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# DOING THE OPPOSITE BUSINESS DISRUPTORS

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Conversations with  
*Jeff Dewing*

## EPISODE THREE

### Leading with Vulnerability: The Power of Saying 'I Don't Know'

**Jeff Dewing – Teaser:**

*And I just sat there with my jaw on the floor, I was blown away. And what that done, it showed me by me being vulnerable, they grew another 10 feet. They became these incredible giants that I'd never seen!*

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**Sam Walker:**

Hello and welcome to Doing the Opposite: Business Disruptors - Conversations with Jeff Dewing. This is the podcast where we explore how leadership, culture, and courage can transform your business, but also life!

I'm Sam Walker. Jeff Dewing has built the company, Cloudfm Group, by breaking every rule in the book. After losing everything, he came back by doing the opposite of what conventional wisdom taught him.

In this episode, we're going to be exploring a leadership skill that's often really misunderstood: vulnerability. Jeff believes that showing your flaws, your doubts, and humanity isn't a weakness, it's what makes you a stronger leader.

Jeff, you've said the most powerful thing that a leader can say is, 'I don't know'. That really isn't something you hear every day from a CEO. So why does vulnerability matter so much to you in being a good leader?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Because it makes you human. And when people see that you are authentically human, they start to realise what a leader's role is. A leader's role is not to know everything, a leader's role is not to be the best at everything, a leader's role is to get the best out of other people. And you can only do that by being brutally frank and honest. And I've only learnt this on a journey. It's not something I was born to know. It's it's it's stuff about understanding people. And people say to me, 'God, Jeff, you're an incredible psychologist. How long did you study psychology?' I said, 'I've never studied psychology, but I love to see how people behave and react and react to situations'. And of course, I've enjoyed my journey by poking and prodding people to spur reactions to try and understand their reactions. So it was really interesting and as much as I've gone through that journey, I didn't really truly understand vulnerability until COVID and that's when I saw the power of vulnerability when used

authentically. Not used as a tool but used authentically. And when COVID hit, we were collecting a lot of money and it fell off a cliff...

**Sam Walker:**

Can you explain that? So it fell off a cliff because of the nature of your business was that you were in hospitality, facilities management, so if those places shut down, so did your income stream.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Exactly. So when all the restaurants closed because of COVID, our income stream went from seven million down to 200 grand. So that meant that I've got 500 mouths to feed, I've got no idea what on earth to do. At that point, we didn't even know if the humanity was gonna survive, let alone whether money was gonna be a problem! My team, my board, convened to say, 'right, emergency meeting, what we're gonna do'. And the first thing they said to me was, 'come on, Jeff', because I'm always full of the drive and the ideas. 'Come on there, Jeff, what you know, come, what's the plan? What are we gonna do?' And I sat in silence, 'I went, I've got no frigging idea. I I don't even know where to start. In fact, this is killing me. And for most of you that know, I can sleep standing up on an underground train. I've lost sleep over the last two or three days, and that's never ever happened to me'.

**Sam Walker:**

Did you worry that that would scare them though? Because you were that solid leader.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Yes, but I I decided that there was no time for pretence. I had to speak exactly how I felt, and I was. I was scared, I was worried. I thought, you know, this is it, we're we're done. All this hard work, all this effort, you know, and it and I was worried that it was the end. And and then suddenly something happened that I didn't expect. Uh, and they said to me, 'Jeff, we want you to take three days off', um, go away. I was living in Portugal, uh, they said, go and spend some time on the beach and reflect and and just do your stuff. We're gonna do a load of work here, we're gonna do some scenario planning and this was on the Tuesday. They said let's convene a call for 10 o'clock Friday. I don't want you doing any emails, I don't want you to look at your phone or your computer for three days.

**Sam Walker:**

Did you manage that?

**Jeff Dewing:**

I did, yes, because it was I was drained of energy because I just didn't know what to do. So I literally just went for walks, walked on the beach, thought this is it, you know, preparing for the worst and whatever. Anyway, I got back on the call on the Friday, and this team had put together about 11 different scenarios. If this happens, we do this, if this happens, we do that, if this happens, we do that. And they put together these ideas that were just mind-blowing. And I just sat there with my jaw on the floor, I was blown away.

After that meeting where I listened to what they had to say and said 'this is incredible stuff'. Um, I then went away for the weekend. Well, I didn't go away for the week, I then obviously

switched off for the weekend, and I sat on the beach watching the waves, and I went, 'How on earth did they do that'? They had three days, they must have worked day and night, must have tested each other. And they've done stuff I couldn't have even dreamt of doing. And what that does, it showed me by me being vulnerable, they grew another 10 feet. They became these incredible giants that I'd never seen, which only made me think, God, I've been constraining them because I've always taken the lead. And then to see this come up, and then what ended up happening was one of them said, 'trust me, the government's gonna solve the problem with furlough'. And I said, Well, they didn't use furlough at the time, they said the government's gonna pay the salaries. I said, What do you mean? They said, well, you've got every company in the country already got payroll set up to pay people for them to try and individually pay people separately, it's gonna be a car crash. So all they're gonna do is they're gonna pay the companies to pay the payroll, and that's exactly what happened before we even knew about furlough. And they had a scenario for that and we just played out the scenarios that were relevant, and we came through it, and the one thing they said is this is not scenarios to survive, these are scenarios to thrive. And it was put a shiver down the back of my spine, and I and I just saw there were seven members of the board, and I just saw seven completely different people. They were just off the scale, and that's when I saw the power of me being vulnerable, they became the giant.

**Sam Walker:**

Isn't it funny that we all think that confidence is the most important thing? But in fact, you were being confident, you were confident in saying, I'm not confident, yeah, yeah. And that's actually was the key.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Well, it's it's some of the golden rules of life, isn't it? About you know, when you talk to your people, your family, your your colleagues, 'it's okay to not be okay'. And it's the ability to be honest about it. I use the analogy that says just you stand outside your office having a cigarette or having a cup of coffee with a colleague, you're having a chat, and an old lady walks past and she falls over. What do you do?

**Sam Walker:**

Well you go and help.

**Jeff Dewing:**

You go and pick her up, right? Yet the amount of people that are falling over, you just can't see it. And that's the vulnerability. If someone says, I'm really struggling, my wife left me last night, or whatever the case may be... 'can I do anything'? You will naturally gravitate towards helping that person. But when you go, no, everything's fine, everything's fine, then you've isolated yourself from anybody caring for you or looking after you or helping you or even comforting you. But you see an old lady fall over, everybody bar no one would automatically go and help that lady up. And it's just that, and that's the vulnerability element.

**Sam Walker:**

It must be challenging though, if you have this reputation of being this fearless leader, of being the man or woman who has the answers, of being the rock, and people go 'oh, I don't

know what to do. They will also know'. To then turn around and go, actually, I don't, there is in some people I guess a feeling that, well, I don't want to let people down by not being always that pillar of strength.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Well, what was even more interesting was once I'd seen that, which I couldn't believe, and again it's about authenticity. We communicated twice a week with the whole company about what we knew and what we didn't know. And on the first time that we done our communication on Zoom, where everyone logged on, there was 380 odd people online. And I'd been given a script only to keep me on the straight and narrow about the subject matter, um, about what we knew, what we were doing. People had just been sent home. The summer was a lovely summer, so people were enjoying the summer but were still fearful about the future, their jobs, and etc. etc. And I start reading out this script, and something happened that's never happened to me since I was 14 years old. I just feel into a heap. I cried like a baby. I was holding back these, my lips were going, it was I was in a terrible state. and I just had to pause to try and gather myself to try and carry on the communication. And whilst that was happening - and it made me worse - whilst that was happening, all these love hearts and thumbs were just coming up all over the place on screen. And then messages started coming saying, Don't worry, Jeff, we got your back. We're all together, we we we live as one, we die as one, we win together, we lose together. And these are people on the front line, some people I didn't even know they were. And I went, and that was me, authentically, because I didn't plan to do that, it just happened because it was such a high emotionally environment. And to see the response of everybody was overwhelming. But it what it done is it gave you a strength that you'd never seen before that says, 'my God, we really are in this all together. This is unbelievable'.

**Sam Walker:**

So connection was more powerful than confidence?

**Jeff Dewing:**

All day long, and it but it was the authenticity, it was the people, frontline staff from help desk operators to managers to directors, were sitting there and all they wanted to do, I was the old lady that fell over. All they wanted to do is come and help me up.

**Sam Walker:**

Yeah. You talked about, you know, how having that vulnerability with your staff can be really powerful in creating an even stronger leadership. But what about what about with your clients? Have you got instances of actually where being vulnerable with clients led to that deeper connection?

**Jeff Dewing:**

The same thing applies: COVID. We learn a lot of lessons from COVID. The world learned a lot of lessons. The first thing you do when you're in that environment and your clients will stop paying you, and we were owed, you know, millions. And the client said, look, 'we're not paying anybody, we don't know what's happening, we've shut the restaurants, we've got no income, so you know the checkbooks are closed'. And the first thing that we start talking about is let's issue statutory demands, let's issue winding up petitions, let's go from yeah,

let's let's go with a knife, let's go with the because you're you're retaliating, you're a cornered rat, right? You're you're retaliating. And then I said, How about we do the opposite? How about we actually support them? And the team says, Me, what do you mean? So I said, Well, let's reach out to the C-suite of these organisations saying 'look, we're not going to phone you out every five minutes for money. We understand the problem you're facing, we're also having the same problem'. And of course, we've got the same problem because we've got a supply chain that we're trying to manage that also not being paid by us because we've done the same, we've locked the checkbooks. So everyone is scared, everyone is frightened, and more importantly, is there is 100% uncertainty, and that's the one thing that kills a human being is uncertainty. So, why don't we go for little and often? And they said, What do you mean? So I said, Well, you owe me seven million quid. How about you pay me a hundred grand a week? And then I can pay out a hundred grand a week to the suppliers, which means they're getting five grand a week each, whatever, whatever. And there's something happening, which means people still believe in the spirit of the human spirit. We're at least doing something, little and often. And every client bar one agreed to do that. And that meant that we were receiving a couple of three hundred grand and paying out supply chain, and then of course we were starting supply chain 'look, we're telling you exactly what's happening. This company just paid us this, we're paying you that, we're paying that'. Everything was completely brutally transparent. And then occasionally one client wouldn't pay us one week because of various challenges that had, and we said, 'no, it's fine, we're working with you'. We was never aggressive. We was like, how do we fix this together? That's vulnerability, right? And what that done was the relationships of our clients went to a whole new level because they said, 'oh my god, we had everybody else threatening to pull service, pull this, pull that, not supporting us here, you owe us millions, we're gonna take you to court, we're gonna do that. Yet you sat down and said, 'How do we solve this problem together'? And it built a whole new level of trust. So much so that as we came out of COVID, the relationships with those clients were a hundred times stronger than they were pre-COVID.

**Sam Walker:**

What about somebody listening to this who goes, that's really inspiring, that's really great. I don't have the courage to do that. I don't have the courage to be vulnerable because it is actually letting down a guard that I've built my professional career on.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Then you carry on doing the same thing.

**Sam Walker:**

Have you ever regretted being open with your team?

**Jeff Dewing:**

No, never. The more open I am, and when I see the responses to that openness, it makes it easy for me to be open again. It's that first hurdle, it's that first it's that first jump, that first coming out. Coming out of your car comfort zone. It's that first jump when you say, Do you know what this isn't so bad? And then you it becomes easier and easier and easier and easier. And it's like I said before, it's like it's like keynote speaking. You know, when you go and do your first keynote or you go and do your first speech on stage, you are absolutely

shitting yourself because you've never done it before, right? But when you just do it and do it and do it, and you speak about your special subject, you know about it, you're passionate about it. But more importantly, you know, imagine you you talk to an audience of 2,000 people about a subject, might be culture, might be environment, might be FM, might be whatever. There's always somebody that wants to hang you out to dry. And how do you control that? Well, the key to controlling that is being honest and being vulnerable. And you'll get a question come from that'll talk about you know financial and you know, balance sheet exchange. It might be about FX, it might be about what they'll say, so how do you manage that? So, how would you deal with that? I said, I've got no idea, never happened to me. Or they'll say, you know, tell me about this. How would you do this or how would you do that? I said, I've got no idea, never done it. It's about being honest, about not trying to answer all the questions and saying, 'look, I can I'll tell you what I know, but I'll also tell you that I don't know that'. And it's just about being honest. And then all you do is you shut the person down that's actually got a hidden agenda, in most cases, not all cases, but in most cases, you've got a hidden agenda, and you just shut them down and be saying, I don't know.

**Sam Walker:**

And that disarms them, but in a way that actually, again, creates more connections.

**Jeff Dewing:**

But at the same time, they come back and go, Oh, he didn't try to be clever.

**Sam Walker:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Dewing:**

So you've then built another connection because you're not someone that's trying to be cleverer than yeah, there's a golden rule about leadership, and that is that never ever think for one second that you're the cleverest person in the room. And how do you spot a leader in a meeting of 12 people? It's the one that is giving no answers, only asking questions. And it's also the you spot a leader in the room by the last person to speak because they're curious about what everyone else has got to say first!

**Sam Walker:**

I mean, that really does fly in the face of pretty much everything we're taught from school. I mean, any questions, people are ashamed to put their hand up and say, I don't know. And in a way, that's that becomes the norm even before you enter the world of work.

**Jeff Dewing:**

It does remind me of a great story that happened to me once that will live with me forever. I was asked to attend a meeting, and my operations director was holding a meeting, and they had a challenge or a problem they needed to solve, really complex problem. I can't remember what the problem was, but it was a complex problem. And he'd assembled 12 people to talk about this problem that was somehow connected to this problem or potentially could create a solution. And he said, 'Jeff, can you come and sit in on this on this meeting? He said, because I'd like your perspective'. I said, 'Yeah'. So sat on a meeting and

he puts the problem up on a on a on a flip chart, and they begin to talk about the problem and they contextualise it, and I then start saying, 'Well, so let's now talk about the potential solutions'. They go around the table and there's various ideas, whatever, and each time an idea came up, they went, 'Yes, great idea, but that's gonna cause this problem, that's gonna cause that problem'. And because I was observer, I didn't say you're not allowed to say yes, but and anyway, they went round the table, round the table, round the table, and it was two and a half hours this meeting. and I sat silent through all of it. And at the very end, John Cotton, who was the operation director, fantastic guy basically they drew a blank... we can't find a way out of this. So he said to me, 'Jeff, you've been sitting there silent for two and a half hours. What do you think?' I said, 'I've got no idea. It's a complex problem, no idea at all'. He said, 'Well, you must have some thought pro...' I said, No, John, let me ask you a question. So he said, What? I said, What do you think the answer is? He said, You just sat here and listened to me for two and a half hours, not know the answer. I said, But if you did know the answer, what would you do? I would do blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. He went, you bastard. How did you do that? I said, I just freed your thinking, John. You just you were barriered by yourself, right now, and what he came up with was not the total solution, but it it was a thousand times further than the two-and-a-half hour debate had gone on. It's the ability to unconstrain yourself. And that's what leaders do. It's not about giving the answer, it's about helping your team find the answers.

**Sam Walker:**

I mean, as someone who sat, especially early on in my career, in so many meetings, panicking that I didn't have anything to say, that would be a really valuable lesson. Because I think a lot of people are afraid of losing credibility by saying 'I don't know'.

**Jeff Dewing:**

No. No, it's just it's about the fact you play people in position and you know the most powerful thing in any discussion or meeting or keynote is a pause. You don't have to fill the pauses with meaningless words. It's the ability to speak when you've got something to say.

**Sam Walker:**

And you're then therefore also encouraging people to do the same because you're modelling the behaviour that you want to see.

**Jeff Dewing:**

And of course, those people feel much stronger in the meeting that failed to come up with a solution in two and a half hours, that then listen to me saying, I don't know. So they went, Oh, we're not all stupid then. This is tough. And you just it just enables people to grow and be confident in their own situation that says, 'I don't feel stupid or embarrassed now'.

**Sam Walker:**

Thank you. That's you know, really insightful.

Thank you to Jeff. Thank you for listening to or watching Doing the Opposite: Business Disruptors - Conversations with Jeff Dewing. You can find out more about Jeff's work at [jeffdewing.co.uk](http://jeffdewing.co.uk). And if you enjoyed this episode, do share it with somebody who is ready to challenge the norm.

Next time we're going to be exploring culture as competitive advantage, why trust, empowerment, and people first values can actually transform performance. To find out more, do visit [jeffdewing.co.uk](http://jeffdewing.co.uk) with thanks to Nichola Crawshaw at Cloud and also to Michael Blades at What Goes On Media. Doing the opposite: Business Disruptors - Conversations with Jeff Dewing is at What Goes On Media Production.