FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Many teams, organisations and professions lack the combination of freedom and responsibility to overcome complex problems. We experience this when being told by customer services that 'I'm not authorised to do that', in work when our ability to respond to complexity with wisdom is blocked or as citizens when we feel powerless to respond to big shared challenges.

In the workplace the conventional mindset of prescription, control and hierarchy is often the result of the well-intentioned desire, when something goes wrong, to respond with preventative rules. You hear this in meetings: "If people aren't filling in these forms, don't we need to write a policy that makes it clear they have to?" These questions can become habit. Habit becomes culture. And when this is the culture, organisations approach problems by building a web of rules that undermines creativity, excellence and responsibility.

Frontline needs a culture that bucks this trend because social work itself has become too bureaucratic. Social workers don't spend enough time with families and their professional freedom is too restricted. Like the best children's services, we need to model a different way. Otherwise we will perpetuate the existing culture and have no credibility when we press for change in social work practice.

So, how do we buck this trend? We need an organisation with fewer rules, more autonomy, crystal clear expectations, lots of feedback, deeply responsible colleagues, high expectations of one another and a low tolerance of poor performance. Making this happen requires a special culture, combining freedom and responsibility.

Freedom without responsibility results in undisciplined chaos – confusion, frustration, a lack of accountability.

Responsibility without freedom breeds a rigid focus on following rules that can result in people doing things right without doing the right thing. Therefore, the most important word is not freedom, nor responsibility, but **and**.

We must combine discipline (e.g. clarity, use of data and effective systems) with autonomy. We need to blend rigour with trust. We are asked to step out of command and control but hold one another to account against high expectations. These may appear paradoxical positions and that is why building a culture of freedom and responsibility is hard.

We can only keep developing this culture if everyone plays their part. It matters because getting this right means you will get more out of work and together we will achieve more change for children and their families. This is why our culture is intertwined with our mission.

What can I do to build this culture?

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 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 participant.

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 exercise their judgement to best achieve our mission. It also makes clear and candid conversations the means for resolving issues. It's equally important to clarify the areas where rules, process and systems are enablers of freedom and responsibility:

• **Simple processes that help talented people do more great work**; processes that are simple and regularly questioned; that help maintain speed, improve service and responsiveness. For example, using our Salesforce system to track relationships with local authority partners making everyone more efficient. Or reporting on data in a way that shares information transparently with other teams that need it.

• **Mission critical process to prevent widespread disaster**; for example, we have a responsibility to handle personal data with great care and checks on those we hire are critical for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. We have commitments to the social work regulator and others that we must meet. If we get these things wrong we put the charity and children at risk.

• **Ethical and moral rules**; dishonesty, discrimination or harassment are intolerable.

2. Act without permission to make things better
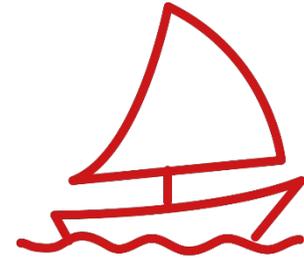
When you encounter a problem or come up with an idea to improve something, ask yourself the question: "if not me, then who?" Our leadership statement, used by participants, consultant social workers, Firstline leaders and fellows, articulates this attitude. You should wholly own that which you are responsible for.

Lucy, our IT and Facilities Manager, 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.

In any circumstances you need to communicate improvements as you make them, even if it's just to inform others. The benefits for others knowing what we are changing is not always foreseeable so it's best to over communicate. Sometimes we can hold back from this because it might slow things down or surface disagreement but our culture is reliant upon people being well informed.

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 of the boat (Frontline, in this case) 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. The new 'Fewer Better Rulebook' that is in development will help explain where the waterline is.

3: Surround yourself with excellent performers

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

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. 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 you to do great work. That's why we celebrate great individual and team performance through the 'Big Thanks' at the Gathering. We also invest in ongoing training for managers to provide the guidance, feedback and clarity that you need.

4: Get and give clarity

All of us need to get clarity to do our roles and to give crystal clear expectations to others. It's impossible to know what freedom and responsibility we have unless our objectives 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 done?".

If you manage people, one of the most important duties is to provide really clear expectations 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?"

Having a comprehensive understanding of Frontline's vision, organisational objectives, theory of change and strategy are essential. 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 specific role you play in getting us there.

For example, in order to achieve our mission, our top objective is to get 4,000 active and excellent fellows by 2025. Each and everyone one of you should be able to connect your day to day work back to this shared goal.
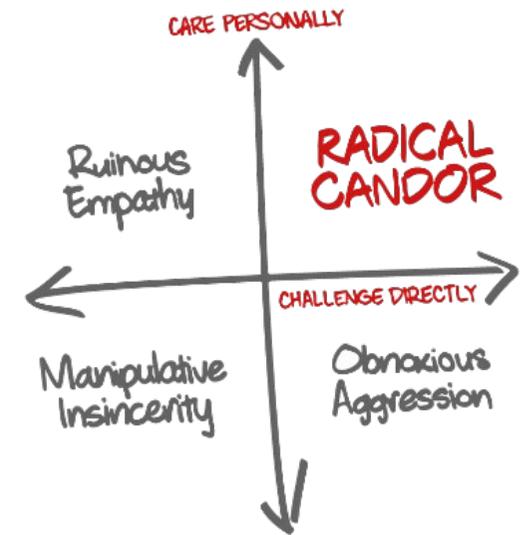
5: Be radically candid

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 sharing meaningful praise 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 Candor 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 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 run 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.

Image taken from Radical Candor by Kim Scott

6: 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 stay curious and 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. Allan, our Head of Region in the North East, is a role model for sharing successes from participants and consultant social workers on Microsoft Teams. 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.

7: Fail well

We have ambitious goals, work with complexity and take calculated risks. We don't always get things right, and that's ok, because we can use these moments as a powerful opportunity to learn. We support our colleagues to willingly share their mistakes, reflecting with curiosity to bring wider learning to the organisation.

We encourage regular reflection in 1:1s and team meetings. At times you may experience feedback that's hard to hear or to give but we always hold our colleagues to account without judgement. Organisational failures require the same approach. Any colleague can call a 'retrospective' for relevant people to have

a reflective conversation about something that hasn't gone to plan or unforeseen events to share the learning with the organisation – addressing failure can take courage. Be brave.
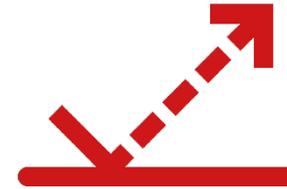
8: One team

Our organisation works together as one team. It's therefore imperative that you take responsibility for learning about your colleagues' priorities. This will create more opportunities for us to coordinate work and learn from each other; our successes and failures, our different skills and backgrounds, and the experiences we each bring.

This is exemplified by how we collaborate in recruiting to and securing placements for the Frontline programme. While each plays a different role, our collective success results from us working towards a single shared goal of making sure we have great participants having the biggest impact throughout the country.

What matters is what works, so we seek-out, listen to and are open to experimenting with each other's contributions in order to make things better. This will help you find creative solutions to tough problems and reach outcomes that cannot be achieved by working alone. For example, Laura, our colleague responsible for learning and development, draws heavily on the social work and teaching expertise from across the organisation when delivering employee training. Similarly, coordinators in the organisation work across teams to share learning.

Turning intent to action
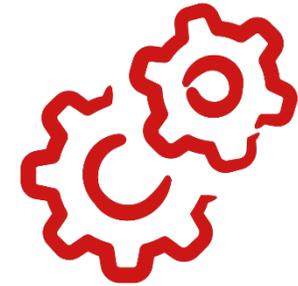
Achieving a culture of freedom and responsibility is a work in progress. We need everyone engaged in a permanent debate about the right levels of freedom and responsibility. There are plenty of organisations we can learn from, but we need to build a culture that fits for our mission. As such, this paper is not a theory or an aspiration. It's an instruction to act.

Change, such as this, is hard. 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 takes 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 frustrations and breakthroughs 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.