

# The Tone from the Top – Moments of Truth

These are the proceeds of a virtual round table of prominent non-executive directors, executives and General Counsel held on Wed 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

The discussions focused around the notion that leaders, be they the CEO or the Chair or another prominent person, reveal themselves for how they really are when the pressure is on. I chose three such moments and cited a few papers (empirical studies) along the way to illustrate the nature of the psychological challenges at hand for senior leaders under pressure.

## 1<sup>st</sup> moment of truth – Being honest when it's necessary but difficult.

There are many reasons for a leader to lie but it boils down to two things: to save themselves or to save someone else. So, what is a leader to do when faced with an unsavoury truth that needs to be shared?

### What the papers say

- *We tell 'prosocial' lies to spare people's feelings (or ourselves from pain)*
- *Brave truth tellers are respected (people who don't count the cost to themselves of the truth)*
- *People who are honest about the fact that they aren't always honest are penalised*
- *People who publicly maintain that lying is always bad, then lie and are found out fare better*
- *We prefer untenable, unrealistic and ultimately hypocritical clarity to moral ambiguity*

### What the group said

- *There shouldn't be lanes for NEDs to have to swim within – we have to be able to range around – with respect for the SME around the table.*
- *Being honest can be made uncomfortable for people around the boardroom table but persisting is important.*
- *It's important to tackle a culture of meanness – especially at the top.*
- *Senior people need to be acutely aware that their rank in and of itself can carry huge weight. So when giving feedback or sharing an honest opinion such a person should consider moderating the strength of their feedback when talking to someone several levels removed to avoid overly worrying them.*
- *Total and swift disclosure, especially when painful perhaps, creates a valuable precedent and wins trust and prevents you from undermining your wider objectives.*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> moment of truth – Behaving positively under pressure

As Goleman said: stress makes you stupid. When under pressure humans feel and display a wide spectrum of responses according to everything from individual brain chemistry to cultural norms and social upbringing. So what options does a leader have when expected to perform at their best under pressure?

### What the papers say

- *In experiments with music students, techniques to moderate the effects of performance pressure made students feel better but made no difference to performance as judged by music experts*
- *Innate boldness makes us more resilient to shock distraction techniques that create task pressure*
- *It is possible, according to some, to train both athletes and business people to perform better under pressure and achieve 'Peak Performance'. The trainable factors include: focused attention, confidence, total control, nutrition and mental state.*

## What the group said

- *Tipping people off that you are going to bring up a difficult topic is helpful – it stops management feeling ambushed.*
- *NEDs that get a good, non-defensive response from management on sensitive topics tend to ask a question and then explain the context or reason for asking it. They help the respondent understand why the question is important to them: “this issue around...is really bugging me, I really want to bring it up at Board”.*
- *A lot of the work around taking the pressure of in Board is done beforehand, one-on-one.*
- *“I taught myself to pick up a pen and write down the main points of what my inquisitor was saying and just going with it as they ranted...it enabled me to change my mindset to: I really want to hear, I really want to understand...even in the face of really aggressive criticism”.*
- *NEDs can get too focused on the challenge element of their role – they need to remember that they are also there to advise and guide based on their wide knowledge and experience.*
- *The atmosphere in a board room can switch quickly from collaboration outside it to competition inside it. There is a strong, almost physical sensation that you’re not on the same team any more. This must be guarded against. One way is to talk about how as well as the what of the meeting. You have the agenda in front of you – that’s WHAT we’re going to be talking about, I’d now like us to remind ourselves of HOW were going to talk about these things – how we are going to treat each other.*
- *A good board mantra: “we’re here to support you to deliver”.*

## 3<sup>rd</sup> moment of truth – Constructive challenge

Leaders must be skilful at challenging their peers and team members if they are to draw the best performance from those around them (as well as themselves).

## What the papers say

- *There are a quintillion ways to tell a lie or deceive ( $10^{30}$ ) based on the finding that there are in fact 87 verbal and 12 nonverbal deception modes at our disposal*
- *We make our decisions about whether to lie or not based upon 5 factors: benefits, punishment, risk, execution cost and dissonance.*
- *Relational aggression (e.g. giving someone the cold shoulder, ignoring them or gossiping about them) is frequently used in preference to straight out behavioural aggression - it carries less social cost to the aggressor.*
- *When put under pressure to answer an unpalatable question we will sometimes refuse or try to change the subject. Studies have shown that that deflection (e.g. “why are the sales down this quarter?” “which figures are you looking at?”) not only works better than flat out refusal and other devices but may even yield better results than simple disclosure.*

## What the group said

- *A good example of strong challenge to avoid “I think you’re telling a whopper”: I need evidence support to support what you’re saying because what you’re saying very much might be something that we need to listen to more about and follow through on.*
- *Another good example of challenge which may depersonalise it with ducking the issue: “How might that be perceived by...”*
- *There’s never a reason to shout, I think it’s a very subtle process of listening understanding the obstacles helping people express themselves and then understanding you know why things have gone wrong or what needs improving today.*
- *A good internal mindset for NEDs: “I’m doing this to be helpful – not to point-score”*
- *Keep an eye on the ethno/cultural differences between boards so that you can understand their operating preferences*

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