

BRINGING CONSTRUCTIVE SCEPTICISM

When have you found it useful to have a sceptic in the room? Cynicism and negativity drain energy. Healthy scepticism can deepen conversations and unearth new angles and possibilities.

Good leaders recognise the dangers of groupthink and invite others to raise constructive questions, bringing curiosity into discussions before decisions are made. If they notice an unease or unwillingness to challenge, they might authorise a team member to be the ‘contrarian’ whose role is to flag up where a proposal looks weak and how critics might seek to undermine it, then to probe whether there is a better way to achieve the desired outcome.

Teams that welcome constructive scepticism tend to :

- Stay curious for longer and welcome diverse viewpoints
- Judge fresh ideas on their merits, and assess them against the shared objective
- Avoid dismissing unconventional thinking or radical solutions just because they are different.
- Keep returning to the shared purpose of the team and assess options against the outcomes sought.
- Hold back from ‘nitpicking’ about detail.

Effective leaders create the parameters for this kind of debate. We notice that they:

- Ensure that all views are equally respected and listened to
- Prompt challenge that is grounded in evidence and data
- Enable the creative development of ideas into potential actions
- Use thoughtful summaries to affirm contributions, identify points of agreement and move discussions forward.

Most leaders have seen the shift when healthy scepticism slides into cynicism. In a well-functioning team they empower everyone to spot the warning signs, such as exchanges of raised eyebrows, activity in the Chat, or people switching off. Anyone can suggest a short break for coffee, a walk or a return to key principles as a way of resetting the tone and restoring productive dialogue.

Cynicism is a dangerous poison. Scepticism can be a healthy stimulant.