



**RED
PEN
LEADERSHIP**

RED PEN

A colleague asked me for feedback on an important paper she had written for the Board. She was due to present that evening so time was short. As I glanced through the paper, I saw error after error in spelling, grammar and punctuation. Without thinking, I picked up the nearest pen on my desk and, intending to be helpful, started to make corrections. 15 minutes later, the paper was covered in red ink. She walked across to my desk, glanced down...and I saw pain in her eyes. How I wished I had paused first, asked what feedback she would find most useful and used a blue or green pen instead.

RED PEN PEOPLE

On this critical theme, I heard a friend talk about 'red pen people'. Am I a red pen person? Does my zeal for perfection undermine others? Could the satisfaction I gain from spotting gaps and errors leave others feeling criticised, incompetent, demotivated or insecure? At my worst, do I risk inadvertently pulling others down to lift myself up? I have pondered these ethical questions for some years now in an attempt consciously to choose and develop my stance, not simply to operate in my own/cultural default mode, and to avoid behaviours that could prove damaging or derailing.

RED PEN LEADERS

You may have met one. You may be one. Red pen leaders seem only to notice the deficit, the failure, the mistake, the thing that's missing, the what could/should have been better. They zoom in keenly on red RAG ratings, over-enthusiastically on lower scores and take delight in issue-seeking. The red pen leaders' motto is 'Every silver lining has a cloud'...and they say it with a grin. 'What went well?' and 'Even better if?' become 'What went wrong?' and 'Don't do it again!' They can be great problem-solvers but the effects on people around them can be draining, diminishing and demoralising.

RED PEN CULTURES

Red pen cultures tend to be cautious, defensive, unhealthy-political and risk-averse. They're often characterised as blame cultures. I worked with one organisation that needed and aspired to become far more innovative and yet, when asked in focus groups, its staff said, 'There's no chance.' Curious, I asked 'Why?' They responded, 'Nobody here is willing to put their head above the parapet.' Again... 'Why?' 'If they do, they will get their head shot off.' It transpired that leaders there were perceived as always expecting near-perfect performance results and completely unwilling to tolerate failure.

RED PEN ERASERS

5 fields of inquiry have helped me address my own red pen risks:

- ☑ My Christian beliefs that focus positively on gifts, talents and releasing potential.
- ☑ Great leadership role models I've known who see the best in people, make them feel amazing and enable them to achieve the near-impossible.
- ☑ Solutions-focused work that addresses what we want rather than what we don't want.
- ☑ Appreciative inquiry that pays attention to what's going well and builds on it.
- ☑ Strengths-based practice that affirms and enhances what we are already good at.

AND I NO LONGER HAVE A RED PEN ON MY DESK.

NICK WRIGHT

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Nick is a Fellow of the UK's Institute of Training and Occupational Learning. If you would like to learn more about Nick and his work, or would be interested to work with a coach or to enhance your own leadership, see:

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