

14 The Yoghurt Theory of Coaching

The most important thing a leader does is not what they say or decide. It is the environment they create, the conditions in which the people around them either develop towards their potential or do not. Most leaders understand this in principle and consistently underestimate it in practice, because the environment is built from hundreds of small, daily interactions rather than from a single visible decision.

The gap between the environment a leader thinks they are creating and the environment their people are actually experiencing is one of the most consequential and least examined gaps in organisational life. It is consequential because it determines what the talent around the leader is actually able to produce. It is rarely examined because the evidence for it sits in the texture of ordinary experience rather than in any metric that a performance review or a quarterly report would capture.

Sport has developed some of the most refined thinking available about how environments shape the development of talent. The yoghurt analogy offers a deliberately simple entry point into what is, in practice, a complex and consequential question for every leader.

Yoghurt as a Leadership Model

The yoghurt theory of coaching begins with a simple observation from food science. Yoghurt cannot be made from milk alone. What transforms milk into yoghurt is the bacterial culture that is introduced into it: a living medium that, when the conditions are right, changes everything it comes into contact with. If the culture is healthy and the conditions support it, ordinary milk becomes something stronger, more complex and more valuable. If the culture is poor, or the conditions are wrong, even the highest quality ingredients will not produce the intended result. The transformation depends not on the ingredients but on the medium.