

WHITE PAPER

The End of Illusions

Leadership, high standards and pseudo-kindness.
What *The Count of Monte Cristo* teaches SME leaders.

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"I owe myself to my cash box."

Baron Danglars, in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexandre Dumas

In one page

Kindness is not the opposite of high standards. It is their highest form.

What circulates today under its name is often something else. A politeness of avoidance. We no longer say what is. We postpone what hurts. We call respect what is really fear.

Meanwhile, the market does not slow down. It does not read inspirational posts. It compares prices, lead times, margins. It decides every morning, on a global scale.

This lie has not only damaged companies. It has damaged the very people it claimed to protect. By promising comfort, we turned many employees into consumers of the company, when it needed players. Artificial intelligence is arriving to settle the accounts.

This white paper takes a detour. It goes through a novel from 1844. *The Count of Monte Cristo* is a gallery of leaders: a lucid, cynical banker, a magistrate of façade, a witness who keeps silent, a shipowner who keeps his word, a prisoner who teaches, a man who spends fourteen years preparing a single move.

Each says something precise about how to lead. Some end up ruined. Others hold.

The thesis fits in one line. **The time for real decisions has come, and true kindness means making them.**

A word on perspective. I write from France, my country, and from what I have seen there over twenty years. Most of the figures in these pages are French. Not every company, every manager or every employee will recognize themselves in what follows, and many already work the way this paper argues for. The trend it describes is real nonetheless, and I suspect many readers elsewhere will recognize it.

Who this is for. Leaders of SMEs and mid-sized companies, their leadership teams, and those who advise them. Everyone who senses that the prevailing discourse no longer matches what they live on Monday morning.

How to read it. In one sitting, or character by character. Each part ends on what it changes, concretely, for a company of twenty to two hundred people.

READER'S GUIDE · THE NOVEL IN BRIEF

The Count of Monte Cristo was serialized in the *Journal des Débats* from 1844 to 1846. Alexandre Dumas wrote it with his collaborator Auguste Maquet. The action runs from 1815 to 1838, from Marseille to Paris, by way of Rome and the Mediterranean.

The plot in a few lines. In 1815, Edmond Dantès, a young sailor promised a command and a fine marriage, is falsely denounced as a Bonapartist agent. He spends fourteen years in the Château d'If. There he meets the Abbé Faria, who educates him and bequeaths him the secret of a treasure. Escaped and immensely rich, he reappears in Paris as the Count of Monte Cristo. He rewards those who were loyal to him and brings down, one by one, those who betrayed him.

The banker's accounts

One scene in *The Count of Monte Cristo* says it all. It takes place in Paris, in Baron Danglars's town house. The banker has just discovered that his wife was speculating with his money, on the advice of Lucien Debray, a minister's secretary and, incidentally, her lover. The operation went wrong. Seven hundred thousand francs gone. Danglars does not shout. He does his accounts out loud.

"I am brutal. Not only do I know it, I boast of it: it is one of my means of success in my commercial operations. Why, instead of killing, did he get himself killed? Because he had no cash box to save. But I owe myself to my cash box. Monsieur Debray, my associate, makes me lose seven hundred thousand francs: let him bear his share of the loss, and we shall continue our business. Otherwise, let him go bankrupt on those one hundred and seventy-five thousand livres, and let him do what bankrupts do: disappear. Good Lord! He is a charming young man, I know, when his news is accurate. But when it is not, there are fifty men in the world worth more than he is."

I reread this passage often. In ten lines, it says what many seminars spend two days avoiding.

Danglars lays down four things, without decoration. He has a responsibility, and it has a name: the cash box. Whoever causes a loss bears his share of it. A relationship is worth what the information it brings is worth. And a man's charm does not make up for false news.

One may find this cold. Above all, it is clear.

The Danglars paradox

The story must be told to the end, though. Danglars is a scoundrel. Twenty years earlier, he is the one who wrote, with his left hand, the anonymous letter that threw Edmond Dantès into the Château d'If. He will end up ruined, on the run, locked in a cave outside Rome, paying a hundred thousand francs for a chicken.

What interests me is that gap. Danglars is right about the diagnosis and wrong about the man. His lucidity is sound. His brutality is a crutch. His lack of loyalty will destroy him.

The whole subject of this white paper is there. One can keep Danglars's lucidity without taking his cynicism. One can demand without crushing. One can decide fast without betraying. Still, one must agree to look the cash box in the eye.

Why now

I have spent twenty years selling, leading sales teams, owning profit and loss accounts. I have known companies that won and others that retreated. The difference never came down to the quality of the speech. It came down to the quality of decisions, and to the moment they were made.

Yet the speech has changed. Open LinkedIn on a Tuesday morning. You will read that a good manager protects, listens, reassures, celebrates. That performance will follow by itself. That high standards are a relic of another age.

Part of this discourse is right. Nobody misses the boss who humiliates. But another part is a comfortable lie. It suggests that one can avoid difficult conversations, defer trade-offs, keep everyone on board, and stay competitive against rivals who, for their part, have made the call.

Markets have never been so open. Your customer compares your offer with that of a Polish, Indian or Texan player in three clicks. Margins tighten. Business failures are hitting record levels in France. In this landscape, false kindness is expensive. It costs jobs, first, at the very moment the company can no longer afford to keep them.

Why Dumas

The Count of Monte Cristo is read as a revenge novel. It is also a novel about money. Dumas wrote it in 1844, with his collaborator Auguste Maquet, for the *Journal des Débats*. France was discovering credit, the stock exchange, speculation. The novel is full of bankers, Spanish bonds, bankruptcies and fortunes.

It is even one of the first great novels of the information economy. Monte Cristo ruins Danglars by sending a false piece of news down the telegraph line. False information, a banker who reacts too fast, a fortune that collapses. You have already seen that film on a trading screen.

Above all, the novel is a gallery of leaders. Each embodies a way of holding, or letting go of, what was entrusted to him. That is the gallery I invite you to walk through.

PART I

The great illusion

Never have we talked so much about kindness at work. Never have French employees been so little engaged. Those two sentences stand together, and that is the problem.

The paradox in the numbers

According to Gallup, **8% of French employees say they are engaged at work**, over the period ending in 2025. The European average is 12%. The global average, 20%. Nearly four French employees in ten report having felt a lot of stress the previous day.

Reread these figures with the posts in your feed in mind. If comfort, softness and carefully chosen words were enough to produce engagement, France would top the ranking. It sits near the bottom.

High stress and low engagement do not come from an excess of standards. More often they come from an excess of fog. Objectives that change without being stated. Problems everyone sees and no one names. Decisions that drag. A colleague who does not pull his weight and has been tolerated for three years. Fog exhausts more than rigor.

The market does not read LinkedIn

While the debate settles on the right tone, competition has globalized and hardened.

The report Mario Draghi delivered to the European Commission in September 2024 gives the measure. The GDP gap between the European Union and the United States grew from just over 15% in 2002 to 30% in 2023, at constant prices. The main driver of that divergence is productivity. The report puts the catch-up at 750 to 800 billion euros of investment a year.

At company level, the translation is brutal. According to Altares, France recorded **69,957 business failures** in 2025, up 3.1% in a year. 267,200 jobs are threatened. Failures of SMEs and mid-sized companies with 100 employees or more rose 18.6%.

Behind each figure there is a leader who often saw the difficulty coming. He rarely lacked information. More often, he waited. He wanted to preserve the atmosphere, spare a team, give one more chance. On the day of receivership, nobody talks about kindness anymore.

Four comfortable lies

Pseudo-kindness rests on a few beliefs that are never stated and rarely discussed. Here they are, in the open.

First lie: you can succeed without ever displeasing. A leader who wants to be loved by all at every moment ends up arbitrating nothing. Yet leading means choosing. And choosing means disappointing someone, at least for a while. Whoever refuses to disappoint disappoints everyone, later, and harder.

Second lie: protecting means avoiding. We think we protect an employee by not telling him his work falls short. In reality we take away his only chance to improve. The day the sanction falls, it falls without warning, and he does not understand. That silence was not tact. It was deferred abandonment.

Third lie: time will sort things out. Time sorts nothing out. It amplifies. An unprofitable customer stays unprofitable. A salesperson who does not prospect will not start on his own. A poorly positioned offer does not reposition itself. Every month of waiting is paid in margin, credibility and energy.

Fourth lie: kindness is something you display. This is the most recent version, and the most visible on social media. We display values. We post thank-yous. We celebrate teams in photos. All of this can be sincere. But a kindness that stages itself and costs nothing to the one displaying it remains a posture. The real one shows in decisions, and it always costs something to the one who decides.

The lie told to employees

It has to be said clearly, because this is the heart of the problem. We lied to employees. Rarely by calculation. Almost always out of comfort.

We told them the company owed them fulfillment, recognition, flexibility, meaning. All of that matters. But we forgot the other half of the contract: what the company expects in return, and why it survives only on that condition.

Not every employee, far from it: many give far more than they are ever asked. But many believed what they were told. They are not guilty of believing. Yet the result is there. Part of the workforce has become a consumer of the company. They consume its salary, its perks, its remote-work days, the manager's attention. They rate their employer the way one rates a hotel. They no longer ask what they bring.

The player, on the other hand, asks a single question: what moves forward because of me? He knows the customer, the numbers, the stakes. He takes initiative. He says when something is wrong. He is part of the company, instead of using it.

Pseudo-kindness manufactured consumers by shielding them from any demand. It is its quietest fault, and its gravest. It deprived capable people of the one thing that would have made them indispensable: the need to improve.

They are the ones who will pay the highest price for what is coming. Part VI explains why.

Who pays the bill

Pseudo-kindness looks free. Yet it is paid for, and never first by the one who practices it.

The best pay first. They see that effort is not distinguished from its absence. They understand that the demand weighs on them alone. They do not complain. They leave, often in silence, often for a competitor.

Customers pay next. A missed deadline, slipping quality, a contact who no longer knows who decides. They do not sue. They compare, then they switch suppliers.

The leader pays last. One day he discovers that the problem tolerated for two years has become a crisis. He must then make, urgently and with no room to maneuver, the decision he could have made calmly earlier.

And when it is too late, employees pay for everything. The very people we wanted to protect.

What it changes, concretely

In a fifty-person SME, pseudo-kindness looks like nothing spectacular. It looks like a meeting that ends without a decision. Like an annual target everyone knows is out of reach and nobody challenges. Like a customer account that has lost money for three financial years, kept "because it is historic."

None of this makes noise. That is precisely why it is dangerous.

Those who fall

Four men sent Edmond Dantès to the Château d'If, by action or by silence. All four succeed. All four fall, and each collapses exactly where he cheated. They are four ways of leading badly. All are still in circulation.

Danglars, or lucidity without loyalty

The accountant who denounced Dantès out of jealousy, and became a baron and a banker.

Danglars sees clearly and treats people badly. He understands money, risk and the value of information. To him, a relationship is an asset as long as it pays.

That is where he traps himself. A brutal boss receives bad news last. Nobody risks announcing a delay, a mistake, a customer who hesitates. He believes he steers by information. In reality, he steers with information filtered by fear. Monte Cristo ruins him with a single false dispatch, which he acts on without checking. The man who lived on accurate news dies of a false one. This is not a novelist's coincidence. It is a law of organizations.

The lesson. Brutality is not high standards. Standards apply to the work. Brutality applies to the person. The first raises the level. The second silences people.

Spotting it in your company. Problems surface late, and always from below. The best leave first. The leader is the last to learn what everyone knew.

Villefort, or virtue as a façade

The magistrate who buried an innocent man to protect his career, and became the face of public morality.

Villefort manages his image before managing reality. Relentless with others, endlessly indulgent with himself. He is the most modern character in the novel: he would have an excellent LinkedIn profile. Today's pseudo-kindness resembles him. It displays values it does not apply when they cost something.

His past resurfaces in open court, and his authority does not shrink. It vanishes. A team always sees the gap between what is said and what is done. It does not say so. It draws its conclusions.

Spotting it in your company. Values displayed in the lobby and bypassed in the leadership team. Rules that apply to everyone except those close to power. Costly decisions always postponed to next quarter.

Caderousse, or complicit silence

The neighbor who saw the trap being set, found it shameful, and said nothing.

Caderousse is the witness. Neither guilty nor innocent. In a company, he is the manager who knows an employee is drifting, a customer is leaving, a project is heading for the wall, and who waits for someone else to speak. Pseudo-kindness has a close cousin: silence. It passes for restraint. It is quiet complicity.

The lesson. A leader has no right to the status of witness. What he sees and does not address, he has approved.

Spotting it in your company. After every failure, someone says: "Everyone knew."

Fernand, or success without foundations

The fisherman who posted the letter, and rose on a betrayal to become count, general and peer of France.

His rise rests on a shortcut, and a single testimony is enough to bring it all down in one session. Reputation is a lagging indicator. It reflects what you did ten years ago. Shortcuts accumulate silently: a promise not kept, a partner wronged. The past always ends up testifying, rarely at the moment you would have chosen.

Four falls, one mainspring

Character	What he confuses	What it produces	His end
Danglars	Brutality and high standards	Information filtered by fear	Ruined by a false piece of news
Villefort	Image and virtue	Authority held up only by a façade	Unmasked in public, loses his mind
Caderousse	Silence and neutrality	Problems known to all, handled by none	Killed by someone more mediocre
Fernand	Success and foundations	A reputation built on a shortcut	Exposed, abandoned, takes his own life

None of these men lacked talent. All lacked the same thing: loyalty to something greater than their own immediate interest. That loyalty is what separates high standards from brutality, virtue from posture, restraint from complicity.

PART III

Those who hold

Against the four falls, the novel offers three figures who hold. None is soft. None is brutal.

Morrel, or the word kept

The shipowner who defended Dantès when it was risky, and preferred death to dishonoring his signature.

Morrel embodies real kindness, the kind that costs. His goodness is not displayed. It is proven in the moments when it has a price.

The novel is also honest about him. He nearly dies from waiting too long, his risk concentrated on a few ships, hoping the sea would be kind. He is saved because a grateful man comes back. In real life, the Count of Monte Cristo does not knock on the door. Integrity is a foundation. It replaces neither anticipation nor decision.

Faria, or the demand that elevates

The imprisoned abbé who finds Dantès desperate, starving himself to death in his cell.

Faria does not console him. He puts him to work. Languages, history, sciences, reasoning. Then, point by point, he goes back over Dantès's arrest: who benefited, who wanted his place, his fiancée, his silence. In a few hours of cold reasoning, he reveals what Dantès had refused to see for years.

That is true kindness: *bene volens*, willing the good of the other. Not his comfort. His transformation. Without Faria, Dantès dies in his cell. With him, he becomes the Count of Monte Cristo.

The lesson. A kind leader does not ask “how are you?” to hear “fine.” He asks “what is stopping you from being better, and how do I help you remove it?” Then he holds the standard. We only demand of those we believe in.

Monte Cristo, or preparation and its limit

Fourteen years in a dungeon, ten years of silent preparation, then Paris.

Monte Cristo improvises nothing. He knows each adversary's flaw better than the man himself. And he destroys no one directly. He reveals, and each falls by his own fault. That is exactly what a good company diagnostic does. Before punishing, he rewards: his first act as a free man is to rescue Morrel.

Then the novel shows his limit. Taking himself for Providence, he goes too far, and the death of a child stops him cold. He doubts, spares Danglars, withdraws. A strong leader is not one who never doubts. He is one who doubts at the right moment, and corrects without disowning himself.

In counterpoint: Noirtier

Paralyzed, able to speak only with his eyes, Noirtier remains one of the most influential men in the house. His authority rests on what he knows, and on a determination nobody doubts. A lesson for all who confuse authority with volume.

What the three have in common

Figure	What he brings	What it costs	What he teaches the leader
Morrel	Loyalty and the word kept	Personal risk, up to ruin	Integrity is a foundation, not a strategy
Faria	The demand that transforms	Effort, discomfort, truth spoken	True kindness wants progress, not comfort
Monte Cristo	Preparation and mastery of time	Years of invisible discipline	Decide with force, and know when to stop

None of the three is loved by all. All are respected by those who count. That is the difference between popularity and authority.

PART IV

What kindness really is

The problem is not kindness. It is what we have done with the word. We have to take it back to the root.

Back to the word

The French word *bienveillance*, like the English *benevolence*, comes from the Latin *bene volens*: the one who wills the good. Not the one who wants to please. Not the one who wants to avoid pain. The one who wants the other's good, including when that good comes through an unpleasant truth.

A kind surgeon operates. A kind coach makes you repeat the drill. A kind teacher hands back the paper with the grade it deserves, and explains why. In all three cases, the other suffers a little. In all three cases, he improves.

Pseudo-kindness reverses the terms. It wants the other's immediate comfort, and often its own. It protects the moment at the expense of the future.

What those who have studied it say

The most interesting point is that the authors often cited in defense of softness say something else.

Kim Scott, a former executive at Google and Apple, popularized the concept of *Radical Candor*. It crosses two axes: caring personally about the other, and challenging them directly. When we care without ever challenging, she calls it ruinous empathy. And according to her, that is where most managers make most of their mistakes: they remember to show they care, and forget to tell the other what he needs to hear.

Amy Edmondson, a Harvard professor, coined the notion of psychological safety, now a buzzword on social media. Yet she is clear: psychological safety is not about being nice, nor about lowering the bar. It is necessary but not sufficient. It must come with clear goals, high standards and accountability. Without standards, it produces complacency. Without safety, standards produce silence. In her book *The Fearless Organization*, she calls the case of high safety and low standards the “comfort zone.” Performance lies in the “learning zone,” where both are high. In other words, the concept most often cited to defend softness actually demands rigor.

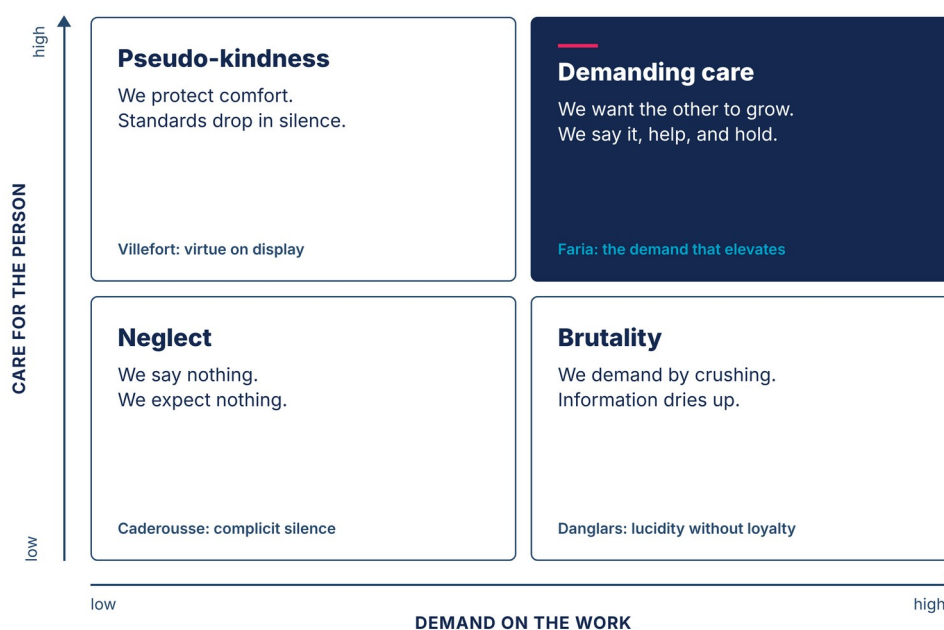
Employees themselves say so. In a Zenger Folkman study of more than 2,500 employees, 57% preferred receiving corrective feedback over praise, and 72% believed their performance would improve if their manager told them more often what was not working. Managers, for their part, avoid those conversations. That is the gap.

Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*, tells the story of Admiral James Stockdale, a prisoner during the Vietnam War. Asked about those who did not survive, Stockdale answers: the optimists. Those who said “we’ll be out by Christmas,” then “by Easter,” and who died of disappointment after disappointment. Collins draws a principle from it: confront the most brutal reality, while keeping absolute faith in the outcome.

Dantès lived exactly this. In the first years, he hopes for a release that never comes. He almost dies of that groundless hope. It is Faria who brings him lucidity, then a plan. Hope only returns afterwards, built on work.

The matrix of demanding care

The two previous parts can be summed up by crossing two questions. Do I really care about this person? Am I really asking them for their best?



The matrix of demanding care. Inspired by Kim Scott and Amy Edmondson.

Only the top-right quadrant drives lasting progress: there, we care about the person precisely because we ask them for their best. The other three end up, sooner or later, costing the company, and first of all those they claimed to spare.

What changes in the words

The difference often comes down to one sentence. Here are a few translations, heard a hundred times in companies of every size.

Pseudo-kindness	Demanding care
"It's no big deal."	"Here is what is wrong. Here is how we fix it."
"We'll see."	"We decide on Thursday. Until then, I need these two figures."
"You did your best."	"It is not up to standard yet. Here is the gap, and here is what I can do to help you close it."
"Take your time."	"I need it on Friday. What could stop you?"
"Well done, everyone!"	"What you did on this file changed the outcome. Do it again."
"This customer is historic, we keep him."	"This customer costs us. We renegotiate or we let him go."
"Everyone deserves a chance."	"He had three months and support. Now we decide."

The right-hand column is not harsher. It is clearer. It shows more respect for the other, because it treats him as an adult able to hear the truth and respond to it.

PART V

The disciplines of the demanding leader

Assertive leadership cannot be decreed. It is practiced, every day, in precise gestures. Here are six disciplines. None is spectacular. Together, they change a company.

One rule runs through all of them, borrowed from Roger Fisher and William Ury's principled negotiation: **hard on the problem, soft on the person**. Dangles was hard on people. Pseudo-kindness is soft on problems. The demanding leader reverses both.

1. Name

Everything starts with saying what is. Not what we hope. Not what suits us. What is.

Faria invented nothing for Dantès. He simply laid the facts out in order, and looked for who benefited from each event. The truth had been there for years. Nobody had put it into words.

In a company, naming means putting a figure where there was an impression. Saying "this customer costs us 40,000 euros a year" rather than "this customer is complicated." Saying "three salespeople out of eight deliver 80% of the result" rather than "the team has uneven levels."

The right word is not brutal. It is liberating. As long as a problem has no name, nobody can address it.

The question to ask yourself. What is the problem everyone in my company knows about, and that nobody has yet said out loud in a meeting?

2. Set the expectation

Fog is the real cruelty of modern management. We blame someone for missing a target that was never clearly set. We judge him on criteria he discovers during the annual review.

Setting the expectation means answering three simple questions, in writing. What do I expect? By when? How will we know it is achieved?

A clear expectation protects the one who receives it. He knows where he is going. He knows how he will be judged. He can say at once whether it is realistic, and negotiate the means. It is the most concrete form of respect a leader can offer.

The question to ask yourself. Could each of my managers write, in three lines, what I expect of them this quarter? And would those three lines look like mine?

3. Decide

A leader is paid to decide. Not to gather, consult, temporize. Those steps are useful. They are not the decision.

Pseudo-kindness has invented a refined form of avoidance: endless consultation. We collect everyone's opinion, we run a workshop, then a second one. Time passes. The market, for its part, decides in your place.

Two habits change everything. Give each decision a date: "we decide on Thursday." And put a figure on the cost of not deciding: what does each month of waiting cost us, in margin, in customers, in energy? That cost always exists. It is simply invisible until we calculate it.

Courage cannot be delegated. One can delegate the analysis, the preparation, the implementation. The decision that costs remains the leader's.

The question to ask yourself. Which decision have I been postponing for more than three months? And how much has it already cost me?

4. Let go

This is the hardest discipline, and the most profitable. Every strategy is first a list of renunciations. But letting go feels like losing, so we keep: the historic customer, the original product, the channel that no longer works, the employee who cannot keep up.

A real case, anonymized with the agreement of the leader concerned. She runs a software company. She analyzed her top 300 accounts on five criteria: revenue, margin, support load, team time, product fit. The finding was clear. A quarter of the customers consumed a disproportionate share of resources for a weak, even negative, contribution.

She decided to part with them. Not brutally: renegotiation for some, guidance toward other solutions for the rest. **Eight months later, her revenue had grown 24% and her margin 12 points.** The team, freed up, focused on the customers who really mattered.

That decision displeased. It caused friction internally, and no doubt with some customers. Yet it was the kindest possible for the company and its employees.

Monte Cristo himself ended up letting go. Of his complete revenge, of his role as Providence. That renunciation is what saves him.

The question to ask yourself. If I started from scratch tomorrow, which customers, products, activities would I not take back?

5. Keep your word

Morrel had a single unquestionable asset: his signature. He preferred dying to dishonoring it.

We do not ask as much of a leader today. But the principle stands whole. Authority rests on the reliability of one's word. Promise little. Deliver everything. And when you cannot deliver, say so before the deadline, not after.

This holds inside as much as outside. The one-to-one promised and postponed three times. The raise mentioned and never confirmed. The hire announced and dropped without explanation. Each of these small breaches erodes a capital that rebuilds very slowly.

Pseudo-kindness promises a lot, because promising feels good. High standards promise less, because they know what a promise costs.

The question to ask yourself. What promises have I made this year to my team, my customers, my partners? How many have been kept?

6. Endure

Fourteen years in a dungeon. Ten years of preparation. Monte Cristo is first a man of the long term.

High standards are only worth something if they last. Fifteen days of demand after bad news, then a slackening, teaches the team only one thing: just wait for it to pass. Consistency builds culture, not intensity.

Enduring requires simple rituals, kept. A weekly meeting that never gets skipped. Indicators looked at every week, the same ones. One-to-ones that happen on the planned date. None of this is heroic. All of it is rare.

Enduring also means knowing when to stop. Every commitment, every project, every action plan should have a review date, and the question asked without indulgence: do we continue? What is no longer justified must stop, by default, without waiting for inertia to decide.

The question to ask yourself. What are the three leadership rituals I have kept, without exception, for a year?

What these disciplines are not

They are not a method of harshness. None requires raising one's voice, humiliating, threatening. All require clarity, consistency and courage.

Nor are they a complete manual. Implementing them in a real company, with its history, its balances and its people, takes tailored work. But they give a direction. And that is often what is most lacking.

PART VI

The time for real decisions

For fifteen years, many companies could put things off. Money was cheap. Growth carried the mistakes. Public support cushioned the shocks. You could keep an unprofitable customer, an aging product, a failing manager, and the whole thing still held.

That time is over.

What has changed

The cost of money is back. Every month of poorly used cash is paid for. The loans taken during the pandemic are being repaid. Customers compare more, negotiate harder, switch faster.

Artificial intelligence accelerates everything. It makes commodity almost free. Whatever can be standardized will be, and sold cheaper by someone else. What remains for companies is what cannot be automated: judgment, relationships, the ability to decide quickly and well.

And competition has become global for almost everyone. An SME in Roubaix, Lyon or Nantes now faces competitors it will never see, who do not know it, and who will give it no gifts.

In this landscape, pseudo-kindness is no longer a weakness of style. It is a business risk.

AI, or the return of the Count

Reread the novel with this question in mind. For twenty years, Danglars, Villefort and Fernand prosper. They have forgotten Dantès. They think they are safe. Then a man arrives in Paris, rich, courteous, under another name. Nobody recognizes him. By the time they understand who he is, it is too late.

Artificial intelligence is Dantès returning under the name of Monte Cristo. For insufficiently productive employees, it is the avenging arm they do not yet see coming. It presents itself under a reassuring name: a tool, an assistant, a copilot. It is polite. It threatens no one. And it already does, faster and cheaper, a growing share of what they used to do.

The orders of magnitude are known. The IMF estimates that about 40% of jobs worldwide are exposed to AI, and nearly 60% in advanced economies. The World Economic Forum expects 92 million jobs to be displaced by 2030, against 170 million created. 41% of the employers surveyed plan to reduce their workforce because of AI, and 59 workers in 100 will need training or reskilling.

Read these figures carefully. They do not say everyone will lose. They say the line will no longer run between occupations, but within each occupation. On one side, those who contribute. On the other, those who consume and settle for being average.

The parallel with Dumas goes further than it seems. Monte Cristo destroys no one directly. He reveals. AI will do the same. It does not create insufficient productivity. It makes it visible, measurable, and suddenly replaceable. What pseudo-kindness hid for years, AI will show in a few months. Without anger. Without qualms. Without mercy.

What it comes to avenge is the lie. And as in the novel, the bill will not fall only on those who profited from it. It will fall first on those who sustained it. The leader who tolerated and the manager who kept quiet will discover that their teams are not ready, because they were never prepared.

What this demands, now

There is still a window. It is closing.

Tell teams the truth, while it can still be useful. Put demand back where we put comfort. Train, the way Faria trained Dantès: fast, seriously, without indulgence. Make each employee a player who knows what he contributes, and who will therefore use AI rather than be replaced by it.

That is what true kindness means today. Not protecting people from reality. Preparing them for it.

The case for hope

None of this is a funeral oration. The same forces that threaten the comfortable company open a remarkable window for the demanding one.

AI is Monte Cristo for those who consume. For those who contribute, it is Faria. It teaches, it relieves people of the work that wore them down without making them better, it gives back time for what only a person can do: judge, convince, create, take responsibility. The same tool that replaces the consumer multiplies the player. A salesperson freed from data entry spends that time with customers. A manager freed from reporting spends it with his team.

The numbers in Part I can also be read the other way. When only 8% of French employees say they are engaged, the gap is not a verdict. It is a reserve. In every company lies energy that nobody has asked for. Clear expectations, honest feedback and real responsibility are often enough to release part of it. Most people do not refuse effort. They refuse effort that leads nowhere.

Small and mid-sized companies have a decisive advantage here. A leader of fifty or two hundred people can change a culture in months, not years. He knows everyone by name. His decisions reach the field within a week. What a large group must negotiate across layers, an SME can simply do. Speed, the very thing the market now rewards most, is on its side.

And high standards attract. The best people do not look for comfort. They look for a place where they will grow, where their effort is seen, where mediocrity is not tolerated at their expense. A company that recovers its standards will lose a few consumers. It will gain players, and in time it will become the place the best want to join.

This is the real promise of the moment. Not a return to harshness. A return to meaning: work that matters, done by people who know why it matters, in companies that tell them the truth.

Dantès entered the Château d'If a nineteen-year-old sailor with little schooling. He came out one of the most accomplished men of his time. Nothing in his situation allowed for it, except work, demand and someone who believed in him. Transformation is possible. It always has been. It simply does not happen by waiting.

What the market no longer forgives

The market forgives a mistake acknowledged and corrected. It even forgives a failure, if it is quick and lessons are drawn.

It does not forgive waiting. The customer waiting ten days for an answer. The project waiting a quarter for a decision. The team waiting for someone to finally deal with the case everyone knows about. Every wait is an open door for a competitor.

Nor does it forgive the gap between promise and delivery. In the age of online reviews and social networks, that gap shows, is told, is shared. Villefort would have lasted two weeks on the internet.

Twelve Monday-morning questions

Here is a simple diagnostic. Twelve questions, to ask yourself alone, honestly, on a Monday morning before the first meeting. Score one point for each frank, positive answer.

ON LUCIDITY

- ☐ I know the real margin of my top ten customers.
- ☐ In the past month, an employee brought me bad news on his own initiative.
- ☐ I can name, without hesitation, my company's main problem. My leadership team would name the same one.

ON STANDARDS

- ☐ Each of my managers knows, in writing, what I expect of them this quarter.
- ☐ I have had at least one difficult, direct and respectful conversation in the past fifteen days.
- ☐ No known case of underperformance has gone without action for more than six months.

ON DECISIONS

- ☐ No important decision has been waiting for more than three months.
- ☐ I have let go of something this year: a customer, a product, a project, a channel.
- ☐ My decisions have a date, and they are made on that date.

ON MY WORD

- ☐ The promises made to my team this year have been kept, or renegotiated before the deadline.
- ☐ The values displayed in the company also apply to the leadership team.
- ☐ My management rituals take place on the planned date, without exception.

Reading your score

From 10 to 12. You already lead with high standards. The challenge is to endure, and to check that your leadership team keeps the same pace.

From 6 to 9. The foundation is there, but comfort zones have settled in. They are often concentrated on one or two questions. Those are the ones that cost the most.

From 0 to 5. This is not a judgment, it is a signal. Your company probably runs on the commitment of a few key people. It is fragile. The right time to act is now, while you still have the means.

The first move

No need to change everything on Monday. Pick a single question where you answered no. Just one. And decide, before Friday, on the action that will turn it around.

That is how every discipline begins: with a small, precise move, kept.

He dug

The novel ends with a letter. Monte Cristo sails away and leaves the young people he has brought together two words as all of wisdom: “Wait and hope.”

This sentence has often been read as praise of patience. An invitation to let time do its work. It is a misreading.

Look at who writes it.

A man who spent fourteen years in a dungeon without ever simply waiting. He dug through stone with a shard of a jug, then with the iron handle of a saucepan. He learned languages, sciences, history, from an old abbé who wrote on shirts with fish bones. He memorized the location of a treasure. He prepared, in silence, every day, a freedom nothing promised him.

And on the night of the escape, sewn into Faria's sack, a cannonball tied to his feet, hurled from the top of the Château d'If into a winter sea, he had only one chance. The knife he had kept on him. He slit the canvas underwater, in the dark, the cold, the weight dragging him to the bottom. Then he swam toward an island he could not see.

That knife is preparation. Nobody gave it to him that night. He had taken it weeks earlier.

There are nights when a leader feels sewn into a sack. The market turns. A major customer leaves. Cash tightens. The team doubts. That night, fine words are useless. What remains is what you prepared: lucidity, decisions already made, trust built by keeping your word, the people you helped grow by demanding their best.

Monte Cristo's hope is not a wait. It is a conquest. It was won, stone by stone, in the dark.

The end of illusions

The age of pseudo-kindness is ending. Not because a leader decided it, nor because one fashion is chasing out another. Because the market no longer funds it, and artificial intelligence is about to make visible everything it was hiding.

What is coming is not a return of the authoritarian boss. Nobody will miss Danglars. What is coming is leadership that dares to say, to demand, to decide, and does so because it cares about people and the company they build together.

It is more demanding than softness, and more humane than brutality. In the long run, it is also what best protects jobs.

The time for real decisions has come.
Dantès did not wait. He dug.

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