
the g-spot

Broken Windows in Leadership

How great leaders inspire change in small ways

By Gillian James

The other day I was at a client's office running through the output of a new CX proposition. After the meeting, the senior client walked out with me, stopping en route via the pantry and loaded our mugs into the dishwasher. It was a tiny moment, but it told me everything I needed to know.

I firmly believe you can tell a lot about an organisation's culture by whether people load their mugs in the dishwasher in the office pantry.

Many people know the Broken Windows theory. In 1982 social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling introduced the idea that a single unrepaired window in a neighbourhood signals neglect, and that neglect invites disorder. The metaphor applies just as powerfully to organisational culture.



The broken windows of leadership are not dramatic scandals. They are the tiny visible signs of care or indifference that tell people what is acceptable. The meeting that starts late without apology. The message from a quiet colleague that goes unanswered. The good piece of work that gets no acknowledgement at all. Each small act seems trivial in isolation, but together they tell a story. When small cracks go unattended, culture begins to erode.

Leaders often tell themselves they must act big: deliver the vision, make bold moves, stand on a stage. But the truth is almost the opposite. The small things matter more. It is the small behaviours that ripple outwards. Those behaviours become the signals that define the environment. They tell people whether to care, whether to try, and at times, whether to stay.

What we are seeing

This piece was prompted by our own work. Over recent months we have been running pilot studies with different teams, examining what drives both engagement and performance. Unsurprisingly, leadership behaviour made a huge difference. What was surprising was where the biggest dips occurred: not under difficult leaders, but under absent ones.

Where engagement fell away, leaders were not hostile or overbearing; they were simply ambivalent. They had moved on to the next fire to fight, assuming their teams would be fine.

But silence from a leader is not neutral. It is interpreted as a signal that the work no longer matters, that no one is watching, that effort is not seen.

And who can blame them. When things look steady, our attention naturally moves on. But our findings showed the opposite: disengagement follows disconnection.

In one pilot site, performance had been stubbornly low. The same people, the same tools, the same processes. Nothing seemed to move the dial. Then one senior leader happened to drop in on the team's weekly meeting, not to deliver a pep talk or a reprimand, just to sit and listen. Within a week things shifted. Attendance improved, deadlines were met, the conversation lifted. The only thing that had changed was a visible signal that someone, somewhere, cared enough to turn up.

That is the thing about leadership signals. They do not need to be grand. Presence alone can recalibrate importance. Ambivalence, on the other hand, seeps quickly into culture. It tells people this does not really matter, and neither do you.

Ambivalence is just as contagious as enthusiasm. It spreads through teams quietly but powerfully, dulling energy and flattening standards. Daniel Goleman, who pioneered the concept of emotional intelligence, describes this as emotional contagion, the way a leader's mood and behaviour spread to others. **In the same way that visible care breeds pride, visible indifference breeds apathy.** A leader's tone, tempo and attention set the cultural thermostat. Ignore it and you invite the organisational equivalent of smashed glass and boarded windows.

This is not about micromanagement. It is about attentiveness. Great leaders do not hover; they stay

visibly connected. They understand that their attention is a currency. Every nod, every question, every small act of noticing adds up to a sense of shared purpose. Culture erodes quietly, but it can be rebuilt just as quietly, one repaired window and one small act at a time.

What the research tells us

Psychologists studying leadership behaviours have found that it is often the smallest visible gestures that shape how people feel about their leaders and their work. In one experiment, teams performed better when leaders simply asked more questions and mirrored the tone of others. Those small cues of curiosity and respect triggered higher trust and better decisions.

Harvard professor Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety echoes this point. Her studies show that team members decide whether to speak up or stay silent based on subtle signals from their leaders: the way they react to mistakes, whether they listen fully, or whether they cut people off mid-sentence. These "micro behaviours" can have macro consequences.

A 2024 study in the hospitality sector found that the most effective leaders were not those issuing bold directives, but those quietly adjusting their small behaviours to the people around them. Big leadership outcomes often start with small signals.

The evidence is telling us what most of us know intuitively: culture lives in the small moments.

The small behaviours that build or break culture

Across our work with teams, three patterns keep emerging, three clusters of small behaviours that act as cultural accelerators or brakes.

1. What leaders notice

Attention is one of the purest signals of value. When leaders notice small improvements, near misses or quiet effort, people feel seen. But when they only notice what is wrong, or worse, nothing at all, motivation drains away. **The most effective leaders are not just problem spotters; they are pattern spotters.** They make curiosity visible.

2. How leaders respond

Moments of response are cultural hinge points. And recently I have seen a pattern that does more damage than leaders realise. Leaders will ask something of their teams, then immediately step away from delivering the very same thing themselves. It is rarely deliberate. But the effect is unmistakable. When a leader shirks their own responsibility, the inaction ripples downwards.

One moment of avoidance at the top becomes hundreds, sometimes thousands, of moments of avoidance throughout the organisation. And in those ripples, you often find the real root cause of poor performance or stalled productivity.

Blame is easy. Looking at our own contribution is harder. Collective accountability drives change. Individual blame rarely does. When leaders respond with curiosity, ownership and fairness, teams follow that behaviour. When leaders deflect, minimise or disappear, teams do the same. Culture copies what it sees.

3. *Where leaders show up*

Where leaders show up matters just as much as how often. It is easy to appear at industry events, conferences and LinkedIn posts where everything is polished and choreographed. That is a kind of visibility, but it is a curated version, performance rather than presence. Real visibility happens in the everyday rhythm of the team. The ten-minute stand-up. The midweek wobble when something has gone sideways. The routine task that everyone relies on but no one ever spotlights.

Leaders who only show up in the glossy spaces send a subtle message that image matters more than connection. Leaders who show up where the real work happens send a very different signal: that people matter and that the everyday is worth their time.

When these three patterns combine: noticing, responding, showing up, teams feel part of something cared for. Standards rise, effort multiplies and pride returns. Ignore them and the opposite happens.

Rebuilding the windows

The concept of Broken Windows was never really about crime. It was about care. It was about the human instinct to respond to signs of order or neglect. In organisations, those same instincts apply. When people see that someone is paying attention, they take pride. When they believe no one is watching, standards slip.

Leaders often tell me that the pull of strategy, commercial realities and stakeholder demands is relentless. And it is. Those pressures are louder and more immediate than the quiet needs of colleagues. Until they are not. When internal issues begin to surface, when trust fractures, or when dissatisfaction becomes organised, those once quiet voices suddenly become the noisiest of all.

The truth is that culture is rarely undone by a single moment. It is eroded slowly, in the gaps left by leadership absence.

The good news is that it can be strengthened in the same way. Five minutes here and there. Making the most of the walk between meetings. Dropping into a team call a couple of minutes early to chat to the early birds. Asking one extra question. Offering one small acknowledgement. These small acts communicate something powerful: I see you, and this matters.

These behaviours might seem insignificant, but collectively they create the emotional architecture of an organisation. They are the quiet proof of what leaders value and what they will not walk past.

And they remind us that leadership is not performed from a podium; it is practised in a thousand small moments that say, without words, I care, and this matters.

So perhaps the next time you walk past a small crack, the missed meeting, the unanswered message, the colleague who seems withdrawn, stop and fix it. Not because it is dramatic, but because it is not. That is the power of behaving small.

Take action by

- Paying deliberate attention to what you notice, how you respond and where you show up.
- Making your attention visible through small, consistent acts that show care and curiosity.
- Asking your team where they see the broken windows in your culture and repairing them together.
- Treating silence and absence as signals too. Presence and ambivalence both spread, so choose which you want to multiply.
- Dropping us a line at hello@signal.cx. We would love to bounce some ideas around with you.

That'll be all!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gilian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the start and a long, sweeping underline.