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# DOING THE OPPOSITE BUSINESS DISRUPTORS

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Conversations with  
*Jeff Dewing*

## EPISODE FIVE

### Trust, Transparency & Technology

#### Jeff Dewing – Teaser:

*Why do we behave as leaders, managers, employees? Why do we behave differently at home than we do at work? Why is it, oh no, at work I have to be professional, I have to work, yeah, whereas at home I can laugh and joke with the kids. Why can't I laugh and joke with people at work? You know, why do I behave differently? Why do I think that this is two different environments? Why can't I not just be myself?*

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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 business and also life. I'm Sam Walker.

Jeff Dewing has built a highly successful company, the Cloudfm Group, by breaking every rule in the book. After losing everything, he came back by doing the opposite of what conventional wisdom says that you should. Today, Jeff joins me to talk about technology and how used the right way, it can actually build trust and not replace it.

Jeff, what do you mean by that? I mean, you've used technology obviously in a really practical way to streamline your business operations. But how does it build trust? Can you explain what you mean by that?

#### Jeff Dewing:

So the whole point came from the ability to say to a client, 'do you know what we got that totally wrong?' Whereas everyone is always geared... and what I'd learnt when I went back to work for six, seven years was that the entire environment was about people, great people, hundreds of thousands of fantastic people behaving badly. They would hide from the fact that they got something wrong. And therefore, the clients are saying, 'you can't always be right about this stuff. Why can't you, you know, it's obvious that you got that wrong. Why, why are we sitting arguing about who got it wrong or not? Why don't you just take the responsibility and we move forward?' 'Uh yeah, but we didn't get it wrong', and it's and it's just my god, it's driving me crazy.

So I would say, yeah, completely, completely fucked it up. Sorry. But when you do that, the conversation changes, you de-ammunise. I look back on a childhood activity, I was I was roller skating with my mate at Pickett's Lock, and we'd walk home to where I lived in Chinkford, a long walk. And as kids, you walk along the wall. I was about 12, 13 years old, and you're walking along someone's house wall because it was fun and your mates on the pavement. And he spotted there was a gap in the driveway where the brick wall had stopped because obviously the cars had got to get in. And he said to me, 'I'll bet you can't jump that gap.' Why did he say that? Because he wanted me to attempt to jump the gap, which he believed I had no chance of doing without hurting myself. And as I approached, I went, You're right, I can't. And I stepped off the wall. I mean, why do you jump the gap? Why do you jump? And you took control of the moment, right? And that was what I that was something that I was in the back of my subconscious when a client says, you know, you're not going to get that finished by next week, are you? And everybody would say, Yeah, we will, yeah, we will, because yeah, we want to say it. I said, No, we're not. And then you you talk about what really matters and you work together on solutions. So for me, that was where the honesty and the transparency had to come from. You had to change the conversation.

**Sam Walker:**

Where did the idea come from to be transparent with your clients?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Because the seven years that I was working for big businesses and corporates as part of my relearning journey following the failure, I just saw everybody lying, cheating, and deceiving. And none of them were bad people. It was the environment they were in. So I said, why don't we try the opposite? Why don't we just be completely honest about everything?

**Sam Walker:**

I mean, that's a really big risk to take. If it's not something that you even see around you, you're the outlier saying, we're actually putting ourselves on the line here and saying we're human, we're flawed, we might not get it right. How do you get clients to trust someone who says we might not be able to do this?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Um I guess you've got to sort of change the question slightly. If you're about to embark on a journey with a client, either in a contract or a project, saying to a client we might not be able to do this is probably not the right thing to do. But when you're actually in the moment and you're doing stuff and things go wrong, because there's one guarantee in life, things are gonna go wrong, right? And everyone says, No, no, we're really we're really good at what we do, things don't go wrong. Well, then you're just a liar and you're very stupid. Of course things go wrong. There's gonna be challenges, there's gonna be curveballs, there's always gonna be something that has an impact on what you're trying to do. And what you say to the clients is 'things are gonna go wrong, and when they do, we're gonna work together to overcome them'. The client has a different mindset. You change the mindset, you change the environment, and they feel more comfortable thinking, I'm gonna know when something's gone wrong, they're not gonna hide it from me, and therefore it spirals.

**Sam Walker:**

Did anyone on your team, anyone within your business, actually push back on that and say this is too dangerous a thing to attempt?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Yes, my two business partners.

**Sam Walker:**

How did that conversation go?

**Jeff Dewing:**

They were like all of us, and you know, that this is not an attack on them, they were the same as the rest of the population. We've always done it this way. And you can't say those things to a client, they won't appreciate it, and you can't do this and you can't do that. And I said, Well, we're gonna because that's why we started this business. So, although they agreed with the principles of why we started the business, when it came to actually doing it, they got very, very nervous and understandably so, they're just trying to protect themselves, protect the business. We need to be a little bit, you know, we need to not perhaps say that. And I said, No, we're gonna say it. And they'd and they'd say, 'Okay, well, I'll go to the meeting, Jeff, so and and I'll control it and we and we won't say that'. And then I say, Okay, fine. So he then comes back to the meeting and said, 'Jeff, you emailed him. I said, Yeah, no, because you weren't gonna let me tell him'. So it just made the conversation more structured. But to do these things, you have to learn to have difficult conversations. And the difficult conversations are not about being aggressive or being assertive, the difficult conversations are the ability to talk about something sensitive without attacking the soul, right? The ability to not attack somebody's soul. When I turn around to somebody and say, this failed because you were shit, I'm attacking the soul. Whereas if you say this went wrong because I didn't pay enough attention, I need to spend more time on attention, they come back and say, Well, actually, Jeff, we might not have spent enough attention on it either. And suddenly the difficult conversation becomes easy, but you've got to get over that barrier.

**Sam Walker:**

So actually, it's learning and having the courage to be vulnerable first. Of course. And that's how you sort of set the tone for the conversation.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Well, it's vulnerability, but the the key word for me is humility. Have the humility that says, listen, I probably could have done better here. I took my eye off the ball. Or um part of the part of the the element of humility is saying, I'm not always gonna get this right. I'm gonna do my damndest to get it right. But we're humans. By default, we're flawed. We make judgments based upon information available at the time. Sometimes it's gonna be wrong. But the key is no one's ever gonna avoid that. We're all gonna suffer that. How where do we focus our attention? On looking at who got it wrong or looking at how we resolve it. And if you put your effort into resolving it, suddenly the project, the contract is just so much easier.

**Sam Walker:**

Can transparency ever go too far?

**Jeff Dewing:**

With certain people, yes. You take Brexit. Transparency was we're gonna put 650 million in the NHS, which was just complete falsehoods. So if you if you are transparent to the extent that you lie, then of course that's a problem. But then you're also in a situation where you've got you know parts of demographics that that go to work on a nine to five, enjoy their life, going home, having Sunday dinner, spending time with the kids, going to the park, and all these wonderful things that make them happy, that's great. If you're transparent about 'if we don't win this contract, I'm gonna have to make all of you redundant'. You can't have that transparency at that stage because you don't know the outcome. So all you do is you're creating fear. Now, that doesn't mean you're hiding anything. It means that at a certain level, you have to manage... another thing that comes to mind was my mum said to me years and years and years ago when when I was like 16, 17, and she'd say to me, Jeff, if you knew what went on in the world, you wouldn't sleep at night. Because there are things that are having to be managed outside of our capability to understand. And therefore, suggesting that you should be totally transparent with things I can't possibly understand is not is not a solution, is not something you should do. You should be transparent with things that affect people when you know it's going to affect them, not if you think it might affect them in two years' time.

**Sam Walker:**

I mean, that's quite a delicate balancing act. How do leaders learn that? How do they learn how to balance that openness with privacy and learning? Is it just trial and error?

**Jeff Dewing:**

It's asking yourself how you would feel in that situation. And we're back to reflection. Before, if you're in a sensitive where you think, 'should I be transparent about this'? You have to ask yourself, how would I feel about that in that position? And you can only do that, not with a 10-second thought process. You might have to sit and think about that over the weekend whilst walking through the woods. How would I feel about that? And then the other way you've got to do it is you you trust the people around you. So I'm the chief exec. If I want to write a snotty email to a client or a supplier, I can write it. I'm the CEO. Of course I can write it. I never have. If I want to write an email that is sensitive, I write the email and I share it with six of my board members and say, Could I do better? And every time, without exception, that email is materially changed. And when it goes out, it's the best email it could be.

I don't have an ego that says, 'No, I'm the chief exec, I decide'. Where leaders get it wrong is they think they're the ones that have to demonstrate strength and demonstrate resilience and demonstrate they're right and demonstrate they're experienced. Ten heads are better than one. A great CEO asks their team, is this the right way to do this?

**Sam Walker:**

So don't be an island.

**Jeff Dewing:**

No, never be an island.

**Sam Walker:**

What is one system or process that comes to mind that you would never hide from your team?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Reality. So COVID would be a classic example. We're in COVID, we've all been sent home, but at that point we don't know about furlough. And I've got 500 mouths to feed, and we were collecting seven million pounds a month in revenue, and on the 20th of March that fell off a cliff to 200,000. What on earth are we gonna do? Um and at that point um the three most important words in business came up and they're the most important words in any business and will be for the rest of time, and that is communicate, communicate, communicate.

And it was that brutal transparency at that point. I said, But trust me, we're gonna speak to you twice a week, and every one of us has got our phone on 24 hours a day. If any of you ever want to speak to us about anything, and we will hide nothing from, we will tell you everything that's happened. We'll tell you what we know and we'll tell you what we don't know, and we'll do that twice a week until we understand we're in some, and we did that for the next six months.

**Sam Walker:**

I want to move on and kind of take these lessons about transparency and trust and openness and talk a bit about tech because tech's such a massive part of your business, but tech can feel the like the polar opposite of everything you've just talked about. You've talked about that openness, that humanity, that humility. Tech can seem incredibly cold, it can seem inhuman. How do you actually use tech in the same way to create a feeling of trust and connectivity?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Technology is an enabler, it's not a solution. And when I decided to start and build Cloud, I asked myself, 'how am I gonna do this differently'? And as you as we've already alluded to, this was about transparency. So the tech I built is no better than anybody else's and there's some great tech out there that's built incredibly well and great architecture, but they all missed the point. All the tech is built for the masses. So here's my bit of tech that I can sell to every company on the planet, and they can all adjust it to how they see fit to serve their purpose, and I then get the mass market. Which basically meant anybody could do anything with the tech. They could change it, they could edit it, they could delete it, they could hide it, they could do all sorts of stuff. And that was the problem.

So if an engineer went to a site and wrote on his PDA, the manager was a complete twat, I threw the toolbox at him, I never want to come back here again, um, and I hope he dies in a car crash, right? The first thing that the administrator does is... 'I can't leave that there because we'll lose the contract. So I'm going to change that. The engineer and the manager um had a disagreement and we'll resolve it in the next few days'. And I'm sitting there going,

No, no, no, no, no, no. No, if that's what he writes, that's what everybody sees. We don't change the wording, we re-educate the engineer.

And because it's not changed and it's so dramatic, the client goes, 'Oh my god, they really are not hiding anything'. And that is the whole point of the exercise. And they'll and they say to us, What are you gonna do? We're bringing the engineer in for a disciplinary and to train him that that's not how he behaves. But you can't hide it. So, what we did with our technology is it's built in a similar way to everybody else's, but all we did was we said, in our technology, there's no way of you editing, hiding, or deleting data. You might not like what it says, but you know it's true.

**Sam Walker:**

So, what's the leadership lesson here?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Transparency. The leadership is just be human, and and we'll touch on it in another time. But I mean, this comes back down to life lessons. Why do we behave as leaders, managers, employees? Why do we behave differently at home than we do at work? Why is it, oh no, at work I have to be professional, I have to work, yeah, whereas at home I can laugh and joke with the kids. Why can't I laugh and joke with people at work? Why do I behave differently? Why do I think that this is two different environments? Why can I why can't I not just be myself? If you're gonna say to your wife, look, I've already I've cocked up done, I forgot to buy the marmalade, but I won't say that to the client in case I lose a contract. It's the whole thing was just about broad basic life values.

**Sam Walker:**

Has that backfired though, ever? As a client turned around and went, 'I can't believe you forgot to buy the business marmalade'.

**Jeff Dewing:**

No. It's never ever backfired because you de-ammunise somebody. When someone wants to attack you for something, or someone wants to critique you for something, or someone wants to hold you responsible or accountable for something, and you say it wasn't me, and they want to bring out all the evidence, you've got this big debate about who's right, who's wrong, right? And who got it wrong. The moment you say, 'I got it wrong, it's totally my fault'. Next thing I'm saying, 'well, maybe it wasn't your fault. Maybe I could have told you this, maybe I could have sent you that email'. You de-ammunise people, right? And it's and it's so much easier. It changes everything. And people, for me, I don't I don't find this difficult. But a lot of people have said to me you showed a lot of courage doing that. And I don't want I don't want to take the glory of saying I had a load of courage. For me, because I was brought up this way, these things don't worry me, but I can see how they worry everybody else because I'm watching how everybody else behaves.

**Sam Walker:**

I love that. There is a quote actually used in your book when you say the opposite of secrecy isn't exposure, it's trust.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Yes, it is.

**Sam Walker:**

So, what is your advice on how a leader can start to introduce this concept to their team, the concept of transparency to their clients? What's the steps?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Firstly, you have to avoid pushing water uphill. And where leaders go wrong is they're pushing water uphill because they want to do something, but they haven't got their team on board yet. And therefore you're trying to drag sleighs up a mountain of ice. It's just ridiculous. You have to focus first on getting your team to believe what you believe. If your team don't believe what you believe, you'll never succeed. So the first job is getting your team to believe. And if you get to the point where you realise your team don't believe, then you've got the wrong team. So you therefore have to assemble the right team. And when you've got the team where you all believe what you believe, then suddenly you're pushing a sleigh down a mountain, not up it.

**Sam Walker:**

I love that. Thank you. Thanks so much.

Thank you to Jeff. Thank you for watching this episode of Doing the Opposite Business Disruptors Conversations with Jeff Dewing. You can find out more about Jeff and his work at [jeffdewing.co.uk](http://jeffdewing.co.uk). If you've enjoyed this episode, do share it with someone who is maybe ready to start to unlock the positive effect of transparency and what it can have on a business.

Next time, Jeff is going to be talking about profit versus purpose, redefining success. Until then, keep questioning, keep leading, and keep doing the opposite. A big thank you to Nichola Crawshaw at Cloud and also to Michael Blades at What Goes On Media. Doing the Opposite: Business Disruptors is What Goes On Media production.