WHITE PAPER

Building a Culture of Deep Excellence

Defining the Essence of Work, Designing Ideal Behaviours, Building Enabling Systems, and Developing the Language of Leadership

John Quirke S A Partners

Based on the book Deep Excellence: Seeing and Hearing a Culture of Deep Excellence

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Executive Summary

Most organisations know they need to change their culture, yet most culture change programmes fail. They produce values on walls, branded merchandise and short-lived enthusiasm, before the weight of the status quo reasserts itself. The reason is almost always the same: the programme was disconnected from the real work people do, the real behaviours that make-or-break performance, and the systems that either enable or disable those behaviours every single day.

This white paper draws on the principles and practice of Deep Excellence, a framework for building organisations that perform consistently, improve continuously, and engage everyone in doing so. It argues that sustainable cultural transformation requires four interlocking commitments:

- Defining the Essence: understanding, at its most fundamental level, what your organisation exists to do and what the work actually looks like.
- Designing Ideal Behaviours: identifying the observable, specific behaviours that make the essence happen at its best, not abstract values but concrete ways of working.
- Building Enabling Systems: designing and managing the systems, processes, and leadership practices that make ideal behaviours the path of least resistance, rather than the exception.
- Developing the Language of Leadership: building the conversational skills that allow leaders to coach, challenge, inquire, and direct in ways that develop capability, sustain accountability, and build trust.

When these three elements are aligned, organisations move from islands of excellence towards enterprise-wide, sustainable levels of Deep Excellence, a pervading culture of transformative participation where every individual understands the purpose, owns a part of the story, and actively works to make tomorrow better than today.

1. The Challenge: Why Culture Change So Often Fails

The phrase 'culture eats strategy for breakfast', attributed to Peter Drucker, has become a leadership cliché. Yet organisations continue to invest in culture programmes whose impact fades within months. The reasons are well-documented in practice, if not always in boardroom conversations.

1.1 The Disconnection Problem

In many organisations, the values and culture aspired to are simply not aligned with the way the business operates day to day. Take a healthcare setting: 'respect and dignity' may be core stated values, yet blocked emergency departments, hurried patient interactions, and under-resourced staffing make consistent expression of those values structurally impossible. The intention is real; the system contradicts it at every turn.

What we often see instead are 'Corporate Programmes', values developed by cross-functional focus groups, rolled out through town halls and branded merchandise, expected to take root within a financial quarter. They seldom do. Teams become more jaundiced with each new iteration. A common refrain emerges: 'Here we go again.'

> *"The local culture and behaviour in the workplace generally remains the same. It may even become a little more jaundiced as yet another cultural-change initiative fades into the wallpaper." — Deep Excellence*

1.2 The Behavioural Gap

A subtler but equally significant problem is the gap between values as stated and behaviours as lived. Values such as 'innovation', 'customer focus', or 'integrity' are typically too abstract to be actionable. They tell people what to aspire to without specifying what to do. The critical question of what this value would look like if genuinely expressed in this role, in this department, in this interaction, is rarely answered.

Yet it is precisely this level of specificity that matters. Observable behaviours are the currency of culture. Culture is not what is written on the wall; it is what we see and hear happening in the workplace, during normal activities and in moments of stress. A leader who jumps in to solve problems rather than coaching the team to resolve them is expressing a behaviour with long-term cultural consequences. So is a supervisor who ignores a lapse in standards to avoid a difficult conversation.

1.3 The Systems Contradiction

Perhaps the most significant, and least addressed, reason culture programmes fail is that organisational systems actively work against the desired behaviours. Performance measurement systems reward individual output over collaborative process improvement. Reporting structures create silos that fragment information and reward departmental performance at the expense of customer value. Meeting cultures drive compliance conversations rather than learning conversations.

Unless these systems are reviewed and redesigned to support ideal behaviours, any culture change initiative is fighting against the grain of how the organisation actually works.

2. Understanding Deep Excellence

Deep Excellence is not a programme or a maturity level. It is a pervading culture, a social contract within and around an organisation, independent of any individual leader, in which agreed standards of behaviour, continuous improvement, and genuine social consciousness intertwine to deliver ever-improving levels of performance for the business, its people, and the planet.

2.1 What Deep Excellence Looks Like

Organisations moving towards Deep Excellence tend not to focus on lean tools or improvement projects as ends in themselves. Instead, they focus on culture and behaviours: the agreed ways of working they need expressed, in every part of the business, at every level, to ensure sustainable improvement.

Deep Excellence is also wide. It is not the isolated excellence of a high-performing team in one area of a business. It is consistent, enterprise-wide performance. There are no islands. There is only an organisational focus on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the entire value stream.

> *Deep Excellence does not rely on the charisma of one leader. It is a social contract within and around an organisation, independent of any individual. Agreed standards of behaviour, improvement, and*

> *real social consciousness intertwine to deliver ever-improving performance for the business, its teams, and the planet.*

2.2 Transformative Participation

The operating principle of Deep Excellence is transformative participation: a cultural expectation that every individual understands the need, actively participates in improvement, and sees their small part in making the organisation's story a reality. This is not tokenistic engagement. It is the genuine ceding of power to frontline teams to manage and maintain the culture and behaviours they have collectively agreed are necessary for success.

Transformative participation is active. It creates accountability without hierarchy: any team member can call out, constructively at a process level, behaviour that falls short of the agreed ways of working. Not because they have been instructed to, but because they own the story.

2.3 The Evolutionary Reality

Any serious discussion of organisational culture must confront a fundamental truth: our brains are running Stone Age software in a 21st-century environment. The same neurological mechanisms that helped our ancestors survive on the African savanna, tribal conformity, threat response, cognitive shortcuts, are still active in our modern workplaces, and they are working against us.

The Asch conformity experiments of the 1950s showed that individuals will give a demonstrably wrong answer when the group around them does the same. The 'invisible gorilla' experiments showed that focused attention causes us to miss the most obvious anomalies in our environment. Both phenomena play out daily in organisations: teams follow the dominant cultural norm even when it produces poor results; leaders miss critical performance signals because they are focused on the wrong metrics.

Deep Excellence requires leaders to work both with and against these evolutionary defaults, harnessing the positive power of tribal belonging and shared purpose, while actively creating conditions that counteract groupthink, inattentional blindness, and fear-driven behaviour.

3. Defining the Essence: What Your Organisation Is Really For

Before any meaningful conversation about culture and behaviour can take place, an organisation must have absolute clarity on one question: what is the essence of what we do?

3.1 Beyond the Mission Statement

Essence is not the same as a mission statement, though a good mission statement should express it. Essence is the core of how the organisation delivers value: the fundamental nature of the work that most people do, most of the time, in the service of the customer or patient or stakeholder they exist to serve.

Consider a children's orchestra. Its essence is not 'delivering technically accurate musical performances'. It is helping young people develop confidence, skills, and friendships through the power of music. This distinction matters enormously: it shapes what behaviours matter, what systems need to be in place, and what leadership needs to look like.

Or consider a medical device assembly operation. Its essence is not assembling components. It is ensuring that surgeons have reliable, high-quality instruments so they can improve patients' lives. This

framing immediately opens questions that a narrow focus on assembly never would: What behaviours in the assembly process protect patient safety? What does respect for the work look like at the operator level? How does the team's understanding of the product's ultimate purpose affect how they approach quality?

3.2 Getting to the Core

The exercise of identifying essence can be powerful and disorienting in equal measure. It requires organisations to leave behind the hype, the strategy documents, the brand language, the annual report narratives, and ask, with genuine honesty: what is it that most people in this organisation actually do with their time, and what has to go right for that work to deliver real value?

> *The farrier's essence is securing the right shoe to the horse's hoof. Once grasped, the most crucial behaviours become immediately visible: calmness, safety, careful preparation, tool discipline, time-keeping, and the willingness to flag a health concern the owner might not have noticed. These behaviours are not abstract values. They are the direct expression of what the work requires.*

The process of defining essence should involve honest conversation about the gap between desired culture and operational reality. Organisations that avoid this conversation, preferring to keep discussion at the level of aspirational values, will find their culture programmes rest on foundations that cannot hold.

3.3 Purpose, Vision, and Story

Once the essence is clear, organisations can build the narrative structure that brings it to life: the Mission (what we do and why it matters), the Vision (what delivering that mission will look like in three to five years), and the Story that connects every team member to that vision in terms they can relate to their own work.

Story is not corporate communications. It is the lived, internalised conviction of leaders that what they are trying to build is genuinely worth building. Teams have ancient, well-calibrated sensors for doubt and vagueness in their leaders. A story told without conviction dies in the room. A story told with genuine belief, rooted in the reality of what the organisation does and for whom, can become the engine of transformative participation.

The best examples of this are the leaders who find themselves in the most challenging circumstances and use those circumstances to forge the most compelling stories. The pharmaceutical site facing closure that developed a vision for 'the best shutdown in the world', and delivered it, understood that even impermanence can be a source of purpose, pride, and extraordinary performance.

3.4 Strategy as the Path to Vision

Vision without strategy is aspiration without traction. Once the future vision is clear and collectively owned, Critical Success Factors (CSFs), the vital few areas where the organisation must excel to realise that vision, providing the link between story and daily action. These CSFs cascade through the organisation, creating alignment from senior leadership to frontline team, giving every individual a line of sight between their work and the outcome the organisation is trying to achieve.

4. Designing Ideal Behaviours: Making Values Observable

Values become real only when they are translated into specific, observable behaviours, the things people do and say in the course of their work that either enable or undermine the organisation's ability to deliver its essence consistently and excellently.

4.1 Why Behaviours Must Be Aligned to the Work

The critical insight here is that behaviours cannot be generic. They must be directly aligned to the specific nature of the work your organisation does. The behaviours that matter in a capital-intensive process manufacturing environment are not the same as those that matter in a creative design house or a patient-facing healthcare setting.

In a capital-intensive operation, ideal behaviours might include: active sharing of equipment performance observations, leaders regularly present in work areas, operators involved in process improvement decisions, and immediate constructive response to non-compliance. In a healthcare setting, they might include: active participation in handover briefings, awareness and respect for all colleagues in the patient care journey, and willingness to challenge any situation where patient dignity is compromised.

In each case, the behaviours are not abstract virtues. They are the specific ways of working that directly enable the organisation to do its essential work at its best.

4.2 Starting With Not-Ideal Behaviours

In practice, teams find it easier to begin by identifying not-ideal behaviours: the frustrations, the workarounds, the silences, the patterns that everyone knows but no one names. This is valuable raw material. Not-ideal behaviours are almost always process-level symptoms: they reveal where the work is being compromised by the absence of ideal behaviour.

> *"Respect you say? I'll tell you what respect means for me. I can spend thirty minutes looking for that shovel. It's spark proof, and I need it. But it regularly goes missing. If I cannot find the right tools, I get delayed with the mix and the batch is late." This is a behaviour conversation at its most concrete: the absence of tool discipline is an absence of respect for the work, with a direct, measurable consequence.*

The question 'what makes it difficult for you to do your work well?' opens a different conversation than 'what are our values?' It is grounded, specific, and honest. From the honest identification of not-ideal behaviours, the ideal behaviours that would address them follow naturally.

4.3 Leadership Behaviours First

Before ideal behaviours are deployed into the wider organisation, leaders must first hold a mirror to themselves. The Shadow of Leadership is real: the behaviours of senior leaders are observed, interpreted, and replicated, or reacted against, throughout the organisation. A leadership team that espouses the value of accountability while avoiding difficult conversations with each other, or that espouses the value of learning while jumping in to solve every problem before teams can work through it themselves, will find its culture programme undercut at every turn.

The Mirror Sessions, in which leadership teams honestly examine the not-ideal behaviours they observe in their organisation and then ask how their own behaviours have contributed to them, are among the most powerful interventions available. They are also among the most uncomfortable. Done well, they create the foundation for a Leadership Pact: a set of agreed ways of working that the leadership team commits to practicing together before asking the organisation to follow.

4.4 From Leadership to Frontline: Participative Deployment

Deploying ideal behaviours into an organisation is not a cascade exercise. It is a participative process. Middle managers must be engaged before frontline teams, and their honest input, which will include observations about leadership behaviours, must be welcomed and acted upon. Frontline teams, through structured conversations facilitated by trained behaviour ambassadors, then contribute their own experience of what good looks like and what gets in the way.

The result is not a list of behaviours handed down from above, but a collectively owned set of ways of working that every level of the organisation has had a genuine hand in shaping. This ownership is the fuel of transformative participation. It is what transforms 'they told us how to behave' into 'we decided what we need from each other'.

4.5 Key Behavioural Indicators

Behaviours can, and must, be measured. Key Behavioural Indicators (KBIs) link observable ways of working directly to business performance outcomes, providing the feedback loops that sustain focus over time. The high jumper does not improve by measuring only the height of the bar: they measure approach speed, take off position, body position, all of which are process indicators that precede a successful jump. But before these there are behaviours that determine the quality of performance. Without these the leading process indicator will not be met, consistently. Training attendance, diet adherence personal training time, metal resilience are some of the ideal behaviours we would observe in an elite athlete that determine consistent high levels of performance. Such behaviours take observable behaviours that predict performance.

Effective KBIs are team-owned, locally developed, and directly linked to what matters for that team's ability to deliver value. They are not imposed. They are not generic. And they evolve: as desired behaviours become embedded habits, KBIs should be updated to push the organisation towards the next level of excellence.

Lagging KPI	Leading Process Measure	Key Behavioural Indicator
Staff retention rate	Employee survey scores; coaching schedule adherence	Leaders hold scheduled 1:1 development conversations; recognition events aligned to agreed behaviours
Customer complaints	Recurring corrective actions; on-time-in-full delivery	Problem-solving teams meet daily; root cause followed to completion; escalation patterns reviewed weekly
Process yield / quality	OEE; first-pass quality rate	Operators return tools to designated locations; standard work reviewed at shift handover; near-misses reported and acted on

Lagging KPI	Leading Process Measure	Key Behavioural Indicator
Safety incidents	Near-miss reports; safety walk completion	Leaders conduct regular floor walks; safety conversations happen proactively, not reactively

Table 1: Connecting lagging KPIs to leading behavioural indicators.

5. Building Enabling Systems: The Architecture of Deep Excellence

Ideal behaviours will not sustain themselves through good intentions alone. They require systems: the structured processes, communication frameworks, and leadership practices that make ideal behaviour the expected, supported, and measured norm.

5.1 Systems Thinking in Practice

W. Edwards Deming defined a system as 'a network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system'. His System of Profound Knowledge established a principle that remains underutilised in most organisations: 85% of problems are correctable only through changing the systems, with only 15% attributable to individuals. Most organisations reverse this ratio in practice, blaming people for problems that the system has created.

A systems thinking mindset requires leaders to ask not 'who failed?' but 'what in our system made this outcome likely?' It requires designing and managing the systems within which work happens, so that they support the behaviours needed for consistent excellent performance, rather than creating conditions in which workarounds, firefighting, and learned helplessness become the norm.

5.2 Signature Systems: Where to Start

While there are many systems in any organisation, five signature systems provide the essential foundation for a culture of Deep Excellence. These systems are present in most organisations in some form; the challenge is to make them purposeful, aligned, and behaviour-enabling rather than procedural.

Strategy Deployment and Tiered Management. The integrated system by which the organisation's purpose, vision, and Critical Success Factors are translated into aligned activity at every level, and by which the reality of that activity is fed back up through the organisation in a continuous loop. Strategy Deployment sets the direction; the Tiered Management System gives it its operational spine. Through a structured cadence of conversations, reviews, and escalations, from frontline team huddle to senior leadership review, it ensures that strategy does not stay in the boardroom. It makes priorities visible, surfaces problems early, drives focused improvement, and creates the daily rhythm within which ideal behaviours are practised and observed. Critically, it is also the organisation's primary learning system: the place where gaps in knowledge, skill, and process become visible before they become failures, and where leaders develop their most important capability, the ability to have the right conversation, at the right level, at the right time.

Key Work Systems. The systems by which the essential work of the organisation is designed, performed, standardised, and continuously improved. Understanding the work, what it is, what has to go right, what behaviours are needed, and what the customer or patient experiences as a result, is the foundation of everything else. Where work systems are unclear, unstable, or poorly designed, no amount of cultural aspiration will produce consistent excellent performance. Where they are well-designed, owned by the people who do the work, and built around the behaviours that make

the work succeed, they become the most powerful expression of the organisation's values in daily practice. Work systems do not merely describe how things are done, they shape what behaviours are possible.

The Improvement System. Not a project portfolio, but the system by which the discipline of improvement is woven into the fabric of how the organisation operates, prioritised, aligned to strategy, visible, and collectively owned. This system defines how problems are identified and solved, how ideas are captured and acted upon, how improvement activity is resourced and reviewed, and how the organisation ensures it is genuinely learning from its experience rather than repeatedly managing the same failures. Done well, it transforms continuous improvement from a periodic initiative driven by a specialist team into a cultural habit expressed at every level, in every area, every day. It is the engine of the organisation's journey towards Deep Excellence.

The Leadership System. The system by which leaders at every level are developed to manage and deploy the culture and behaviours the organisation needs. Leadership is not a personal style, it is a system element that must be deliberately designed, consistently practised, regularly observed, and continuously improved. This system defines what good leadership looks like at each level of the organisation, how leaders are supported and coached to develop their skills, how the quality of leadership is assessed and fed back, and how the shadow leaders cast is actively managed rather than left to chance. Without a functioning Leadership System, cultural transformation remains dependent on the presence of exceptional individuals rather than becoming a reliable feature of the organisation itself.

The People Development System. The system by which the organisation builds the capability it needs, not through periodic training events, but through a deliberate, structured approach to growing skills, developing potential, and ensuring every individual has a line of sight between their own growth and the organisation's purpose. Closely linked to the Tiered Management System, which routinely surfaces gaps in knowledge and competence as part of its performance and improvement cadence, the People Development System ensures that what is seen is acted upon: learning needs identified early, development planned and resourced, coaching and mentoring embedded in daily work. This system makes learning a designed feature of the organisation rather than an accidental one, and in doing so, sustains the culture of transformative participation that Deep Excellence requires.

5.3 The Tiered Management System

Of all the systems available to an organisation seeking Deep Excellence, the tiered management system, intertwined with the leadership systems and leader standard work, is among the most powerful. It is the backbone of communication, performance management, problem-solving, and cultural development, connecting the frontline to the senior leadership in a coherent, cadenced flow of information and conversation.

A well-designed tier system provides the structured framework within which ideal behaviours can be observed, practised, supported, and developed. It is not about boards and metrics: it is about the quality of the conversations that happen around those boards. A tiered management system that drives compliance conversations produces a compliance culture. One that drives genuine inquiry, learning, and problem-solving conversations produces a learning culture.

> *In organisations moving towards Deep Excellence, tiered management meetings become the location where leaders can effectively observe the presence or absence of desired behaviours, and where leaders can develop their most important skill: the ability to have the right conversation, at the right level, at the right time.*

5.4 System Elements: The Five Essentials

Every system, whether it is a work system, management system, or improvement system, requires five essential elements to function as a behaviour-enabling architecture:

- Standard Work: the agreed best way of performing the activities within the system, developed with the people who use it, and maintained as a living document of current best practice.
- Reports: usable, timely information on how the system is performing, designed by and for the users of that information.
- Feedback: active mechanisms for gathering input on how the system is working and how it could be improved.
- Schedules: the cadence of activity within the system, when structured conversations, reviews, and improvement events take place.
- Improvement Log: a record of improvements made to the system itself, demonstrating that the system is a living entity, not a fixed procedure.

The tools of a system are its human interface. They must be designed with elegance, simplicity, and genuine respect for the people who will use them. A reporting template that no one understands, a standard work document in a language half the team does not read fluently, a meeting structure that takes more time than it saves, these are not neutral inefficiencies. They are expressions of the culture the organisation is actually building, as opposed to the one it claims to be building.

5.5 The Leadership System: Language as Architecture

Perhaps the most underestimated element of the systems architecture of Deep Excellence is the quality of leadership conversation. Language is not incidental to culture, it is culture, made audible. The way leaders ask questions, give feedback, respond to problems, and acknowledge contribution shapes the mindset and behaviours of every person they interact with.

Research across more than two thousand leadership self-assessments consistently shows that leaders and managers systematically underuse the more challenging voices in their conversational repertoire, direct challenge, constructive evaluation, high-quality inquiry, in favour of telling and suggesting. The consequence is a culture of dependency: teams wait to be told, rather than developing the capability to find answers themselves. Standards go unchallenged. Accountability remains notional.

Developing language skills in leaders is not a soft aspiration. It is a systems design decision. When leaders learn to flex between instructing, mentoring, coaching, and delegating, matching their conversational approach to the competence and confidence of the person in front of them, they are building the human infrastructure of a learning organisation.

> *The 'curse of suggestion' is real. When a leader consistently builds on team members' ideas rather than coaching them to develop and test those ideas themselves, teams learn to bring incomplete thinking to their leader, not because they are lazy, but because the system has taught them that this is how it works. Changing the system means changing the conversation.*

6. The Language of Leadership: Conversation as a System

If systems are the architecture of Deep Excellence, language is its connective tissue. The quality of the conversations that happen within an organisation's systems, at tier meetings, in coaching conversations, during problem-solving sessions, in corridor interactions, determines whether those systems generate learning and improvement or merely compliance and information passing.

This is not a peripheral concern. Research across more than two thousand leadership self-perception assessments consistently shows that leaders and managers systematically underuse the more demanding voices in their conversational repertoire, challenge, evaluation, high-quality inquiry, while over-relying on telling and suggesting. The consequence, played out across thousands of daily interactions, is a culture in which teams wait to be directed rather than developing the capability to think, decide, and improve for themselves.

6.1 The Three Voices: Ask, Suggest, Tell

Every leadership conversation draws on some combination of three broad modes of dialogue: Ask (explore and inquire), Suggest (position and advise), and Tell (direct and decide). Each has its place. The problem arises not from any individual mode but from habitual, unexamined reliance on one or two at the expense of the others, and from mismatching the mode to the situation.

Telling a highly experienced, self-motivated individual what to do in every situation is a reliable way to disengage them. Asking a beginner to coach themselves towards a solution they do not yet have the knowledge to reach creates anxiety and stalls progress. Suggesting, offering a modified version of someone else's idea, feels collaborative but in practice creates dependency: the team member learns that their role is to produce a first draft for the leader to improve, not to develop the quality of their own thinking.

> *The 'curse of suggestion' is among the most common and least recognised obstacles to building a learning culture. When a leader consistently improves on team members' ideas rather than coaching them to develop and test those ideas themselves, the team learns to bring incomplete thinking to the leader, not from laziness, but because the system has taught them that this is how it works.*

6.2 Nine Voices, One Repertoire

Within the three broad modes, there are nine distinct conversational voices available to a leader: Inquire, Probe, Diagnose (within Ask); Advocate, Articulate, Advise (within Suggest); Direct, Challenge, Evaluate (within Tell). Each voice serves a different purpose and produces a different effect on the mindset and behaviour of the person on the receiving end.

The absence of any voice from a leader's active repertoire has consequences. The absence of inquiry costs engagement, people feel talked at rather than listened to. The absence of direction costs standards, boundaries go unset and expectations drift. The absence of challenge costs accountability, poor performance is tolerated in silence. The absence of evaluation costs learning, people do not receive the honest feedback they need to improve.

Most leadership development programmes focus on content, what leaders should know. The development of conversational skill focuses on something more fundamental: how leaders talk, and what that talk produces in the people around them. This is a learnable skill. With practice and feedback, leaders can significantly extend and balance their conversational repertoire, making their interactions more effective at every level of the organisation.

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6.3 Matching Conversation to Competence and Confidence

Effective leadership conversation is not about selecting a preferred style: it is about reading the situation and responding appropriately. The key variables are the competence and confidence of the person in front of you, not as a fixed characteristic, but in relation to the specific task or challenge at hand.

Instructor. When someone is new to a task, regardless of their overall experience, they need clear direction, explicit standards, and confirmation of understanding. The right question here is not 'what do you think you should do?' but 'tell me back the key steps you'll take'. Open-ended coaching questions directed at a beginner leave them feeling rudderless, not empowered.

Mentor. As competence grows but confidence or motivation fluctuates, the conversation should shift: more open, more exploratory, drawing on the leader's experience to offer perspective and guidance while progressively transferring ownership of decisions to the individual.

Coach. With a capable, motivated individual, the most valuable contribution a leader can make is often to ask the questions that help the person develop and test their own thinking. The leader's role is to be a sounding board, not a solution-provider.

Delegator. When competence and confidence are both high, the leader's task is to get out of the way and engage at the level of outcomes and learning, not process. Over-managing at this stage is not cautious leadership, it is a waste of capable people.

The practical implication is that any individual may be in a different quadrant on different tasks at different times. An experienced engineer who has never led a project before is a beginner in project leadership. A senior clinician new to a management role needs instruction, not coaching, on the systems of the organisation they have just joined. Leaders who apply a single conversational style across all situations, however sophisticated that style, are mismatching their approach to the actual needs of their team.

6.4 Acoustic Management: Listening as Leadership

The most observable expression of leadership culture is not what leaders say, but what they hear, and what they do with what they hear. Acoustic management is the discipline of attending carefully to the quality of conversation in the organisation: listening for what is said, what is unsaid, what is asked, and what goes unchallenged.

In a well-functioning tiered management meeting, for example, a skilled leader is simultaneously monitoring: whether the data being discussed is genuinely understood or just reported; whether team members are engaging actively or passively; whether problems are being explored to root cause or managed to a quick close; and whether the conversational dynamic is creating psychological safety or quietly reinforcing hierarchy.

> *A typical failing meeting pattern: a KPI goes red; a team member explains the reason; the leader accepts the explanation and moves on. No inquiry into whether the explanation addresses root cause. No question about what would prevent recurrence. No challenge to the pattern if it is the third week running. The meeting generates data but not learning. The system is running, but it is not working.*

Improving the quality of conversation in an organisation is not a training event. It is a sustained commitment to developing language skills across the leadership community, through self-perception tools, peer coaching, recorded conversation review, and the creation of safe spaces where leaders can

practice having the difficult conversations they have been avoiding. The payoff is not merely better meetings. It is an organisation that learns faster, improves more consistently, and builds the trust that makes transformative participation possible.

6.5 Language and the Systems That Support It

Language skills do not develop in isolation. They develop most effectively when embedded in the systems of the organisation. The tiered management system provides regular, structured opportunities for leaders to practice purposeful conversation; when leader standard work builds in reflection time and peer observation; when coaching conversations are scheduled, not incidental.

The quality of leadership conversation is itself a behavioural indicator. It can be observed, measured, and improved. Organisations serious about Deep Excellence treat the development of conversational skill not as a personal development aspiration but as a system element, designed, resourced, reviewed, and continuously improved alongside every other system in the business.

7. The Leadership Dimension

Culture is shaped by leadership. Not by leadership's aspirations, but by leadership's acts, what leaders do when they walk the floor, what they ask about, what they challenge, what they let pass, what they celebrate, and what they model in their own peer relationships.

7.1 The Shadow of Leadership

Every leader casts a shadow into the organisation. Teams take signals, often unconsciously, from the behaviours of those above them in the hierarchy. A leadership team that does not hold itself to account cannot expect accountability further down the organisation. A leadership team that avoids difficult conversations will find that difficult conversations are avoided at every level.

This is not a counsel of perfection. Leaders are human, with the same Stone Age brain structures as everyone else, the same tendencies towards tribal conformity, cognitive shortcuts, and stress responses. The difference between a leadership team that builds a culture of Deep Excellence and one that does not is not perfection: it is awareness, commitment, and a genuine willingness to practice what they intend to preach.

7.2 Six Energies of Effective Leaders

Experience across global consulting practice suggests that leaders who successfully build cultures of Deep Excellence draw on six energies:

- Deep conviction and belief in what they are trying to achieve, having internalised the story and can tell it with genuine passion.
- A constant desire to learn, approaching the organisation as a source of insight, not a machine to be directed.
- Willingness to adapt, adjusting their style and approach based on what the situation requires, not what they find most comfortable.
- Empathy for their teams, taking time to understand the lived experience of the people they lead, designing systems and conversations accordingly.
- Respect for their own personal health and space, modelling the sustainable high performance they seek from others.

- Resilience, navigating setbacks with a mindset oriented towards response and learning, not cause and blame.

7.3 Leading Through Systems, Not Despite Them

One of the most important shifts a leader can make is from managing the work directly to managing the systems within which the work happens. The leader who races to the factory floor every time there is a problem is building a culture of learned helplessness. The leader who asks 'what in our system allowed this to happen?' and 'what needs to be in place so this never requires my personal intervention again?' is building the infrastructure of autonomous, resilient performance.

This is not a withdrawal from leadership. It is leadership at its most effective. It is the difference between a leader who is indispensable and one who has built something that will outlast them.

8. A Practical Roadmap for Deep Excellence

The journey to Deep Excellence is not a project with a start date and a completion milestone. It is a sustained, iterative commitment. The following roadmap synthesises the steps that organisations have found most effective.

Step 1: Establish the Reality

Begin with an honest current-state assessment. Where is the organisation on the spectrum from reactive firefighting to proactive excellence? Not a benchmarking exercise for external comparison, but a genuine internal conversation about performance, culture, and the gap between aspiration and reality. The 'magic wand moment', asking leadership teams to estimate how much better things could be if the friction, miscommunication, and workarounds were removed, is a useful starting point. The answer is almost always above 60%.

Step 2: Define the Essence

Facilitate structured leadership conversations to define, with precision and honesty, what the organisation exists to do and what the work at its best actually looks like. Develop or refine the Mission, Vision, and Critical Success Factors. Ensure that every senior leader can tell the story with genuine conviction.

Step 3: Mirror the Leadership

Before deploying behaviours into the organisation, conduct Mirror Sessions with the senior leadership team. Name the not-ideal behaviours that are currently limiting performance. Ask how leadership has contributed to them. Develop a Leadership Pact, agreed ways of working that the team commits to practising together. Practice, review, and support each other.

Step 4: Engage Middle Management

Middle management is the engine of cultural transformation, or its greatest obstacle. Engage this group in honest conversations about current state behaviours. Their perspective will include observations about leadership that must be heard. Develop agreed ways of working at this level, aligned to and extending the leadership commitment.

Step 5: Deploy Through Participative Dialogue

Engage frontline teams through behaviour ambassadors, trained facilitators who create safe spaces for honest conversation about current state culture and ideal behaviours. Gather, collate, and feed back themes. Run percolation sessions to allow the whole organisation to test, challenge, and take ownership of the agreed ways of working.

Step 6: Align the Systems

Review the four signature systems, strategy deployment, key work systems, improvement system, and leadership system, against the agreed ideal behaviours. Where do systems enable those behaviours? Where do they contradict or undermine them? Redesign, simplify, or replace systems that work against the culture you are trying to build.

Step 7: Measure, Review, and Sustain

Develop KBIs that connect behavioural practice to business outcomes. Build regular review of cultural performance into the tiered management system. Ensure senior leaders are visible, present, and genuinely engaging with the culture at the frontline. As behaviours become habits, update the KBIs to continue the momentum towards ever-improving levels of Deep Excellence.

9. Conclusion: Building a Culture of Deep Excellence

Organisations that achieve Deep Excellence share three characteristics. They know with precision what they are for. They know what ideal behaviour looks like, not in the abstract, but in the specific, observable, workday detail of how people interact with each other, with the work, and with their customers. And they have designed their systems to make those ideal behaviours the path of least resistance.

Getting there requires courage: the courage to look honestly at the current state, to hold leadership to the same standards it sets for everyone else, and to engage the organisation in a process of genuine participation rather than managed communication.

It requires patience: the deployment of culture cannot be rushed. Each step must be owned before the next can be taken. The organisation has one credible attempt at this. If it falls short, if the behaviours are announced rather than developed, if the systems are left unchanged, if leaders talk about what they want but continue to act as before, the result is not neutrality. It is an erosion of trust that makes the next attempt harder still.

And it requires humility: the recognition that the organisation does not have all the answers, that the most important insights are in the hands of the people closest to the work, and that the leader's most critical skill is not directing but asking the right question, at the right time, in a way that opens up learning rather than closing it down.

> *Deep Excellence is not a destination. It is a direction. It is the commitment, made at every level of the organisation and renewed every day, to understand the work more deeply, to express the ideal behaviours more consistently, and to build systems that make sustainable excellence not the exception, but the way things work around here.*

The organisations that make this commitment do not merely perform better in the short term. They build something more durable: a culture that is resilient to leadership changes, resistant to the

entropy that defeats most improvement programmes, and capable of continuous self-renewal. A culture, in short, of Deep Excellence.

About the Author

John Quirke is a Senior Partner with S A Partners. Together with his colleagues Juliette Packham, Simon Grogan and Bryan Cutliff, they published the award-winning book Deep Excellence Seeing and Hearing a Culture of Deep Excellence in 2023.

John's work spans operational excellence, cultural transformation, and systems thinking. He is co-author of TPM: A Foundation of Operational Excellence (Shingo Prize, 2022) and author of Deep Excellence: Seeing and Hearing a Culture of Deep Excellence.

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