FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

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

This paradox is fuelled by 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 that restrict innovation. This increased bureaucracy and unwelcome complexity blows off course many once-thriving start-ups. By sapping morale and deterring talent, it puts organisations into a tailspin. It undermines 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. They avoid difficult conversations at times and they manage the risk inherent in working with children and families 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 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, high expectations of one another and a low tolerance of poor performance. **But to become this outstanding organisation, we need to both let go of control and expect much more of one another.** If we can manage this feat, you will be surrounded by 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 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.

1: 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, we recently got rid of our 'five participant unit policy' and replaced it with guidance allowing Heads of Region to use their judgement to determine when a consultant social worker can take an extra trainee. Policies designed to address isolated performance issues communicate to the majority doing their job well that they are not trusted. People come to work as fully formed adults and we should treat each other as such. This freedom from policy constraint helps talented people use their judgement and creativity to act in line with our mission. It instils a bias for action and gets rid of unnecessary, stifling complexity. It also makes clear and candid conversations the means for resolving issues. It's equally important to clarify the areas where process and rules are helpful or necessary:

- **Simple processes that help talented people do more great work**; processes that are simple and regularly questioned; that help maintain speed, improve service and drive innovation and responsiveness. For example, using our Salesforce system to track relationships with local authority partners making everyone more efficient. Or simplifying our objective setting process to be quicker and more outcomes focussed.
- **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.

2: 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. Lucy, our IT and Facilities Officer, recently noticed a spike in the number of laptop hinges that were breaking. She taught herself how to repair them and now saves the charity significant time and money. 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.

To know when you can act without permission, to take a risk or innovate, you must know the difference between acceptable and unacceptable mistakes. A helpful analogy for this is a boat. Failure (or a hole) above the waterline is ok but one below the waterline is too serious. Are you aware of whether a risk you're taking is below the waterline? This is a question of judgement and it can help to seek advice from colleagues to determine if the risk is manageable. Ask questions like "what would happen if this went wrong" or "are there wider implications of this going wrong that go beyond my team that aren't visible to me".

3: Know our purpose and strategy inside out

Each of us should have total confidence to which work we should say 'yes' or 'no'. This requires a comprehensive understanding of Frontline's theory of change and strategy. This understanding directs you to know how much 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 us there. For example, in 2018, when we submitted a bid to run a new programme, we refused to compromise on its size. We knew our strategy is to develop talented, high potential individuals – not the entire workforce. Anoshe, Head of Firstline, is researching whether Frontline can be accredited as an apprenticeship provider as a way to improve sustainability of our programmes. Clarity about our growth targets for the 2019 Frontline programme enables all teams to work together to make sure we have the applicants, CSWs, employees and offices in place to start with a cohort of 452 participants.

4: 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 the need 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 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 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. That's why we celebrate great individual and team performance through the 'Big Thanks' every month at the Gathering. We are also investing in ongoing, quarterly training for managers to provide the guidance, feedback and clarity that you need.

Great performance in a culture of freedom and responsibility still allows people to make mistakes (see Fail Well). We should distinguish between 1) capable people who make mistakes, are self-aware and open to learning from them; and 2) incapable people, or capable people who aren't able to embrace their mistakes and learn from them. We ask for people to have self-reflexivity (self-awareness that drives action) so that they can learn when things don't go to plan.

5: Get and give clarity

All of us need clarity in our roles and to be crystal clear on expectations. It's impossible to know what freedom and responsibility we have unless our roles are clear. 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 sure. 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 the most important duties is to provide really clear expectations (focussed on outcomes) and direction, to give your team sufficient freedom and understanding of their responsibilities to achieve great results. If you are working on a project with a colleague from another team, you are no less responsible for communicating your expectations clearly. For example, the Recruitment and Programme Management teams have held short regular coordination meetings to clarify accountability and track progress of their joint activity. Revisit these expectations and calibrate them frequently. Give rapid and candid feedback (see below) and check for understanding with questions like: "I want us to be totally aligned on this; can you describe what a successful outcome looks like?"
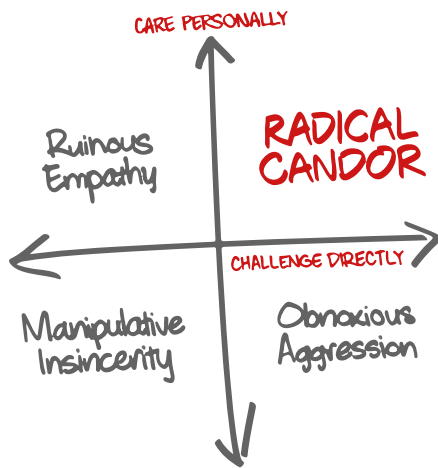
6: Be radically candid

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 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. Quality feedback aids transparency and inclusion. It helps us manage risk and make the most of diversity.

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

CARE PERSONALLY

Ruinous Empathy

RADICAL CANDOR

CHALLENGE DIRECTLY

Manipulative Insincerity

Obnoxious Aggression

speaking to. The aim is to be radically candid with feedback. But you are just as responsible for how you receive feedback as you are for giving it. If you appear defensive or dismissive, you are harming our culture and making it harder for others to give you feedback in future.

We've recently introduced skip level meetings where your manager's manager will ask you to provide feedback on your boss. This is a healthy supplement that can further open up the space to be clear and caring and to ensure feedback goes up as well as down the organisation. We also hold frequent feedback workshops for employees to learn new models for giving and getting feedback.

7: 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. 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. Chris, our Year One Principal Curriculum Lead, is a role model for sharing successes from participants and CSWs on our Teams platform. It's just as important that our board is focussed on our frontline and that's why we have a fellow as a trustee of the charity.

8: Fail well

Everyone fails. However, not everyone uses these moments as powerful opportunities to learn. Failure is a natural part of the process of having ambitious goals, taking calculated risks and succeeding. Failing is painful. But if we put ego to one side, we grow and get better. If we can recognise and own our mistakes, we can learn huge amounts.

Despite fight or flight tendencies when something goes wrong, we should lean on colleagues, seek feedback (even when it's hard to hear) and avoid rushing to judgement. Organisational failures (for example, testing new ideas, unforeseeable events or process complexity) require the same approach. Any employee at Frontline can call a retrospective meeting where the relevant people come together to have a reflexive discussion about a mistake and share the learning with the rest of the organisation.

Turning intent to action

Achieving a culture of freedom and responsibility is a work in progress. We need everyone engaged in a permanent debate about the right levels of freedom and responsibility. 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.

Change, such as this, can be frightening. 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 work in a mediocre team achieving average results. Our mission is too important for our culture to be anything other than excellent.