Working with Team Dynamics and the
Leaders Who Shape Them…

Introduction: Recent assignments with a range of senior leaders and their teams has involved 'joined-up working' that connects specific team dynamics to individual leaders' particular capabilities and style.

Based on our observations and professional practice, a 'model' is beginning to emerge which helps us to describe particular 'types' of team dynamic and an associated form of leadership – and also to point to the sort of interventions that might be most useful in shifting both the team interaction and the leaders' style, simultaneously.

Below, we share tentative descriptions of these types, and give examples of the sort of work we have done in each case. In our next paper, we intend to outline a model which shows how these types relate, and a typical development pathway for each particular leader. However, it feels important first to share something of our base-line thinking and work, and to open this up to feedback.

Ultimately, we are interested in helping leaders develop the quality of greater *flow* in and around their team – which means developing a set of leadership capacities and competencies, which we group under the label *'Constellator'* (See 4. below).

1. Tight Ship

A **'Tight Ship'** culture is characterised by a sense of having a capable, confident leader at the helm who ensures that everyone delivers well-managed, well-proscribed pieces of work in service of a larger goal. There is an air of order and tidiness about the work, with everyone knowing their role within a very functional team environment and looking to their leader for guidance and affirmation. However, during times of change, often when individuals are required to step out of their comfort-zone and take on new responsibilities, or step up for the sake of the team as a whole, the team struggles; creativity is missing, and relationships between team members come under strain.

The **'Captain'**-like leader ultimately responsible for this type of culture tends to be unaware of the subtle ways in which s/he is rather controlling, and disables others from taking responsibility. While this leader has a good sense of overall priorities and milestones, s/he tends to overly manage how these should be achieved – perpetuating something of a parent-child dynamic and a 'competitiveness' among team members for his/her attention. S/he has to learn how to intervene more subtly, perhaps framing a challenge at a higher level and allowing greater uncertainty – but nevertheless providing a consistently safe space for team members to experiment with new roles, separately and together, to find their own way to more jointly-owned solutions.

Case-study: An MD within the financial services sector had successfully led his business through a very testing commercial environment and major restructure. His problem was that everyone now looked to him to make all key decisions, and he needed his management team to step up and take greater responsibility for delivering against the following year's very challenging business plan.

Key elements of our work: We designed and facilitated a 2-day off-site for the management team which combined: a) co-creating a journey plan with key priorities and milestones for the year - so team members could experiment doing this together, practicing taking greater responsibility - while we helped the MD lead in a more subtle, strategic way, giving greater space to others; b) 'live working' of key relationships within the team: re-aligning them through

subtle, systemic work to help them feel more connected to one another,
and in service of the journey-plan - rather than the leader as an individual. We followed up by providing live 'team coaching' during a regular management team meeting two months' later, so embedding newly learned behaviours.

Client response: *""Performance has dramatically improved and we are now ahead of plan… What I had seen up to the offsite was a group of individuals all wrestling with their own objectives and priorities. What we came away with was a more collective team, with a clear set of jointly-owned priorities – just what I was looking for."*

2. Rebels and Conformists
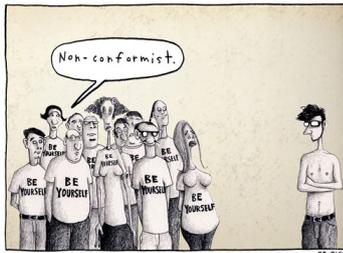
A **'Rebel and Conformist'** culture is characterised by an ability to get lots of specific things done in an exacting way – while containing lurking frustrations. Some team members buckle down to the tasks in hand, while others feel de-motivated and possibly diminished. In this culture, individuals tend to find ways of maintaining their territory and expertise – perhaps holding on to information or being uncompromising and prickly about certain issues.   Some therefore thrive, producing high-quality work, while others become more personally or organisationally destructive.

The **'Risk-Manager'** type of leader who helps create this type of culture tends to get stuck into the details out of anxiety. This often leaves direct reports feeling continually hassled and overly controlled – although they might also produce work of exceptionally high standard.   Like the 'Captain', this leader can interfere and reduce team members' sense of their own agency. Unlike the Captain, this leader's focus on the details comes at the expense of being clear about the bigger-picture agenda of the company and how everybody's different work contributes to that – which can lead to loss of morale and energy.   Such leaders need to be supported to let go of their anxiety around specific risks, and to articulate a larger 'operating space' for everyone to play their role.

Case Study: A Chief Executive of a utility company wanted both to shift some long-standing attitudes and behaviours among his direct reports - perhaps via some psychometric tests and leadership development workshops - and to experience them as more responsive to his leadership.

Key elements of our work: We contracted step-by-step, starting with 1:1 interviews with the team. We initially imagined reflecting back our findings, along with some suggested next steps, to a management team meeting. However, our findings indicated that we needed first to deliver some challenging feedback to the Chief Executive about how his leadership was being perceived and to test his capacity to receive this and respond to it. We did this via a confidential, written report and then a series of 1-2 hour conversations to support his ability to both digest our feedback, and to alight upon the best ways forward with his team. This led to his engaging us for further 1:1 coaching, while he tested out and led some initiatives with the team - unmediated by an external consultant - that were more about the future, strategic direction of the company and their roles in relation to this, rather than psychometric individual and team development work.

Client response: *"The view of the team without exception was that we are certainly making progress... Although these were difficult conversations at times, I feel good that you and I had the chance to discuss the feedback at length on a number of different occasions - and I appreciated your frank reporting which was a helpful diagnostic....   I wouldn't feel uncomfortable in bringing you back later to help with a health-check."*

3. 'Characters'

A team commonly described as comprising a number of **'Characters'** tends to contain individuals given plenty of scope to run things in their own particular way - with differing levels of commitment to shared goals, and a degree of uncertainty about how much, why or when they should be working across the piece. Collaboration between team members is sporadic and tends to run into trouble as the leader is often sought to arbitrate.

The **'Spider'**-like leader in charge of this type of culture tends to give direct reports plenty of room to lead in their own domains, and prefers to manage them via 1:1 relationships, rather than through a team dynamic. The result is a group of 'characters' – with a limited sense of team, or loyalty to the whole, and unsure of the exact nature of the 'contract' that exists between the leader, themselves and their colleagues. 'Spiders' need to be supported to face the implications of their inability to set a more unifying agenda and, perhaps, to face conflict as they attempt to lead via the team as a whole. Meanwhile the 'characters' in their team need to be supported to give up some of their autonomy and to find ways of trusting and collaborating with their peers, to deliver results in service of the whole – rather than just their particular part of the business.

Case Study: A Chief Executive in the health sector was wanting her management team to demonstrate more mutually-supportive, 'One Team' behaviours – particularly so that they could each assume more responsibility for the success of the whole organisation, rather than leave her carrying so much 'strategic burden' in relation to a large group of demanding external stakeholders.

Key elements of our work: We designed and facilitated two, 1-day workshops - spaced several months apart – in which we helped team members' into each others' worlds, building accountabilities between them. We did this by helping them see the advantages of closer collaboration between team members in delivering against certain specific objectives – and also by facilitating dialogues about individual and team values. The space between workshops enabled the team to experiment with 'One Team' behaviours, and then review and change what was still preventing progress during the second workshop. Meanwhile, we supported the Chief Executive to explore the psychology behind aspects of her approach to conflict, and to experiment with some new leadership behaviours.

Client response: *"I am grateful to you for the work you did with us ... Our discussion at meetings now shows a maturity and level of respect which simply wasn't there a year ago. Everyone is now making much more effort to bring discussions to the team in a timely way and contribute positively. I am far more confident in managing the agendas and chairing meetings, even when the discussion gets heated or difficult. The energy is really positive..."*

4. Flow

A **'Flow'** culture is characterized by a team that has a good sense of its priorities and where the organization is going – but not at the exclusion of being able to adapt to emerging issues and sudden demands. There is a tacit understanding across the team of where key risks lie, and of different team members' capacities to respond in different ways at any one time. People work together well, and trust that space will be made to tackle and progress complex problems. There is a sense of urgency when needed – and, on the other hand, a capacity to reflect and be creative. Morale and energy levels are generally high.

The **'Constellator'** is a leader able to provide their team with a continual sense of how the details of their work relate to a moving, larger picture. S/he understands exactly when they need to bring direction and focus to specific issues, and when they should give space to team-members to find their own way. This type of leader works well 1:1 when necessary and has great command of key details. But s/he also understands the importance of working the leadership team as a whole and staying focused on defining and expanding the team's operating space. The 'Constellator' is particularly adept at working the relationships *between* individuals on their leadership team, while managing their anxiety as interactions become complex and decision-making difficult.   At best, they can deliver a certain 'flow' around them – where everyone is clear about what they need to do and why, and they're in the best place at just the right time to do exactly this.

However, 'Constellators' are always likely to be learning about the more subtle ways of working diverse relationships to deliver coherence across a complex system – and are likely to have default 'Spider' or 'Captain' leadership modes which they'll get drawn back to under stress. Support for 'Constellators' therefore tends to involve supporting them to become increasingly able facilitators of group/system dynamics on the one hand (so addressing 'Spider' tendencies), or to cope with greater uncertainty and their own 'letting go' on the other hand (so mitigating against 'Captain' tendencies).

Case-study: An MD within a global energy company needed to see rapid performance improvement across his entire business – and was particularly concerned to see traction among middle-management.

Key elements of our work: We contracted via a retainer agreement to deliver an average of 7-8 days' month over a 12 month period, building relationships right across the business and then getting alongside key leaders and their 'real work' to unblock obstacles to higher performance and to resolve patterns resulting in unaligned and/or inefficient behaviour across various interfaces. Our relationship with the MD focused on bringing key aspects of life in the business to his attention and coaching him on how detailed or 'big picture' his response needed to be – and also supporting him in either bringing his particular perspectives and skills to a situation, or tolerating the uncertainty involved as he was encouraged to give others space to find their way.

Client response: *"You have worked very professionally and made a considerable difference here... I liked the way that you didn't present your diagnosis via some consultancy 'model', but instead got around the business, built trusting relationships and worked in response to the feedback you received as you went. I know many people here have learnt and developed a good deal thanks to your efforts – as have I..."*