

What would you dare not say to your manager or director?

As part of Module 2 in this Learning Journey; participants explored Trust and Speaking Up in the workplace. Within the training, participants were asked to consider what they would “Dare Not Say to their Manager or Director” (DNS). The facilitator provided an anonymous app, using free-text, to allow participants the freedom to write responses specific to their own situation.

Participants were not given any suggestions on what DNS they could write, aside from: a) it must be a valid business issue (ie – not personal or rude); b) something that they personally would find difficult to bring up; and c) not to include any item that would identify them, nor their manager, by context. The report that follows, summarises the statements from across five cohorts (approximately 120 staff members), the raw data can be found in the [appendix](#).

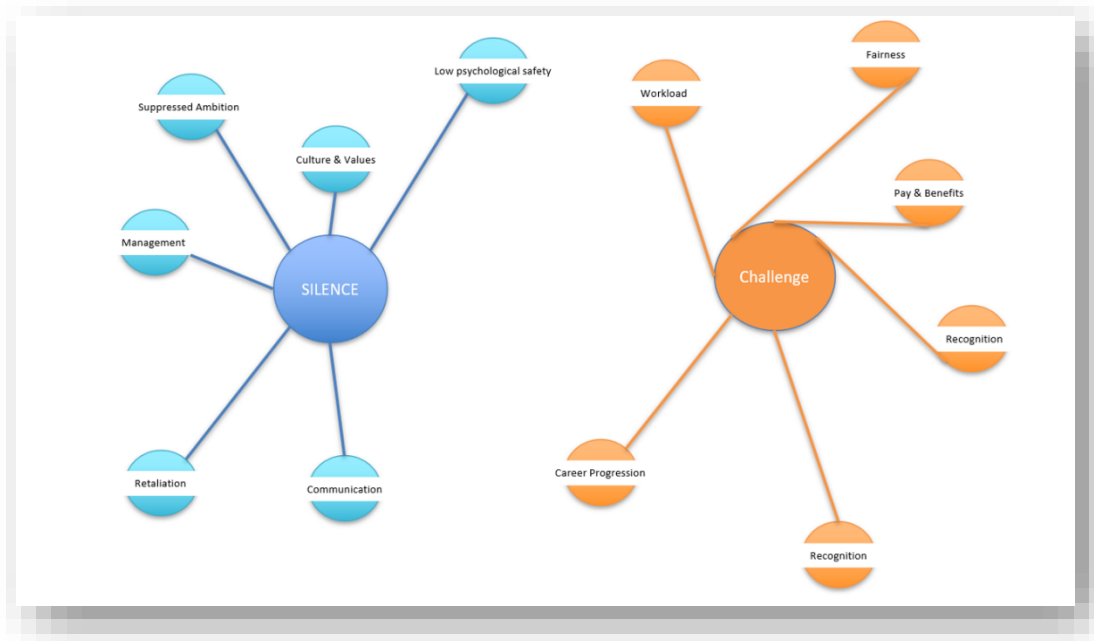
We feel it important to note that, while there is a long list of DNS, the number of statements represents just over one Dare not Say per participant. This is not a report of systemic dysfunction. What emerges are individual challenges – patterns of behaviour and communication – that, if recognised and acted upon, will unlock staff voice and build a stronger culture.

Dynamics: Silence vs Challenge

When staff were asked anonymously what they “dare not say” to their managers or directors, a powerful set of themes emerged. These DNS are not simply complaints; they are signals of what people need in order to feel safe, valued, and motivated.

Two broad dynamics stand out:

1. Silence – Many staff hold back because of fear of repercussions, lack of psychological safety, or the belief that speaking up won’t make a difference. This silence shows up in concerns about micromanagement, favouritism, and inconsistent leadership behaviours.
2. Challenge – At the same time, staff want to challenge positively. They want fairness, recognition, growth opportunities, and more realistic workloads. The challenge is there, but it is muted until leaders create space for it to be expressed safely.



This diagram maps the unspoken staff statements into these two overarching dynamics:

1. Silence
 - Themes like *fear of retaliation*, *low psychological safety*, and *suppressed ambition* sit here.

- Staff withholding views, concerns, or ideas because they don't feel safe or believe nothing will change.

How it shows up in the data:

1. Fear of retaliation (“If I disagree, it may affect my promotion”).
 2. Avoiding honest feedback (“I can't say the idea is wrong”).
 3. Suppressing ambition (“I won't ask for training or progression”).
 4. Withdrawing effort (“I'm overworked but can't speak up about it”).
- *Underlying behaviour:* Self-censorship. People know what they'd like to say, but the cost of speaking outweighs the perceived benefit.
 - The DNS link strongly to issues of leadership style, inconsistent communication, and cultural signals (e.g., favouritism, micromanagement).
 - In practice, silence looks like meetings where people nod politely, avoid raising risks, and hold back on new ideas.

2. Challenge

- Themes like *fairness demands, recognition needs, and growth aspirations* are part of this.
- Staff wanting to raise constructive pushback, hold leaders accountable, and seek fairness or recognition.

How it shows up in the data:

1. Calls for consistency and fairness (“Stop the favouritism, recognise contributions”).
2. Demands for resourcing and balance (“We need headcount, workload is unrealistic”).
3. Growth aspirations (“I want career progression, overseas training, development opportunities”).

4. Requests for transparency (“Give us clear direction, involve us in decisions”).

- *Underlying behaviour:* Suppressed voice with a constructive intent. Staff aren’t trying to undermine leaders—they want better clarity, fairness, and opportunities.
- They connect to workload, pay, career development, and the desire for leaders to act with transparency and consistency.
- In practice, challenge looks like staff suggesting improvements, questioning workload balance, or asking for recognition—provided they know it won’t backfire.

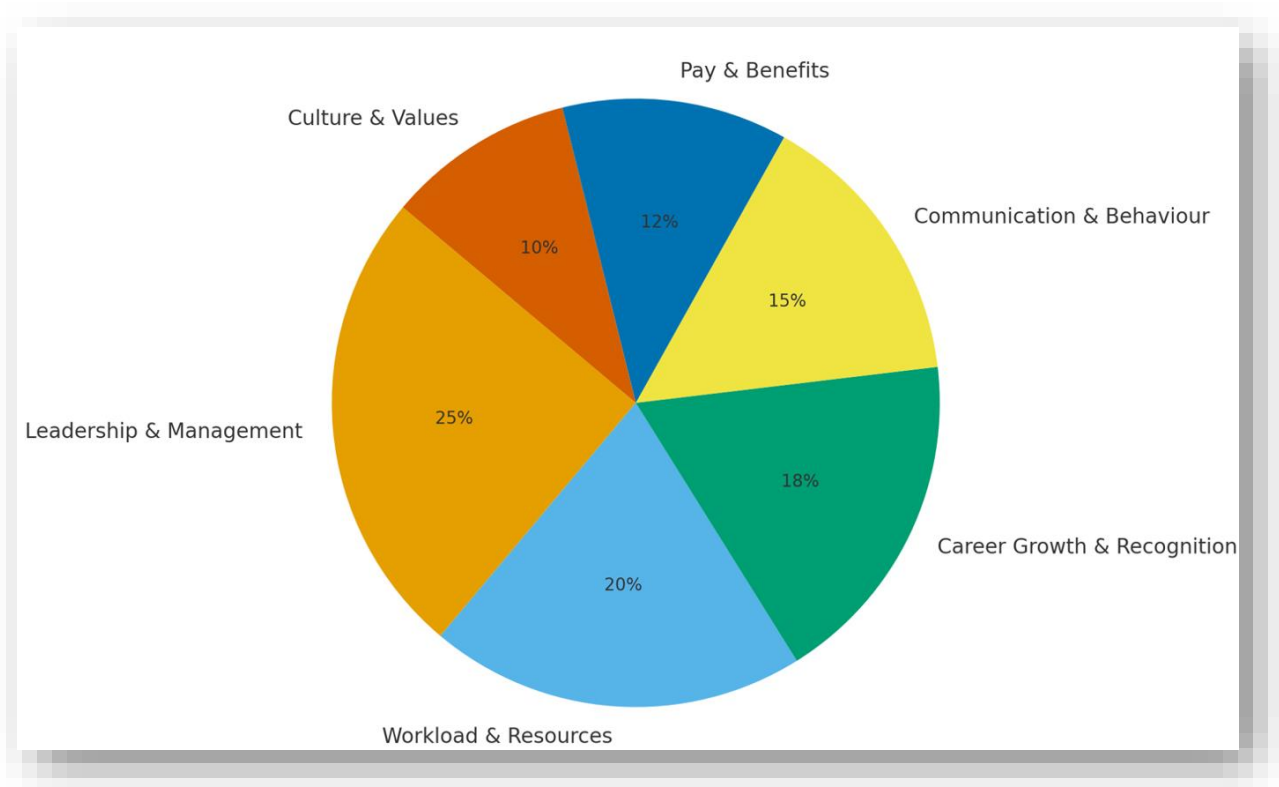
The tension between the Silence and Challenge:

- Right now, staff lean towards *Silence* because they don’t trust that their voice will be welcomed.
- But underneath, there’s a strong appetite for *Challenge*—for making things fairer, clearer, and more growth-oriented.
- This means the potential is already in the system. By shifting behaviours at the leadership level (listening, protecting space for ideas, rewarding openness), we can unlock that potential.

The diagram above is not a criticism; it’s a roadmap, there are opportunities for leaders:

- Reduce Silence by building psychological safety and trust.
- Increase Challenge by encouraging constructive pushback, recognising effort, and following through consistently.
- In doing so, leaders can turn unspoken frustrations into energy for collaboration, innovation, and resilience.

Themes: Categorising the DNS



What do the themes tell us? When we look across all of the “Dare Not Say” statements (see [appendix](#) for full list), the largest share sits around *leadership behaviours* and *management style*. Staff want managers who are consistent, fair, and grounded in reality. They see bias, micromanagement, and detachment from day-to-day realities as barriers that make it unsafe to speak honestly.

The second major theme is *workload* and *resources*. People describe feeling stretched, carrying extra responsibilities, or working under unrealistic expectations. They see gaps in resourcing and systems, and want leaders to notice when the balance is tipping towards burnout.

Career growth and recognition also emerge strongly. Staff feel overlooked, both in terms of development opportunities and in the simple act of having their contributions recognised. The lack of appreciation is as damaging as the lack of progression, leaving people questioning their future in the organisation.

Communication issues run through the data as well. Leaders are sometimes seen as unclear, inconsistent, or not genuinely listening. This undermines trust and discourages staff from raising concerns.

While *pay and benefits* are raised, they are not the dominant theme. The deeper frustration lies in perceived unfairness—when rewards and promotions are misaligned with effort, or when resources are directed towards senior hires instead of existing staff.

Finally, *culture and values* appear in the background of many comments. Staff notice when stated values are not lived, when double standards are tolerated, or when empathy is missing. These moments erode credibility and deepen silence.

The overall story from the themes point to a workforce that cares deeply about their work but feels constrained. They want to contribute ideas, challenge constructively, and grow—but the current environment pushes them towards silence. Leadership behaviour, workload balance, and recognition are the levers that will either unlock or suppress this energy.

Recommendations

The statements shared by staff reveal not disengagement, but concern, care, and caution. People want to speak up, but fear it will not be safe or worthwhile. By shifting behaviours, leaders can unlock staff energy and move from Silence to Constructive Challenge.

1. Building Trust in Leadership

- End favouritism and mixed messages — role-model fairness.
- Replace micromanagement with trust and autonomy.
- Create visible “listening forums” where staff input is invited and acted on.

2. Addressing Workload & Resourcing

- Audit workload balance and resource commitments.
- Link initiatives to proper headcount and systems support.
- Ensure managers experience “ground reality” to guide decisions.

3. Recognising & Growing People

- Establish transparent career pathways.
- Celebrate contribution and effort routinely, not just results.
- Co-create development opportunities with staff.

4. Strengthening Communication

- Keep messages clear, concise, and consistent.
- Close the loop — show staff how their input has influenced outcomes.
- Train leaders to listen and respond without defensiveness.

5. Ensuring Fair Rewards

- Be transparent about pay, promotion, and WFH policies.
- Align recognition and reward to contribution, not seniority.

6. Living the Values

- Demonstrate empathy and fairness daily.
- Actively connect leadership behaviour to organisational values.
- Reinforce psychological safety as a non-negotiable cultural standard.

The Opportunity

Staff want to challenge constructively. If leaders make it safe and meaningful to speak up, silence will give way to stronger collaboration, innovation, and resilience.

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Appendix – Raw Data

‘Dare Not Say’ Statements – Staff Module 2 (August and September, 2025)

“What would you dare not say to your manager or director?”

Note: statements are as written; no editing was undertaken by Simia. Any typos or unclear thoughts are presented as written by the participants)

INDICATORS

(s)= Silence - staff withholding due to fear, safety, or futility.

(c)= Challenge - staff want to raise constructive pushback, fairness, or growth needs.

1. Leadership & Management Style

- That he is not doing his job well (C)
- I followed your instructions and it is wrong (C)
- Their working style (S)
- To man up and protect our team (C)
- Favouritism (C)
- Feedback on management style (C)
- You don't understand how things work in here (C)
- Do you think you're the right person to lead the team? (S)
- Please exercise the core value of the company before asking for other to do so (C)
- Don't change your decisions every now and then (C)
- Don't bring us around in circles (C)
- Cut the act. Be professional & upright (C)
- You are incompetent (S)
- You need to be more firm and direct in your leading (C)
- Operating model is not productive and effective (C)
- Can you be more transparent to us? (C)
- Rank does not match the actual work (C)
- Provide a clear direction on how things need to be done (C)
- I'm not sure if you have our best interest at heart (S)
- My team often notices that the manager sleeps on the job (C)

- Stop asking me all the time (S)
- Can you do it yourself (C)
- Your idea is not good and here is why (S)
- That his idea/solution is lousy or wrong (S)
- Stop being so soft... fight for the dept and team (C)
- Please avoid showing excessive favoritism (C)
- Are you aware that your biasness is too obvious? (C)
- The planning and organising skill is lacking (C)
- Try to be on the ground to understand your staff (C)
- Listen, and look into the root of issues... (C)
- Let's be consistent—no double standards (C)
- Favoritism is a sin (C)
- Do not constantly be a “yes” person (C)
- Don't be too abstract. Go straight to the point (C)
- Your expectation is too unrealistic (C)
- That he/she is micromanaging and not respecting personal time (S)
- You should listen to others instead of insisting you're always correct (C)
- I don't believe in the direction this company is heading (C)
- Your management style is making the team less effective (C)
- You didn't listen to my ideas, you just waited and changed them (S)
- You shut down my idea without explaining (S)
- So what happened to my idea, did it disappear? (S)
- The team's credit is never appreciated, only blame (C)
- Treat your staff equally (C)
- He is a monopolist (S)
- Please have more concrete sense of direction (C)
- Not doing enough and don't understand the workflow (C)
- That they need to think ahead of time to plan effectively (C)
- He/she could do so much more to allocate work fairly (C)
- He does not accept feedback and tells others we are rude (S)

2. Workload & Resources

- I'm feeling overwhelmed by my workload—can we look at how it's distributed? (C)
- Why do we have to be overworked because of incompetent people? (C)
- With more workload and responsibilities, does my salary increase too? (C)
- Managers should experience groundwork before judging feasibility (C)
- Our team is understaffed for the initiatives rolled out (C)
- Details of work can be more than he/she thinks (C)
- Understand and define your role and protect team members (C)
- Access was only raised after follow-ups, delaying training (C)
- WFH cited as reason for training delays, unfair (C)
- We have not been involved in workflow discussions, feel left out (C)
- Stop piling me with more work (C)
- The team is constantly taking on extra workload (C)
- Please do not give me more work than I'm supposed to (C)
- Ask for additional headcount (C)
- Stop hiring so many senior roles... (C)
- Please direct resources into improving systems/infrastructure (C)
- I am overworked (S)
- Too much work cannot cope (S)
- I'm full-time with work without rest, stop chasing (S)
- If it's so easy, why don't you show me how? (S)
- To have lesser responsibilities... fear of looking incapable (S)

3. Career Growth & Recognition

- I do not see opportunity for career growth (C)
- I'm bored and not growing in my role (C)
- Focus on existing staff instead of creating unnecessary roles (C)
- I hope to attend overseas training (C)
- How is my work performance so far? (S)
- The team's effort never gets appreciated (C)
- I fulfilled my promises, why did you not keep yours? (C)
- That I was unhappy my manager took recognition for my project (S)
- Please give recognition where it is due (C)
- Concerns we raised remain unresolved (C)

- I am exhausted resolving problems caused by colleagues (C)
- Can we talk about promotion and pay adjustments? (C)
- I feel the job scope will limit my career (C)
- Can have more recognition and support (C)
- Not a bad thing, but I would not dare to commend manager (S)

4. Communication & Behaviour

- Can you make yourself clearer? (C)
- Please be quiet and stop making nonsense comments (S)
- When discussing things with you, only 10% relevant... (C)
- Please speak straight to the point (C)
- Don't be too abstract (C)
- Boss, can we have more communication and be informed? (C)
- Not sure if manager already decided—democracy show (S)
- I cannot understand your point of view in this review (C)
- To be fully engaged in meeting, not distracted by phone (C)
- Please keep it short (C)
- Be more firm in decision-making or flexible where needed (C)
- Stop asking me all the time (S)
- You really don't know this, just believe me ok? (S)
- Messages to us differ from what is practiced, affecting trust (C)
- Open communication (C)

5. Pay & Benefits

- Asking for a pay raise (C)
- Ask for a pay raise (C)
- I should get a pay raise for the work I do (C)
- Pay rise (C)
- Would want better bonuses (C)
- More pay, bonuses and promotion (C)
- Please allow WFH more than 1 day (C)
- Can we have more days to work from home (C)

6. Culture & Values

- To man up and protect our team (C)
- Please exercise the core values before asking others (C)
- Dare not to say about team bonding (S)
- It would be better if more empathy was shown (C)
- Some of the policies in the bank don't make sense (C)
- He is not empathetic on situational details (C)
- No leadership = self-driven, thanks (C)
- We must be forward-looking and embrace changes (C)
- Need quieter working environment (C)
- Take it easy man, I have only been here a minute (S)
- Do not copy wholesale from previous experience (C)
- Can head office respect branch decisions? (C)
- Why another team gets away with delaying but not ours? (C)
- Why is someone given less responsibility just for bad attitude? (C)
- Personal or family matters (S)
- What about non-performers in review? (C)
- Value staff who put in effort, not storytellers (C)
- Do you know what's happening on the ground? (C)
- Do you foresee any potential roadblocks? (C)
- Please start to recognise team problems before expansion (C)
- Unreachable KPI (C)
- The practice might not be correct (C)
- Understand what we are doing instead of asking us (C)
- His or her mistake made (S)
- I wouldn't say 'no' (S)
- I'm tired and exhausted (S)
- When can we be like other offices... less interruption? (C)