

# Leadership without the drama

## Mark Topley explains how to stay calm, clear and kind when people are hard work

**Mark Topley**
Founder, Exceptional Team Performance

There's a particular kind of tiredness that doesn't just come from a busy diary. You can run a full list all week and go home perfectly fine. But one conversation you didn't have, or had badly, can follow you round for days.

In my experience, most leaders in dentistry aren't worn out by the work. They're worn out by a small number of people who take up a disproportionate amount of their headspace – the team member who sighs at every change, the one who's clinically excellent but culturally corrosive, the colleague who somehow makes a simple request feel like an imposition. Nineteen little irritations – and that's before lunch.

Something worth saying early: difficult behaviour is rarely about you. It's usually fear, fatigue or a genuine lack of clarity about what's expected. That doesn't make it acceptable, and it certainly doesn't mean you put up with it. But it changes the job in front of you, because you're not managing a difficult person, you're addressing a behaviour that's been allowed to carry on.

### Start with what's been allowed

Most difficult behaviour in a practice has a history. Someone tried it once, nothing happened and over time it became normal. Everyone else adjusted around it, which is how you end up with a team that quietly organises itself to avoid one person's moods.

That's not a comfortable thing to look at, but it is good news, because it means the thing that changed it can also change it back. One of my core beliefs as a coach is that 'clarity is kindness'. People behave better when they know exactly what good looks like, and most of them are relieved when someone finally says it out loud.

### Calm language does the heavy lifting

The words you choose matter more than the strength of feeling behind them. Two habits will carry you through nearly every difficult conversation you'll have.

The first is describing behaviour rather than character. Not 'you're being negative', which invites an argument about who they are, but 'you've pushed back on the last three changes we've made, and I'd like to understand what's going on'. One is a judgement. The other is an observation, and observations are much harder to fight.

The second is the pause. Say your sentence, then stop talking. Most of us undo a perfectly good piece of feedback by filling the silence that follows it – softening it, explaining it, adding a joke, offering an excuse on the other person's behalf. Let the silence sit there. It's doing work.

**'People behave better when they know exactly what good looks like'**

### Holding the line isn't drama

Drama doesn't come from boundaries. It comes from boundaries that move. When a standard applies on Tuesday but not on Friday, or to one dental nurse but not another, people stop trusting the standard and start testing you instead. When you've decided something, say it plainly and stop hedging. 'That's not how we speak to each other here' doesn't need a preamble or an apology attached to it.

If you have to say it calmly for the third time, that's not a failure – that's just what bedding in a new standard looks like, and repetition without irritation is one of the most underrated leadership skills there is.

### Getting your energy back

The bit people miss is what happens afterwards. Difficult conversations cost something, so don't stack four of them into one afternoon and then wonder why you're flat by 6pm. Take one at a time, protect a bit of headspace either side, and be honest about which parts of this are actually yours to carry.

You're responsible for being clear, fair and consistent. You are not responsible for managing another adult's feelings about a reasonable expectation.

This week, pick one person and one behaviour, and write down the single sentence you'd say. Just one. That's usually where it starts.