



Self-Awareness, Teams, and the Work of Leadership

Paul Lennen and Sean Coxall discuss why leadership performance depends not only on strategy and structure, but also on self-awareness, team dynamics, and the quality of working relationships.



A conversation about the less visible side of leadership

Leadership is often discussed through visible business questions. In fashion, retail, and sourcing, the emphasis tends to fall on strategy, planning, growth, operating discipline, or market performance. In this conversation, Paul Lennen and Sean Coxall spend more time on a different set of concerns. The focus is less on structure and more on the internal conditions in which people work: how they relate to one another, how they respond to pressure, how leaders are experienced by others, and why some teams work well while others become difficult places to operate.

Several themes run through the discussion. Self-awareness is treated as more than a personal quality. It is presented as something that shapes performance, communication, and trust. The conversation also returns repeatedly to the idea that leadership is not expressed only through decision-making from above. It is revealed in the atmosphere leaders create, in the habits a team takes from them, and in whether people feel able to contribute honestly. There is also a clear interest in the gap between what organisations say they value and what people actually experience inside them.

Rather than setting out a formal leadership model, the interview builds a view of the subject through examples, reflection, and comparison. At several points, Paul aims to translate broad concepts into practical workplace situations. Sean, for his part, keeps returning to the less visible side of organisational life, to behaviour, conflict, and the repeated patterns that often determine whether a team improves or remains stuck. What emerges is not a guide to leadership, but a discussion about the less visible dynamics that often shape it.

Self-awareness sits closer to performance than it first appears

One of the clearest arguments in the conversation is that self-awareness is not a secondary issue. Sean describes it as a missing quality in many workplaces, including at senior levels. In his account, many people do not fully understand how they are experienced by others, how their behaviour affects a team, or how their own assumptions shape the environment around them.

This is presented as a practical business problem rather than a purely personal one. The discussion suggests that organisations often pay close attention to plans, budgets, structures, and targets, while giving less weight to the way people actually behave inside those systems. Yet plans only become real through the actions of the people expected to deliver them.

If leaders are unaware of their own impact, the result may be poor communication, low trust, and a growing gap between how they think they are leading and how that leadership is received.

Sean also points to a familiar organisational silence. Employees often do not tell managers when something is wrong, either because they are reluctant to do so or because they assume it will not make a difference. That creates a difficult dynamic. Leaders may continue believing that they are effective, while dissatisfaction accumulates beneath the surface. The discussion treats this as one reason poor habits persist. Self-awareness is not just limited in individuals. It is also weakened by environments in which honest feedback rarely travels upward.

Leadership is experienced through behaviour

Another strong theme in the interview is that leadership is not defined only by title or formal authority. The discussion treats it more as a behavioural presence. Leaders shape an environment around them, whether they intend to or not, and the quality of that environment affects how others work.

Paul develops this point by distinguishing leadership from earlier stages of responsibility. In his own description, management is more closely associated with control and organisation, while leadership is more about creating an environment in which other people can succeed. That framing gives the conversation a useful structure. It shifts attention from hierarchy alone to the quality of influence leaders exercise.

This part of the discussion is less interested in charisma than in the practical consequences of behaviour. A leader who creates fear, distance, or defensiveness shapes the organisation in one way. A leader who creates trust, clarity, or openness shapes it in another. Sean reinforces this by returning several times to the importance of example. People do not simply follow formal instructions. They take cues from how senior figures behave, what they normalise, and how they work with others.

Teams often reflect the behaviour of their leaders

The discussion repeatedly suggests that teams absorb and reproduce the habits of their leaders. This idea appears first in Sean's reflections on large corporate environments that were full of capable people but also marked by rivalry and limited cooperation. He describes cultures in which competition became intense enough to undermine collaboration.

The point is not simply that some companies are political. It is that behaviour at the top can shape a wider working culture in ways that are hard to reverse later.

That theme returns in a more specific example when Sean talks about a team structure he saw functioning particularly well. His emphasis is not on process alone, but on how two senior leaders worked closely together and created a collaborative tone around them. In his telling, that way of working influenced hiring, shaped the culture beneath them, and created a team that was more aligned internally than others around it.

The interview does not treat collaboration as a soft aspiration. It is presented more practically than that. A collaborative team shares information more effectively, reduces internal friction, and gives itself a better chance of acting coherently. By contrast, a fragmented team may still contain strong individuals, but the organisation pays a price through duplication, withholding, rivalry, and slower execution.

Hierarchy can get in the way of performance

One of the more practical parts of the conversation comes through two stories about team exercises. These examples matter because they ground the discussion in situations that are recognisable and specific, rather than leaving it at the level of general principle.

Paul describes a leadership course in which a group was asked to build a go-kart and complete a course within a short period of time. The first attempts went badly. By the time the final round began, he had little belief that the team would succeed. What surprised him was not only that they did succeed, but that they did so by coming together far more cohesively than before. The experience stayed with him because it changed his own assumptions about what a team could do and about how quickly a group can perform differently once trust begins to take hold.

Sean responds with a similar story from an earlier point in his career. In his case, people from many organisational layers were put into one team. At first, hierarchy distorted the exercise. More senior participants hung back. The most junior person felt intimidated. The group did not operate as a team so much as a collection of positions. When the exercise was repeated on the basis of skill rather than level, performance changed sharply.

These stories support one of the interview's quieter arguments. Hierarchy may be necessary inside organisations, but it can also obstruct useful contribution if people begin to defer to status rather than capability. Teams function better when responsibility is shaped by the demands of the task,

not only by formal rank. That does not remove leadership from the picture. It reframes it. The work of leadership, in these examples, lies partly in making sure that hierarchy does not silence the people who are best able to contribute.

Speaking up is both personal and structural

The conversation returns several times to the issue of voice. Sean argues that many people do not tell their manager when they are unhappy or when something about the working relationship is going wrong. Paul then takes that observation into more difficult territory by referring to experiences that are common in organisations but hard to discuss openly: uncomfortable bosses, bullying behaviour, and workplaces in which people feel trapped between self-protection and the wish to keep the peace.

This part of the interview is notable for how cautious it remains. Neither speaker suggests that these situations are easy to fix. If anything, Paul emphasises how widespread and difficult they are. He notes that many people, at many levels, have found themselves in environments they would rather leave or change but do not know how to address directly.

What the discussion does suggest is that silence has consequences. If people feel unable to speak honestly, poor dynamics often become embedded. Teams adapt around them. They become part of the accepted atmosphere, even if few people would actively defend them. Over time, this can narrow what is sayable inside an organisation and make straightforward problems much harder to surface.

Change begins with recognising repeated patterns

Another persistent theme in the conversation is that many organisational problems are sustained through repetition. People respond in familiar ways, avoid certain situations, or continue with habits that are no longer useful. Sean returns to this idea several times. In his view, improvement often begins when people notice those patterns more clearly and become less automatic in the way they respond.

The interview does not present change as a neat sequence. Nor does it suggest that awareness alone is enough. What it does suggest is that many people remain more constrained by habit than they realise. They are not always lacking intelligence or technical skill. Sometimes they are repeating a way of reacting that has become routine.

Work shapes life because it occupies so much of it

A quieter but important thread in the discussion concerns the place of work within the wider shape of life. Early on, Sean makes the observation that although people often say family, home, or private life matter most to them, they spend a large share of their time at work. If that environment is unhappy or obstructive, it affects more than output. It spills into the rest of life as well.

This point helps explain why the conversation spends so much time on the emotional and relational dimensions of working life. The argument is not simply that stronger teams are better for business, though that is clearly part of it. It is also that the everyday quality of working relationships matters because work occupies so much time and attention.

That does not turn the interview into a discussion of wellbeing in a general sense. The framing remains mostly organisational. But it does widen the significance of leadership behaviour. Poor communication, conflict, and low trust are not treated only as business inefficiencies. They are also part of how people experience a large portion of their lives.

A different emphasis in the leadership discussion

A business may have a strategy, a structure, and capable people, yet still struggle if its internal dynamics make honest communication difficult, if hierarchy suppresses contribution, or if leaders fail to see how they are experienced by others.

That may be the strongest thread running through the conversation. The questions that matter are not only what leaders decide, but how they are present, how they are understood, and what kind of working life they make more likely around them.