

## FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

**There is a paradox.** As organisations grow, pressure increases to add rules and take away professional freedom and responsibility. Thus growth creates stagnation that limits future growth.

This layering of bureaucratic process comes from the well-intentioned desire, when something goes wrong, to respond with preventative rules. You hear this in meetings: "If people aren't doing what they need to, why don't we write a policy to make it clear?" These questions can quickly become habit. Habit becomes culture. And when this is the culture, organisations approach problems by building a web of rules, processes and policies that restricts innovation. This increased bureaucracy and unwelcome complexity blows many once-thriving start-ups off course. Not only does it sap morale and deter talent, putting organisations into a tailspin, but it also damages performance by undermining creativity, excellence and responsibility. Frontline needs a culture that bucks this trend.

We believe that social work has become too bureaucratic and process-driven. Social workers don't spend enough time with families, their professional freedom is curtailed, difficult conversations can be avoided and the complexity of work with families is managed by sticking to process. Like the best local authorities, we need to role model a different way. Otherwise we have no credibility when we press for change in social work practice. For the sake of our mission, we cannot tolerate the traditional management response to complexity.

So, what is the alternative? An organisation with less bureaucracy, increasingly talented people, fewer rules, more autonomy, crystal clear expectations, lots of constructive feedback, deeply responsible colleagues, higher expectations of one another and a low tolerance of poor performance. This will create an organisation where people are thriving and supported to do their life's best work.

So herein lies another paradox. **To become an outstanding organisation, we need to both let go of control and expect much more of one another.** If we can do this, we will comprise a team who can solve problems, speak with candour, communicate expectations and give one another the space and support to achieve fantastic results for children and families. This culture will also allow for greater fairness, transparency and diversity in the charity. This alternative is what we call a culture of freedom and responsibility.

How do we make it happen? Freedom without responsibility results in chaos – confusion, frustration, a lack of accountability. Responsibility without freedom breeds a rigid focus on following rules and process, even when professional judgement and creativity would produce better results. It can result in people doing things right without doing the right thing. Because of this, we need to have huge levels of both freedom *and* responsibility. The most important word is not freedom, nor responsibility, but **and**.

### **What can I do to build this culture?**

Building the culture we want and need will take time and it will be everyone's business. If culture is an accumulation of all of our behaviours and relationships, then we can shape the culture through our own actions. Use the ideas below in your own work and in your debates with colleagues. When you have an idea for improving or adding to these pointers, draft something and send it Josh.



### Have fewer but better rules

Do away with rules, processes and policies that only serve to add complexity, slow us down or respond to a small number of people not taking responsibility or acting in Frontline's best interests. For example, if some colleagues aren't available when working from home, the response needs to be a frank conversation, not a new policy. If 10% of consultant social workers (CSWs) aren't holding weekly unit meetings, then asking for a monthly report on unit meetings from all CSWs is probably not going to be effective. Instead, it will tell the 90% of people doing their job well that they are not trusted. We are all adults and we should treat each other as such. This freedom helps talented people use their judgement and creativity to act in line with our mission. It instills a bias for action and gets rid of unnecessary, stifling complexity. It also makes clear and candid conversations the focus for resolving issues. It's equally important to clarify the areas where process and rules are helpful or necessary:

- **Process that helps talented people do more great work;** in other words, simple, regularly questioned processes that facilitate speed, service improvement, innovation and responsiveness. For example, using our Salesforce system to manage relationships with local authority partners makes everyone more efficient.
- **Process to prevent widespread disaster;** for example, we have a responsibility to handle personal data with great care. Similarly, checks on those we hire are critical for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. If we get these things wrong we put the charity and children at risk.
- **Ethical and moral rules;** for example, dishonesty, discrimination or harassment are intolerable.

The first of these bullet points can be subjective and people will debate whether a specific policy or system is in place to help people or to respond to a minority who are not taking responsibility. Good. We should debate the right level of freedom with more rigour and frequency.

### Act without permission to make things better



When you encounter a problem or come up with an idea to improve something, ask yourself the question: "if not me, then who?" Our [leadership statement](#), used by applicants, participants, CSWs, Firstline leaders and fellows, articulates this attitude. You should wholly own that which you are responsible for. If your job is to hire 20 final year students from Leicester University, do everything it takes to make that happen (or even hire 25!). If

your job is to manage partnerships with local authorities, then change and improve the systems we use to manage these relationships. Don't wait for someone to tell you to make things better. Spend the charity's money like it's your own by negotiating hard and being nimble. If there's something you see in the organisation that's not working, take responsibility and play a role in solving the problem.

### Know our purpose and strategy inside out



Each of us should have total confidence about what work we should say 'yes' or 'no' to, based on a comprehensive understanding of Frontline's theory of change and strategy. This gives you the direction to know what freedom there is to be creative. It reduces the need for senior level sign off, it engenders trust and it lets you know exactly where Frontline is going and what role you play in getting it there. For example, in 2018 when we submitted a bid to run a new programme, we refused to compromise on its size, because we knew our strategy is to develop talented, high potential individuals, not the entire workforce.



### Surround yourself with excellent performers

For true freedom, we need to work in a team where every single person is thriving as an excellent performer. Excellence is defined as having the motivation, behaviours and skill to do amazing work. While allowing room for difference and creativity, we must all be able to consistently deliver great outcomes.

When this doesn't happen, trust takes a hit. Conflict seeps into working relationships and we lower our own expectations of what we can achieve. Average performance also drives demand for more rules and less freedom. When this happens, we need to be clear and swift about moving people on. We'll all have times when life outside of work means we can't be on top form. We'll stick with you through tough spots when dips in performance are a blip rather than a pattern. This is what makes Frontline more like a sports team than family.

We recognise that excellent performance doesn't happen in isolation. Whilst we expect excellence from you, we are equally committed to making sure that we create an environment that supports and inspires you to do great work.

### Get and give clarity



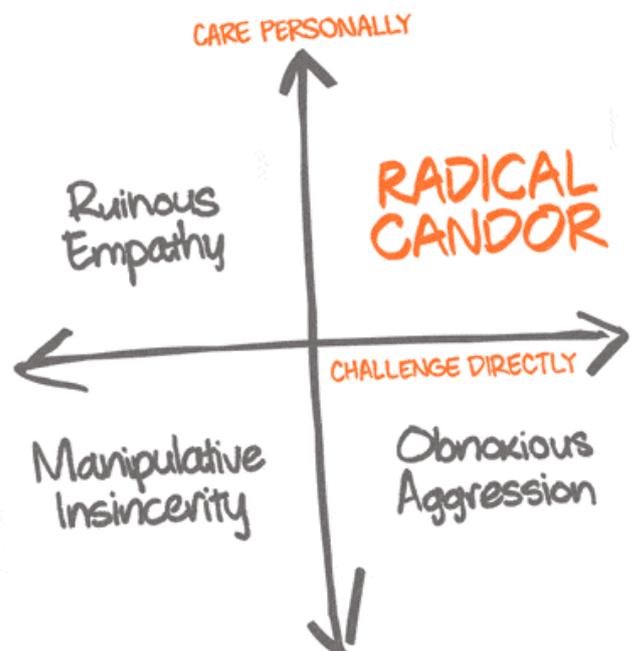
All of us need clarity in our roles and be crystal clear on expectations. It's impossible to know what freedom and responsibility we have unless our roles are clear and expectations are set. Though it's your manager's job to set expectations for what you should achieve, don't wait to be told if you're not clear. Try asking questions, like: "what are the most important outcomes you want me to achieve?", or "who's responsible for getting this over the line?".

If you manage people, one of your most important duties is to provide really clear direction and expectations (focussed on outcomes) so that your team have sufficient freedom and understanding of their responsibilities to achieve great results. Clarity of expectation is equally important when collaborating across teams. If you are working on a cross-team project you are no less responsible for communicating your expectations clearly. Check in on these expectations and calibrate them frequently by giving rapid and candid feedback and by checking for understanding with questions like: "I want us to be totally aligned on this; can you describe what a successful outcome looks like?"

### Give and request honest feedback

Feedback is the oxygen of freedom and responsibility. Without it, we stop setting expectations and communicating disappointments. Teams can then quickly become toxic.

Feedback can start with praising frequently. Making the effort to give people targeted praise when they have done something well makes it more likely that they will do it again. We must also tell people when they haven't met our expectations, even in a small way. This might be about what they've done or how they've done something. We will all disappoint people some of the time – that's life! Getting feedback helps us see the consequences of



this disappointment and giving feedback helps others disappoint us less often.

The Radical Candour model can help you understand if you are being clear and caring with your feedback. We can all be guilty of 'ruinous empathy' where we hold back from being challenging for fear of causing upset. We can also risk being 'obnoxiously aggressive' if we forget to care personally about the person we're speaking to. The aim is to be radically candid with your feedback. But you are just as responsible for how you receive feedback as you are for giving it. If you appear defensive or dismissive then you are harming our culture and making it harder for others to give you feedback in future.

### **Learn from our frontline**



The purpose of freedom and responsibility is to do the best work possible to achieve our mission. It's not a 'nice to have', but an essential part of making change happen. That's why we must focus on our own 'frontline' – our programmes and fellowship. You should constantly use feedback from the frontline to drive improvement. We should also hold social workers to the highest standard. When making a decision, don't ask what is convenient for us, consider what is in the best interest of our participants, leaders, fellows or children?

We should celebrate and support those who are directly responsible for delivering our programmes and fellowship by doing all we can to support their success. Conversely, those in delivery roles have a responsibility to share their work and accomplishments so that everyone in the charity has a deeper understanding of what's working and what's not.

### **Conclusion**

We urgently need to start making this culture a reality. But there's a warning here as well. We don't fully know how we will make this happen and we need everyone engaged in a permanent debate about the right levels of freedom and responsibility at Frontline. There are plenty of organisations we can learn from, but we need to build a culture that works for our mission. As such, this paper is not a theory or an aspiration. It's an instruction to act.

Lots of this is about behaviour change and will require all of us to be frank and kind with one another. Change, such as this, can be frightening and lots of people will find these levels of freedom and responsibility daunting – that's why so few organisations manage it. Whilst this change is urgent, it will take some time for this culture to become habit. Some things may not work the first time we try them. We will all need to stick with it and experience the frustration and elation together. Our culture matters because no one came here to be frustrated, constrained or to work in a mediocre team achieving average results. Our mission is too important for our culture to be anything other than great.