

# SEVEN Bytes

## A CRITICAL LEADERSHIP SKILL FOR OUR TURBULENT TIMES

### INTRODUCING ACCEPTANCE & COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT) FOR LEADERS

Many of the leaders I've spoken to over the last two years have been feeling overwhelmed, anxious and exhausted. The stress of navigating the changeable and complex landscape since the pandemic took hold have made it difficult for many to disconnect and recover from their day-to-day work pressures.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY

I believe that the skill of psychological flexibility has the potential to support leaders, not only in navigating their complex roles but in supporting them in every area of life. Through the cultivation of psychological flexibility leaders can:

- Become more effective at noticing opportunities and cues in their environment, allowing them to relate more effectively to others.
- Connect with their purpose and personal values as a leader to enhance their authentic style.
- Cultivate a more workable relationship with stress, uncertainty and change.

#### DEVELOPING PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY WITH ACT

Psychological flexibility can be developed through an approach called **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)** and there are over 850 Randomised Controlled Trials (the gold standard for research methodology) in clinical settings which show that ACT is effective in enhancing mental health. Don't be alarmed by the word Therapy – there is a growing body of research showing that ACT can be adapted for adults in the workplace, providing skills to enhance effectiveness, behavioural flexibility and life vitality.

#### TAKEAWAY – EXPLORING YOUR VALUES

One of the core skills within ACT is an exploration of and connection with your personal values. The intention is that these values can then be used as a personal behavioural compass, providing direction, even in the most turbulent times.

If you want to explore your own personal values in the workplace, have a go at this quick exercise.

Imagine a time in the future. The time has come for you to retire from work and there is a party in your honour. For this exercise you have permission to suspend the rules of time and logic – so people will be at your party from throughout your career.

Imagine that three of the guests stand up to make a speech about you:

- How you were as a leader and a colleague?
- What you stood for?
- Your impact.

Take a moment to really imagine yourself in this situation. What would you really love to hear them say about you and write it down?

Those words you've written down will probably give you some clues about your deeper personal values; your purpose and what gives you meaning in the workplace.

- How much do those personal values guide the way you behave as a leader right now?
- How could you express them more in your day-to-day interactions with your colleagues, your teams and your clients? Think about the small ways you could express these values in different work scenarios and experiment?
- Do you notice any difference in how you feel or the reaction of others?

These personal values can act as a beacon for leadership behaviour, helping to set and adjust our trajectory and make decisions.

Of course, when we're moving in a purposeful direction, our minds can generate some really unhelpful content which has the potential to derail us. There is a set of skills in the ACT approach that can help us relate to this content more effectively, so its potential to sabotage our purposeful intention is minimised. That will be the subject of a future post!

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ross McIntosh is a Senior Business Psychologist at SEVEN, Psychology at Work.

He specialises in the application of Contextual Behavioural Science to support individuals and organisations to enable the development of a healthy, flexible, values driven and authentic approach to complex environments and change.

Ross is an honorary Lecturer & Researcher in Psychological Well-being at City, University of London and Birkbeck, University of London. He is a globally recognised trainer in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in the workplace.

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