When Organisations Only Pretend to Care: Is There a Better Way?

I recently saw a meme on social media that said: "The only thing worse than an organisation that doesn't care is one that pretends to care." This immediately brought to mind organisations that fit this description: The ones with bold values displayed prominently as you walk into their buildings, even while their employees privately share how overwhelmed and unsupported they feel. These are organisations that frequently use buzzwords like "burnout," "mental health," "culture," and "change," yet remain riddled with disengagement, blame, and shame. They might point to one-off initiatives to prove their commitment, but still wonder why people are unhappy.

Do leaders truly understand what their teams are experiencing and needing? Are their responses genuinely caring, or are we setting people up for failure with surface-level gestures, token gifts, and celebration days that lack real impact?

In my work in the field of people development, I often hear stories about employees feeling invisible, unheard, and disconnected from their workplaces. People express frustrations over the hollow values on the walls, which are rarely practiced, or remark: "What's the point of speaking up? No one listens anyway."

Leaders, too, face their struggles. Many are burnt out, micromanaging, and overwhelmed by tasks, admitting they don't have the time to "manage people" beyond ensuring the job is done. I recall a senior manager suffering from severe burnout. When she sought support from her leader, she was met with indifference. Her leader dismissed her concerns, stating that she never received help herself. It was only

after seeing a psychiatrist, who insisted on medical leave and rehabilitation, that the manager got the support she desperately needed. This happened despite the company having an Employee Assistance Programme and hosting wellness days. It underscores the truth that what leaders do is far more significant than what they say. If actions don't match the words, it's not genuine care.

Another common scenario I see is leaders blaming higher management for urgent, last-minute demands that require their teams to work late. These leaders seem afraid to have tough conversations with either their bosses or their teams, preferring to push blame rather than tackle the issue and find constructive solutions.

A big part of leadership and demonstrating care involves having those difficult but necessary conversations. Leaders have a duty to protect their teams. If a deadline shifts unexpectedly, how can a leader communicate transparently, negotiate, and work collaboratively with the team to meet the challenge? Authenticity and regular, honest communication are crucial.

As a leader, remember that your team observes your behaviour every day. Even when you're not speaking, your non-verbal cues—whether you're frustrated, tired, irritable, or inspired—are loud and clear. Ask yourself: Who am I being as a leader that my team is showing up in the way that they are?

Reflect on your behaviour and consider the following:

Model the behaviours you would like to see in your team: This is one of the most impactful things that leaders can do. For example, if you want everyone to be on time for the meeting, ensure that you are too.
Engage and listen to your team: Find out about the burning issues affecting them, what is working well and what can be improved. Connect with them as human beings first with lives, joys and challenges like you.
When you are not okay, seek support from your team. Demonstrating this will make it okay for others to do the same.
Create authentic spaces for engagement with your team e.g. a social gathering, a break station, a weekly check-in where the focus is only connection and supporting one another. What you will find is that this is likely to transform into a vehicle to tackle many other important work issues.

Demonstrating true care takes consistent effort, time, and a deep commitment to people and it means that leaders must be intentional about putting aside time to invest in their teams. The leaders that do, often see incredible results. When people feel safe, valued and a sense of true belong, they're more willing and able to give of their best.