

The Joyful Leader's Playbook

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Five practical moves to build a thriving team culture people actually want to be part of.





Carly Cannings, Founder of The Happy Business School

You Don't Need Another Culture Manifesto

You don't need another culture manifesto. You need five things you can actually do on Monday morning. No ice cream vans. No ping pong tables. Just real moves that make people want to stay, contribute and do their best work.

How to use this playbook: each of the five moves follows the same simple format - Problem, Move, Try This and Watch Out For - so you can pick it up and put it down without losing the thread.

Start with the move that stings the most. That's usually the one you need first. If one of them makes you a little uncomfortable, lean in - that's the point.

Let's get started.

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Move 1

The 2-Minute Culture Check



The Problem

You can't fix what you haven't noticed; most leaders only find out their culture had a problem when it shows up in an exit interview.

The Move

Regularly run a quick, honest self-check on your leadership. Just five questions, answered by you, in the two minutes before your next team member 1:1.

Try This Today

Before your next 1:1, take two minutes to ask yourself these five questions honestly:

- When did I last genuinely ask how this person was doing - and actually listen to the answer?
- Is anyone on my team quieter than usual, or less engaged than they were a month ago?
- Have I given clear, honest feedback in the last two weeks - or have I been avoiding something?
- Are people bringing me problems, or are they solving things without me because they expect no support?
- If I were on this team, would I feel trusted, valued and clear on what matters right now?

Watch Out For

Treating this as a tick-box exercise. If you're not a little uncomfortable answering at least one question honestly, you're probably not doing it right.

Move 2

Listen Like You Mean It



The Problem

Most leaders think they're good listeners because they don't interrupt. Nodding along isn't listening, it's just queuing your next sentence.

The Move

Use reflection before response. Before offering a fix, opinion or next step, say back what you heard in your own words. This one shift tells your team that you actually heard them - not just the words, but the meaning behind them.

Try This Today

The next time someone brings you a problem, use this reflection script before you offer any advice or solution:

"So what I'm hearing is [X] and it sounds like [the impact or feeling]. Have I got that right?"

Then pause. Let them confirm or correct you. Once they have, ask:

"What would be most helpful right now a second opinion, or a bit of space to think it through yourself?"

Then do whatever they say.

Watch Out For

Reflecting back and then launching into advice anyway. If you asked what's helpful, let their answer actually change what you do next. If you're already forming your solution while they're still talking, start again.

Move 3

Hand Back The Reins



The Problem

Leaders who hold on to every decision aren't protecting quality - they're quietly telling their team they don't trust them, one micro-decision at a time.

The Move

Take one recurring decision that currently lands on your desk and hand over the authority to make it, not just the task of doing it. There's a difference between delegating a job and delegating the power to choose how to do it.

Try This Today

Pick one recurring decision that currently lands on your desk, then:

- Name the decision clearly - be specific about what is now theirs to own
- Set the boundaries - budget limit, timeline, who needs to be looped in
- Define what 'done' looks like - outcomes, not process
- Step back - resist the urge to be consulted before they act
- Let them report the outcome, not seek your approval

The goal isn't to offload work. It's to build a team that thinks, decides and acts - because they know you trust them to.

Watch Out For

Handing over the decision and then still asking to review it before it happens. Real ownership means they make the call, not just carry out yours. If you catch yourself saying "just run it by me first," ask yourself: is that really about quality, or is it about control?

Move 4

Say The Hard Thing



The Problem

The conversation you're avoiding is the one your team needs you to have. Leaders often mistake avoidance for kindness. But letting an issue sit for six weeks doesn't protect anyone. It just lets the problem grow roots.

The Move

Name It, Don't Nurse It. Say the honest thing early and plainly, instead of hinting at it, softening it beyond recognition, or waiting for the "right moment" that never quite arrives.

Try This Today

Use this script to have the hard conversation:

"I want to raise something honestly, because I think it matters and I'd rather say it now than let it sit."

Then name the specific issue - clearly, calmly and without excessive caveats.
"Can we figure out together what's causing it, and what might help?"

This approach signals respect, not criticism. It tells your team: I trust you enough to be straight with you.

Watch Out For

Softening it into so many caveats that the actual message disappears. If they leave the conversation unsure what you were trying to say, it doesn't count as honest.

Move 5

Make It Stick



The Problem

Most culture efforts fade in about three weeks because they depend entirely on the leader remembering. Good intentions aren't a system.

The Move

Install one weekly ritual that runs itself, not relying on memory or motivation. A ritual is something small, regular and expected. When it becomes part of the team's rhythm, it stops needing you to push it.

Try This Today

Choose one ritual to start this week:

- The Friday Shoutout - Name a win and who made it happen. Takes two minutes. Put it in your calendar to remind you.
- The Monday Check-in - A 10 minute team huddle to kick off the week. What have you got on this week? Do you need my help with anything?
- The Straight-Talk Slot - Five minutes at the end of your team meeting for open issues. No immediate fix needed. Just space to say the thing.

Watch Out For

Choosing a ritual that sounds good but won't survive a busy week. Pick the one you can do even on your worst Monday.



About The Happy Business School

The Happy Business School's mission is simply to make workplaces happier. By creating people-centric cultures, where happy people can thrive at work, everyone wins. As a result, both the organisation, and the people who work within it, will flourish.

The Happy Business School's approach has two parts. Firstly, to educate and empower people to invest in their own happiness, by giving them the understanding, tools and techniques they need to be joyful at work. This goes hand in hand with the second part - creating the right environment to allow people to flourish at work. Without a culture that supports and encourages thriving at work, tools and techniques can only go so far.

The Happy Business School works with organisations of all shapes and sizes, delivering workshops and keynotes, and providing consultancy services, to help organisations tap into one of the most undervalued business tools they have at their disposal - happiness.

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Workshops



[Carly's] enthusiasm, drive and knowledge...really comes through. Carly gets individuals, teams and leaders. [S]he understands the challenges and has simple yet effective tools to make a big difference... We all felt invigorated and full of great ideas after her workshop, she's just overall a really lovely human.

Monica Maya, The Cabinet Office

Workshops are usually tailored to meet the client's specific needs but some examples include:

- Workplace Happiness 101 - An introductory session exploring individual happiness hacks (mindset, relationships, happy habits etc) and what a thriving workplace culture looks like,
- How to Lead a Happy Team - A session for leaders to work on their own happiness and learn how to empower and encourage their teams to be more joyful at work,
- CultureSpark - A session for senior leaders to reflect on the current culture and create a roadmap to a more joyful, thriving and people-centric culture.

From £650

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Keynotes



Carly came to kick off our leadership team meeting for 2024 - she was absolutely brilliant. Sharing her personal experiences to help us ask questions about the way we lead our teams to be happier. Really pleased I met Carly - even on a personal level she makes me want to do better!

Lisa Smith, We The Curious

Whether it's a slot at a leadership event, company conference or something else, leave you people buzzing with ideas and ready to be more joyful at work.

Recent talks include:

- Doughnuts and Dopamine: Was Aristotle right when he said happiness depends upon ourselves?*
- Why workplace happiness matters and how to increase it*
- Happy Habits: Looking after your happiness as a small business owner*

More themes and ideas: running great meetings, helping remote teams thrive, nurturing social connections at work, kindness in the workplace, the power of vulnerability, having great conversations.

From £450

Consultancy



We've really enjoyed working with Carly, who has helped us develop our company-wide training programme on fostering a happy workplace. She took the programme from concept to delivery with endless patience and a constant smile. Her relatable experiences and engaging approach made the training not only effective but also enjoyable. We couldn't have asked for a better partner in this journey!

Emily Witt, Optimised

If your organisation is looking for some support with culture change, here are some ways The Happy Business School can help:

- *designing and delivering training programmes around workplace culture and leadership,*
- *working with senior leadership teams to develop and to bring organisational values,*
- *1:1 work to help leaders develop their skills and create thriving team environments.*

Bespoke pricing

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Want to find out more?

If you'd like to find out more about how The Happy Business School can support your organisation then get in touch.

Send an email or get in touch via LinkedIn or Instagram using these details.



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