

Summary of *Restorative Leadership — Building Cultures of Connection, Accountability and Healing*

This post presents restorative leadership as a necessary and transformative response to the growing pressures, disconnection and burnout experienced across public services, particularly in social care. It argues that traditional leadership models rooted in hierarchy, control and performance metrics are no longer fit for purpose in a world marked by complexity, polarisation and emotional strain. As the text states, “traditional models of leadership rooted in hierarchy, control and efficiency are proving insufficient” and have contributed to “burnout, disengagement and stress” in organisations.

Restorative leadership is positioned not as a new invention but as a rediscovery of the qualities embodied by the best teachers, mentors and managers those who lead with humanity, curiosity and relational integrity. There is a longstanding culture in social care where promotions have been tied to structural performance and cost-saving rather than relational competence, noting that “staff do not feel valued” and workloads have tripled over two decades, contributing to sickness and service cuts. Against this backdrop, the author argues for recruiting and developing leaders with restorative values leaders who inspire, connect and build community rather than reinforce corporate detachment.

A powerful example is offered through Leeds Children’s Services, which transformed from inadequacy to becoming the only core city to achieve three consecutive Outstanding Ofsted ratings. It has been recognised that this has been due to the shift to the restorative vision of Director Nigel Richardson, who placed “people... at the heart of all work” and prioritised the needs of both families and employees. As a result, staff retention soared, vacancies disappeared, and applications for social work posts reached unprecedented levels. Leeds is presented as a national exemplar of what becomes possible when restorative principles guide organisational culture and leadership practice.

The post then outlines ten foundational traits of restorative leaders, plus an additional eleventh trait, each supported by research, reflective exercises and practical application.

1. Empathic Listening

Empathic listening is described as the bedrock of restorative leadership and the foundation of psychological safety. Amy Edmondson's work emphasises that when people feel heard, they feel valued and when they feel valued, they engage more fully. The text quotes Edmondson: "When people believe that their voice is welcome, they are far more likely to speak up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes".

Belinda Hopkins' frames listening as "an active, intentional act of respect" reinforces the idea that restorative leaders listen to understand, not to fix or judge. She includes a reflective exercise *Pause and Prepare* to help leaders regulate their emotions before entering difficult conversations, ensuring they show up with clarity and presence.

2. Relationship-Centred Leadership

Restorative leadership prioritises belonging over hierarchy. Research cited from Kitchingham, Sienrukos, and Reynolds shows that relational trust leads to greater cohesion, innovation and resilience. The research highlights that restorative leaders share power, co-create solutions and foster cultures where people can "show up as their full selves" rather than wearing a workplace persona.

A reflective practice, *Shared Power, Shared Purpose*, helps leaders shift from control to collaboration, encouraging humility, openness and shared vision.

3. Emotional Regulation

Restorative leaders model calm in crisis. Neuroscience shows that emotions are contagious and a regulated leader can stabilise a team. Emotional regulation is especially vital in trauma-informed environments, where anger or defensiveness can trigger fear responses. Emotional regulation is framed not as suppression but as intentional, values-aligned response.

4. Fairness and Accountability

Restorative leaders uphold fairness with compassion. They take responsibility for mistakes, model vulnerability and maintain clear expectations. Brené Brown's principle that "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind,"

emphasising that accountability is about growth, not punishment. Fairness is responsive rather than rigid, considering context, impact and need.

A structured exercise *Relational Accountability Conversation Prep* guides leaders in preparing for difficult conversations with empathy and clarity.

5. Inclusion and Collaboration

We need to acknowledge the loneliness of middle leadership, where team leaders feel squeezed between directives from above and resistance from below. Restorative leadership counters this by sharing power, involving people in decisions and valuing diverse voices. Research from the Centre for Creative Leadership is cited to show that inclusive leaders drive higher performance and innovation.

The *Strengths & Interests* workshop helps teams identify their collective assets and passions, building psychological safety and aligning tasks with motivation. Collaboration is framed not as consensus but as co-creation, leveraging diversity as a strength rather than a challenge.

6. Skilled Facilitation

Restorative leaders are facilitators of dialogue, not just managers of tasks. They create spaces for truth-telling, healing and repair. Drawing again on Belinda Hopkins, she emphasises that “restorative dialogue is a process, not a product.” Skilled facilitation requires patience, courage and humility, especially in conflict or emotionally charged situations.

7. Trauma Awareness and Compassion

Trauma-aware leadership recognises that challenging behaviours often reflect unmet needs or past harm. Trauma responses can appear as disengagement, defensiveness or conflict and that many people in caring professions carry their own histories of trauma. Leaders must therefore cultivate environments of safety, trust and empowerment.

The *Story Behind the Behaviour* exercise helps leaders shift from judgment to curiosity, mapping what a person says, does, feels and needs. Compassion is framed as wisdom and an ability to see beyond behaviour to the story beneath it.

8. Conflict Capability

Restorative leaders do not avoid conflict, they transform it. Drawing on John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation theory, Lederach sees conflict as a neutral energy that can lead to deeper understanding and stronger relationships when approached constructively. Conflict arises from communication breakdowns, myths, and misunderstandings and restorative leaders use dialogue, reflection and structured processes to navigate it safely.

9. Future-Focused and Restorative-Minded

Restorative leadership is proactive rather than reactive. Leaders look beyond immediate crises to build sustainable systems, strengthen relationships, and embed restorative practices into everyday operations. This future-focused mindset emphasises creativity, resilience and long-term wellbeing. Restorative leaders create environments where people feel valued, recognised and motivated to contribute meaningfully.

10. Values-Driven Leadership

Values sit at the heart of restorative leadership. Principles such as dignity, respect, inclusion and truth-telling guide decisions and behaviours. The use of the phrase, "We inspire not conspire, enthuse not use, relate not debate", illustrate the ethos of values-driven practice. Drawing on Simon Sinek's *Start with Why*, he argues that people follow leaders not for what they do but for why they do it.

11. Vulnerability (The "Plus One")

The final trait, vulnerability, is inspired by Brené Brown's work. Vulnerability is defined as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" and is presented as the birthplace of courage, creativity and connection. Restorative leadership requires vulnerability because it challenges traditional norms of control and certainty. Leaders must be willing to admit mistakes, ask for help and show up authentically.

Vulnerability enables relational accountability, repair and learning. It shifts cultures from perfectionism to progress, from blame to belonging, "to lead restoratively is a courageous act" and vulnerability is the mechanism through which that courage is expressed.

Conclusion

I believe that restorative leaders are and should be culture builders. They create environments where people feel safe, valued and connected. They lead with empathy, courage and integrity, they listen deeply, share power and transform conflict; they model fairness, foster inclusion and build for the future. In a world “hungry for connection and healing,” restorative leadership offers a path forward rooted in humanity and purpose.

The final challenge posed to the reader is not whether restorative leadership is needed, it clearly is, but how each of us will choose to become restorative leaders in our own contexts.

Jim McGrath
©NetCare 2026

1. Edmondson. A. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. (John Wiley & Sons)
2. Hopkins. B. (2004) *Just Schools: A Whole School Approach to Restorative Justice and The Restorative Classroom*. (JKP, London)
3. Kitchingham. C, Sienrukos. J and , Reynolds. V (2021). *The importance of restorative leadership practices in organizations: a Delphi study*. Journal of Behavioural Studies in Business, Volume 15
4. Goold. A (2024). *Restorative Practices and Leadership*. ICS Research, <https://iscresearch.com>
5. Brown. B (2018). *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*. Random House
6. Supporting Employees Through Workplace Trauma and Conflict <https://theworkplacemediator.co.uk/supporting-employees-through-workplace-trauma-and-conflict/>
7. Centre for Creative Leadership. (n.d.). 6 Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership. Retrieved from Leadership: For All Things Humanly Possible. <https://www.ccl.org/>

8. Brown, B. (2012). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Gotham Books.
9. Sourced at: <https://www.johnpaullederach.com/2023/03/conflict-transformation-a-working-definition/>
10. Sinek, S (2009). *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. Penguin Publications.

**Empathic Listening Relationship Centred Leadership Emotional
Regulation Fairness and Accountability Inclusion Collaboration Skilled
Facilitation Trauma Awareness Compassion Conflict Capability Future
Focused Restorative Minded Values Driven Leadership Vulnerability**