When you and your team are leading big change, there are inevitably going to be complexity, ambiguity and stresses. And in all organisations, it is standard for people to face a constant stream of performance reviews, critiques, 360s and more.

Unfortunately these can all too easily undermine people's confidence, energy and relationships. We have found that the most inspiring leaders — those who engender loyalty, creativity and sustained success — instinctively seek to balance these forces.

There are several ways in which they do this but one that stands out is what we call "creating an ERA culture" — an atmosphere characterised by high levels of Encouragement, Recognition and Appreciation.

Research since the 1960s (see Herzberg’s “Hygiene Factors” theory on what motivates people at work, for example) has shown that most people are motivated at least as powerfully by these seemingly soft, intangible things as they are by the promise of more money.

When did you last encourage someone? What difference did it make for them, and indeed you? We often hear how transformative it can be when leaders show their faith in people, and invest time and attention in this way. As for recognition, this is about acknowledging people’s contributions to the shared purpose – publicly where relevant. It does not have to be an award or huge public fanfare – although these are options when appropriate. As for appreciation, this can be as simple as two words – “great report”, “useful meeting” or “delicious lunch”. An adjective and a noun. Add more if you want!

Nancy Kline recommends sticking to three guiding principles in offering appreciation – a big part of her work on how to create productive thinking environments - and her guidance applies well to encouragement and recognition too. She says be:

- **Sincere** – above all else, only say what you really mean – there is nothing more counter-productive than people feeling that you are going through the motions but don’t really mean it – and they will usually know the difference.
- **Specific** – because then the recipient can really recognise the link between what you are saying and something that they have done; not least, this encourages them to do more of it.
- **Succinct** – don’t blather on for ages or people really will start rolling their eyes!

“People thrive in an atmosphere characterised by high levels of ERA: Encouragement, Recognition and Appreciation.”

And it is worth recognising that many find it hard to receive compliments and good news. So if some ERA is offered to you we suggest the 3 A’s:

- **Acknowledge** – that what the other person is saying is true for them, so probably contains some truth about you
- **Allow** – the words to enter your system: hear them, let them in and feel the positive emotions they bring up for you – and for your relationship with the other person, and
- **Accept** – because then this intangible stuff, being like water, can douse the fires caused by the stresses you face, and feed the seeds of your confidence, creativity and generosity.

We have repeatedly seen how even small bits of ERA can act like magic in organisations – better relationships, more resilience and, paradoxically, a greater willingness for people to critique themselves. Research suggests you aim for a 5:1 ratio - five parts positive feedback to one part critique. Some people need even more positive stuff; few thrive on less, even those who say they don’t need it.