have to say about their journey so far... And how they can be helped back to join in with people.

Something else that's important is recognising differences... The different skills and attributes people bring to a group or organisation. What do those experiences add to the richness of our understanding? So valuing that; their journey through life and how they got to where they are.



## Can you say a bit more about the reasoning process here? **Is this a more complex way of seeing things?**

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I think you're getting into a two-dimensional thinking there. It's about moving into a more complex way of thinking about things... Three or more dimensions are operating. But what's influencing these factors? What you often see in organisations is one person gets scapegoated – then they leave. Then another person quite quickly takes their place. Clearly, there's something unhealthy going on in the system. Is there something happening unconsciously? People are getting driven out and we're losing good people... And they're actually experiencing a loss and blockages in their own creativity as well.

Some people work better in a fairly private space. Other people like to work with others – very engaged in a team. And people bring different contributions to that process... Sometimes helping people find their metaphorical place at the table is important.





## What's the role of senior teams in helping people to **find their place**?

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The culture comes down from the top of the organisation, really. And clearly, the values and the leaders in the organisation do percolate down. We may have to go into quite uncertain territory. Leaders might be quite fearful of that. Again, it's easier to go back to the tick box. It's more reassuring in an immediate sense. But it's also quite frustrating if you have a vision of how things might develop beyond that.

**Yes, it's moving into unknown territory, away from the shopping list... Moving to truly look at the experiences of different people – that can feel rather scary, can't it? It's about human beings and their preferences and their unpredictability, which we can't control.**

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That's right, we can't control it at all, but we can try and help people be their best! To bring themselves to work as best they can, and to grow in their work environments. It's important to recognise the emotional labour of being a leader. And also for leaders to make sure they have space to think about what they're doing... Because it can be exhausting to reflect on things; very tiring. Tiring – but also very exciting and fantastic.

**And could you highlight a few points that leaders could think about prioritising? What might, for example, give them a better understanding of their colleagues' experiences? What questions could they be asking themselves, as leaders in organisations?**

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One of the points I think about is: what's going on under the surface here? Do we know about it? How do we understand the dynamics between groups and teams that work together? How do we understand the dynamics of a person's understanding of me as a leader, for example? And one of the concepts we use in psychotherapy is 'transference'...

## **Transference?**

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Transference is when somebody brings unresolved feelings and emotions from their earlier life into consultation and psychotherapy. And there's something about thinking: how is this person seeing me at the moment? How does that sit with my impression of myself? Is it very different? For example, I may not regard myself as very authoritarian in my approach... But if someone was very frightened of an authority figure, they may pick that up in a different way.

Also, just having some space about what I can do differently... Can I open up my mind? Can I, as a leader, listen to ideas that are put on the table? Or is it my tendency to just dismiss them? How do I make space for open, creative, innovative thought? How do I make space for that dialogue? Where people bring their professional backgrounds, but are also open to other ideas?

So trust, openness in communication... Bearing in mind that most people work hard and try to do their best at work. Recognise that – and also that there might be problems going on at the same time. And there's a space to talk about those in confidence... In the right kind of place, at the right time.

**Thank you, Jan. One final question... This is around what's going to help leaders frame good leadership differently. Frame it as important that conversations matter... That people have different experiences, and may feel scapegoated or marginalised. What can leaders be saying to themselves to help them realise we're all people, trying our best? What would help them stay evermore attuned to the humanity in the organisation?**

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Reflecting on our own journey is important... Those times when we might've felt uncomfortable and vulnerable. And also thinking about what other things happen that seem to go well. That's important in terms of how I recognise when things are not going comfortably well. When the organisational outfit isn't fitting the culture in a very good way. How do we talk about that? How do we remedy that?

**Thanks, Jan. That's a wonderful way to end. It takes me right back to the start of the conversation when you said a key part of the psychiatrist's role is to bring all of yourself into the job. *Thank you, Jan.***

If you or others around you are effected by any of the topics included in this podcast, please visit the [Mental Health Foundation](#), [Mind](#) and [Samaritans](#) for resources and support.

