Ordinary Extraordinary Leaders podcast: Fur-lined ruts and freedom to fail with Richard Cooper and Mike Hickman

[00:00:00] **Mike Hickman:** Welcome to the Ordinary Extraordinary Leaders Podcast, and our guest this time round is Richard Cooper from Harrogate Homeless Project Chief Executive, who's also been a member of our leadership steering group, *is* a member of our leadership steering group, and, I had the privilege of visiting Harrogate Homeless Project not too long ago. Good morning, Richard.

[00:00:35] **Richard Cooper:** Good morning, Mike.

[00:00:36] **Mike Hickman:** I thought we'd start with a question that we sort of ask everyone around what leadership *is* and what it means to you.

[00:00:44] **Richard Cooper:** Thanks. Well, to me, I think leadership is about enabling the right decisions to be made by the right people at the right time. They need to be equipped with the right knowledge and the right skills to make those decisions and to make good decisions. But critically, I think leadership [00:01:00] is about supporting people. When they make that decision, even if the outcome isn't what we think it would be in its most optimal sense, you know, if the outcome isn't good and respecting people's rights to make those decisions and to make those mistakes.

[00:01:19] **Mike Hickman:** So in terms of, it would be right in saying that you've been with the Harrogate Homeless Project now for how many months?

[00:01:29] **Richard Cooper:** 10 months.

[00:01:30] **Mike Hickman:** 10 months. So are there things you've, are there things that have challenged your view about what leadership is, would be, should be in that time? Or are there things that have cemented, you know, that have made you think, yeah, absolutely, it should be this.

[00:01:48] **Richard Cooper:** For me, I think the really motivating thing about giving people the freedom to take decisions, for which they're after all responsible and accountable, is watching people when they realise that they have that freedom and that [00:02:00] accountability, go and make those decisions and enjoy making those decisions and enjoy taking that responsibility and then take the next step to more responsibility or to think about how they can extend what they're doing and take responsibility for that as well. And it's particularly good, I think we've got a lot of young people work for Harrogate Homeless Project and they are great, but it's their first jobs or very early in their career, and I enjoy seeing them grasping the opportunities, taking decisions, and taking responsibility because it enables growth, development, it's motivating and that gives me a bit of a buzz. It sounds like silly modesty, doesn't it? But everyone in the organisation is a leader at some level and the more people you have leading, the more things, the more you are going to achieve. Yes, somebody has [00:03:00] to have overall responsibility, but that responsibility should be exercised at all levels in the organisation and everyone should be respected to take the decisions that they're capable of taking. Otherwise, you'll never develop as an organisation because one person or one person's view will dominate everything and that's never healthy.

[00:03:24] **Mike Hickman:** How do we get to a level where people understand what it is they have responsibility for and that they feel comfortable with that?

[00:03:33] **Richard Cooper:** You've got some good job descriptions. You've also got to, in my view, ensure that any contracts in the organisation has, are the responsibility of a named individual so that they know that anything to do with that area of the business is theirs. You need a very robust one-to-one regime. So managers need to see the team every month, [00:04:00] and it needs to be… I've worked in places or worked with people whose experience of one-to-ones – some people call it supervisions; I think that's a bit of an offensive term – where one-to-ones are just the monthly beating that's given to the employee. And I'm constantly saying to them, you know, if there is criticism, or if something has gone wrong, I will address it there and then. The monthly meetings are to talk about the things that are your responsibility. Check that you're comfortable with the decisions that you're taking, to check on anything that you want to talk to me about, about your responsibilities, to talk about how you're developing your team so you need a very robust one-to-one, an appraisal sort of process. I think people, particularly when they've not been increased to exercise responsibility, are nervous of it and [00:05:00] afraid of it. And they're afraid of the consequences, particularly if something goes wrong. I would say that a lot of it is about demonstrating that there actually isn't anything to be afraid of. That taking responsibility for stuff, for driving the stuff forward is actually, you know, quite fun. I also think it's incumbent on managers to find niches, if you like, that the team can occupy. So if you've got somebody in your organisation who is very good at manipulating data which drives me spreadsheets, then let them do it. Add it to what they do, encourage them to do it. If you've got someone that's got a particular interest in one part of the organisation, even if it's nothing to do with their job role, let them have experience of it. So I think it's a lot about demonstrating to people that [00:06:00] taking responsibility, nothing to be afraid of, making mistakes, nothing to be afraid of. Respecting their rights to take the decision or supporting them when it goes well. Acknowledging their contribution when it goes right, and supporting them when it goes wrong. And if you disagree. So sometimes I'll disagree with a member of staff about something that they're doing, and I'll say, well, I would do it this way. And they would say, well, I want to do it that way. Let them do it their way. And if it goes wrong, nobody must ever know that you disagreed.

[00:06:37] **Mike Hickman:** Oh, that's like, you know, we are in Cabinet Collective responsibility territory here, that sort of thing.

[00:06:42] **Richard Cooper:** Except, um, except I, I mean it.

[00:06:45] **Mike Hickman:** Yes. Yes. Well, well, I didn't want to get into how politics works, but the principle of it. Um, and that's, you know, talk about empowering, but you're allowing people to be successful and to [00:07:00] work out what it is they're passionate about and they enjoy. And then this is, this is motive…, you know, at the best…this is motivating people, um, not just for your organisation but for themselves and ultimately onto wherever else they work in future. I wanted to ask about change because one of the things that, again, thinking about things that people are concerned about, is when change comes about and sometimes there is no or limited choice in the changes that need to be made, and how you work with people around that.

[00:07:38] **Richard Cooper:** When I came to this job, we were just starting our strategy process and, yeah, the way you develop that, which is a change and a new chief executive itself is a change. The way you develop that should be collegiate, should be through consultation with staff. They need to respect your rights to take the decision, but you need to [00:08:00] make sure that you listen to their views. So I don't feel that people should be afraid of change. It's taking what works forward and doing new stuff and if something doesn't work, you know, talk to people, get rid of it, or just try doing something different for a short while. And if it doesn't work, well go back to what you did before. It's not, people shouldn't be embarrassed if trying something new doesn't work. You have to go back to what you did before. That's life.

[00:08:31] **Mike Hickman:** When we are talking about, you know, when people come to the point, perhaps where they think that change or whatever's happening within an organisation doesn't fit with them or vice versa, their views no longer fit with where the organisation is going, what's the role in terms of supporting people at that point in their career?

[00:08:55] **Richard Cooper:** I think people moving on from an organisation, it ends in two ways, isn't it? There’s the scenario you just [00:09:00] described and the scenario I prefer, and the scenario I prefer is when someone just reaches the end of their time with an organisation and it is time for them to positively move on because they've learned all they can and developed all they can. It's very easy to get stuck in a fur-lined rut, where you're comfortable in an organisation. You like the people, you like the culture, but somebody's got to push you to move on, and I think that's about an open and honest conversation, explaining what more they can do and the future you see for them.

[00:09:36] **Mike Hickman:** We're approaching the end of our time. Is there anything that we've missed in terms of the, again, listener won't know this, but there's a thousand questions written before one of these, but, we see how the conversation goes. Is there anything I've missed, any majorly important thing that should be said here, Richard?

[00:09:56] **Richard Cooper:** Yeah, there's just one question. You very kindly sent me the questions [00:10:00] in advance where you asked about resources or tools. Yes. Now, you know, books, training courses. Yeah. They're important. They're good but when I think about what I do now and how I do it, I base it on the very best people I've ever met, and they can be friends, family, colleagues, people with line manager for me, and I thought about, 'cause this is my first chief executive role, why did they make me feel that they were so good? And frankly, I've copied it. There ain't nothing new under the sun. No need to try and reinvent the wheel. Just copy the people you respect.

[00:10:46] **Mike Hickman:** Richard, before we finish, is there anything you'd like to say about Harrogate Homeless Project, just to listeners interested in maybe supporting you or finding out what's coming up?

[00:10:56] **Richard Cooper:** Well, we are implementing our new three year strategy and that [00:11:00] surrounds our clients with activities to support their social life, their life skills, their welfare, and their health. So, if anyone out there has got experience in those areas and could do some coaching for our clients or some development for our clients, then we'd be very pleased to hear from you. Just an hour week or an hour a month, giving a session supporting a client with any of those kind of skills would be fantastic.

[00:11:28] **Mike Hickman:** That's brilliant. Thank you, Richard. And, do listen out for more in this series of podcasts, but until then, thank you very much Richard, and thank you for listening.