

Where must we go, in search of our better selves?

“Where must we go, we who wander this wasteland, in search of our better selves?”
First History Man, Mad Max: Fury Road (quote at the end of the movie).

A note on the quote

The movie *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) is set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland created by war, environmental collapse, and the breakdown of social order. In its final moment after the violence, the loss, the long pursuit across the desert, and the theme of redemption, the question is not “how did we end up here?” but “where must we go, in search of our better selves?” Now that is a question worth borrowing.



The corporate wasteland

I have spent nearly three decades walking into organisations as a facilitator. In a significant number of them, I encounter something that, after the niceties have been observed and the corporate language has fallen away, looks unsettlingly like a wasteland. Not a wasteland of bombs and dust, but a wasteland of people in a hostile environment where they feel restricted, silenced, and even their job security is uncertain. Capable colleagues quietly go through the motions, with some floundering in presenteeism. Talented people masking their truth to survive. Some leaders project a certainty and confidence they do not truly feel but believe they must show. Whole teams are trapped in routines and processes they struggle with, but no one will raise any challenges against them, except quietly among themselves. Mistakes are hidden because admitting them is dangerous. Truth is filtered out of many conversations that matter greatly, as decisions are made based on them. And threading through all of it, a low murmur of resignation: “This is just how it is here.”

These are the wastelands of corporate life. They are not natural disasters. They are made by people, sustained by people, but here is the hopeful part: they can be unmade by people. This document is about how they form, why they persist, and what we **must** do, individually and collectively, to leave them behind in search of our better selves. I grant you the metaphor is not exact. But corporate wastelands erode people’s “why”, their belief, and their drive. They are different, but the desolation and loneliness are strikingly similar.

How the wasteland forms

Corporate wastelands do not appear overnight. They accumulate year on year through a small set of failures, repeated until they become normal. The pattern is consistent.

Poor leadership and management. The vast majority of leaders and managers I meet are not vindictive or ill-intentioned. They are managing or leading others, which can be highly challenging, and all whilst doing their own work. Most people in these roles were never taught how to manage people; they were promoted for their work-related skills or tenure with little or no regard to their ability to manage people. Handed a team and told to get on with it. Left to invent their leadership style in real time, and possibly on the wrong examples from those they themselves have suffered under previously or witnessed in other teams. Their failures are rarely malicious; they are often just due to a lack of professional training.



A lack of professional training in people skills. Most of the leaders I meet have been formally trained in the technical aspects of their job, finance, engineering, sales, marketing, and HR. But very few have been formally trained in the **people** skills we all require to manage others. This gap, in my view, is the single largest cause of the wastelands we all experience. Most, not all, organisations in the UK have this very odd approach to training people to manage others. They wait until they have been put into a team managers or leaders position, and then, sometimes years later, they put them on a training programme. That’s too late!

If you're now thinking that this is me just trying to get you to purchase training from us, it is not, I promise. Think of how many times you, your family or friends have been in a shop, bought something, and come out thinking how lovely or awful the salesperson was. Arguably, all salespeople know the sales process, how to use payment options, how to wrap or bag purchases, and how to record email addresses, etc. They know the technical aspects of their job. But the good ones are either naturally gifted with people skills or well-trained in customer-facing skills. The skills, knowledge and understanding required to manage or lead others include many topics and are rarely found in untrained people.

Ineffective Performance Management. Most organisations have a performance management process. In my experience, most performance management processes have become, in practice, a tick-box exercise. The very term Performance Management, for most, makes people think, "Tick box exercise", "can't afford the time", "no one really cares or does anything afterwards", and so on. The form is filled in. The conversation is rushed. The rating/scoring/grade is often not what it should be, as emotions get in the way. Little or no development emerges from the sessions, even when they are promised, and follow-up is left rolling beside the tumbleweeds in that wasteland. The employee leaves the meeting, realising that the process has become a performance in itself. That does not develop people; it does not hold them to account; it does not surface the truth, the challenges, or the fact that your best people are looking for jobs elsewhere. It just consumes time with no real ROI. But, in fairness, **some** organisations work hard at this and make a difference.



A lack of accountability. Accountability without consequence is a waste, and in wasteland organisations, both the language and the action of consequence have gone missing. Poor behaviour is tolerated because addressing it is uncomfortable. People are marked up as excellent when, in fact, they are far from it. But there's a huge reluctance to say what needs to be said! The link between a professional, friendly, and well-facilitated one-to-one has slowly eroded, and the conscientious colleagues who notice it are almost driven to leave for a more accountable working environment, as they're sick and tired of carrying poor performers whose managers don't hold them to account.

Managers who hand people problems to HR. A manager's job is to be the primary point of contact and the primary source of feedback, accountability, care and support for the people they manage. When difficult conversations are needed, it is the manager who should have them, as they (in theory) know the person, their work, and their situation best. By all means, ask HR for advice beforehand, as, depending on the subject(s) to be discussed, they may advise you to have them join you as a witness.

In wasteland organisations, managers often pass challenging conversations to HR, often because they are afraid to have them themselves. Now, before we scold those people, think from their shoes. They know this is an important discussion, and they don't feel able or confident to have it, so they pass it to the experts. I get that. But the root cause here is that they have never been trained to handle them.



The damage is real. Colleagues experience their manager as absent in the moments that they really need them. A follow-on impact is that HR becomes overstretched and resentful as they're passed all the challenges managers should be addressing with their teams. If this rings a bell with your organisation, address it as soon as possible.

If you are a leader and you cannot remember the last time you held a challenging conversation yourself, that probably means you need to step up and support your people.

If you are an HR professional and find yourself facilitating the conversations managers should be having, then add training to that to-do list and help all managers and leaders learn how to approach, facilitate, and follow up on challenging conversations.

Psychological Safety

If I were forced to blame just one thing on toxic cultures and this wasteland thinking, it would have to be the lack of **psychological safety**. Just as rust starts slowly and then spreads, causing deeper and deeper problems until structures fail, so does the pressure of stifling what needs to be said. It spreads through everything.

The stories about what may happen or has happened to people spread during coffee-and tea-making moments, lunch breaks, and smoking huddles. This is a culture killer. It doesn't happen quickly, but once it bites, things go downhill fast.



In every organisation I have worked with where the working environment has been “challenging”, the same pattern appears in the post-mortem: people knew all about the problem(s). Multiple people, and sometimes for months and yes, even years. But they did not speak to those who could do something about it. Why? Because speaking out felt risky. Sometimes the risk was real; colleagues had been quietly punished, sidelined, or labelled as “difficult” for being courageous enough to speak out about their concerns (Hi Soph 🙌 😊). Sometimes the risk was perceived rather than real, but the perception was enough. (See our handout on “belief creates reality”). People weighed the cost of speaking against the cost of staying silent, and year after year, those thousands of small moments led them to conclude that silence was safer. That repeated belief, multiplied across a workforce, is what produces the wasteland. Even managers who wanted to escalate up to their bosses were too scared of the repercussions they may face. In some organisations, senior leaders knew their director would be furious, so they hid problems and altered reports or the figures within them!

When things eventually explode, CEOs are annoyed because they don't understand why people didn't raise the issue(s) earlier. But what those CEOs have missed is that the people who led and managed them were not doing what they should have. They were not insisting on the truth and were stopping the filtering of information by those experiencing the issues. How else can others help if they can't hear the problem? Managers and leaders, **it is your job to listen to your people**, be their voice, and, initially, speak for them until they, too, see it is safe to speak up. Enable and empower your people. Show evidence of psychological safety.

Imagine if it were your organisation and you were the CEO. Then imagine that after months of regularly asking people to raise concerns through their managers, a project has serious issues and crashes and burns, wasting the organisation a lot of time and money. Can you imagine how frustrated, annoyed and even upset you'd be? CEOs are busy people doing what they do. They should be able to rely on their directors to ensure that everyone feels safe speaking out and to make it a company directive to do so.

I am the CEO of two organisations, and in each, the **golden rule** is that **anyone can say anything they want, to anyone**, professionally and respectfully. So, be the spark that lights up and enables that openness. Light the fire of success for your colleagues and the organisation. The remedy is not telling people to “speak up”. It is changing the conditions under which speaking up actually feels safe. We will return to this when we discuss psychological safety. The point here is that fear of speaking out is not a weakness in the workforce; it is a signal about the distrust in your workplace.

Psychological safety is the scaffolding that builds our workplace culture. Amy Edmondson's working definition, drawn from her 1999 research on clinical teams and her 2018 book “The Fearless Organisation”, is that psychological safety is the felt sense that interpersonal risk-taking is acceptable, that you can speak up, ask a question, admit a mistake, raise a concern or disagree with a senior person without fear of reprisal.

We add to Edmondson's thinking by saying organisations need to implement Emotional Security first. The point is that **safety** cannot exist without **security**. You cannot announce safety into existence. The security created and maintained by the organisation is the umbrella that keeps all colleagues safe. It must be evidenced regularly, reinforced, and consequences felt for all who damage that safety.





In the vast majority of organisations I encounter, psychological safety is missing. Not entirely missing, as most organisations have a few people who will speak up. Most do not feel safe enough to bring difficult truths to the table, especially upwards. The result is filtered information, hidden mistakes, late-discovered crises, and quietly demoralised and disengaged colleagues.

Build security by sharing how others are speaking up. Share how they have challenged things and the responses given to those challenges, proving it is safe for people to challenge in the right way. Ensure your People Strategy states real consequences for any leader who acts wrongly towards those who challenge in the right way. Constant reinforcement of what is welcomed and what is not is critical to success. **Senior leaders must model the behaviour**, especially in moments when they themselves are being challenged. None of this is dramatic. All of it is essential. The organisation that announces “speak up” without its leaders leading the way has produced a slogan, not a building block for a superb open culture.



Psychological safety is the single most underinvested-in yet most important ingredient in attaining a great organisational culture and, in my view, the largest cause of wasted talent, hidden failure, late-discovered crises, and quiet attrition than any other single factor. It is only created when leaders are willing to put in the effort, care for and truly understand what it is like to be in the shoes of others.

Trust

Trust is the foundation beneath every other piece of work in this handout. Without trust, the Moccasin Approach® cannot land, communication cannot be clean, feedback cannot be received, accountability cannot be exercised humanely, and culture cannot improve.



At LaPD Solutions, we define trust as “**the consistency of reliability**”. That is, trust is not built by grand gestures, charismatic speeches, or a poster showing the organisational values. It is built by people who say what they will do, do what they said, and keep doing it, even in moments when no one is watching or congratulating them. Trust the most consequential currency in any organisation.

The wasteland is, in part, what happens when trust has been eroded. Promises made and broken. Managers who promise the team they’ll voice their concerns and never do (because they’re scared to), or senior leaders who never get back to update the people who raised concerns or innovation with them in the first place. Values abandoned under pressure. Consequences threatened and not delivered. Recognition promised and forgotten. Each instance, by itself, is small. The accumulation is the corrosion that creates your very own organisational wasteland.

The good news is that trust can be rebuilt, but only through the consistency of reliability, keeping our word, doing as we promised, speaking openly and honestly, and slowly building trust again. There is no shortcut.

Growing a meadow in the wasteland.

Where do we start to change our wasteland into a thriving, colourful, and diverse meadow? With ourselves. With the people directly around us. Specifically, with two disciplines that underpin every other piece of work that follows: **the Moccasin Approach®** and **emotional intelligence (EI)**.

The Moccasin Approach®, our trademarked phrase based on walking in someone else’s shoes, is the simple idea that we cannot lead or manage others until we understand **their** world from **their** perspective. It is the discipline of asking, listening, watching, asking again, and being prepared to adapt through what we learn.

Walking a mile in a colleague’s moccasins is not the same as glancing at their shoes from across the room and assuming you can guess what the journey feels like. It is the deliberate **effort** to find out what they are actually carrying: the visible work, the hidden load, the bereavement, the diagnosis, the financial pressure, the carer’s exhaustion, and the imposter syndrome. And don’t forget the neurological differences that make a neurodivergent person’s journey to work, and **their** working environment, a daily ordeal. Use that understanding to **lead and manage them as they actually are**, rather than as we assume they are.



“It is the blending of ingredients in our cooking that produces the most wonderful meals. Likewise, it is our understanding of each other that can create high-performing teams, but we need to learn how to cook”.

Emotional intelligence is the working machinery that makes the Moccasin Approach® operational. Four ingredients, in our framing:

1. **Self-awareness:** recognising how our emotions cause follow-on behaviours and actions.
2. **Self-management:** considering our response rather than reacting to our emotions.
3. **Social awareness:** learning about others, including their emotions, needs and concerns.
4. **Relationship management:** using 1, 2 and 3 to develop and sustain good relationships over time.

Together, the Moccasin Approach® and EI are the starting point to **getting to know our colleagues** really well. They are also the starting point for **genuinely knowing ourselves**, which, on the evidence, is where most leadership development must begin. The leader who does not know what is going on in their own head and the impact they have on others will not lead others well, as people will not want to follow them. Truly great leaders do not have to push or pull people to follow them; people will follow them because they have been inspired, given purpose, empowered and trusted, and most importantly, drawn by their authenticity.

The professional training gap

I want to return to the training question, because it underwrites almost everything else in this handout, plus, it is not sufficient to just read a document like this to learn how to weave all this together. It doesn't highlight the pitfalls and nuances. Leaders and managers need the knowledge and understanding that underpin the skills to get all the ingredients and recipes right and achieve that delicious result I mentioned earlier.

We do not allow people to do certain things unless they are properly (and currently) qualified, certified, or both. Think about the pilot of your plane, the bus or train driver, your children's teachers, the armed response police officer, your doctor or surgeon, your accountant, etc. Would it be ok if they weren't qualified/certified? In most organisations, we promote people into positions of significant authority over others, with **no formal training** in how to lead and manage people! I hear senior people actively discouraging spending time/money on what is dismissed as “soft skills”.

The phrase “soft skills” is often said to be one of the most damaging in the leadership lexicon. There is nothing soft about the discipline of self-management under pressure, the skill of giving honest feedback that the recipient actually welcomes and is grateful for. The capability to hold a “consequence conversation” cleanly, the craft of building a team that performs above what its members would produce alone. These are tough skills to pull off effectively and efficiently, and all while you get your own job done, too. They are also the skills that determine whether your organisation thrives or becomes a wasteland.

Ok, yes, I am biased, but training is not optional. In my opinion, every person who manages another person should be formally trained in emotional intelligence, facilitating feedback, the Moccasin Approach®, psychological safety, challenging conversations, performance management, delegation (a huge topic), EDI and more. Yes, the financial investment is significant, but the cost of not investing is measured in attrition, missed deadlines, a lack of innovation, mistakes that are hidden, late-detected crises, and exhausted leaders, and it mounts into a real financial impact that grows far bigger than the cost of the training and can wreak havoc for years.

If you take one operational message from this handout, please make it this: train your people managers to manage and lead their people effectively. Continue to train them. Promote based on the evidence of their capability within their job **and** on how they work with their people. It is not **all** about output, KPIs and sales. The leaders who emerge from sustained investment in this work are equipped with the skills, knowledge and understanding to help their organisation become the meadow, not the wasteland.



Values and Policies

Most organisations have a People Policy or People Strategy of some kind. Many of them, on close inspection, are decoration. They exist, use the right words and are in the right place, but they are often not used properly. A robust People Policy, in our experience, has to do several things at once.



It must require organisational values to be lived **by example and by every colleague**. Aspirational values become decoration and flag waving; values that are operational shape behaviour. The difference lies in the example set by colleagues, **especially by senior leaders**, who set the standard to be followed.

If you are a director or a member of a senior leadership team, do you really think that no one talks about you? People talk about people in those positions a lot. It can be “good”, “bad”, and, yes, even downright “ugly”. Oh, and by the way, which one of those you come under **depends on you**. Your personal brand is not what **you** say or think it is. It is created by what **others** say about you, and based on what you say or don’t say, and by the actions you take or don’t take.

I have heard so many top people in organisations say to me Mac, we need to sort out our teams, as many of them are not performing as well as they could. They are not bonding together and becoming high-performing teams, etc. I say the same thing each time. Before you criticise other teams, make very sure that your top teams are operating in the right way, as those most senior teams set the example for **all other teams** in the organisation (like it or not).

Top-level meetings often have the usual suspects that turn up late, who breeze in loud and proud, etc. Punctuality, professional conduct, exemplary values-based behaviour, honesty, consideration, and patience (I could go on) are for all of us. **Lead by example** as the rest of the organisation is watching and talking about how you behave and treat others.

“Your words say who you are; your actions prove who you are.”

Monitor your values. Leaders and managers must monitor whether the values are being lived and led by example. The leader who notices when a colleague is acting in line with the values, praises, and recognises it builds the values. The leader who notices when behaviour is inconsistent with the values and addresses it defends the values. The leader who does neither is not living the values and is doing nothing to uphold them. Bad example!



Put your values in all job descriptions. In my opinion, people are employed to do two things: perform the job they were hired to do and represent the organisation by living its values. If the second is not in the contract, it is, in practice, optional. If it is in the job description, it is a condition of employment, with all that follows. It can be raised during performance management one-to-ones and coaching; support and other development can be provided to colleagues, and HR can bring consequences to bear as necessary.

The People Policy must include an explicit, powerful statement that all colleagues are required to speak their minds. Not permitted; **required**. Without this, we are not living the values of honesty and openness; we are tolerating a kind of fence-sitting silence, which is its own form of avoidance or even dishonesty.

The Policy must state, equally explicitly, that any colleague who treats another colleague poorly for speaking their mind will face disciplinary action. Without such consequence, the insistence that we must all speak our minds in safety is just more empty flag-waving, which people will see as another promise not being kept.

When consequences are brought to bear, it becomes real. This applies regardless of seniority. The CEO who silences a junior colleague is committing a more consequential breach than the junior colleague who pushes back hard, and the policy should reflect that. A People Policy that is built around these elements is no longer a document; it is an operating standard. It is the structural commitment that makes the cultural work possible.



Purposeful filtering is "lying by exception"

Scenario: A senior leader asks all their managers during a routine update whether their teams are happy. Everyone says yes. The teams, in fact, are not happy. Each manager has filtered out the difficult parts because they fear the cost of speaking up, have learned the senior leader does not want to hear bad news, or they fear being the only person saying anything different from everyone else.

Each filter may be small, but the cumulative effect is enormous. The senior leader is now operating on a wildly inaccurate picture and will make decisions based on it. Decisions made on filtered information will yield outcomes that do not reflect the expected results. This will only serve to deepen the trust gap, and the trust gap will deepen the filtering. The cycle continues until something breaks.

Filtering is, in our view, a form of lying. We sometimes call it **lying by exception**, not telling the whole truth, while remaining technically not lying. It is everywhere in organisations with low psychological safety, and it is one of the surest indicators that you are walking through a wasteland.

The more we do not say what we truly think, the faster the journey into the wasteland increases. The colleagues who are still trying to do good work watch the filtering, lose faith in the system, and eventually look to leave. They do not leave for a similar job at a similar organisation; they leave for a **better** organisation that they believe will look after its people properly by doing what they said in their people strategy. Your best people are, on the evidence, the most likely to leave a filtering and failing culture, because they are the most likely to believe that better cultures exist elsewhere and that they deserve to work in one. And in terms of your generational considerations, Millennials and the emerging Gen Alpha will move for those reasons alone.

The remedy is not "tell people to stop filtering". It is about addressing the root cause by removing the conditions that lead your people to believe filtering is necessary.

The neurodivergent dimension

A particular note. I am autistic, diagnosed in adulthood, and one of the reasons I care about this work is that wastelands are not neutral environments. They disable some colleagues more than others.

For neurodivergent colleagues with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, Tourette's, and other differences, or a hidden disability of any kind, the wasteland can be a **lot** harder. Any lack of psychological safety leads us to mask, often at a high cognitive cost. Filtering is illogical! Why on earth would I not tell you the truth if you asked for it? But I have been thrown out of an organisation for answering a question truthfully (it all worked out in the end). If I don't say the truth, it means our different perspectives are missed. Tick-box performance management often misses what we actually need. Managerial avoidance of difficult conversations means we are more often performance-managed for behaviours that, in fact, reflect how the workplace is failing us. The list goes on.

The brutal data: approximately 15–20% of the global population is neurodivergent. Up to 40% of neurodivergent people are unemployed. While 60% of employers now claim to focus on neuroinclusion, around 35% of neurodivergent staff feel unsupported, and approximately 50% of managers report being uncomfortable hiring anyone who they know to be ND. This, in turn, means that people who are ND will not share their condition for fear of being excluded or treated differently. There is substantial talent being lost, not to mention the accidental discrimination.

The Moccasin Approach® is not a nice-to-have for neurodivergent colleagues but an absolute necessity, as is psychological safety. For some ND people, building relationships can be really challenging and exhausting, so imagine that after building that good relationship with our manager, they hand a challenging conversation over to HR. For us, it can be like being thrown in a bath of cold water! Then, we're so focused on trying to mask and communicate in a neurotypical (NT) manner that we can't communicate our thoughts clearly at all.



We also very much appreciate reasonable adjustments. But do remember that these may vary widely from one ND colleague to another. They include clear written communication, predictable routines, sensory accommodations, flexible work arrangements, adjustments to our working environment, acceptance of our ways and structured feedback. These adjustments cost very little; the return is very much worth it. A culture that genuinely works for neurodivergent colleagues is, almost without exception, a culture that works better for everyone. The reverse is rarely true.

So where must we go?

(We who wander this wasteland, in search of our better selves.)

The First History Man's question lands a lot harder once you have been honest about the wasteland.

We do not avoid or get out of the wasteland with a poster campaign, an away day, or a new strapline. We get out through **action**, maintaining our work and behavioural standards by living our values, holding ourselves and each other to account; the care, consideration, and support we give our colleagues, and our continuous assurance of psychological safety across the whole organisation.

Consider:

1. **Training every people manager/leader** in EI, the Moccasin Approach®, psychological safety, feedback, challenging conversations, delegation, inclusion and much more.
2. **Making managers responsible** for their own difficult conversations, with HR as a partner, not a substitute.
3. **Building and actively supporting a robust People Policy** that requires values to be lived, mandates speaking up, and applies **real consequences** for silencing those who step up and speak out.
4. **Putting values in job descriptions** and in every step of the employee lifecycle.
5. **Building psychological safety with evidence**, not announcements, but visible, sanctioned speaking-up, real consequences for retaliation, sustained reinforcement.
6. **Treat trust as the consistency of reliability** and behave accordingly in the small, daily moments that nobody else is watching: live by your word and take the **actions** your words promised.
7. **Allowing adaptations** (reasonable adjustments) for neurodivergent colleagues as a default, not an exception.
8. **Ending filtering** and stop tolerating filtering from colleagues, especially those who report to you.
9. **Leading by your values**, even when it's costly, especially when no one congratulates you for it.



The journey out of the wasteland is, in the end, a journey of small, consistent acts repeated over time. The first one is the **ACTION** that you take tomorrow morning. Choose it now.

A closing reflection

If people made the wasteland, then it can be unmade by people. The Moccasin Approach® and emotional intelligence are the starting point. Trust, psychological safety, professional training and a robust People Policy are the structural commitments. Honest conversations held by managers themselves, supported by HR but not delegated to it, are the goal. None of this is glamorous, but all of it works when it is genuine.

Where must we go, we who wander this wasteland, in search of our better selves? The honest answer, in my experience, is the same direction that the Moccasin Approach® has always pointed. Towards each other, with the courage to ask, the patience to listen, and the discipline to **do** something useful with what we hear.

Now it's all up to you, but we're happy to chat.



About this document

This document from LaPD Solutions Ltd includes aspects of the broader ingredients from the leadership, management and organisational culture programmes we facilitate for organisations.

Whilst the “Moccasin Approach®” and “Moccasin Manager®” are registered trademarks of LaPD Solutions Ltd, you are welcome to use them in the correct context, but not to use them as your own in the training that you sell to others. Thank you.

About the quote. “Where must we go, we who wander this wasteland, in search of our better selves?” is the closing quote in the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), attributed to the character known as the **First History Man**. The line marks the film’s central theme: the search for hope, humanity, redemption, and a better way forward in a world that has fallen apart.

Mac Macdonald is the founder and CEO of LaPD Solutions Ltd. Mac has been diagnosed with autism and writes from that lived experience, and has over 30 years of experience facilitating leadership, management, and organisational culture programmes to organisations across the UK and internationally (See image below).

Call Mac directly on 03000303007 for a chat. It does not have to lead to work; he’s happy to chat 😊.



~ Thank you for reading this document ~

