

# **Courage at work**

## **Causes and cures for timid management**

A research report by Common Purpose  
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## Executive Summary

We have been offering leadership programmes for 15 years and count a large network of executives across all sectors among our alumni. We are increasingly asked to identify the main challenges executives face in their careers; to define the competencies they will need to overcome those challenges; and to review why some people progress well while others seemingly stall.

In 2004, we published our report on the challenges faced, in particular, by young middle managers. Here we extend our research to look at executives in all age groups who have management/leadership responsibility. The questions we have sought answers to were:

- what leads once ambitious executives to pause on the career ladder?
- can we define the challenges most likely to daunt them?
- what should employers do to help their most talented people to rise to challenges and reach their full potential?

What we learned from our new research is that there is a real deficit of courage among managers at all levels in UK plc. The most challenging situations they face involve stepping out of their comfort zone, particularly when dealing with the people they need to influence. Too often, their response is avoidance because they feel ill-equipped to tackle situations that involve influencing, motivating or instructing the people who will have a direct or indirect impact on their success, whether colleagues, suppliers, investors or customers.

Respondents argue that employers don't provide the right kind of training to give them the courage to deal with the many challenges they can face, with the result that they avoid daunting challenges – and so stall in their career progression. This is bad news for them and bad news for employers who are failing to bring out the latent talent in their people. It is also, of course, an immediate opportunity to do better.

We believe there are three stages of development, and usually people who come on our leadership programmes are in the first two. We help executives reach the third and final stage. The three stages are as follows:

- first, they are effective in their own area of expertise
- second, they have identified the other worlds that influence the success of their own but are beyond their direct sphere of influence
- finally, they learn to influence and lead outside their formal authority in these other worlds.

People who get to the top of the career ladder have the courage to step out of their comfort zone and into the third stage of leadership to learn to cope with new situations. They see challenges as opportunities to gain new skills and valuable experience.

Employers need to identify and nurture their most talented people to give them the courage to step out of the comfort zone and rise through these three stages of leadership. In moving into

those places where they have no direct authority but need to develop influence, executives will need guidance and training. They need to get used to seeing the discomfort of the unknown as an opportunity to grow, learn and spot new opportunities.

That way, the Managing Director will be at ease explaining his company's performance to investors and analysts, the architect will influence the thinking of city planners, the HR manager will integrate an increasingly diverse workforce and the wheels of commerce will run more smoothly to the benefit of employer and manager and all over whom they have influence.

***Julia Middleton, CEO and founder of Common Purpose***

This report is based on a confidential online survey of 1,000 executives, from management trainees to board directors, conducted in January 2004. The gender split was 624 males and 376 women between the ages of 18 and 64. The profile of responses by seniority was as follows:

- Management trainees 2%
- Junior management 13%
- Junior to middle management 16%
- Middle management 30%
- Middle to senior management 15%
- Senior management 15%
- Board director or above 9%

## Main findings

- When presented with new challenges as they move up the career ladder, too many executives back away rather than embrace them (57%). The fear of failure is too great, so they avoid daunting challenges choosing to stay within their comfort zone.
- Junior and middle stage executives are the most likely to avoid challenges or potentially leave an employer because they are not getting enough support or training.
- Executives of all ages and status avoid challenges they find daunting, including almost two-thirds of board directors.
- Executives at all levels doubt their own judgement and see making a decision based on instinct as the most daunting of challenges. Doubting their own judgement mostly occurs when something hasn't worked or where they are inexperienced.
- Most of the challenges cited by respondents involve dealing with people, in particular dealing with difficult personalities (93%).
- Executives claim to agree that they would welcome the opportunity to lead a more diverse team because diversity leads to innovation and creativity. While most people still work in largely homogeneous teams, this is one area where executives say they are not afraid to embrace new challenges (83%).
- To help their most talented people get to the top, employers need to increase the training of their junior and middle level executives. Otherwise these executives will avoid challenges, harm their career and some may even fall off the corporate ladder.

## Lacking the courage

Most surprising was the number of people who avoid challenges at work. Respondents say they do not get the right type of training so they avoid challenges they don't have the confidence to cope with. As a result, employers face the possibility of being held back by a lack of strong leadership.

### % Managers avoiding challenges at work

- |                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| • Total                       | 57% |
| • Management trainees         | 52% |
| • Junior management           | 65% |
| • Junior to middle management | 66% |
| • Middle management           | 58% |
| • Middle to senior management | 50% |
| • Senior management           | 48% |
| • Board director or above     | 59% |

"I buried my head in the sand to start with, and then just got on with what was happening and lived with it."

Junior and junior to middle managers avoid challenges most often. Over two-thirds admit to avoiding challenges they find daunting.

Almost half of senior executives admit to ducking daunting decisions. While still high, this may indicate that junior and middle managers who avoid challenges may also fail to gain promotion.

Almost two thirds of board directors admit to dodging daunting challenges. This shocking statistic highlights the difficulties that board directors face. It may also show that they know when not to tackle some situations, so they pass them to people with more suitable skills.

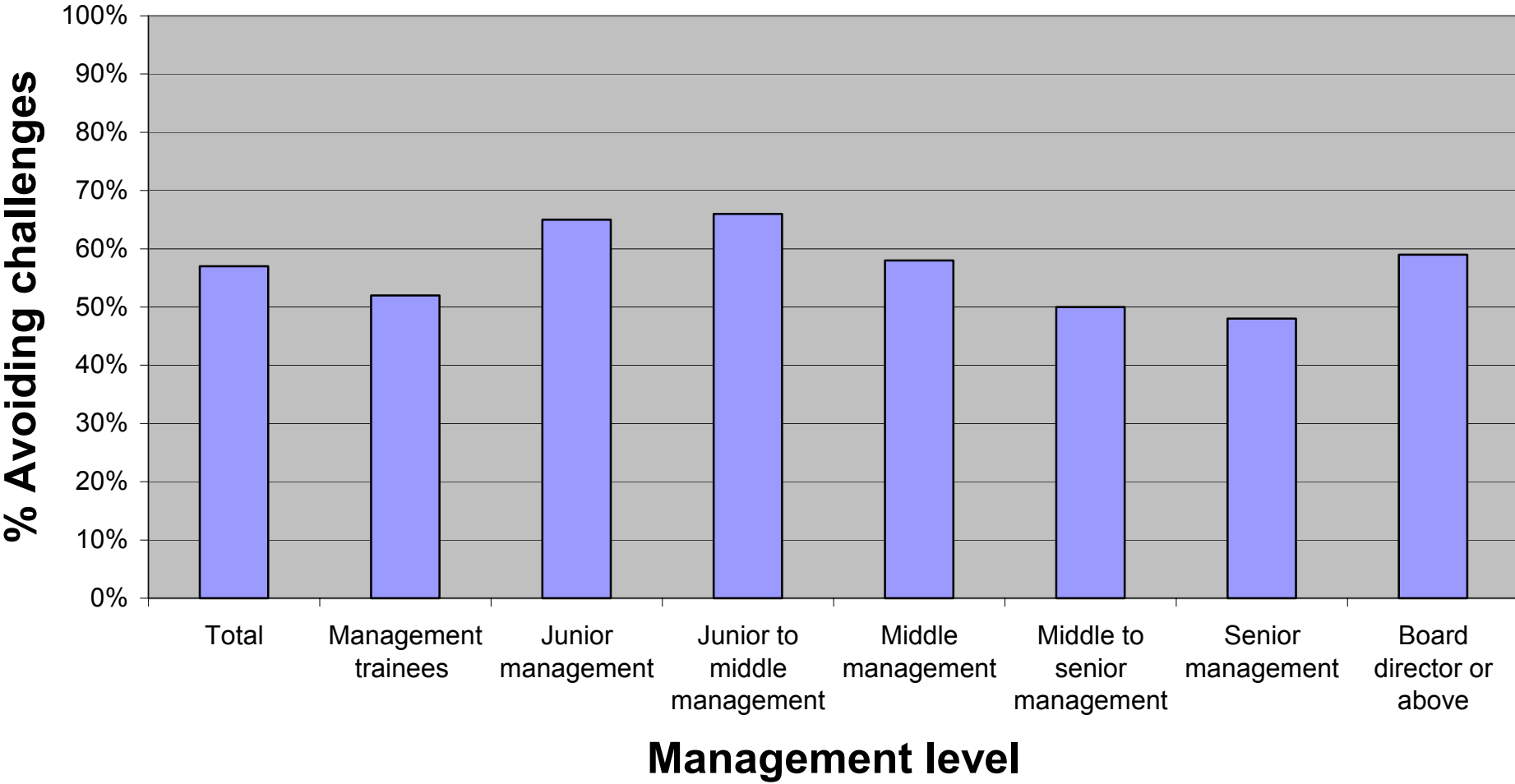
Just over half of management trainees say they avoid challenges. The slightly lower figure may be due to them not having tackled as many difficult situations as more senior executives.

What is clear is that people with management responsibility at every level avoid difficult situations and decisions. They are more likely to be afraid of failure than excited by challenge. UK plc appears to be starved of courage.

“I was made team leader when I had no experience of managing people. My instinct was to pussyfoot around issues, rather than face them. I would have liked to observe a manager tackling performance issues so I could learn from observing them.”

“A colleague was not pulling her weight. I felt quite scared giving criticism. Yes I was tempted to back away, but didn't as I got support from my manager.”

**Figure 1: Lacking the courage**



## A cry for help

A combination of pride and anxiety about revealing weakness prevents us from seeking guidance when faced with new management challenges. What we would like is more formal training and support initiated by the employer instead of executives feeling they need help, but suffering in silence.

Figure 2 (next page) shows the management level and times they have wished they had more support.

Management level	Once Or Twice	Repeatedly	Total
• Management trainees	52%	19%	71%
• Junior management	54%	38%	92%
• Junior to middle management	7%	35%	92%
• Middle management	54%	33%	87%
• Middle to senior management	7%	33%	91%
• Senior Management	52%	29%	81%
• Board Director	52%	24%	76%
• Total	54%	33	87%

Almost nine out of 10 executives wish they had more support or training when they face new challenges. A third admit to having felt like this on several occasions.

The highest level of demand for training and support comes from junior and junior-to-middle executives, with over nine out of 10 wishing they had more help.

Nearly four out of five senior managers and board directors wish they had more training and support – a surprising proportion at such a level, perhaps, although inevitably each level brings new and tougher challenges. A senior manager’s new business challenge may come in the shape of a whole new country rather than a number of individual customers, for example.

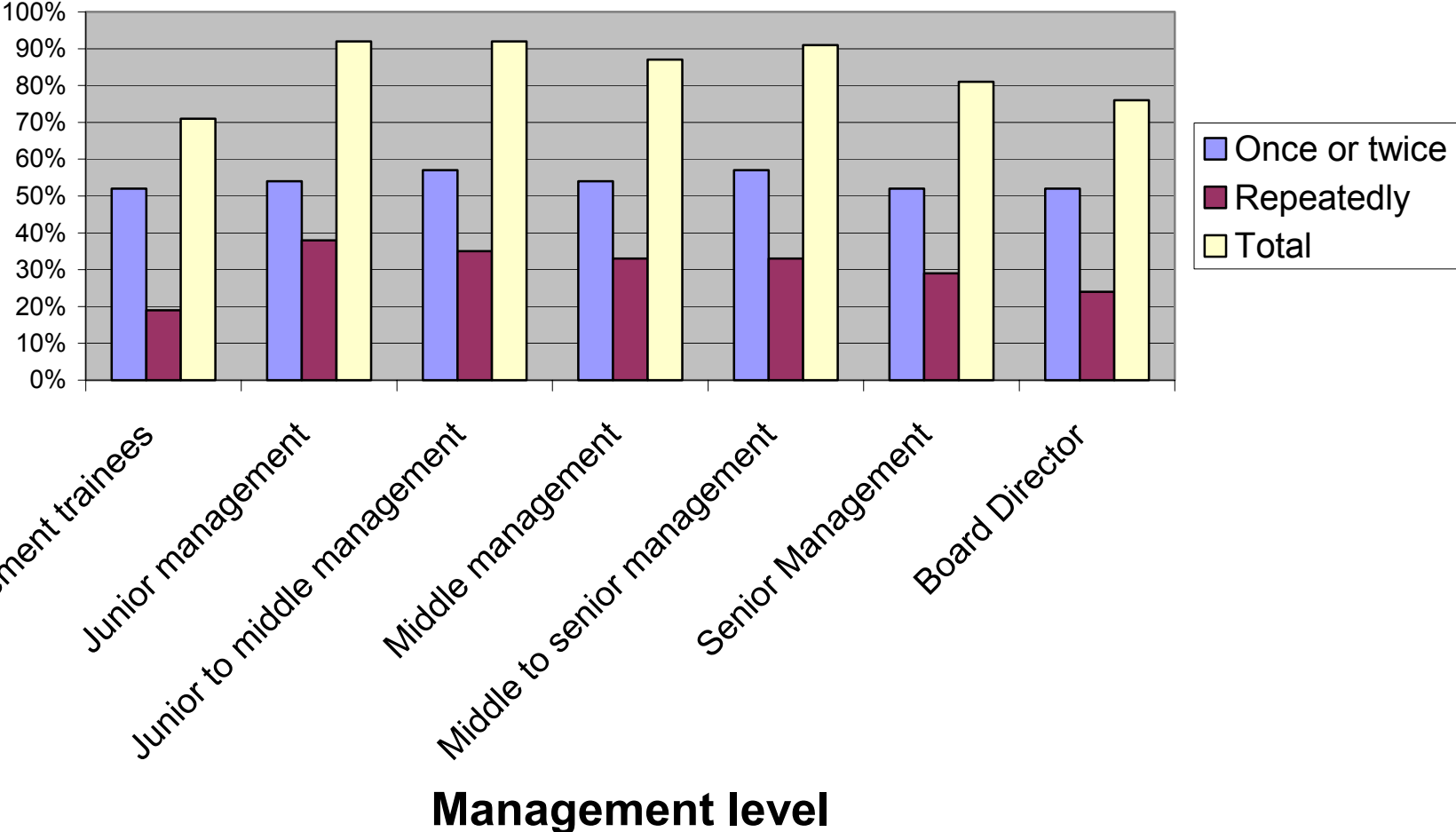
Even management trainees, whom we would expect to have adequate training and support, say they need help with their challenges. Over seven out of 10 say they are not adequately supported.

“Staff management is far more difficult than budget management, customer care or meeting targets. Managers have very busy lives and it would be helpful to have support outside the organisation that you could approach in confidence of mentoring.”

These responses show that executives think employers should provide relevant training and support at every level. And, as individuals move into more senior roles and face new and more daunting decisions, they need preparation with further support and training. The priority should be given to those in junior and junior-to-middle management who are likely to be feeling the highest level of fear in facing challenges. Empowering them will unleash their potential and prepare them for the tougher challenges that await them further on in their careers.

### Figure 2: A cry for help...

Wish for more support



## **Not so brave business**

Drilling down to the challenges managers find most daunting, we find that they fall into three broad categories. Most daunting is simply the need to stay with it; in difficult situations people too easily lose the courage of their own conviction, become demoralised and doubt their own judgement. The most populated group of challenges centres around dealing with people, motivating employees, tackling difficult staff issues, managing difficult personalities or angry customers. And, the third group of tough challenges can be defined as moving out of the comfort zone into areas where existing skills are no longer enough.

### **The Most Daunting Challenges Top 10**

1. Doubting their own judgement
2. Feeling dispirited when whatever they're doing isn't working
3. Dealing with difficult staff issues (such as redundancy)
4. Working with poor support from above
5. Dealing with difficult personalities
6. Dealing with the unexpected
7. Giving criticism
8. Dealing with angry, bullying or hostile customers
9. Feeling out of touch
10. Dealing with things outside their own area of expertise

Lack of confidence in their own judgement is the biggest barrier to acting with courage, cited by nine out of 10 respondents. This leads to despondency when a chosen approach appears not to work and almost nine out of 10 respondents say they have felt dispirited when what they had been doing hadn't worked.

This courage deficit occurs at every level – even board directors (almost six out of 10) say they sometimes doubt their own judgement.

A third of respondents admit to having felt out of touch, a figure that remains constant at every management level.

Feeling out of touch is the most daunting challenge faced by young executives. Every management trainee we interviewed who has experienced a feeling of being out of touch says they found the experience daunting.

It is frankly shocking that so many of those appointed to lead teams at every level in UK plc can, in challenging situations show such loss of composure and courage. The assumption is always that the leader is strong, has a clear plan and the ability to build a route to reach corporate goals successfully. But it appears that this is not the case and that corporate success is being held back by a lack of conviction and willingness to step out courageously into unknown territory. Clearly, businesses that nurture bravery at work and overcome the fear of failure have a real opportunity to develop a competitive edge.

## The people challenge

Not the most daunting but certainly the most common challenges we face are connected to how we deal with our fellow humans. The art of diplomacy is rare at work where we find persuading, leading, influencing and winning over people hard to do. Indeed, eight of the 10 most frequently cited challenges involve dealing with people, surprising given the many other financial and strategic challenges executives face.

Dealing with difficult personalities; receiving and giving criticism; and negotiating with people, are the most frequently faced of all challenges. Managers at every level find these tasks daunting and feel they need help in honing their people skills.

### The Most Common Challenges – Top 10

1. Dealing with difficult personalities, including customers, staff or boss
2. Giving criticism
3. Receiving criticism
4. Negotiating, with people outside their authority eg, colleagues, customers or suppliers
5. Making judgements or decisions under time pressure
6. Communicating bad news upwards or downwards
7. Working with poor support from above
8. Dealing with angry, bullying or hostile customers or clients
9. Feeling dispirited when whatever you're doing isn't working
10. Building credibility with important new clients/customers/stakeholders

“An issue arose with a senior member of staff; bullying was her management technique. I was scared as she was my senior manager. I was tempted to back away, but glad that I challenged her and took it above. I got no support whatsoever.”

Dealing with difficult personalities (including customers, staff or boss), is the most common challenge, faced by over nine out of 10 respondents. This is a significant finding given that as well as being a common challenge, it is also one of the most daunting. Dealing with difficult staff issues is seen as very daunting by almost nine out of 10 executives with almost a third finding it “really daunting” or “terrifying”.

Giving criticism is the second most frequent challenge, with nine out of 10 of managers having regular occasion to address poor performance in those who report to them and over three-quarters finding doing so daunting.

Nearly half our respondents find negotiating challenging, a significant problem when one considers that over eight out of 10 say they negotiate with other departments, customers, or suppliers on a regular basis.

Coping with angry or hostile customers or clients is also deemed to be very challenging. Almost three quarters have had to deal with angry people, with most finding it challenging.

Helping executives to work more comfortably with a whole range of personalities and styles will remove the unease they face in their relationships with all those they need to manage and influence.

## Embracing the diverse

As the author James Surowiecki<sup>1</sup> argues, groups of people make smarter decisions than expert individuals – but only if these groups are allowed to be genuinely diverse (ie, diverse in terms of difference of thought, background, ethnicity, and age). Suggesting that the “collective wisdom” of crowds delivers its value because each member brings different insight, information, experience and decision-making.

For the moment, though, most of us spend our days working with people who are pretty much like ourselves. Most of our respondents say they work with like-minded people or people from a similar background to themselves. But, like Surowiecki, they appreciate the benefits of diversity and given the chance would welcome the opportunity to lead a mixed team.

- Over eight out of 10 people in management roles would welcome the chance to work with people from different backgrounds. There is little disagreement through the ranks: nine out of 10 of management trainees favour working with a diverse team, reducing gradually to a still high eight out of 10 at senior management and board levels.
- This enthusiasm translates into confidence with almost 90% of respondents saying they would be very comfortable to working with people from different ethnic backgrounds, which may be due to experience with diverse people in their personal lives, eg, at school, instead of just at work.
- Most respondents agree that a diverse team is more creative.
- Workplaces in the rest of the country are much less diverse than London, with only 14% of those in the North West saying they work in a mixed team. The North West has areas with high levels of ethnic minorities, so the results point to that region remaining more segregated at work than the rest of the country.
- The Scottish results show a different outlook towards diversity. Despite having the highest level of people working in homogeneous teams, they are almost as confident as Londoners in working with people from different backgrounds, with almost nine out of 10 saying they could do so comfortably.
- People from East Anglia are the least interested or willing to work with different cultures, with almost a quarter saying they would not like to. This may simply be because the region is less mixed anyway.
- People in London and the South East are the most willing to take orders from someone of the opposite sex. The least willing are employees from East Anglia and the North East.
- Organisations keen to build diverse teams will need to consider these regional variations as they expand their businesses into new parts of the country.

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<sup>1</sup>Surowiecki, J. *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004)

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the results that UK plc is not working to its full potential because managers are not confident in dealing with many of the new challenges they face as they rise up the corporate ladder.

When executives feel they are leading outside their authority and experience, they can doubt their judgements and lose confidence. This is particularly the case when managers face difficult situations involving people. These problems are magnified when situations do not work out as planned, leaving managers dispirited and fearing failure.

Most executives find new challenges daunting, and facing them unprepared and unsupported can sap their confidence, leading them to doubt their own ability. The result is often deferring or avoiding activity altogether.

The crunch time on the career ladder is at junior and middle management. This is when executives face the most challenges, avoid the most daunting challenges and are most likely to wish they had more training and support. Employers need to ensure these executives have more help or their future talent pool could be drained by people staying in their existing comfort zones or becoming so disillusioned they decide to search for alternatives to their career.

Thankfully executives realise their limits with the majority wishing they had more support or training available to them as they face new challenges. And, wish they had a more mixed team to work with, believing diversity equals creativity.

It is now up to employers to respond to this call for help and make the most of the talent within their organisations.

## **Plugging the drain**

### **Tips for employers**

1. Pay careful attention to your junior and middle managers
2. Let everyone know that you applaud those who take calculated risks and understand that this can sometimes lead to failure
3. Create activities that show that teams can positively learn from mistakes, for example post-project reviews involving the whole team in identifying ways to do things better next time
4. Give staff time to develop new ideas and encourage them to take them forward. Put in a mechanism to celebrate and reward courage that leads to triumph
5. Encourage staff to develop broader networks and look for leadership opportunities, which will force them out of their comfort zones.

### **Tips for employees**

1. Don't be afraid to seek advice; you will command more respect for consulting than you will for burying your head in the sand or avoiding the challenge
2. Ask for leadership development opportunities or placements in other departments so you get used to working outside your comfort zone and working with people who have different expertise to your own
3. Take up activities outside work to hone your skills in working outside your comfort zone: become a school governor or a charity fundraiser for example
4. Seek opportunities to develop more diverse networks of people who may think very differently or have very different values. These networks will bring value to both you and your organisation.
5. Tell your employer you want to work in a more diverse environment because you know it will make you a better leader and the organisation stronger.

### **Tackling the Challenges**

By the end of this week aim to have tackled the challenges you have been putting off. Do not be afraid to ask for help if you need it.

1. List the challenge/s that you have been avoiding and the reasons why.
2. Face the fear of these challenges and summon the courage to tackle them head on.
3. Decide how you are going to approach your challenges. There may be several ways, so weigh the up the pros and cons of each way and take the best plan of action.
4. Decide the best time to tackle your challenge. Timing can be crucial so think about it carefully. Ensure you tackle your challenge at that specific time and do not put it off.
5. Tackle your challenge head on focusing on a successful outcome.

## **Verbatims**

### **Facing the fear**

“Thinking the organisation that I was working for thought I was inadequate...I did not back away from the challenge. I got and gave support and used the experience as a learning tool.”

“Compiling and producing a report for the Chief Executive in only a week. I was a nervous wreck trying to reach an almost impossible deadline. I did not want to do it or think I could do it, but eventually I did. I had very little support and managed on my own, which taught me a few things about myself.”

“Having to relocate a company to Norway from the UK, with many redundancies. Felt under huge pressure. Tempted to back away, but had no choice but to press forwards. No support but coped admirably!”

“After only four months in my first job my manager (the head of the organisation) broke down in tears in front of me saying he couldn’t cope. I had to run the organisation myself in order to bring in income, while at the same time encouraging my manager to regain his confidence, for four months until he could be replaced. It was terrifying – I had no experience. I was tempted to back away but also saw it as quite possibly one of the best learning opportunities I would ever experience. I embraced it.”

“Making the step up from middle management to senior management and having the ability to be able to do the job well. I felt quite challenged at the time.”

“I had a panic attack in a meeting in 1997 and eventually gave up my job 12 months later as I just couldn’t cope. It was brought on by stress and overwork and no support from my management team. I haven’t worked since. I am on anti-depressants and I take tranquilisers in certain social situations as I get very anxious around people.”

“To be a good leader you have to be confident; otherwise it’s better to resign and let somebody else handle things.”

“Loss of contracts for which I was responsible. I was gutted. I took control and retrieved as many as possible. I got full support from company to take whatever steps were necessary.”

“I felt very under pressure and felt I couldn’t ask for help from the MD as it would make me look incompetent.”

“Felt like the guy trying to keep his plate spinning. Never thought of backing away and probably embraced the challenge.”

## **People Issues**

“Having to close a multi-million pound deal when I knew the customer was about to announce huge losses. I was under pressure to get them to sign to make our bottom line look good even though I knew the customer would not complete the deal. I tried to warn management that this was the case but our own bank balance was more important.”

“A member of staff was stealing the funds to feed a drug habit and buy designer gear. I was upset, annoyed and bit distraught. No option but to investigate and tackle the problem. Very little support and senior management backing off. I would have liked a more open and honest approach to dealing with difficult situations.”

## **Cry for help**

“When backing away is not an option, but it is very difficult as you would lose all credibility if you don't fix it. You need good training, experience and belief in yourself to turn it around. It gets easier with time.”

“I had to make one of three colleagues redundant. I desperately wanted to avoid taking the necessary action, as I felt it would cause harm and be unjust. I would have liked some help and back up.”

“Having to sack a junior member of staff. Found it difficult to find the right words – are there any? I would like some training in this area.”

## **About Common Purpose**

Common Purpose is a campaigning organisation that believes the UK needs more – and more diverse – leaders. It runs leadership programmes for leaders of all ages, backgrounds and sectors.

Since 1989, more than 60,000 people have been involved in Common Purpose and over 16,000 leaders from every area of the UK have completed one or more of its programmes. More than 70 per cent of FTSE 100 companies and many small businesses and organisations across all sectors have used Common Purpose for professional development.

For more information on Common Purpose visit [www.commonpurpose.org.uk](http://www.commonpurpose.org.uk)