

Leading Humans: Getting It Right (And Wrong, and Right Again)

Part 2 of 2: **What to do with
what you now know**

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Hello there and welcome.

Before you dive in, I thought it might help to introduce myself properly. I'm a psychologist. I've spent years studying how people think, feel, cope, connect, unravel a little, and then find their way again. I've worked in clinical settings, sat with people in crisis, and walked alongside individuals and families through some of the hardest seasons of their lives. And somewhere along the way, I noticed something. Psychologists hold a vast amount of knowledge about the human mind, how it works, why it spirals, how it heals, but so much of that information stays in therapy rooms, journal articles, or university lectures. It doesn't always reach the people who could use it most. So this series is my attempt to change that.

Before psychology, I was a police officer and detective. That role taught me things no textbook ever could. I saw what happens when people don't have the tools to make sense of what's happening inside them. When conversations are avoided. When emotions get misread or bottled up. I saw how struggles left unexamined don't stay contained, they ripple outward into families, workplaces, and communities.

What's happening inside us has a way of showing up everywhere else. In how we live. How we lead. How we love. How we speak to ourselves. How we respond when things don't go to plan. And how we show up for the people who matter most.

Here's the hopeful part. When people understand what's happening inside them, when they have language for their experiences and practical tools to work with them, things can start to shift. We can change the outcome.

My hope is that these eBooks bring some of that understanding out into the real world. To you. That they show you your thoughts and feelings are more normal than you think. That they give you practical tools you can actually use. And that they remind you that change is possible and you can create the life you want.

I'm really glad you're here.

Tenneille Quin





Leading Humans: Getting It Right (And Wrong, and Right Again)

Part 1 explained why people do what they do. Part 2 is what happens when you have to respond to it on a Tuesday afternoon.

Let's start here

Welcome back (or welcome, if you're jumping in here first. You'll be fine, though Part 1 is worth a read when you get a chance.) If you read Part 1, you've already spent some time with Jamie — a manager partway through their first real leadership role, trying to work out why leading people feels significantly harder than it looked from the outside.

Because from a distance, leadership often appears to involve strategic thinking, inspiring conversations, and confidently guiding people towards shared goals. And sometimes it does. Other times it involves staring at a Teams message thinking: *"That felt a bit passive-aggressive..."* before spending the next hour wondering if you've imagined the whole thing (a surprisingly common leadership hobby).

Part 1 was about understanding what sits underneath behaviour. Why stress changes people. Why some team members go quiet. What psychological safety actually looks like. And what really drives motivation once you move beyond coffee vouchers and enthusiastic workplace slogans.

Part 2 is where that understanding gets put to work. Because knowing the psychology is one thing. Using it in real conversations, on difficult days, when tensions are high, people are struggling, and you've already said the wrong thing before your brain had a chance to intervene...that's the part that actually makes you a better leader. And that's where we're heading next.

Before we jump in, a quick reminder about Jamie. Jamie was promoted because they were good at their job. Like many leaders, they suddenly found themselves responsible for a team without anyone handing over the secret handbook explaining how humans work. Part 1 followed Jamie learning some of the psychology behind stress, motivation, trust, and team dynamics. Part 2 is where Jamie discovers that understanding people and leading people are not quite the same thing.

**"Good leadership
isn't getting it right
every time. It's
knowing what to do
when you don't."**

It's probably not what you think it is...

The psychological shortcut leaders fall into all the time

A couple of months into the role, Jamie finally scheduled a proper check-in with Sam. Not a quick hallway conversation. Not a “you good?” while half-looking at emails. A real sit-down conversation. By this point, Sam's work had become inconsistent enough that it was hard to ignore. Deadlines were slipping slightly. Small mistakes had started appearing in work that used to be excellent. Nothing catastrophic. Just... different.

Jamie came prepared with notes. Which felt responsible and leadership-ish. The conversation lasted about twenty minutes. Sam was polite. Agreed with everything. Said very little. And somehow, by the end of it, Jamie walked away feeling like things had actually gotten worse. You know those conversations where technically nothing bad happens, but afterwards the atmosphere feels heavier somehow? It was one of those.

On the drive home, Jamie kept replaying it: Why didn't that land properly? The answer had actually been shaping the conversation from the very beginning. Because before the meeting even started, Jamie had already formed a conclusion: Sam just isn't trying hard enough.

And humans do this constantly. Psychologists call it the fundamental attribution error — our tendency to explain other people's behaviour through their character rather than their circumstances.

Someone misses a deadline? = They're lazy.

Someone's quiet in a meeting? = They're disengaged.

Someone seems distracted? = They don't care enough.

Meanwhile, when we drop the ball, we magically become much more understanding. Because now we know how stressful the week has been, how many competing priorities there were, how badly we slept, the difficult conversation we had an hour earlier. We explain our own behaviour through context. And other people's through personality. Not because we're terrible people. It's just one of the brain's favourite shortcuts.

The problem is, in leadership, that shortcut gets expensive very quickly. Because the assumption you walk into a conversation with tends to shape the entire interaction. Jamie went into the meeting internally asking: Why aren't they trying harder?

A much more useful question would have been: What might be getting in the way right now?



It's probably not what you think it is ...continued

And those two starting points lead leaders into very different conversations. One feels like being assessed. The other feels like being understood. That doesn't mean leaders avoid difficult conversations or ignore performance problems. Sometimes standards genuinely do need to be addressed. But people respond very differently when they feel curiosity coming from someone compared to judgment. One tends to make people defensive. The other makes it far more likely they'll tell you what's actually going on. And usually, the information underneath the behaviour is the useful part.

Jamie eventually learned that asking: "I've noticed things seem a bit different lately... how are you going?" opened far more doors than: "Your performance has been below expectations." Because often, the first conversation tells you why the second one is happening.

Burnout isn't a personal failure

...what burnout actually is (and why workplaces keep getting it wrong)

About three months into the role, Jamie finally stopped looking only at the work and started properly looking at the people doing it. Not performance dashboards. Not KPIs. Actual humans. Sam was still unusually quiet. One team member who used to have a joke for absolutely every situation, now mostly just stared at their laptop with the energy of a person emotionally negotiating with Microsoft Excel. Another team member who had once been first in and last out every day, had started leaving exactly on time. Sometimes earlier.

The whole team felt flatter somehow. Not dramatic. Not openly falling apart. Just... depleted. And Jamie had the uncomfortable realisation that the signs had actually been there for weeks.

They'd just been explained away. *Everyone's busy. It's a heavy quarter. Things will settle down soon.* Workplaces say this constantly, usually while everyone quietly deteriorates together in matching lanyards. Because burnout gets misunderstood all the time. People often talk about it like it's an individual problem; not resilient enough, not organised enough, not coping properly. As though the issue is simply that someone failed to become a perfectly optimised human productivity machine.

But psychologically, burnout is much bigger than that. Researcher Christina Maslach found that burnout usually grows from an ongoing mismatch between people and the conditions they're working in. And those mismatches tend to show up in a few predictable areas.

Workload

Too much for too long without enough recovery. Not "busy for a week." More: running on adrenaline for so long your nervous system starts treating stress like a personality trait.

Control

People struggle when they feel micromanaged, over-monitored, or like they have no real say in how their work happens. Humans generally don't thrive when they feel trapped inside someone else's spreadsheet fantasy.

Reward

And interestingly, this isn't just about money. It's about effort being noticed. Feeling invisible at work drains people surprisingly quickly. Especially when feedback only appears once something's gone wrong.

Community

Whether the team actually feels supportive, connected, and psychologically safe. (Remember when the room went silent instead of challenging the flawed idea? This is one of the reasons that happens.)

Fairness

People cope far better with hard work than they do with work that feels unfair, inconsistent, or arbitrary. Humans can tolerate pressure surprisingly well. Meaningless pressure? Much harder sell.

Values

Being asked to work in ways that conflict with what someone believes in, or the kind of person they want to be. That kind of disconnect wears people down slowly.

And this is the important leadership part: most of these aren't personal failings. They're conditions. They're shaped by workload expectations, team culture, communication, leadership behaviour, recognition, support, and the environment people work inside every day.

Which means burnout prevention usually has a lot less to do with resilience seminars than workplaces would like to believe. Because burnout isn't fixed with a meditation app, a motivational poster, or an email reminding exhausted people to prioritise self-care.



What actually matters is whether the conditions people are working in are sustainable. Can people actually recover properly? Do they have autonomy? Does anyone notice good work before there's a problem? Does the team actually feel like a team?

Jamie looked around and slowly realised several of those boxes weren't being ticked. And the confronting part? Some of those conditions had been shaped by leadership decisions. Including Jamie's.

But strangely, that was also the hopeful part. Because conditions can change. And once leaders start paying attention to the people underneath the workload, workplaces tend to change with them.

Getting it wrong isn't the end

Repair - the leadership skill nobody talks about nearly enough

About four months into the role, Jamie finally had one of those moments. Not a dramatic meltdown. No table flipping. Nobody stormed out while resigning in slow motion. But still... not great. During a team meeting, someone raised a concern Jamie felt had already been addressed multiple times. And before Jamie could stop it, the response came out short. Sharp. Dismissive. The kind of response that lands in a room and immediately changes the temperature.

Everyone went quiet. The meeting wrapped up awkwardly a few minutes later, while everyone suddenly became extremely interested in packing up laptops. Jamie drove home replaying the interaction on a mental loop. *Why did I respond like that?*

And honestly, this is the point where many leaders accidentally make things worse. Because after moments like this, the temptation is usually to pretend it didn't happen, hope nobody noticed, move on quickly, or convince yourself: It wasn't that bad. Meanwhile, the team is absolutely talking about it in the group chat called something subtle like: "Not Work."

But Jamie did something different. The next morning, Jamie pulled the person aside.

"I want to come back to yesterday. I was shorter with you than I should've been. I was frustrated, but that wasn't yours to carry. I'm sorry."

That was it. Not a dramatic speech. Not overexplaining it. No "if anyone was offended..." corporate non-apology. Just ownership.

And interestingly, the effect was far bigger than the moment itself. Because psychologically, repair matters enormously. Researcher John Gottman spent decades studying relationships and found something fascinating: healthy relationships weren't conflict-free. They were just better at repairing after conflict happened. They acknowledged ruptures. Took responsibility. Reconnected afterwards. And the same principle applies in teams.



Getting it wrong... continued

Because every leader will eventually:

- misread a situation
- speak too sharply
- get defensive
- miss something important
- make the wrong call
- or send an email that sounded significantly warmer in their own head

That part is unavoidable. What shapes trust isn't whether leaders make mistakes. It's what happens after the mistake.

Leaders who repair create something incredibly important inside teams: the sense that mistakes don't automatically damage relationships beyond repair. That awkward moments can be recovered from. That honesty is safe. That people don't have to spend three business days emotionally recovering from one tense interaction.

And repair doesn't need to be huge to matter. Often it sounds like:

- "I don't think I handled that very well."
- "I was frustrated and it came out sideways."
- "I should've listened more carefully."
- "Can we have another go at that conversation?"

Simple moments. But moments that tell people: You matter more than my ego does. And teams notice that. Because repair models something quietly powerful: that mistakes are something people acknowledge and recover from — not something everyone silently pretends never happened. And strangely enough, that tends to make teams feel safer, stronger, and more honest over time.

"What shapes trust isn't whether leaders make mistakes. It's what happens after the mistake."



Before You Go

Six months later, Jamie's team feels different. Not perfect. Definitely still human. There are still hard days. Still awkward conversations. Still moments where Jamie leaves a meeting thinking: Well... I'll be revisiting that interaction in the shower later.

But something has shifted. Sam is contributing again. Properly this time. People are speaking up earlier when problems appear, instead of waiting until everything is metaphorically on fire. One team member recently admitted they were struggling (Six months earlier, that conversation probably wouldn't have happened at all). And instead of immediately launching into performance management mode, the conversation became: "How do we support this properly?"

That shift matters. Because healthier teams usually aren't built by leaders becoming endlessly calm, perfectly regulated workplace unicorns. (Those people do not exist. And if they do, they're probably deeply committed to LinkedIn.)

The shift is usually much smaller than that. A leader becomes a little more curious. A little less reactive. A little better at noticing what's happening underneath behaviour instead of reacting to the behaviour itself. And over time, teams respond to that. People relax a little. Speak a little more honestly. Take more risks. Ask more questions.

They feel safer saying:

- "I'm not sure."
- "I need help."
- "I think we're heading in the wrong direction."

And those moments change teams far more than most leaders realise.

Because leadership was never really just about managing tasks. It's about leading people. People who are capable, stressed, complicated, motivated, distracted, trying their best, occasionally overwhelmed – and still interpreting full stops in emails as emotional threats for reasons nobody fully understands.

You don't need to have all the answers to lead people well. But it helps enormously when people feel safe enough to think alongside you. Because when people stop using all their energy protecting themselves, they usually start doing their best work.

Tenneille Quin



The Honest Leadership Audit

This isn't a checklist. It's a set of questions worth sitting with — quietly, honestly, without the pressure to have perfect answers.

Think about your team as it actually is right now. Not as you'd like it to be.

- Do people on my team feel safe to bring me problems — before they become crises?
- When someone's performance drops, what's my first instinct? Character (“they're not trying”) or circumstance (“what might be getting in the way”)?
- Can I name what each person on my team is growing toward right now?
- When did I last repair something — and did I actually say the words out loud?
- Is the team's energy sustainable — or are we running on empty and calling it momentum?
- Do people know their work matters — not just that it needs to be done?

There are no right answers here. Just honest ones.

And sometimes, an honest question is where the best leadership begins.



Now it's your turn

One Person. Six Questions

Think of someone on your team you've been a little puzzled by lately. Not necessarily the hardest person — just someone whose behaviour has landed with you, or someone you haven't quite been able to figure out. Hold them in mind. Now run them through the six lenses from this guide, one at a time.

1. Their nervous system

What might this person's internal experience look like right now — not their behaviour, but what's underneath it? If they were spending a lot of time in threat mode, what might that feel like from the inside?

2. Safety

If they were being completely honest, where would they place your team on a scale from “I can get it wrong here and it's fine” to “I need to tread carefully”? What's your evidence for that? And does the evidence come from you, or from the culture around you?

3. What drives them

Do you actually know what matters to this person? Not what they're good at — what they care about. When did they last feel like their work meant something to them specifically?

4. The story you've told yourself

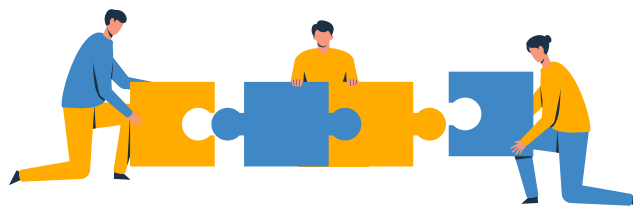
What's the explanation you've settled on for their behaviour? Write it down. Now ask: what's something happening in their world — their context, their history, their pressures — that might tell a completely different story?

5. Their tank

Cast your mind over the six mismatches: workload, control, reward, fairness, community, values. Where do you think they'd feel most depleted? Do you know? And if you're not sure — is that information worth having?

6. The thing left unsaid

Is there a moment between you that never quite landed right? A conversation that went sideways, something you meant one way and they took another, something that just... never got resolved. Is it still sitting there?



Jamie never became a perfect leader. The team never became a perfect team. But people felt safer. Problems got raised earlier. Conversations became more honest. And work got a little easier for everyone. That's usually what good leadership looks like. Not perfection. Just humans understanding humans a little better than they did yesterday.

Get in touch.

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**Impacting 10
Million Lives
in 10 Years**