

DO SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

HARNESS THE POWER OF
MICRO-INTERACTIONS TO
TRANSFORM YOUR LEADERSHIP

Sarah Langslow

Praise for *Do Sweat the Small Stuff*

I'm a sucker for books like this! Packed full of practical examples, in *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* Sarah Langslow has done the hard work of breaking down how to translate our good intentions into the words we actually say to make those intentions real and tangible.

L. David Marquet, Wall Street Journal bestselling author of *Turn the Ship Around* and *Leadership is Language*

As someone constantly searching for tools to become an effective leader this book by Sarah Langslow really resonated. Why? Because it made me stop immediately and think about the effectiveness of my micro-interactions with all the people I currently lead or have led in the past.

Micro-interactions are vital in building and maintaining relationships, yet they are so rarely discussed. *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* raises your awareness as a leader of how important all these are for every person we lead and gives you tools to help you reflect and improve your leadership effectiveness.

We owe it to the people we lead to use our leadership skills to grow every relationship, and for this to happen we need to understand these micro-interactions and use them to the best of our ability. I really think the rewards will be worth it.

**Stuart Lancaster, Head Coach at Racing 92 Rugby,
former Head Coach at England Rugby**

This is a brilliant read that challenges you to notice how small, practical changes can have a significant impact on yourself, your colleagues and the wider workplace. Essential reading for leaders, managers and teams who want to look beyond intentions to understand and improve their impact. If we all paid more attention to what this book highlights, our workplaces would be better for it.

**Cath Bishop, Olympian, diplomat, leadership and culture,
coach, author of *The Long Win***

Do Sweat the Small Stuff is a great active read (keep a pen handy)! The book offers a valuable lens through which to observe your own leadership, and a practical set of exercises and suggestions to intentionally develop your influence and effectiveness as a leader by focussing on the acute impact of your so-called micro-interactions.

David Singleton, CTO of Stripe

For managers, aspiring leaders, or anyone with an eye on the executive suite, Sarah Langslow has created a vibrant road map to leadership effectiveness and high-performing teams. Packed with practical advice, *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* charts an actionable path to creating healthy workplace cultures and strong organizational outcomes.

I've had the joy to lead high performing teams across some of the world's top organisations, and I think Sarah has written the leadership, management, and culture guide we all need to move forward.

Deb Taft, CEO of Lindauer Global Search and Talent

Reading this book felt like having a coach on my shoulder; quietly but firmly challenging me to think differently about leadership, and providing the tools, support and reassurance to do so. It's helped me notice how the small choices I make and interactions I have influence how I show up at work and figure out how by changing them I can improve my leadership.

**Katie Smith, Executive Director Global Hub of CAMFED
International**

This is a very important book. We spend a lot of time teaching people the 'what' and the 'why' of management but, typically, not enough on the how. *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* is on the how. Sarah offers a structured guide to the small, ubiquitous, crucial behaviours that leaders need to demonstrate to lead effectively.

**Ben Hardy, Clinical Professor of Organisational Behaviour,
London Business School**

In a post-pandemic world where hybrid and remote working has become the norm, many of us have defaulted to task-focused meetings and interactions with our work colleagues. This book is a healthy reminder that we are social animals – that people work with people. And our micro-interactions with other people are the glue within a company culture that make it social and empathic as well as efficient and productive.

A great, practical book for leaders and employees alike to step back and consciously reappropriate the transformative power of micro-interactions at work and in your personal life.

**Abel Ureta-Vidal, CEO of Octicor, Serial Entrepreneur,
NED, Investor**

Do Sweat the Small Stuff is a fresh take on approaching leadership. It made me think differently about how the small stuff can impact not only other people but also myself! It reminded me how easy it is to get into habits, and that taking the time to concentrate on the small things helps all my interactions – with team members, peers and other parties. Though aimed at leadership, I would encourage everyone to read it as its principles and practical tools will be valuable to professionals at all levels and will equally impact your life beyond work.

Claire Shepherd, COO

Do Sweat the Small Stuff zooms in on the culture makers and breakers that we have the power to control in in our everyday choices as a leader. So many leadership books focus on the big and the strategic and overlook the micro changes that aggregate to make us extraordinary people leaders. The reflective and practical exercises throughout help you see yourself as others might and by the end you will already be operating at a higher level.

Joanna Lyall, Founder and CEO of The Better Menopause

I've always been someone who appreciates the small moments and little gestures that accumulate over time to make our interactions and relationships what they are. This book makes a convincing

case for paying A LOT more attention to the ‘small stuff’, especially in a leadership context.

When we’re leading anything, the tendency can be to focus on the big ideas, leaving our micro-interactions frequently overlooked. *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* lays out their critical importance. More than that, it provides a practical guide to making positive change, delivered in an engaging and entertaining style.

**Clarissa Sowemimo-Coker, CEO of Oxford
Cannabinoid Technologies**

Do Sweat the Small Stuff draws necessary attention to an often ignored aspect of leadership, opening up thinking about our relationships with our teams. This book guided me to reflect on the micro-interactions that make up these relationships, as well as providing tools and practical suggestions to change and improve the impact I have in my organisation. An essential read if you want to up your leadership game.

Clare Harvey, Chief Executive of The Ogden Trust

Do Sweat the Small Stuff is a great call to action for leaders and aspiring leaders to do not just the ‘right thing’ or the ‘business’ thing, but to do the things that they will be remembered for and will support their people to be their best.

Sarah reminds us that best doesn’t just happen, we have to learn about ourselves and work at getting better – this book will lead you to do that step by step. It’s a wakeup call to humanise leadership that you will want to read from cover to cover.

**Annamarie Phelps CBE OLY, President, European Rowing,
Vice Chair, British Olympic Association**

Sarah Langslow makes a convincing case for the value to leaders and managers of improving their micro-interactions. An intensely practical handbook for leaders who are willing to make changes in the way they interact, so that they can have a more positive impact at work.

**Felicity Dwyer, author of *Crafting Connection: Transform how
you communicate with yourself and others***

Seven out of ten people leave their managers not their organisation. What actions can you take to prevent you being one of the seven? One is to read this book – because the small stuff really matters. Highly recommended reading for any manager or leader who wants to improve their performance.

Krista Powell Edwards, author of *Credible HR - Why HR don't have credibility and what to do about it*

Like the middle-of-the-night A-hah! recognition when something seemingly complex becomes ground-breakingly simple, *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* reveals the steps needed to take to infuse the practical with the inspirational. Blending humour with real-life examples, Sarah calls for leaders to cultivate the mindful and humane leadership style that meets the requisites of our times, resulting in leadership and teams that no longer just work at their day jobs, but indeed function at their zone of genius.

Laura Kline Taylor, Life & Business Coach, PCC

This book will not just change the way you think, but will turn how you think upside down. In *Do Sweat the Small Stuff* Sarah distils complex ideas into practical and actionable insights, creating a toolkit for impact that will allow individuals and leadership teams to get the most out of themselves and create real change. Essential reading for the modern workplace. I loved it!

Niamh Corbett, Head of Americas at Board Intelligence

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For Nathalie, who started me on this adventure,
and Christine, who opened my eyes to what I am capable of.

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Preface

I was standing next to the screen with the last slide of my presentation still showing. My hands were curled into fists to try and stop them shaking. I could feel the rising flush of shame and was desperately hoping it wouldn't make it as far as my face and explode in a sea of crimson on my cheeks.

I'd just struggled my way through answering a series of questions from my boss, the CEO. They were delivered quick-fire in a challenging, even aggressive tone, making it feel like an interrogation. He concluded with:

'This doesn't have the depth of thinking we need. It's really not good enough.'

I was relatively new to the company, still finding my feet and establishing myself. I certainly didn't have all the answers, and, yes, my ideas did need more work. But the manner of his questioning and his choice of words felt callous and uncaring. Worst of all, he said all this in front of the entire company.

I fought to keep a neutral expression on my face, answered questions from a few other colleagues as fast as possible, and got the hell out of that room. The whole thing probably lasted less than 10 minutes, but it remains etched on my memory.

The choices made in that moment by the individuals in that room were in so many ways tiny and insignificant. The choice of words, phrasing, tone. The choice to criticize rather than support. To knock down rather than build up. The choice to give feedback publicly rather than privately. For others, the choice was to stay silent rather than speak up to contribute or encourage. To be focused on themselves rather than considering the impact on someone else. Small choices when considered individually, yet the impact on me was devastating. I still wonder if anyone else even noticed how it had affected me. I suspect not.

It wasn't until many years later, after spending hundreds of hours of training as an executive coach, and thousands of hours coaching a wide range of clients, that I joined the dots. The changes I work on with my clients can also feel small and insignificant, to both them and me. And yet the cumulative impact is far greater. Because the *small stuff matters*.

As I was developing my ideas and started to share this premise, everyone I talked to had a story. Everyone could immediately think of a moment, an interaction, something someone said to them that was etched in their memory too. Few, sadly, were positive experiences. Most were moments of frustration, shame, astonishment, incredulity or simply despair. Despair at the quality of leadership – or lack of – that had been demonstrated.

That's why I wrote this book. We deserve better leaders. Most of you have the capacity and desire to *be* those leaders, whether you are already in that role or aspiring to step into it. If each of you reading this takes just one action to improve your micro-interactions the effect will be substantial. If you embrace the work fully, it has the potential to be transformational, for you and everyone around you.

Introduction

I remember the moment when I was first asked to manage someone. It felt like a heavy responsibility. I knew I would need to support and challenge them, set objectives, help them manage their tasks, give feedback and undertake their end-of-year review. I might even have to decide on whether to recommend them for promotion.

I felt wildly unprepared. I was good at my job, sure: working on projects, writing reports, creating and delivering presentations to clients. But what did that have to do with managing people?

Like so many, I was largely left to my own devices to figure it out. The average age at which people start managing others is around 30, whilst the average age they first receive related training is almost 40.¹ That's ten years of building bad habits, ingraining attitudes, coalescing poor management practices. Often with little guidance.

In the words of renowned leadership coach Marshall Goldsmith: 'What got you here won't get you there.'² Too many individuals are still promoted into positions of responsibility based on the skills required for their previous role or, worse, their length of tenure. Yet the technical skills that most people develop early in their career are not the skills required to lead and manage people.

The result? Many managers focus only on the task-based elements of people management: planning, scheduling, allocating tasks, monitoring performance against objectives and so on. But they forget, or worse still never realize, that that's not all, because the best managers are also leaders. And leadership happens through the relationships and day-to-day interactions we have with our people. How we show up, how we behave, the tone we set, and how we motivate people.

Leadership isn't the sole domain of the C-Suite and the most senior executives. We *all* lead, even if we don't realize it: we all influence the behaviour of those around us through our own actions and interactions. We all have an impact through what we say, how we say it, what we listen to, what we ignore, what we prioritize, and what we decide is unimportant.

The nuances within these actions and interactions are the ‘small stuff’ that this book is about. It matters. And we are not paying nearly enough attention to it.

Who is this book for?

The primary focus of this book is for those with responsibility for managing others, who want to sharpen and grow their leadership skills.

It’s for you if you manage a team and have a sense that somehow you’re missing something. Or you have the commitment to be better at leading your people, and you’re looking for the next area you can work on.

It’s for you if you’re struggling to understand why your people are disengaged and your turnover is higher than you want it to be. It’s for you if you’re frustrated with the performance of your team and want to do something about it but you don’t know where to start.

And it’s more than that because actually this book is for leaders and aspiring leaders at every level. Being a leader isn’t a job title. It’s not about the power you hold, or how many people you manage. I believe leadership is about influencing change and inspiring and motivating others; and you can do that whether you’re directly responsible for hundreds of people, or for no one.

So, whenever I talk about leaders in this book, I mean *you*. Whether you relate to yourself as a leader (yet) or not.

More than likely, you’ve experienced poor quality, or perhaps simply absent, leadership. You probably noticed the cost of that to you, and those around you. You may have looked at leaders around you and felt pretty uninspired.

We *need* better leadership. We *deserve* better leadership. And I wholeheartedly believe there is a better way.

You can lead, and achieve the results you seek for yourself, your team, and your organization, without it being at the cost of the people around you. In fact, it’s the opposite. You create those results by focusing on your people first. And you do that by

focusing on the small stuff you do every day. When your micro-interactions are *intentional* and are aligned with the kind of leader you want to be, then you *can* start to make a difference.

We may not all be able to change our organization, but we can change ourselves. We can role model something different. We can adjust our behaviours. We can change how we show up; start a revolution from the inside if you will.

I want this book to be a rallying cry to shift how we lead, to create cultures that inspire and engage people. And trust me (and the evidence) that when you do that, the results will follow: it will be good for your team and for the organization. You will attract great people and you will keep them. Above all, given that our work is somewhere we spend an extraordinarily large proportion of our life, it will be so much more enjoyable – for you and for everyone around you.

This book will equip you with an awareness of the impact you have as a leader through your current behaviours, and then help you to think through which of those you want to adapt and change. I can't promise you a quick fix. Personal growth requires a commitment for the long term. It requires you to embrace reflection, learning, practice, being open to make mistakes, hearing feedback. It requires you to be willing to improve, adjust, adapt, learn to be better; to take the lessons from what works and what doesn't, what people respond to well and what they resist. With that mindset, and that approach, you *will* grow your leadership.

Whether you're the head of an organization looking to catalyze this shift everywhere in your organization, a middle manager feeling powerless in the face of a toxic culture, or whether you're simply someone with aspirations to lead differently, I promise you the work is worth it.

The elephant in the room

I can't go any further without addressing the elephant in the room: this book's namesake, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*.³ After all, the title of this book might suggest I completely disagree with that concept. Actually, no. I still support Richard Carlson's message in

that book. His invitation is to not let unimportant things – the ‘small stuff’ in his terms – stress us out and derail us.

The focus of this book is something different. What I want is for you to be aware of the power of your words, actions and behaviours – the ‘small stuff’ I’m talking about – and to be more intentional with them. As the title puts it, to ‘sweat’ them: to switch on to their impact and be curious about where that doesn’t match what you intend.

I want to be really, really clear about what I’m *not* saying:

- I am *not* saying you should live in a state of hyper-vigilance about everything you do.
- I am *not* suggesting you should live in fear of the impact of your actions, in case you say or do something wrong.
- I am *definitely not* saying you should become so hung up on every detail of what you say and do that you are paralyzed into inaction.

That’s no way to lead, or to live.

It’s not about sweating every detail to excess. Instead, the approach I will outline through this book is to define a vision of the leader you want to be, then practise making your everyday micro-interactions align with that vision. It is about paying attention to your impact, acknowledging the power you have to influence others, even unintentionally, and using that awareness to become a better human, and better leader.

How to use this book

This book will work best if you read it actively. Yes, thinking deeply about the insights offered as you read (and I hope there are plenty of those) is beneficial. However, what really makes a difference is taking action.

Insight + Action = *Different* Results⁴

It takes insight *and* action to achieve different results. Insight alone is interesting, but rarely makes a difference. Action without

new insight or reflection is likely more of the same. To achieve change requires both together.

Throughout the book there are exercises to support your learning. Each time there is an exercise you will see one of the following motifs:



REFLECTION EXERCISE

These denote a reflection exercise. Take a moment, pause reading, and think about the question or concept. If it helps to write something down, feel free.



SPEAKING EXERCISE

These denote a speaking exercise. This might be speaking aloud to yourself, or something to practise with others.



WRITING EXERCISE

These denote a writing exercise. In most cases there is space in the book for you to make notes. If you prefer, take a pen and paper and write down your thoughts separately.

I have included suggestions for actions you might take, and support structures to help you take them. Appendix 1 provides a structure to plan how you integrate your learning into your leadership, at a pace that works for you. There are also companion resources, including fillable worksheets for all the written exercises, available for download at www.dosweatthesmallstuffbook.com

The first time you read this, I recommend reading front to back. It's designed to take you on a journey; each section builds on those that come before:

- Part I introduces you to micro-interactions – what they are and why they matter; why you cannot afford not to pay attention to them.
- Part II invites you to reflect on your micro-interactions – to hold a mirror up to yourself and explore the impact you have through your current patterns of speaking and listening, and through your habits and everyday behaviours. It's not about fault finding; it's about building self-awareness of how you show up as a leader.
- Part III moves you into action and practice. We start by defining the leader you want to be, then explore how you (re)shape your speaking, listening, habits and behaviours to align with that vision.
- Part IV looks at how to make that stick – how you embrace these practices and habits and commit to your growth as an ongoing journey, not a one-time fix. This part also looks at creating congruence across all aspects of your leadership and harnessing the power of feedback.

There are two final points I want to make before we dive in. First, this book is written predominantly from the perspective of the spoken word in micro-interactions, to avoid excess repetition. However, the points made generally apply equally to what we read and write. In some ways more so to the written word, as in that medium we lose some elements of communication that help our understanding. As you go through this book, try to apply what you learn to all forms of your micro-interactions, whether or not that is explicitly stated.

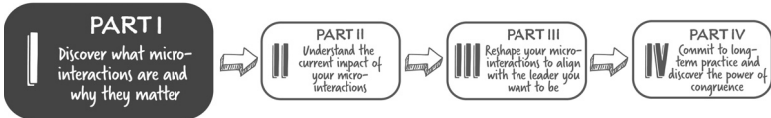
The second point is around remote and hybrid working, which increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in many industries remains at a higher level than pre-2020. There are

a number of places where I make specific points and distinctions that relate to micro-interactions on video or audio calls as opposed to in person. However, as with the previous point, in many cases communicating online amplifies the issues we come up against when we interact. So, if your micro-interactions mostly happen online, take extra note of the nuances described. They can have a greater impact on others, and you may have fewer opportunities to notice that impact occurring. Once again, keep that in mind throughout, whether specifically mentioned in the text or not.

Right, are you ready? Then let's get started.

Part I

Why you do need to sweat the 'small stuff'



We begin in Part I by laying some foundations.

We will explore what micro-interactions are. We will look at their profound impact in our professional lives in terms of our relationships, our working culture and our experience at work. We will establish how, as leaders, the impact of our micro-interactions is magnified due to our power and position of authority.

You will learn why you can't afford *not* to pay attention to them: how they have a real, measurable impact through performance, productivity, engagement, recruitment and retention. And, we will look at why they are never neutral. That is, if your micro-interactions are not a net contributor to growing your relationships, they risk killing them or causing the relationship to die through neglect.

We will look at what it takes to create the space to pay attention to and work on your micro-interactions. The answer is not to do more, or work harder, but instead to refocus: to embrace putting your people first, making your relationships with those around you your job. Through this lens, your micro-interactions become the most important things you do every day.

Finally in Part I, we will look at what I believe are the four, foundational pillars of transforming your micro-interactions: self-awareness, clarity of intention, building your toolbox and creating congruence.

Chapter 1

Small stuff, big impact

Why your micro-interactions matter

I want to start with an exercise.



REFLECTION EXERCISE

Think about your day yesterday. Think through every interaction you had with another human being: whether in person or online; whether spoken, written or nonverbal; whether you travel to work or work remotely; whether you live and work with others, or on your own.

Try closing your eyes and visualizing the day, starting from the moment you woke up.

These examples might help jog your memory:

- saying good morning to your partner or housemate (or your cat!)
- sharing about your upcoming day
- discussing household tasks to be done
- chatting with people at your gym class
- smiling at the woman on the station platform, or next to where your car was parked
- ordering coffee from the barista
- the awkward laugh when you almost walk into someone on the street
- greeting a colleague or client on a phone call
- meetings held, whether online or in person, including the small talk before and after the main discussion

- group chat on a video call
 - sending emails, from short confirmations or thank you's to the substantive content
 - calling to book a dentist's appointment
 - smiling at the exuberant dog and their owner while out for a walk
 - messaging with friends confirming plans for the weekend
 - chatting with a work colleague sitting next to you or over online messaging
 - saying 'see you tomorrow' to the security guard as you leave
 - conversing over dinner or a drink after work
 - putting your kids to bed and reading them a story
 - saying goodnight to your partner
-

When looked at this way it is striking. Around a core of longer, deeper conversations, a huge proportion of our day-to-day interactions are short, apparently inconsequential – not interactions into which we put a great deal of thought, planning or intention. They are interactions that happen largely on autopilot.

This is what I want to shine a light on, what I'm calling our day-to-day micro-interactions.* I believe they matter far more than we realize; our micro-interactions impact our success and efficacy as leaders in subtle yet profound ways. As such, they deserve our attention.

So, what are micro-interactions?

Micro-interactions are what we say, and don't say. They are how we say things: the phrasing, tone, timing, and energy. They are what we listen to and what we ignore, consciously or otherwise. They are the emails we respond to fast, and the ones we sit on or avoid. They

* I'm aware micro-interaction has a specific definition in the User Interface world; this is a term I've adopted for use in this field and has no relation to that concept.

are when we say thank you, and when we leave someone hanging. They are the interruptions and the silences. They are the questions we ask and how we ask them. They are also the questions never asked. They are the smiles, frowns, blank looks, flashes of irritation that pass across our faces. They are our habits and behaviours. They are the myriad of decisions we make.

Micro-interactions are the moments of connection we have with other humans that occur in their multitudes every single day.

All of our micro-interactions have consequences, sometimes significant, often unintended. Collectively they show what matters to us and what we don't care about. They project a continuous message to the world about who we are: what sort of person, what sort of leader.

This book will help you build awareness of the message your micro-interactions currently send, and then show you how to reshape your micro-interactions to align with the message you *want* to send. The focus throughout is on a professional context, looking at how micro-interactions influence your leadership. However, the lessons here can be applied equally in a more personal context and will be just as beneficial.

The seemingly insignificant is in fact foundational

It's easy to look at the list of micro-interactions above and think: 'So what? Why are they important?' I want to outline three core reasons why I believe they *all* matter.

Relationships

Micro-interactions are how we experience all of our relationships. And relationships matter.

Human beings are by nature a social species;⁵ we need other humans to survive and thrive. We depend on others for safety, to acquire knowledge and skills, and to accomplish tasks we could not achieve alone.⁶ More than that, relationships are how we experience love, companionship, friendship, a sense of belonging, and how we build esteem.⁷

And what makes up relationships? Hundreds and thousands of interactions over time. Many of which are, you guessed it, micro-interactions. Each one is like a stitch in the tapestry of that relationship, adding to its depth, colour and overall shape. Alone they may seem insignificant but added up over time the micro-interactions *become* the relationship.

Take the relationship I had with my first boss as an example. The significant moments were noteworthy and memorable: the job interview, the big client presentations and so on. But most of the relationship was not these things; it was the trust, respect and understanding built up day to day. Offering words of encouragement when I was taking on a new project. Being willing to listen when I had questions. Valuing my perspective when we interviewed a candidate together. Providing thoughtful feedback on my work. Giving unconditional support when I shared that I was considering studying for an MBA. It was the cumulative impact of the day-to-day micro-interactions that made it such a positive relationship, and helped me be successful in that role.

Whether with your peers, your team or your boss, at work, relationships are key. When they are working well, they are how you get things done, how you learn, how you mobilize others, how you succeed. When they aren't working, they cause frustration, distrust, disengagement, stress, and can cause people to leave. It is a truism backed by research⁸ that people don't leave jobs; they leave managers.

Our work is also a place of friendship as well as professional collaboration. In their regular employee engagement surveys, one of Gallup's twelve statements is 'I have a best friend at work.'⁹ Despite scepticism from many, they continue to include it for one good reason: it predicts performance.¹⁰

Culture

Micro-interactions drive the culture of our team and our organization. But what is workplace culture? 'The way we do things around here' is how Marvin Bower, the man behind McKinsey and

the father of modern management consulting, described it. It's the values, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, actions, norms and habits that make up our work environment. It is how we make decisions, and what we do when no one is looking.



REFLECTION EXERCISE

Think about the norms of behaviour where you work. Do you receive praise, or only criticism? Or perhaps you receive no feedback at all? Do colleagues turn up on time for meetings, or are they frequently late? Do you speak to people, or is business conducted mostly by email or online messaging? Is it a safe environment to make errors as you learn? Or are mistakes punished? Is everyone always busy? Or are colleagues generous with their time when you need help?

Positive workplace cultures are generative.¹¹ They build trust, they increase engagement, they improve performance and productivity. They help retention, reduce turnover and absenteeism, and make recruitment easier. Employees feel a sense of purpose and belonging, they feel connected with their work and give their best. Later sections will delve deeper into the interaction of culture and micro-interactions; how culture is impacted by leadership behaviours and how it drives (or inhibits) performance, trust and retention in a measurable way.

Just as in relationships, most of what makes up workplace culture is the day-to-day micro-interactions we have with those around us. The ones we hardly notice. It's how culture comes to life. Taken as a whole, our micro-interactions tell a story about how the organization operates, how its people treat each other, and what people, and by extension their organization, care about.

Experience

Above all, micro-interactions form a huge part of our experience of work, and of life. They influence how we perceive our job, our manager, and our team. They affect whether we feel valued, seen, understood and supported; or ignored, marginalized, exploited and taken for granted. They often determine whether we have a good day or a bad one.

That includes our interactions outside work too. When you exchange a smile with someone as you walk past, just the act of smiling will make you both feel better.¹² If you get frustrated and snap at the barista when you're in a hurry and feel like they're being slow, it will make both your day and theirs less enjoyable.

Poor employee experience often leads to lower employee engagement. All too often, leaders then look for a quick fix. Perhaps HR brings in an enhanced employee wellness programme, or the benefits system is revamped. Maybe there's some training and development offered, or they run a team away day.

All of these have their place and can be helpful. But if the day-to-day micro-interactions between leaders and their teams are not creating an environment in which it is positive to work, the big initiatives will make no lasting difference. They will be the metaphorical glitter on a turd.

The average person spends over 90,000 hours of their life at work, more than 10 years.¹³ Rather than have our professional lives be something we endure, why not strive to make them something we enjoy? Somewhere we feel valued, a place of real connection. A place where we can feel good about ourselves.

So, for our own sake, and for the sake of everyone we interact with, taking the time to work on our micro-interactions such that they create a supportive, enjoyable work environment can only be a good thing.

Leadership and micro-interactions

As a leader your micro-interactions matter even more.

Leadership is about relationship; it's how you work with people, how you influence people, how you engage and inspire your teams

and organizations to work towards a vision for the future. And it's about how you get those around you to take ownership of their contribution.

Leaders who rely on authority alone are rarely successful.¹⁴ The most effective leaders make things happen through influence: through the way they communicate with their team; how they make and communicate decisions; the conversations they have. It's about getting things done by inspiring people to want to do them and want to do them well. A huge part of that occurs through your everyday micro-interactions.

Beyond what you say, as a leader you also set the tone, and your behaviours influence the culture. This is because of the power dynamics in place, which are rarely acknowledged or talked about. Power dynamics in a professional sense relate to someone's ability to reward or punish. This may be in a material sense through promotions, pay rises or bonuses, or the less tangible ability to grant or withhold opportunities for advancement and growth. Power and authority add significance to every micro-interaction.

When we come into a new environment our instinct is to establish firstly how we can be safe, and secondly how we can be successful and get what we want. We evaluate the structures of power, and figure out who is in charge, who is influential. We try to understand the norms and accepted behaviours in the group in order to fit in. We are biased towards understanding and maintaining the status quo because change is inherently higher risk.¹⁵ If you are the leader, in a position of power, your micro-interactions will influence behaviour in a broader, deeper and more significant way.

'The culture of any organization is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate.'¹⁶

As a leader at any level in an organization, you are responsible for the working culture you create. Those around you look to you for cues: what you acknowledge, what you ignore or let pass; what and who you reward, and what you punish; what you listen to,

what conversations you avoid or shut down. These give out subtle signals to those around you. They train people how to treat you and how they should behave.

This is why it is crucial to turn the mirror on ourselves and understand the impact of our micro-interactions. You underestimate their power at your peril.

You can't afford not to pay attention

It's easy to look at this and think 'well that's all very nice but it's not how things work around here'. If you and your team don't meet your targets, and if your company isn't profitable, it doesn't matter how good the relationships are or how positive the culture, it won't last very long. However, a positive culture and good working relationships aren't simply nice-to-haves, but actually the route to higher profitability and a feature of teams and organizations that outperform their competitors. So, let's look at the business case for investing time and energy into your micro-interactions.

Performance

The strongest predictor of high-performing teams is psychological safety.¹⁷ Team psychological safety is defined as a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes – all without fear of negative consequences.

Psychological safety is created in the interactions between team members: in how ideas are listened and responded to, and in the conversations teams are willing to have with each other. In *The Fearless Organization*,¹⁸ Amy Edmondson outlines three aspects of a leadership toolkit required to create psychological safety:

1. **Setting the stage:** setting expectations about failure, uncertainty and interdependence, and emphasizing purpose by identifying what's at stake.

2. **Inviting participation through situational humility:** asking good questions, modelling intense listening and setting up structures and processes to support input.
3. **Responding productively:** expressing appreciation, not stigmatizing failure, and sanctioning clear violations.

Each aspect is about how the leader interacts with their team, and how the team interacts with each other: what they say, how they say it, when they speak, how they listen, what they reward, what they sanction – which all take place through micro-interactions. Where the team’s micro-interactions align with the intention to create psychological safety, including acknowledging one’s own mistakes, high performance will follow.

‘... to be fully present at work, to feel “psychologically safe,” we must know that we can be free enough, sometimes, to share the things that scare us without fear of recriminations. We must be able to talk about what is messy or sad, to have hard conversations with colleagues who are driving us crazy. We can’t be focused just on efficiency.’¹⁹

Culture also drives performance.²⁰ Features of high-performing cultures include a great employee experience, defined values and purpose that are embodied across the organization, leaders who inspire and motivate, and effective, regular communication, recognition and feedback.²¹ All of these are created through micro-interactions. At an organizational level, companies with top quartile cultures will deliver a shareholder return more than 200% higher than those in the bottom quartile.²²

The relationship between culture and strategy is also important. Whether you prefer ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’,²³ or ‘Culture trumps strategy, every time’,²⁴ the implication is clear. It doesn’t matter how good your strategy is, if the people executing it don’t share a culture that allows it to succeed, it will fail. Micro-interactions make up a large part of your culture, so you cannot afford not to pay attention.

Trust

An aspect of performance worth highlighting in relation to micro-interactions is trust.

‘... people at high-trust companies report: 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, 40% less burnout.’²⁵

Trust is built through intentionally building relationships. Managers who ‘express interest in and concern for team members’ success and personal well-being²⁶ outperform others in the quality and quantity of their work. When we build social ties at work, performance improves.²⁷ And how are social ties built? Micro-interactions with our peers and our team.

High-trust workplaces help people grow personally as well as professionally. In these organizations leaders really get to know their team: they understand their ambitions, they set clear goals and give employees the autonomy to reach them, and they give clear and consistent feedback. It is a people-first approach, driven largely by micro-interactions, that delivers improved performance.²⁸

A final behaviour worth highlighting is showing vulnerability. Leaders who are willing to admit when they don’t know, or willing to ask for help, build trust and credibility.²⁹ Those who share more intimately about themselves tend to be viewed by others as more trusting, friendly, and warm.³⁰ These moments of vulnerability occur in micro-interactions: in a moment of uncertainty, do you share or double down? Do you open up or shut down? Once again, micro-interactions matter.

Productivity and engagement

Productivity is a key metric: it is core to any successful business to use its available resources – including labour, time and capital – in a manner that maximizes efficiency and profitability.

One way to enhance productivity is to tap into the discretionary effort of your team; that is, by creating an environment where your people are self-motivated to *want* to do more. A satisfied employee is 40% more productive than an unsatisfied one. Taking that a step further, an engaged employee is 44% more productive than a satisfied worker, and an employee who feels inspired at work is nearly 125% more productive than a merely satisfied one.³¹ That's a big difference.

What does it take to create an inspired employee? Employees are inspired by their leaders, and they derive meaning and purpose from their company's vision. So, the quality of leadership is crucial. As we have seen, leadership is about relationship, and relationship occurs in large part through micro-interactions.

Employee engagement has become a hot topic in recent years, particularly in the wake of the so-called 'Great Resignation' that began during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Although employee engagement is back on an upward trend, the numbers remain low. Data for 2023 suggest that only 23% of the world's employees are engaged, and a terrifying 59% are 'quiet quitting'.³² (Quiet quitting is when employees put in the effort required to keep their job but don't feel inspired to go the extra mile, which can be an indicator of disengagement.)

Delving deeper, of the 59% who are quiet quitting, nearly half said they wanted improved engagement or culture. Employees referenced wanting managers to be more approachable, wanting to have more open conversations with managers, being respected, receiving clearer goals and guidance, having more autonomy and being recognized for contributions. Yet again, every single one of these is influenced by the micro-interactions between leaders and their teams.

Recruitment and retention

Almost 60% of employees have left a job during their career because of their manager, and 32% of employees have seriously considered leaving because of their manager.³³ If you lead a team, this should be of huge concern. The same research found that

relationships with management was the top factor when it came to job satisfaction, and, following mental health, it was the second most important determinant of their overall well-being.

High turnover disrupts and demotivates teams and adds to everyone's workload. For team leaders, it takes additional time to train new staff, taking them away from other elements of their role, and often affects team performance. It also takes significant time and cost to recruit new employees.³⁴

Retention is strongly related to workplace culture, which itself is influenced by leaders and managers through what is rewarded, punished, addressed, ignored and so on. Poor management behaviours within negative workplace cultures create demotivated employees; 42% of UK employees have previously left a job due to negative workplace culture.³⁵

All of these elements can be traced back in large part to micro-interactions. Each individual moment may seem tiny and unimportant, but they add up to a huge impact, and one with real-world cost implications.

Growing it, killing it, letting it die

There's another, *really* important reason why you need to pay attention to your micro-interactions. They are never neutral. Every interaction is contributing to one of three things happening within the relationship:³⁶

First, you are growing it, nourishing it. Your micro-interactions are additive, net positive, forward moving over time and are contributing to an ever deeper and higher-quality relationship.

If that isn't happening, there are only two other things that may be happening.

One, you are actively killing it. Your micro-interactions are damaging the relationship, causing loss of trust and decrease in connection and understanding.

Or two, you are letting it die through neglect. Whether through carelessness, thoughtlessness, a lack of self-awareness, laziness or simply not paying enough attention, the relationship is deteriorating.

Your micro-interactions are insufficient, inconsistent or confusing. Trust is eroding, and the metaphorical distance between you is increasing.

As we will discuss in more depth later, I'm not suggesting you should be trying to achieve perfection; progress in any relationship is not linear over time. But you do need to pay attention to the net impact of your micro-interactions, to look at the direction of travel. The work for you to do is, as far as possible, to eliminate or transform those micro-interactions which are at best frustrating to others and, at worst, cause harm, even when unintended.

Chapter summary

- Micro-interactions are the moments of connection we have with other humans that occur in their multitudes every single day. They are how we experience all of our relationships.
- Micro-interactions shape working culture and our experience of work, and they have a measurable impact on performance, trust, productivity, engagement, recruitment and retention.
- They are never neutral. In any relationship, our micro-interactions are always contributing to growing it, killing it or letting the relationship die.