Snakes on a plane

**Mike Hickman, Leadership, Development and Training Manager, Community First Yorkshire**

[00:00:00] Welcome to the Extraordinary Ordinary Leaders podcast or Ordinary Extraordinary, if you prefer, you can have them either way round. This is the second year, believe it or not, of our podcast series. My name is Mike Hickman, Leadership, Development and Training Manager at Community First Yorkshire. And, if you haven't listened to the podcast to date, this is our ninth. We've covered bad leaders (I did that one), wellbeing, trustees, change management and sex power and politics, which speaks for itself, but it's well worth the listen along with all the others.

So, we thought, you know, how can we beat what we've already offered? We clearly need to give you a bit of a hook, for the new year. And if you've clicked on this, you already know the title, but I'm never one for avoiding the theatrical. So, you get the theatrical anyway. The title for this podcast, please accompany this [00:01:00] with, Jerry Goldsmith or John Williams, music of your choice. The title for this podcast is Snakes on a Plane. Seriously, both of those things will become very relevant to leadership of ordinary and extraordinary qualities as we go along.

Have you finished with the dramatic music? Okay, just let that fade away, good. Where to begin? Snakes or plane? We’ll do the plane first, just to be a little perverse. And I'm going to begin with a story, and I have to be blunt about this, it's a story that isn't a very nice one. The deadliest accident, in fact, in aviation history, which was on the 27th March, 1977. It took place in Tenerife, an airport in Tenerife. And two Boeing 747 planes collided on the runway. One, in effect, took off while the other was still on the runway, in thick fog. [00:02:00] There were 583 fatalities. Wikipedia is ever so useful, isn't it?

The captain of the plane, and here's the important bit about leadership, the captain of the KLM plane, the plane that took off while the other one was still on the runway, was in fact their chief flight instructor. A guy called Jacob Van Santen. And his picture was all over KLM's promotional materials at the time. His smiling picture was on the brochure you'd have picked up in the plane; if you were training to be a pilot, there's his face as Chief Flight Instructor. And when, on the 27th of March 1977, they had the worst aviation accident still in history - and there's reasons why it's still the deadliest and there haven't been others like that and we'll get to that too - but when the accident happened, in the aftermath, who did KLM go to look for? To investigate what had happened. Well, they [00:03:00] went for their Chief Flight Instructor because they thought well, clearly, no one with their qualities would have done a thing like this and you'll understand what happened, okay. So what did happen?

Well, I'm not going to go into all the details about this. You can look it up. There's a Wikipedia page. The decision taken by this incredibly knowledgeable guy who everybody looked up to and the decision to take off at precisely the wrong point, when in fact authorisation hadn't been given, but it's very complicated, there's lots of details, so I'm only giving you one of the key reasons this happened.

One of the key reasons was he was fretting about was overtime. In the cockpit, they were worried about the rules that had been laid down about getting back to Amsterdam and not accruing overtime. And that fretting led to, we need to leave and we need to leave now. That's the point of this podcast and why we have [00:04:00] the plane we'll get to snakes in a minute.

It's a perverse incentive, basically and it leads to an unintended outcome. No one intended overtime rules to lead to a deadly accident. No one intended that. That's not what KLM wanted. And that's not what anyone wants when they lay down a target or a measure. Unfortunately, in this case, it was tragic.

Bad incentives can undermine good intentions. Even safety. And that's where we're going. Now, how have airlines avoided this in the years since? As I've said, it is still the most deadly accident in history. So, why? And that's central to this, because there are rules that are now in place. There are things a co-pilot can now do, and in fact have to do, to ensure that one person, and one person alone, can't make a decision of that magnitude.

Okay. Cobras. Snakes. [00:05:00] I was going to call this Cobra Theory, but Cobra Theory is nowhere near as enticing as Snakes on a Plane. But we arrive at cobras now, so quick story. In colonial India, under British rule, the city of Delhi had a problem with cobras. To control the population, the government offered a bounty for every dead cobra that citizens could bring in.

Huge numbers, massive numbers of dead cobras arrived. But the cobra problem in Delhi got worse and not better. I wonder, if you don't already know this, if you can picture why? Yeah, absolutely. If you tell people they're going to be paid for cobras, they're going to want cobras, aren't they? And if they don't already have cobras, they may end up procuring, purchasing, breeding. Which is [00:06:00] in fact what they did do, cobras. And where you once had a minor cobra problem, perhaps now you have a major cobra problem. And the reason this resonates and connects to what we've just talked about is, again, it’s the intention behind it was to do something good. The intention behind it was heading in one direction and what they achieved was quite the opposite.

Intentions don't actually drive human behaviour though, incentives do. Now think of overtime targets, think of what happens if you get rewarded for getting back early with your passengers. And that's the thing at the front of your mind.

Another example, Mexico. I love this one, had a program intended to reduce pollution by banning cars from the road one day a week. It was sort of like a lottery. If your licence plate has these numbers or letters in it, you can drive on these days. [00:07:00] If your car has these, you can drive on these days. Imagine alternate days, something like that. They thought it would cut pollution and driving. It didn't. Again, think about what conceivably happened here to people who wanted to carry on driving every day a week. They bought another car, didn't they? So now Mexico City is even more polluted than it was before.

So, we've had Cobras, we've had cars, we're getting closer to our sector, and then there's COVID. A university, I won't name them, because I'm fond of universities and I don't wish to upset them, who had offered money for people who had COVID to come in for tests to help them with research into COVID. They managed to get quite a lot of students deliberately infecting themselves with COVID as a result of that one. And I think it was something [00:08:00] like £500 was offered as well. So, the nudge unit at the UK government flagged that giving people a lump sum is a great incentive, but it's going to have all sorts of unfortunate side effects. If the money is the most important thing to that person.

Now our sector. Okay, any example, collecting bottles, plastic bottles, reward and return schemes, those sorts of things. Cobras. All of a sudden, people may have more plastic bottles than they ever had before. It depends what you're rewarding people with.

What about encouraging dependency? I was thinking about this one. So, we target delivery of support to a community. Or a subsection of a community. Great. But what about the equally important mission that might be there in our charity's aims? To ensure independence for those people. If the target is about how much support we [00:09:00] deliver, how many people, how much time, we can end up delivering too much support and making people too dependent.

Consequently, we might also be thinking, well, this is good. This keeps our charity running. This dependency, these people, these numbers, this is terrific. This is proving that we're needed. But if we don't give the opportunity to people to prove that they're no longer dependent in those ways, how do we know how much we're really needed?

And, by the way, what happens in the unfortunate event of a charity folding if dependency has been encouraged? Where are those people going to go? And how does that align with your charity's aims and objectives? And the ethics that underline a lot of what we do. It ought to be said, by the way, that targets informed entirely by contact hours can result in too little support being given. Think of medical appointments, NHS and other examples of that kind. [00:10:00]

Okay, this is where we need to think about charitable aims, our actual mission, and the role and responsibility of everyone in the organisation to be the co-pilot. I was thinking actually, as well, another nice example is Dad's Army. You know I love my cultural references. And Captain, what's his name, Sergeant Wilson, played by the wonderful John Le Mesurier, to Arthur Lowe's Captain Mainwaring. It only takes somebody to say, is that wise? To look at why a decision is being taken. How does that fit with what it is we intend to do? And what will the difference made be? So, we need our, we need our Sergeant Wilson to ask those sorts of questions.

And that is very like crew resource management in aviation. You've heard Donald Trump talk about the weave. This is a massive weave, this one. We've got snakes and planes and all sorts, but I promised you, I promised you at the start, [00:11:00] it would come together. And it has, because you need people at all levels to be able to ask the questions that ensure that what is delivered, is actually what you intend. So that involves, how do we tackle this? Regular monitoring. Adaptability. Consideration of decisions against charitable aims. Particularly if somebody wishes to offer an incentive. Ethical considerations matter and ethical guidelines should be the basis of the design of incentive programs. So clearly you don't accidentally fall into something you clearly didn't want to encourage.

And consider impact. What difference is being made? Is that what you want to see? Because if what you're getting, or what you're counting, what you're measuring, isn't what you want to see, how are you going to know?

Okay, as we approach the end, I've said [00:12:00] consider impact. People, whether co- pilots, trustees, volunteers, service users, staff of charities, snakes and fellow snakes, any of these people need to be able to speak up when things are not working and they need to be heard. Perverse incentives need to be recognised for what they are, and if meetings don't look at the differences that are being achieved, and how they stack up against what you aim to achieve, then you might need to look again at how you're discussing things, and what you're measuring, and what are the results.

As always with these podcasts, we'd love to hear your thoughts on this. So please do contact me at leadership, usual spelling, at Community First Yorkshire all one word. org. uk. All thoughts gratefully received. We've got lots of new thoughts about podcasts and training, including training on impact, in fact, which is why I've mentioned it [00:13:00] a few times during this podcast. But, until the next time we speak, thank you ever so much for listening and watch out for snakes.