



The Behavioural Realist: Inside the Human Workplace and How Good Cultures Drift, Fracture and Recover

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This article series explores how workplace cultures drift, fracture, and, in the right conditions, recover. It looks at the behavioural patterns that sit underneath organisational life: political leadership, silence, fear, over-control, survival mode, and the gradual loss of trust that changes how people think, act, and contribute. It also looks at what healthier cultures do differently, and what it really takes to move people from self-protection back into shared purpose, contribution, and performance.

Written through the lens of behavioural realism, the series examines five connected themes. It begins with political leadership and the damage caused when power becomes performative rather than purposeful. It then looks at how cultures drift from collective environments into survival systems, what it means to build a brave and healthy collective heart, how our tribal survival wiring still shapes behaviour at work, and finally what organisations must do to recover after toxicity has taken hold. Taken together, these articles are designed to help leaders and organisations look beyond surface language and better understand the human experience driving the culture beneath it.

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Article 1:

The Corporate Chessboard — Why Political Leadership is Killing Your Culture



Over the last few months, I have found myself in a recurring conversation about workplace culture—one that seems to be playing out across organisations, roles, and industries. It usually starts with a subtle admission:

“I love my job and the work I do, but I cannot stand the game playing and certain toxic individuals.”

People describe a shift they cannot quite name. They joined an organisation for its heart, believing it would be a great next move, only to wake up in a landscape that feels more like a playground or a battlefield.

Culture often drifts from Collective to Survival—but if we want to fix that drift, we have to look honestly at the players. We have to start the conversation about the real negative impact of Political Leadership.

The rise of the career politician

In the broader world, we have seen a shift in what it means to be a politician. We once looked for individuals with conviction—people driven by purpose, service, and a genuine belief in what they were building. Today, we increasingly see the Career Politician: someone whose primary skill is not governing, but retaining their position through calculated, self-serving trade-offs.

When this mindset enters a leadership team, the organisation stops being a mission and becomes a vehicle for personal leverage. The organisation still functions, but the intent behind it quietly shifts.

The danger is that this behaviour is almost always wrapped in a professional façade. These leaders are highly effective at managing up and owning the space they occupy.

To the Board, they appear decisive, polished, and aligned. But for the people sitting across from them, the atmosphere feels different. There is a quiet sense of tension—difficult to articulate, but impossible to ignore.

The ownership shift: becoming the architect

A political leader often fears genuine talent because they view the organisation as a corporate chessboard where every individual is a piece to be moved or sacrificed. They play a calculated, two-stage game: the ownership shift, followed by slow marginalisation.

First, they pull talent close, encouraging the expert to share knowledge, insight, and innovation. Once the work is ready to be presented, the leader steps in and takes ownership of the narrative. The story is positioned in a way that suggests they were the architect, while the individual who did the work becomes a supporting player.

Once the credit is secured, the marginalisation begins. The expert's reputation is slowly eroded through language that feels professional on the surface—lacks strategic overview, not aligned to the vision, not a team player.

The outcome is simple: the person with the real expertise is kept in the shadows, never allowed to become a threat.

What looks like alignment from the outside is, in reality, a quiet cycle of extraction and erasure—one that is difficult to spot until the damage is already done.

The divide and conquer of horizontal hostility

To maintain control, the political leader often relies on horizontal hostility. Silos are created, and individuals are positioned against one another, turning colleagues into competitors for approval. When a team is busy chasing small fragments of recognition, they are too distracted to notice what is quietly disappearing at the centre.

Information becomes something to protect rather than something to share. People stop focusing on the mission and start looking over their shoulders. This is the point where innovation begins to disappear and the survival mindset takes over.

Many organisations run annual surveys to “listen” to their people. In a political culture, these exercises often become performative. Employees complete them, but with caution. When the results are uncomfortable, the narrative is redirected. The data is questioned, the team is labelled, and the insight is quietly buried in a strategy document.

Bridging the gap: from awareness to action

At this point, most people can recognise the pattern. The challenge is not seeing it—it is knowing what to do next without becoming part of the game yourself.

Because once you see the system clearly, you have a choice: continue to operate within it, or begin to step outside of it. That shift does not require a dramatic move. It starts with small,

conscious decisions about how you show up, what you reinforce, and what you refuse to participate in.

This is where awareness becomes action.

The Behavioural Realist's Toolkit: 5 Ways to Break the Game

1. **Spot the currency shift**

In a healthy culture, the currency is results. In a political culture, the currency becomes proximity. When access matters more than output, the shift has already happened. Naming it helps you stay grounded in reality.

2. **Step away from the breadcrumb cycle**

Political leaders create dependency through inconsistent validation. Break the cycle by grounding yourself in peer feedback and your own professional standards. When you stop seeking approval, the leverage disappears.

3. **Pierce the crust with neutrality**

If you are operating at Board level, do not rely solely on internal reporting. Political environments develop a layer that filters truth. A neutral external perspective creates space for honesty without consequence.

4. **Disrupt horizontal hostility**

When competition is manufactured, the instinct is to compete. Resist it. Build direct relationships with your peers. The moment information is shared freely, the system begins to lose its grip.

5. **Listen beyond the words**

In meetings, notice the energy. Is there a pause before people speak? Do they look towards the leader for permission? These are early signals. The culture will show you what it cannot yet say.

The bottom line

Organisations behave like humans because they are driven by humans. What we need are leaders who create independence, not dependency—leaders who invest in the strength of the collective rather than control over it.

Because the moment leadership becomes a game, culture becomes something people have to survive rather than contribute to.

It is time to bring the human element back into business and stop playing games with the people who make organisations great.

Article 2:

The Blurred Line — How Culture Drifts from Collective to Survival



I remember standing at a whiteboard trying to map out why a once-thriving leadership team had become a battlefield of silent resentment. I had been researching the behavioural dynamics between narcissists and super empaths — a relationship often defined by a cycle of deep mission, gradual erosion, and eventual exhaustion. I could begin to see the clear lines of parallel between that co-dependent relationship and the broader toxic leadership culture.

As I drew the lines on the board, it began to formulate into something that sits at the heart of my theory: businesses behave like humans because they are driven by humans. I was not just looking at a singular couple; I was looking at an organisation, a leadership team, and a culture in danger. What I saw was culture drift — the slow, almost invisible slide from a collective culture to a survival culture.

The narcissism of the system

In a personal relationship, a super empath enters with high intent — they want to help, to fix, and to build a bond of trust and care. They are the perfect counterpart to a narcissistic personality, whose behaviour is not always about being overtly harmful, but often driven by an unconscious need to survive and dominate the narrative at any cost.

When you overlay this onto a business, the high-belief employee becomes the empath, and the political leader becomes the narcissist. The leader extracts the passion of the employee,

claiming the success as their own while dropping just enough breadcrumbs of praise to keep them dependent.

This is where my glistening yacht theory begins to appear. To the senior leadership team, the leader stands on a ship with perfect paintwork, green KPIs, and the presence of someone firmly in control. However, beneath the waterline, the employees who once had passion projects have become a shadow of their former selves — a pawn in a game they never signed up to play.

The tide of culture drift

People often ask me: when did it go wrong, and can you pinpoint the moment that it shifted? In Atlantic Canada, where I grew up, we have the highest tides in the world, and as every Maritimer knows, they are a force to keep a close eye on when you are fixed on the shoreline. When the tide is out, the waterline is a distant smudge, but it creeps back in with a subtle, relentless persistence.

Culture drift works in exactly the same way. You do not notice the inch-by-inch shift until you realise the ground you were standing on — your collective foundation — has been submerged by survival tactics. You are so focused on the gentle ripples in front of you that you lose the peripheral vision needed to see what is coming.

While the senior leadership team admires the glistening yacht from the shore, the crew is quietly drowning as the tide rises around them — and as every Maritimer knows, you are a fool to keep a close eye on the horizon while ignoring what is happening at your feet.

The first follower: breaking the silence

So, how do we catch the drift before the exodus begins?

There is a well-known video of a lone individual dancing alone on a hill. At first, he looks ridiculous — completely out of place. It is only when the first follower joins him that everything changes. That second person transforms the moment from something isolated into the start of a movement. *(If you have not seen it, it is often referred to as the “First Follower” video by Derek Sivers — worth a quick search.)*

In an organisation, visible silence holds more power than people realise. It is broken the moment one person is willing to speak the truth. As a behavioural realist, my role is often to be that first follower. By validating that voice, we create the safety for others to step out of the shadows.

The moment you realise

The shift rarely announces itself. There is no clear point where someone stands up and says, “this is no longer what it was.” It is felt in smaller moments — a hesitation before speaking, a glance across the room, a decision not to say what you were about to say.

Individually, those moments are easy to dismiss. Collectively, they tell a different story.

The challenge is that by the time you begin to question the environment, you are already in it. And without a clear reference point, it becomes difficult to know whether what you are feeling is real, or something you should simply push through.

That is why recognising the signals matters.

5 Realist Observations: Is your culture drifting?

- **The I vs. We ratio:** Does the leader position themselves as the sole architect of the team's work when presenting to the Senior Leadership Team?
- **The energy of the room:** Is there an atmospheric weight or a visible silence in your meetings?
- **The shadow self:** Are your best people becoming quieter, less creative, and more breathless as they try to survive the rising tide?
- **The first follower:** Is there a safe space for the second person to agree with an uncomfortable truth?
- **The safety-net exit:** Are people resigning to nothing? If they choose the void over the pay check, the tipping point has already happened.

The bottom line

Identifying these markers is not about assigning blame; it is about regaining sight. Even the longest winters eventually give way to spring. By naming the game and choosing to be a first follower for the truth, you begin the work of reclaiming the collective heart.

Because at the end of the day, an organisation is not a machine to be managed — it is a community to be led.

Article 3:

The Collective Heart — Building the Brave Space for Success



In my work as a behavioural realist, I often see organisations that have drifted into a survival state — where the primary goal is simply to make it to Friday without being blamed for a mistake. But there is another way. When a team operates from a collective heart, the dynamic shifts from fighting to flow.

If a toxic culture is defined by success snatching — where leaders wait for the win and then claim the credit — the collective leader is defined by being an equal participant. They don't just stand on the glistening yacht admiring the view; they are in the trenches with the crew.

The 360-degree shield

Building a healthy culture starts before a person even joins the payroll. Recruitment isn't just a chat with a senior executive; it is a diagnostic.

I advocate for a diversified hiring panel. You need HR for the process and a peer for collaboration, but most importantly, you need a member of the team they will actually be managing. A political leader can often mask their ego when talking to a CEO, but they almost always reveal their true nature when interacting with those they perceive as below them. A behavioural specialist on that panel isn't just listening to the answers; they are observing the nuances of respect and the boots-on-the-ground intent. We are looking for leaders who want to be in the organisation, not just on it.

The GPS: Playbook meets values

We've all seen company values plastered on a breakroom wall. These represent our aspirations, but values without a map can feel abstract. To maintain a collective heart, you must complement your values with a behavioural playbook.

This isn't an employee handbook about contract rules; it is a live document of shared beliefs and behaviours. It documents how we disagree and how we call each other out. When a team agrees to this playbook upfront, it creates a brave space. If a leader starts to overreach, a junior team member doesn't have to mount a personal attack. They simply refer to the agreement: that doesn't align with how we said we would work. It takes the sting out of conflict and replaces it with a shared commitment to the map.

Breaking the glass floor

The ultimate test of a healthy culture is how it handles success versus failure. In many environments, the leader stays back during the process to observe from a safe height. If the project fails, they are the first to distance themselves; if it succeeds, they are the first to step into the spotlight and snatch the success for themselves.

The collective leader operates differently. They understand that a big win is just a collection of small, daily shop-floor victories. Perhaps their most powerful act is inviting individuals into the senior leadership arena. By allowing team members to see above the glass floor and present their own successes to the senior leadership team, the leader removes the fear of the unknown.

Anxiety thrives in the shadows. When success is celebrated openly and based on contribution rather than role, the visible silence evaporates. The team member is no longer a shadow; they are a visible, valued heartbeat of the organisation.

The living system of leadership

Culture is not static. It is a living system that responds, adapts, and reshapes itself based on the behaviours it experiences every day. The challenge for leadership is not just to define what good looks like, but to understand the intensity and consistency required to sustain it.

A collective culture does not sit in a document; it sits in the lived experience of the people. It is felt in the small interactions, the tone of conversations, and the decisions made when no one is watching. That is where the pulse of the organisation sits.

The role of the collective leader is to stay connected to that pulse. Not from a distance, but from within it. They are not just setting direction; they are sensing, adjusting, and responding in real time.

This is where many cultures begin to drift. Leadership becomes removed from the lived experience, and the system starts to operate on assumption rather than reality. Over time, that gap creates friction, and friction creates survival.

Understanding culture as a dynamic system changes the role of leadership. It is no longer about control; it is about participation, awareness, and the discipline to stay close enough to the organisation to feel when something shifts.

5 Realist Rules for a Collective Heart

- **The 360 filter:** Never hire a leader without the input of the people they will actually lead.
- **The playbook partnership:** Use your values as the why and your behavioural playbook as the how.
- **Real-time recognition:** Don't wait for the big win. Celebrate the small moments on the shop floor as they happen.
- **Close the risk gap:** Stand with your team during the work, not just at the finish line.
- **Break the glass floor:** Actively invite your team into senior spaces to find their voice.

The first step

A healthy culture isn't a happy accident; it is a managed infrastructure. If you are reading this and feeling the atmospheric weight of a survival culture, the first step isn't a massive restructure — it's an honest conversation.

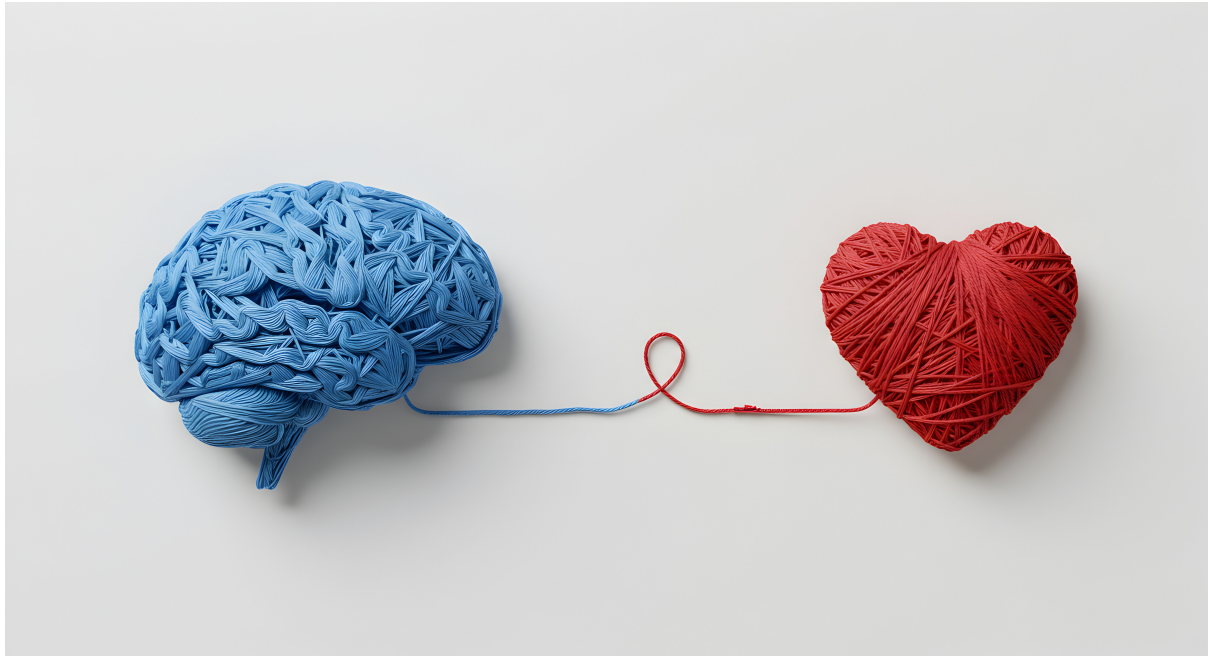
Start by naming the game. Bring your team together and ask: what are the rules we want to live by?

When you have a solid playbook and a leader who stands next to their team, the ground remains firm.

It is time to stop surviving the hour and start winning the day.

Article 4:

The Survival Brain — Legacy Code in a Modern Tribe



In my previous articles, we looked at how cultures drift and how to build a collective heart. But to truly understand why toxic environments are so hard to escape, we have to look at our hard wiring. We like to think of the modern office as a sophisticated invention, but in reality, it is just a high-tech version of the ancient tribe.

As Yuval Noah Harari explores in *Sapiens*, our species survived because we mastered the art of collective fiction and tribal alliance. Our DNA doesn't know the difference between a predator in the bushes and a success snatcher in a senior leadership team meeting. To our survival brain, being cast out of the company isn't just a career setback — it's a threat to our very existence.

What is often missed is that this wiring was not designed for the complexity of modern organisational life. For the majority of human history, we operated in small, tightly bound groups where trust, visibility, and proximity were constant. Anthropological research, including Robin Dunbar's work on social group size, suggests that our brains are optimised for tribes of around 150 people — environments where everyone knows their place, their value, and their level of safety.

In contrast, modern organisations stretch far beyond that scale, yet still rely on the same biological coding. When clarity, trust, or belonging begins to fracture, the brain does not interpret it as a management issue; it interprets it as a survival risk. That is why seemingly small shifts in tone, behaviour, or leadership intent can create disproportionately large emotional and behavioural responses.

The hijack: when innovation dies

When a workplace turns toxic, our biology takes over. The prefrontal cortex — the creative brain responsible for problem-solving and innovation — begins to shut down. In its place, the amygdala — the survival brain — takes the wheel.

In this state, you aren't working; you are hypervigilant. You are constantly scanning for threats. This is where the survival hangover begins. You see it in the permission loop, where no one dares make a decision for fear of being the one left standing when the music stops. While the leader is busy polishing the glistening yacht for the senior leadership team, the crew is experiencing the heavy silence of a team that has simply stopped trying to be great because they are too exhausted just trying to stay safe.

This is not just a psychological shift; it is a physiological one. Research in behavioural neuroscience, particularly the work of Robert Sapolsky, shows that prolonged exposure to stress hormones such as cortisol reduces our capacity for creative thinking, memory recall, and long-term decision-making. In simple terms, the brain reallocates its resources away from exploration and into protection.

That is why teams in toxic environments do not just underperform — they narrow. Decision-making becomes conservative, communication becomes guarded, and innovation becomes a risk rather than an opportunity. The system is not failing; it is adapting to what it perceives as a threat.

The mean girls of the savannah

Without a collective leader to provide safety, the tribe fractures into cliques. In many ways, it mirrors the dynamics captured in the iconic 2004 film *Mean Girls*, starring Lindsay Lohan — often dismissed as a teen comedy, but actually a sharp portrayal of social hierarchy, shifting allegiances, and the subtle power plays that define group behaviour.

What plays out in a high school cafeteria is not that far removed from what happens in a boardroom. The alliances shift, influence becomes currency, and individuals find themselves either inside or outside of the dominant group. The environment becomes less about contribution and more about positioning.

This triggers RSD — rejection sensitive dysphoria — an intense emotional pain rooted in our ancient past. For a hunter-gatherer, being ostracised meant death. In 2026, that same DNA makes a sharp email or a cold shoulder from a leader feel like a physical blow. We aren't being overly sensitive; we are reacting to legacy code that tells us our survival is at stake.

The fixer and the martyr trap

Perhaps the most tragic part of this biological hijack is the saviour complex. Outsiders often ask why you don't just leave, but they don't understand the trauma bond. The super empath often becomes the tribal shield. They stay not out of loyalty to the company, but out of a perceived duty to protect their colleagues.

They become a martyr, willing to endure the success snatcher's behaviour because they fear that if they leave, the rest of the tribe will be left exposed. This is the deeper trap of the

toxic environment: it reshapes identity. Innovation fades, and in its place comes a belief that your value lies in your ability to endure rather than create.

Breaking the bond

A healthy culture — a collective heart — isn't just nice to have. It is a biological necessity. It is the only environment where the survival brain can finally stand down, allowing the creative brain to turn back on.

There is also a deeper layer to why people stay longer than logic would suggest. In behavioural science, this is often linked to intermittent reinforcement — a pattern where unpredictable rewards are enough to sustain engagement, even in a negative environment. When moments of recognition or success are inconsistent but present, they create a powerful attachment loop that is difficult to break.

This is where the dynamic begins to mirror what we explored earlier in the series. The same pattern seen in narcissistic–empath relationships — where validation is irregular, conditional, and just enough to maintain connection — can begin to show up at a systemic level. The organisation itself becomes the source of both pressure and relief.

Combined with the social identity we form within teams, this creates what can feel like loyalty to the tribe, even when the tribe itself is no longer safe. Leaving is not just a professional decision; it can feel like a psychological break from something that, for a long time, defined your role and your value.

To break the cycle, we have to recognise that we are not just dealing with behaviour; we are dealing with millions of years of evolution. When the environment feels unsafe, the brain will always choose survival over innovation.

But when safety is restored, something shifts. The system begins to recalibrate. People stop scanning for predators and start looking forward again.

3 Realist Takeaways for the Survival Brain

- **Recognise the hijack:** If your team has stopped innovating, they aren't disengaged; they are hypervigilant. They cannot create while they are trying to survive the rising tide.
- **Name the mean girls dynamic:** Call out the cliques and shifting allegiances. Transparency is the only way to reset tribal mistrust.
- **Release the shield:** If you are the fixer, remember that you cannot save a tribe that is being led over a cliff. Your survival is not a betrayal; it is a necessity.

A call to the tribe

We are not just employees; we are a community of humans with ancient needs for safety and belonging. Long before organisations, there were tribes, and those tribes only survived when individuals trusted the environment they were part of.

As Harari suggests, the power of a tribe has never been in control, but in shared belief — the ability to create a collective story that people feel safe enough to participate in. When that belief is broken, the system fractures. When it is restored, the tribe stabilises.

It is time to stop using our legacy code to control one another and start using it to support one another. Because the strength of any tribe has never come from fear — it has always come from trust in the space it operates within.

Article 5

The Post-Toxic Reset — Systemic Recovery and the Architecture of the Collective Heart



The removal of a toxic leadership influence is often mistaken for a final resolution. In reality, it is merely the clearance of a biological hazard. For an organisation to truly shift from survival back to innovation, it must undergo a structured reset. This is a process of addressing the lingering legacy code—the habits, fears, and shadow processes that remain embedded in the team's DNA long after the source of the toxicity has exited the building.

To rebuild, we must look past the individual and diagnose the leadership culture as a whole. We have to address the specific pixels of the collective that have been distorted by prolonged hypervigilance.

The scapegoat strategy vs. systemic accountability

The most common failure in a recovery phase is the scapegoat strategy. It is a corporate reflex as old as the dog ate my homework excuse—a defensive manoeuvre where the

remaining senior leadership team blames a single departed individual for the entire cultural rot. While a specific success snatcher may have been the catalyst, they functioned within an ecosystem that provided the oxygen for their behaviour.

True recovery requires a culture audit that examines the wireframe of the leadership team. Think of a beautiful yacht sitting in the harbour; it looks shiny and glistening in the sun, but underneath the waterline, there may be decay and barnacles eating away at the hull. If left unattended, those barnacles slow the ship down until it eventually sinks, no matter how much you polish the deck.

The audit is your dry dock. It means looking at the passive complicity of the bystanders who allowed the distortion to continue because performance metrics appeared stable, or the managers who utilised a toxic leader's shadow as a heat shield to avoid their own accountability. If you simply march one person out of the building without scraping the hull, you are merely waiting for a new version of the same infection to take root.

Behavioural diagnostics: unlocking the martyr

A collective is comprised of individuals, each of whom has developed a bespoke survival strategy. The most difficult pixel to recalibrate is the martyr. Often found among the super empaths, the martyr is the individual who transitioned into a shield role during the toxic era. In a crisis, they are heroes; in a recovery, their behaviour can become a significant liability.

Because they found their significance in being the one holding things together, the absence of chaos can trigger an identity shift. This is where the atmosphere turns beige—a flat, joyless energy where everyone says they are fine, but the fine wall prevents any real colour or innovation from returning to the room.

There is also a more subtle dynamic at play. The martyr often derives influence from the very environment they are trying to move beyond. On the surface, they appear aligned to change, visible in their support and intent. But underneath, they can keep the system anchored to the past revisiting what happened, reinforcing what went wrong, and holding the team in a state of reflection rather than movement.

This creates a difficult tension. To some, they are seen as driving the positive shift. To others, there is a sense that progress is not fully taking hold. Without awareness, this can become a passive resistance that slows the transition forward.

To move through this, the shift has to be intentional. The martyr needs to move from significance through suffering to significance through contribution, giving them permission to step out of the role they once needed to play.

The failure of sticking plaster initiatives

When leadership tries to force a culture reset, they often resort to superficial perks that highlight the disconnect. I have seen leadership teams offer fruit bowls and gym passes as a substitute for psychological safety—a diagnostic sign of a team that does not understand the depth of the issue.

Offering back massages or quiet zones in repurposed janitorial closets that still smell of floor cleaner signals that employee well-being is a checkbox task, not a core value. Newsletters

featuring a recipe of the month or pizza parties are perceived as an insult to professionals who have been operating in sustained hypervigilance.

People do not want a forced obligation town hall where the CEO talks at them for an hour; they want to be participants in the sailing of the ship. You have to sell culture with the same intensity that you sell your products to your customers.

The clean slate: rebuilding the scaffolding

The final stage of recovery is the implementation of a collective playbook—a shared agreement of behaviours built by the people, not decreed by the senior leadership team. This is a clean slate approach that uses both quantitative and qualitative data to hear the raw human perspective. Reconnecting to purpose often requires taking a few steps backwards so that you can begin to move forward with clarity.

You must respect the biological reality of the survival brain versus the creative brain. It is a light switch; you cannot have both on at the same time. If your team is still in survival mode, the creative light is physically incapable of drawing power. Sometimes the most productive move is to take your foot off the gas just enough to allow the survival brain to stand down so the creative brain can re-engage.

This reset is not defined by new faces, but by a new intent. It is the recognition that an organisation is a living, breathing entity that behaves like a human. It requires honesty, transparency, and a refusal to hide behind the scapegoats of the past. When the survival brain finally feels safe, the creative brain takes the helm.

3 Realist Takeaways for the Reset

- **Scrape the hull:** Don't just remove the person; audit the systemic wireframe that provided the oxygen for their behaviour.
- **Identify the beige:** Spot the martyrs anchoring the team to past trauma and help them find significance in solutions rather than suffering.
- **Abandon the fruit bowl:** Stop using superficial perks as a sticking plaster for deep cultural issues and start building a collective playbook.

A call to the collective

We are not just employees; we are a community of humans with ancient needs for safety and belonging. The tribe is only as strong as its heart—not its fear.

By naming the game and choosing to be a first follower for the truth, you begin the work of reclaiming that heart. It is not enough to remove what was wrong; you have to rebuild what was missing. That means looking honestly at the system, not just the individual, and having the discipline to hold that line even when it is uncomfortable.

It is time to stop using our legacy code to control one another and start using it to support one another. Even the longest winters eventually give way to spring.

It is time to stop surviving the hour and start winning the day.

Article 6

From Caution to Contribution — The Final Reflection



The removal of a toxic leadership influence is often mistaken for a final resolution. In reality, it is only the clearance of the most visible part of the issue. For an organisation to truly shift from the survival brain back to a state of collective purpose, it must undergo a structured reset — a process of addressing the legacy code of habits, fears, and shadow behaviours embedded in the team over time.

One of the things I have noticed in these situations is how quickly people want to believe that things are fixed. There is usually a shift in energy and a sense of relief, and on the surface, it can feel like the problem has been removed. But if you spend a little more time in the environment, it becomes clear that not everything has moved on in the same way. People are still careful in how they speak, still reading the room, still working out what is safe to say and what is better left unsaid. What has changed is the visible pressure, not necessarily the underlying behaviour.

The boardroom vs. the shop floor

To understand the reset, it is worth stepping back and looking at the thread that has run through this series:

- **The Game:** We identified the political leader who treats the organisation as a corporate chessboard, where influence is built through positioning and where extraction and erasure shape how progress is managed.

- **The Mask:** We saw how strong performance and stable metrics act as a cover, masking a culture where individuals have become shadows of their former selves.
- **The Tide:** We looked at the slow drift from collective effort to survival tactics, where the ground is lost an inch at a time.
- **The Hijack:** We explored the biological reality of the survival brain, where hypervigilance shuts down the capacity for innovation and leaves a team in a state of exhaustion.

The final shift is not about a new set of rules; it is about moving from protection back to participation.

The diagnostic of the “I am Fine” Wall

True recovery requires looking past the surface. I often look for the martyrs — the ones still rubbing their temples or sighing over simple tasks. They are still behind the “I am fine” wall, where everyone says they are okay because they have not yet realised the predator has left the bushes.

But the deeper diagnostic is not just who is still struggling; it is how the system is still behaving. Decisions may still be filtered before they are spoken, people may still read the room before they contribute, and leaders may still be protected from challenge in subtle, almost invisible ways. These are the signals that the system has not yet reset.

If the senior leadership team responds to this with fruit bowls or quiet zones in repurposed janitorial closets, they are missing the point. You cannot fix a biological survival hijack with a snack. You fix it by closing the gap between leadership and the shop floor.

Something deeper

There is also a structural layer that often goes unspoken. Cultures are not defined by a single moment or individual; they are shaped over time by what is allowed, what is rewarded, and what is left unchallenged.

If a toxic dynamic has taken hold, it is rarely because no one noticed. It is more often because the cost of challenging it felt too high, or because results were still being delivered. Over time, people adapt. They learn how to navigate the environment, how to stay safe within it, and how to operate without drawing attention.

That adaptation does not disappear overnight. It remains in the system, quietly influencing behaviour long after the original source has gone. That is why a reset requires more than removal. It requires reflection — not just asking who was responsible, but asking what became normal.

The humble leader

The antidote is the humble leader, but not in the way it is often described. This is not about stepping back or softening authority. It is about having the confidence to lead differently at the point where trust has been fractured.

The humble leader re-enters the system as a participant, not just a position. They are present in the reality of the organisation, not just the version presented through reports and performance metrics. They are able to acknowledge that things may not have landed as intended, that the environment may not have felt as safe as it should have, and that there are perspectives they are now willing to understand more fully.

In doing so, they create the conditions for something that does not come easily once it has been lost: trust. They allow space for people to speak without rehearsing, to challenge without fear of consequence, and to contribute without first assessing whether it is safe to do so. That shift does not come from a single conversation; it comes from consistent behaviour that proves the environment has changed.

This often means absorbing some of the tension that was previously pushed downward. It means hearing things that may be uncomfortable and choosing not to react defensively, but to understand what sits beneath them. Over time, this begins to change the dynamic. People start to test the environment again, cautiously at first, and then with increasing confidence as they see that their voice is not only heard, but acted upon.

The real shift is not in what the leader says. It is in what the team begins to believe again.

The power of humility

Humility, in this context, is not a trait. It is a discipline that sits at the centre of how leadership is experienced. It is the decision to stay close enough to the organisation to feel it, to notice what is not being said, and to respond to what is actually happening rather than what is assumed to be true.

Where the political leader creates distance to maintain control, the humble leader reduces distance to rebuild connection. That connection becomes the mechanism through which trust is restored, and trust is what allows the system to recalibrate.

Without that, any attempt at change remains surface-level. With it, the culture begins to move, not because it has been instructed to, but because people begin to experience something different in the way leadership shows up.

The final word

Organisations do not become collective because they describe themselves that way. They become collective when people within them no longer feel the need to protect themselves from the environment they are part of. That is the shift at the centre of everything in this series: moving from caution back to contribution, from protection back to participation, and from survival back to something shared.

If you are embarking on any form of cultural change, it is important to recognise that this is not a moment; it is a journey. It is not a tick-box exercise or a short-term intervention. It is a continuous process of aligning behaviour, rebuilding trust, and reinforcing what good looks like over time.

For those who want to go deeper, the *18 Realist Signals* is not a separate idea, but an extension of this thinking — a way of recognising, in real time, whether a culture is truly shifting or simply presenting a new version of the same system.

Because culture is not what is written. It is what is experienced, what is reinforced, and what people come to trust as consistent.

The winter is over. It is time to stop surviving the cold and step forward into something stronger.



The Realist's Guide: 18 Truths for Overcoming a Toxic Leadership Culture

In a high-performance environment, we are selling more than a strategy; we are selling a collective belief — the idea that we are safer and stronger together than we are alone. When a culture turns toxic, that belief begins to fracture. Every interaction becomes a signal that tells the employee whether to innovate or to survive.

Throughout human history, we have survived by adapting to our environment. Whether it was terrain, climate, or threat, our ability to read the signals around us and adjust our behaviour accordingly has been our greatest strength. Organisations are no different. A culture is not static; it behaves like a living system. When the environment feels safe, people expand, collaborate, and innovate. When it feels uncertain or threatened, they contract, protect, and adapt in order to survive.

That is why culture cannot be managed purely through intention. It is shaped by the signals people experience every day—and those signals determine whether a team chooses to contribute or to protect itself.

To reset the culture, we must look at the behavioural signals of leadership — the small, consistent moments that shape how a culture is actually experienced. We do not change a culture through posters; we change it by mastering the cues that tell the human survival brain it is safe to stand down.

The Field Manual: 18 Cues for the Collective Reset

The Open Palm Feedback: Approach feedback with transparency and a no-weapon policy. In a toxic culture, feedback is used as a blade for erasure; in a reset culture, it becomes an open-handed gesture of growth.

Piercing the Crust: Leaders must actively move beyond filtered narratives and spend time on the shop floor, hearing the unedited reality of the organisation while protecting the dignity of the frontline.

The 360 Filter in Hiring: Never hire a leader without the input of those they will lead. A political leader can mask their ego to a CEO but will reveal it to a peer. This filter is your first line of defence against the career politician.

Naming the Success Snatcher: Openly call out the behaviour where leaders wear the cloak of their team's hard work. By crediting the expert publicly, you dismantle the extraction game.

Breaking the Visible Silence: In meetings, notice who is not speaking. A reset leader invites the silent voice into the room, ensuring that hypervigilance does not turn into a permanent permission loop.

The Day in Their Shoes Proxy: Participation is the ultimate signal of competence and humility. When a leader does the actual job, they signal that they are a participant in the mission, not just an observer of it.

Closing the Anticipation Gap: Anxiety thrives in the space between decision and understanding. Proactive, honest communication replaces uncertainty—the biggest driver of stress in the survival brain.

The Behavioural Playbook vs. The Poster: Values are aspirations; a playbook is the how. Define what acceptable behaviour looks like so teams have a clear reference point to call out overreach safely.

The Martyr Transition: Identify those who carried the weight during the toxic period. Support them in moving from significance through suffering to significance through solutions.

Limbic Resonance (Mirroring): Match your pace to the team. If the team is exhausted, do not arrive with frenetic energy. Mirroring their state demonstrates awareness and shared understanding.

The Open-Handed Delegation: Use delegation as an invitation, not extraction. Ask, “What can I do for you?” and follow through in a way that rebuilds trust over time.

Removing Horizontal Hostility: Recognise and address internal cliques and shifting allegiances. A healthy team protects one another; it does not compete for the breadcrumbs of approval.

The Light Switch Reality: The creative brain and survival brain cannot operate at the same time. Do not demand innovation from a team that does not yet feel safe.

The Energy of Culture: Culture is felt before it is understood. Reset the environment by recognising and reinforcing small, real moments of progress where the work is actually happening.

Breaking the Glass Floor: Invite individuals into spaces they have not previously accessed. Removing the unknown reduces fear and dismantles the hierarchy that feeds political behaviour.

The First Follower Protection: When someone speaks an uncomfortable truth, the leader must be the first to support it. This creates the psychological safety required for others to follow.

The Power of the Pause: Not all progress comes from acceleration. Sometimes the most effective move is to slow down and allow the system to recover from sustained pressure.

The Dry Dock Audit: Periodically step back and assess the leadership dynamic. Address the unseen behaviours and passive complicity that may be slowing progress beneath the surface.

Closing: The Professional Participant

We do not apply these behaviours because they are soft skills; we apply them because they directly shape how safe a team feels to contribute. When we master these eighteen cues, we move beyond management and into collective leadership.

Human beings are adaptive by nature. We adjust to our environment, to the signals we receive, and to the conditions we are placed within. In a toxic culture, people adapt to survive. They become cautious, selective, and protective. In a healthy culture, they adapt to thrive. They become open, collaborative, and willing to contribute.

The difference is not the individual—it is the environment they are responding to. Every open conversation, every day spent understanding the reality of the work, and every consistent follow-through becomes a signal that the environment has changed. Over time, those signals rebuild trust—not through intention, but through experience.

Culture is not what we say it is. It is what people come to expect—and whether they thrive or survive within it. When people begin to expect safety, clarity, and honesty again, the system shifts. The team no longer operates in protection; it begins to move forward with confidence, contribution, and a renewed sense of collective responsibility.

Continue the Conversation

Culture is never just a leadership issue, an HR issue, or a communication issue. It is a lived experience shaped by behaviour, consistency, trust, and the signals people absorb every day. If this series has prompted reflection, challenged your thinking, or helped you put language

to something you have been sensing inside your own organisation, then that is exactly what it was designed to do.

If you would like to explore any of the themes raised in these articles in more detail, discuss how they may relate to your organisation, or learn more about Bridge's work in culture, leadership, and behavioural change, please contact Dale Smith. Equally, if these reflections have sparked ideas of your own, or you would be interested in contributing thoughts, experiences, or perspectives to future articles, I would be very pleased to hear from you. The conversation around culture is always richer when it is grounded in real voices and real experience.

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