

Switched on LEADERSHIP[®]

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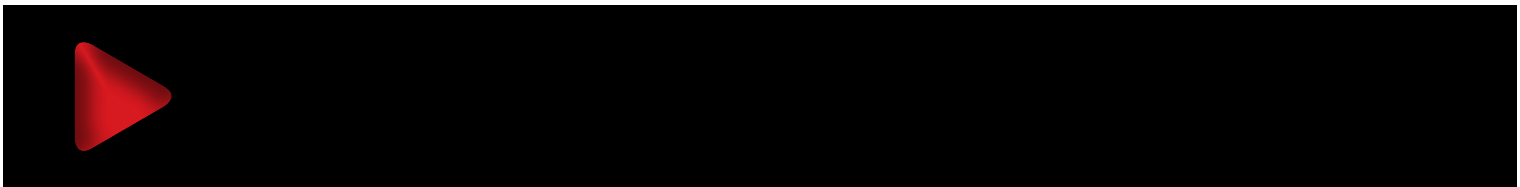
Interview with
**Chris
Atkinson**

HOW TO ENGAGE
and **Inspire**
Your Team

HOW TO ENGAGE and Inspire Your Team

INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS ATKINSON





Audio Podcast: Internet Connection Required

CC: Hello and welcome to Switched On Leadership, I'm Christele Canard and I have great pleasure in introducing my guest today Chris Atkinson.

Chris is an international business speaker and author who combines a strong commercial approach with a deep understanding of human psychology.

He has qualifications in the fields of psychology and counselling from the University of Bristol, in the UK.

Starting his speaking career in 2001, Chris has now worked in over 22

countries worldwide with more than 43 different nationalities. He has spoken in front of an estimated 30,000 people worldwide.

He is renowned as a speaker, master trainer and facilitator who specializes in audience engagement, organizational culture and inspiring leadership.

His new book, *Corporate Energy: How to Engage and Inspire Audiences* is due for release on the 26th of August.

Chris, welcome to Switched On Leadership.

CA: Great to speak with you, hello. ►

CC: Chris, I am interested in what drives you. What's the impact you are hoping to make in the world?

CA: As you mentioned in your introduction, I've worked with a lot of people over many years. When I reflect on all those people that I have worked with (all of which was in the commercial world) I wonder how many felt passion for their work or even enjoyed it at a minimum standard. Even if we estimate that fifty percent of the people that I've worked with enjoyed their job – which I believe is probably significantly too high – it is still a horrifying thought.

Imagine, all these people spending all day long in their office, doing something that isn't somehow satisfying them, or enriching their life in some way. To me that is fundamentally depressing. It is worrying and it feels dysfunctional in some way.

So the impact I hope to make in the world is: *I want to help people connect with some passion and enjoyment for working life.*

CC: Yes, I agree. We spend so much time at work, that it can be soul-destroying if you cannot connect to



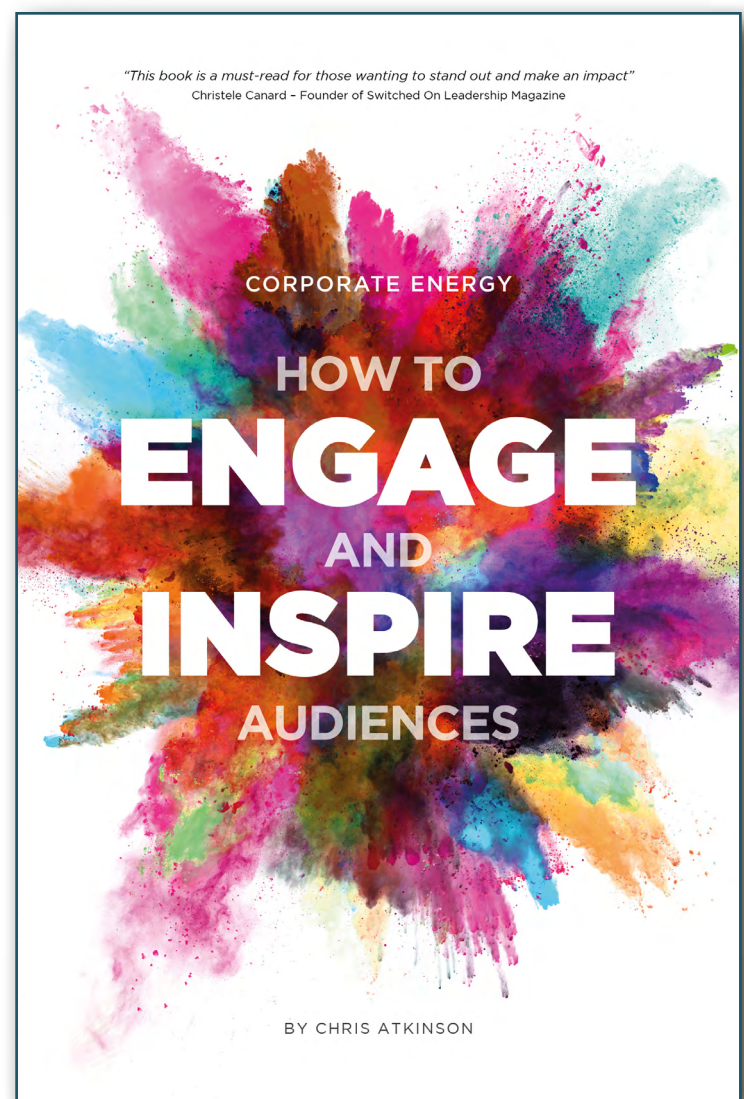
a deeper meaning or purpose.
I think it's a great cause.

What is your key message Chris?
What would you like to see happen
for listeners as a result of this
interview?

CA: My fundamental belief is that the job isn't the problem here. This isn't about the nature of work itself. It would be easy for people to say, "I work in this industry..." or "I do this type of work, so how am I going to find pleasure?" Maybe that's a misinterpretation that everyone should be bouncing into work every day. I'm not going that far. What I'm saying rather, is that it's an issue of corporate culture and attitude. I've seen teams and people find pleasure and satisfaction – even excitement – from the most challenging or seemingly monotonous roles.

I've worked with water companies with teams of people who deal with our waste water and they are literally doing the grimmest, toughest job you could imagine. I've worked with these teams of people who *absolutely* love what it is that they do. They feel like they are heroes going out doing the work that no one else wants to do. They take huge pride in their work.

I do a lot of work in the automotive industry. People who work in the manufacturing side of the automotive industry often have jobs where they have seconds to do their job before the manufacturing line moves on. Your job is to repeat the same process, every 20, 30 or 40 seconds. You can imagine that being monotonous, but somehow when



companies get it right – the culture, the attitude of the people, the camaraderie of the staff – it makes it work.

So it's not about the job. It's about the culture and the attitude of people. That's the message I want to get across.

CC: The focus of your book is on "engaging and inspiring" audiences. Some people however think that "work is work." Why do you think inspiration and engagement are so important? Why should business leaders give it serious consideration?

CA: I'm going to be careful not to get on a soapbox here. This is an issue that I have a fundamental challenge with. I mostly work with senior teams and executive level within organizations. These people are making hard-edged, ►



It's not about the job. It's about the culture and the attitude of people.



commercial decisions about the future for their organizations.

These decisions often involve an investment of millions of dollars or significant sums of money. Imagine if I sat around that boardroom and I said, "We've got this new technology and we believe it can increase your profitability by 12%" or "We have evidence to show that it increases productivity of your workforce by 18%" or "We have a new customer relationship software, and it can increase your customer satisfaction by 12%." Would the board of a company be interested in some technology that could achieve those results? I'd be damn sure they would. I think they would jump on it.

These are the exact statistics Gallup found when they looked at 263 different studies of engagement, covering 1.4 million employees. A massive piece of research, looking at thousands of different organizations and people across loads of different countries. What they found is a 12%

increase in customer satisfaction; 18% increase in productivity; 12% increase in profitability. They found 147% higher earnings per share for organizations that have high engagement.

What I don't understand is, when I sit in front of boards and talk to them about the importance of investing in increasing employee engagement, why it feels like an uphill battle? My feeling is that if I was offering them a piece of software, or a technology solution, or some new process, they would jump on it. They would probably make millions of dollars available. The investment in IT infrastructure is huge.

And those are only the positive benefits – things it improves. You can even look at it from the other side – things it reduces. Safety issues: reduced by 62%. Reductions in staff turnover. In the UK we have a publicly funded body called ACAF. They looked at the cost of replacing a single employee. They estimated that the cost of replacing a single employee was thirty thousand UK pounds. That was based on 28 weeks of lost productivity, estimated as one of the costs incurred whilst the new person comes on board.

That's £30,000 *per* employee. In the Gallup survey, they found that for high or low turnover organizations, it can be anywhere between a thirty to fifty percent reduction of staff turnover. You can put real numbers on these figures. You could literally calculate what they would mean for any given organization. I think these issues should be considered with a high level of importance at a corporate and



strategic level. Yet somehow they tend to get overlooked.

Managers are being driven very hard by their bosses, and they want to get the best from their teams. All of the research and data is saying that highly engaged people – people who are inspired and motivated in their work – deliver measurable, quantitatively different returns for their organization. So to me, it's a commercial topic as well as an emotional one.

CC: We can't ignore those figures.

Regarding the employees, you mentioned earlier, that were inspired by their work. How much of that was due to the corporate culture and how much to the individual?

CA: The answer is probably not going to be either or. There are certainly different levels at which this can happen. The easiest level is at the level of corporate culture. If you can define a culture where people are encouraged and supported; where you are actively seeking the *best* positions for each person in order to get the most out of them. Again, Gallop has a lot of investment in the strengths based approach. We know that a strengths based approach also drives engagement. This is where people are playing towards the things they are good at, rather than having a performance management system where you go, "What are you *not* good at? Well, you need to improve that." This generally puts people on a negative cycle. ►



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On one level, if you can get the culture right – then as people are coming into the organization – they are almost indoctrinated into this positive environment. And it becomes self-sustaining.

However, lots of clients I work with are simply too large to be able to make that kind of shift culturally. So what you end up with are pockets of high engagement, and divisions that outperform other divisions. When you look at those divisions (and in answer to your question, how did that happen?) – what you will normally find is *a* leader. Normally somebody, with some influence in the organization, has taken that team or that division and gone “right, this is how I want it to be in this area.” They kind of made it happen, almost like in a protective bubble from the rest of the organization.

I’ve seen this over and over again in my career. One or two leaders within a larger organization who have managed to shelter their people and create the culture that they wanted. And those people deliver. They really deliver great results.

CC: That’s encouraging. Even if you are not the head of the organization you can still have a tremendous impact on raising the engagement of your team and your colleagues.

CA: Yes. If I could add to that. You’ve got to remember, organizations are basically built around metrics and measures. One way or another, you are being almost purely evaluated on your deliverables. It would be nice to think that there’s also the softer side...and the ►

more positive organizations do have that. But for the most part, you are being measured on an output.

Therefore, if you are a manager or leader – as long as you are reporting the figures and the numbers that the wider organization requires from your team or department – what you do within your department can be a little bit more creative and disruptive. To some extent, I would even encourage you to challenge the boundaries of your organizational processes. There will be certain things that will be understood that you can't do, but generally if you are delivering results there is a lot more tolerance. I would say, report out of your department what is required, but how you structure and manage your team internally shouldn't be defined by the wider organization. You can take some risk there.

CC: What makes a person inspirational? Is it something that can be taught?

CA: Inspiration is the other half of the engagement bit. Engagement is *my* feeling towards my work. And then the complementary part is, *I have a manager, or a boss, or a leader who inspires me*. When the leader is inspirational – engagement tends to sort of match. The two are complementary to each other.

For me, inspiration came most strongly from research by two researchers called Zenger and Folkman. They are very big in the area of positive psychology and strength-based approach. They looked at 30,000 managers and took feedback from 300,000 of the peer group. What they were interested in, which I think was wonderfully controversial, was the bottom 1%. They looked at the *worst* performing people. They wanted to see whether there were characteristics that were seen *only* in the bottom 1%. Characteristics that we don't see in other managers. They wanted to find what they call the *fatal flaws*. The absolute fatal flaws of managers. They came up with a top ten list. You can find this online. It's a great study.

Number one on their list – the number one thing out of *everything* that people could say about the failings of the bottom one percent – was a failure to inspire people, because of a lack of energy and enthusiasm.

And so for me this is a really key topic. Sometimes I think we pick the wrong role models when we think about whether someone is inspirational. We have quite a US centric view of what inspirational or motivational speakers are like. It is very heavily influenced by the media exposure that speakers in the US tend to get. ►

“True inspiration is a function of your authenticity.”

The big on-stage, extroverted character is only one small subset of how people are inspired. When you actually look at what inspires people, you find that true inspiration is a function of your authenticity. In my book, I spend a lot of time talking about this. It's not a function of how extroverted you are, or how over-the-top, or even how impressive you are. It's about how authentic you are. To what extent you are able to speak from the heart. That's something people overlook when they think about whether they can be inspirational.

So can it be taught? Yes of course. If anything, it's about dropping the mask a little bit. Which is being more yourself.

CC: I don't know how easy that is for people to do sometimes. What suggestions would you have to get people to be more authentic?

CA: Yes, I think the issue is that it's easier said than done. You are right to observe that.

We have created, I suppose, professional lives that don't look like our home life. It's not uncommon for someone to say, "I'm a different person at work than I am at home." We don't even think that that is a surprising or a shocking thing to say. When you stop to think about it, that's not okay actually. What do you mean you are a different person? Which one is you and which one is not you? Or are they both you?

And if they are both you, why are you different? You are you. So it's as if you are hiding one part of yourself from one or either of those circumstances. We take that almost entirely for granted.

The other thing is, I'm not sure to what extent in organizations we have a culture where people are open and emotional in front of their colleagues. You can't inspire someone unless you are yourself being emotional. You can't inspire people through intellect. It is an



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You can't inspire people through intellect. It is an emotional experience.



emotional experience. I don't know to what extent we have organizations that are open to people speaking emotions. Maybe you get anger or frustration, when people thump a table or shout at a team member. I don't know that we have that level of openness.

So in terms of practical advice, I would say it's a little bit about *less* of some things and *more* of the others. Firstly, let's discuss the *less*. We need to have less difference between who we are at home and at work. That distinction is from a business culture of days gone by. That time has gone now.

And now for the *more*. The more authentic you are, the more you show people you work with who you are, the more likely they will trust and respect you. Why not talk about yourself as the person you are...the good, the bad and the challenges you have? Be a whole person. The fact that we segregate bits of our life that we do not expose to our colleagues, in some ways diminishes the level of trust they have in us, because

they don't know us. I'm not suggesting you expose your deepest, darkest secrets, or you bring inappropriate material into the workplace.

Brené Brown has the most amazing Ted Talk. If you go online and look for it, you'll see it has millions of hits. She talks about the power of vulnerability. What she says is, when people speak from the heart and risk vulnerability by showing emotions, other people then trust in them. They connect with you. In that space between people, is where inspiration tends to live.

That's the inspiration part, but I do want to also address the engagement part. Within the engagement part is one other "more." And that is, you do need a bit more energy and enthusiasm in the *way* that you speak to people. I think the assumption is that when I am speaking or presenting to my team, it should be a very comfortable experience. But actually that's not the truth of it.

When I finish presenting or I finish facilitating an event, I'm exhausted. I'm totally shattered. It's a *full-on* physical experience. My whole body, my mind, my voice...I'm pushing myself as much as I can. It's a form of athleticism to keep your energy level high, whilst paying attention to the audience. I just wonder whether leaders appreciate that this process that we are speaking about, should be effortful. It should take significant effort. You should sit down feeling exhausted. If after having spoken to your team, you are not exhausted when you sit down, you have probably not put enough into it. ▶



CC: Yes, it does take a lot of focus, a lot of effort. And I agree with you, the most powerful thing we can do is show our vulnerability. After all, we don't like "perfect people." There is something strange about people that pretend to be perfect.

CA: Human instinct would suggest that if I show vulnerability, I'm showing you weakness. Therefore, you will think I am weak, especially if I am a leader. Why would I expose what I consider to be a negative trait...my vulnerability?

I would venture that where we are heading in the modern world is towards the premise that *when you are vulnerable, people trust you more.*

They are more willing to open up to *you* about *their* vulnerability. You build stronger, deeper relationships. And *then* you get the performance benefits.

CC: When you share your vulnerability people connect with you on a deeper level. I think speakers have tapped into that but not necessarily leaders within organizations.

CA: Yes, absolutely. Maybe what I should emphasize is the idea that *if I'm delivering a presentation then of course I would put more energy into it.* Leaders are very little *if not* speakers. You could argue that if you are not speaking – you are probably doing the work. And if ►

you are doing the work – you probably haven't delegated enough. As a leader, the best thing you can do is to fully empower your team to do as much of the job. If you are doing the work, you are probably thinking, "Why am I doing this?" The principle should be to work through the team as much as possible and be a support for the team. And in that circumstance, what are you if not a communicator? That's *all* you are doing.

You're right, it's perhaps easier for people to imagine that when they are onstage they would *turn it on*. But this isn't about that. This is about the daily briefings; the weekly meetings; when you are just chatting to people and talking to them about their job. In these instances, how are you communicating? If I had to put money on it, my bet would be that you are communicating in the following way. *How are you doing against your target? Are you going to get that report in on time? Can you review this for me?* Totally unemotional; totally practical. Treating people like a robot. Focused on whether they are working right. *Are you functional right now?* Rather than what we've been talking about, which is quite a different conversation.

CC: What skills do leaders need to have in order to engage and inspire?

CA: That is a relatively large question, but what I can say in simple terms is it definitely lies within the communications skills set. This whole topic and everything that I have written in the book, is a lot harder

to implement if you are not firstly comfortable standing in front of people. You don't have to be the extrovert but you have to be able to stand in front of people and be in control of body language, nerves, and those types of things. That's a fundamental.

You need good questioning skills, which is strongly linked to coaching. It's also easier if you are a facilitator rather than a "tell" person. It takes a level of risk-taking to do things like story-telling and creativity. You integrate these skills into a package, and that package becomes your communication style.

CC: What's one tip that we could implement tomorrow, that would help us in this area?

CA: I'm going to give you one and a half tips! The simplest tip, and it's the most obvious really, is to turn off technology. PowerPoint is the enemy of this topic. Our default communication style in organizations has become slides. And what you commonly get when you have a slideshow, is a leader who stands up and narrates a series of slides.

When you stop and think about it, how crazy is it that we have all these leaders who just stand and narrate slideshows. Then we hand over to the next person who stands and narrates their slideshow. In the book I say, *if everything you are going to say is on the slide, just cancel the meeting*. Save everyone some time, just send them the slides. There's no point you standing and presenting the slides. People can read it quicker and more conveniently in their own time. ►

There is an idea in the academic world called “flipped classroom.” What they try and do in flipped classroom is send out the reading in advance. The classroom then becomes this dynamic, conversation environment. It puts a bit of responsibility on the people, because if you haven’t done the reading, then of course you don’t get the value. And maybe that’s what we don’t trust, and why we use PowerPoint so much.

Stop getting people to stand up and just present their metrics and measures. Start having a conversation with people. Start having a dialogue. That is for me the number one tip. But I did have a half tip. Once you have turned PowerPoint off, and you are discussing and talking with people – then talk more from the heart. Talk more about your *feelings* and how you are experiencing things, and where your concerns are. Ask people where *their* concerns are. Get away from just talking about the numbers and the outputs. You’ll find there is a whole conversation existing in your team that you just don’t know about. You’ve got no access to it because you have never had that conversation before. But it’s there. It’s there right now, today! People have all of these concerns, fears, worries, and assumptions. We just don’t access that knowledge.

CC: Yes, that’s true. That’s powerful. I like that. Besides

PowerPoint are there any other big mistakes we make in this area? I’m sure there are a few. What are the most common?

CA: Okay, if we are going for the most common mistakes, then we are moving in a slightly different direction, content wise. I watch a lot of leaders and the most common mistakes are actually around body language issues and voice tone.

People not appreciating the impact that their total communication is having.

It sounds like a really small thing. Or maybe it sounds like a basic thing, but the reality is, when you go and watch a lot of leaders, they seem to be fidgeting and they don’t look comfortable. They

tend to move around instead of standing still. Generally, if you want to communicate, you don’t want to be shuffling around, or moving side-to-side, or pacing up and down like a caged lion.

People tend to look at the screen. Again this is partially linked to the PowerPoint issue. People tend to look at their slides. And then if they are looking at their slides, they go one step further and read from their slides. Like the world’s worse teleprompter. *I’m going to have a teleprompter, but I’m going to let you see it. I’m not even going to try and hide it. I’m actually going to turn and* ►

*When you are vulnerable,
people trust you more.*



Photo credit: ©Nathapong Khromkrathok/123RF.com

read it in front of you. To me that is really shocking!

I discuss body language, tone of voice, how you should stand, and how you should use your voice in the book. I do recognize that for a lot of people that may feel like basic things.

If you want one thing that connects more strongly to the idea of corporate energy, it would be to stop talking *at* people. Stop lecturing at people, and start involving them. Start discussing and exploring ideas with them, rather than *telling* them things. That would be the big mistakes I see.

CC: Would you do that by asking quality questions?

CA: Yes...if you are taking a facilitation approach. That is probably the strongest

entry point into this whole area. The other techniques, like showmanship and inspiring people through your experiences, are quite advanced techniques. I do recognize they take practice.

The easiest entry point is to be a great facilitator. Those skills are completely consistent with coaching skills – ask rather than tell. Learn to ask good questions. But who thinks they are bad at questioning? It sounds like the most basic 101 Level Communication's subject. It isn't.

If you listen to most questions that people ask, it goes like this: *Do you...? Can you...? Have you...? Is that because...? Are there...?* All of these closed questions are filled with your assumption. You are essentially *leading* the audience into giving ►

you the answer that you think. They are not good questions. When you say, *"is that because you don't have enough time?"* you are suggesting they don't have enough time. *"Can you do it differently? Is there some way you can improve the process?"* You are making suggestions. You are not really coaching or facilitating. You are leading.

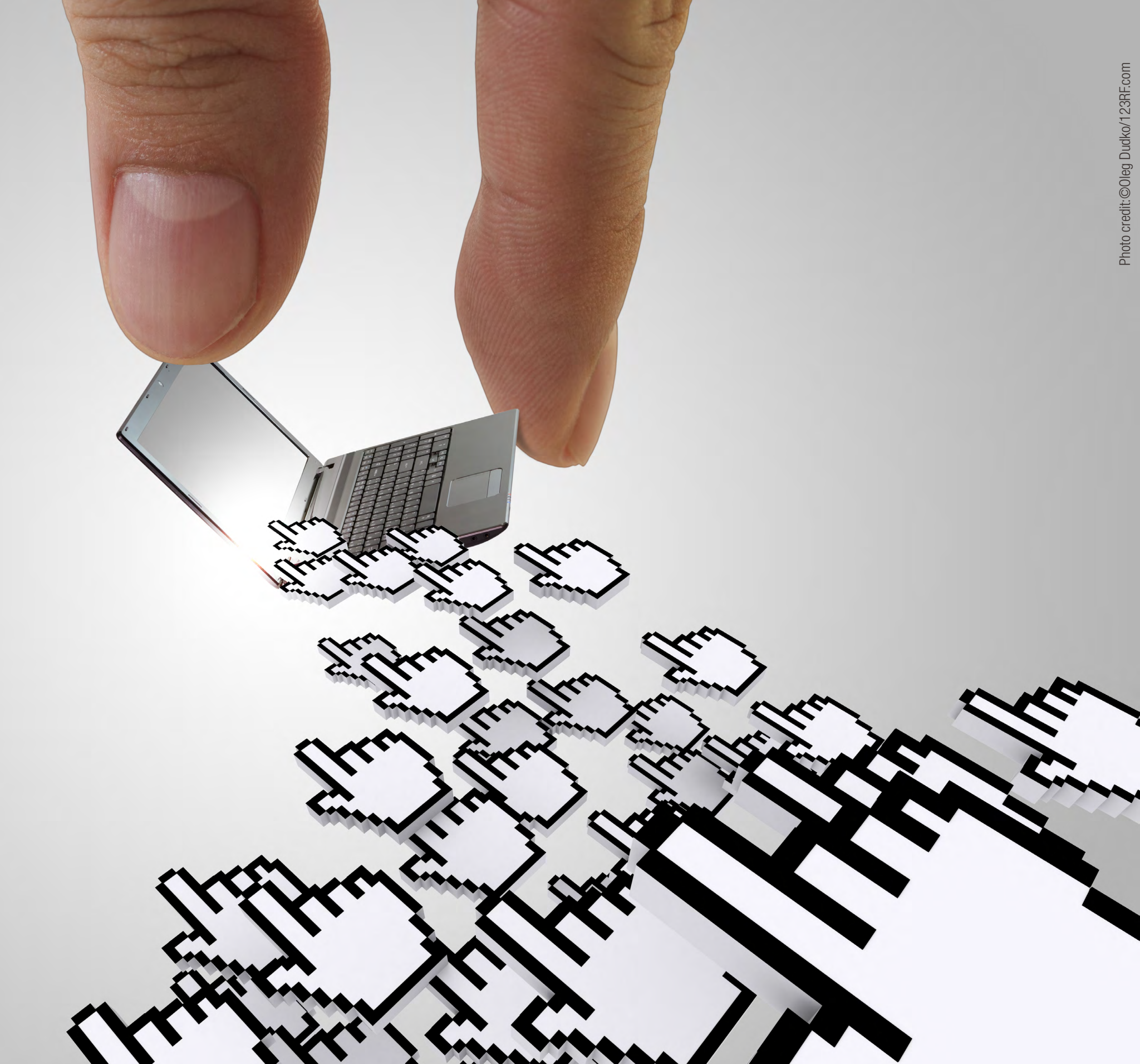
So yes, it is tied to facilitation. It's a great way in. These skills are wonderful to master. To be a great questioner will certainly help you in any leadership career. But don't assume they are easy. It takes years of practice to make it really clean and sharp.

CC: It feels like this requires a lot of self-reflection and thinking about how others are responding to our message. I'm not sure if in business, people are thinking enough in this way.

CA: No and I suppose you also have to consider what level of feedback you are getting, and to what extent you can be sure that you are getting *honest* feedback.

At one level, when I am standing and presenting alongside a slideshow, probably 70% of my focus is going to be on the slideshow and not on the audience, which is a fundamental mistake. Ask yourself: *am I reading my* ▶





audience? In meetings many people have their laptops open. Are they doing their emailing? If so, why are we all here? Or are they checking their phone? Or are they looking bored?

A lot of times, managers and leaders don't seem to respond when they see people looking bored. Or maybe that's

the reason for my book. Maybe they just don't know what to do to change it. So they think, "Well I'll just carry on, because I don't know what to do."

And then of course you have to question whether you are getting honest feedback. You could look at



360-degree assessment or something like that. Some way by which you can independently ask people – with no fear of reprisals – how you are doing. Certainly, feedback is the lifeblood of leadership. Constantly checking. *How am I doing? What do you need from me? What can I do more of? What can I do less of?* If you trust your people to be honest, just ask them. Don't spend the money on surveys.

I would do a quality check every few years. Some sort of 360-degree assessment, just to make sure I'm not deluded in some way.

CC: Yes, it's easy to delude ourselves. I'm going to give you a plug for your book, because just reading your book will make us think about all the things we can be doing differently. And if we are not doing the things you are suggesting, then we need to consider what impression we are making. Are we inspiring and engaging others or disengaging them and boring them to tears?

CA: That's my hope for the book, that it makes a real difference to the people who read it, and therefore their teams, and with luck, their whole organization. That's the aspiration for sure.

CC: Chris, what's one final piece of advice you would like to leave listeners?

CA: I would say that there is a tension in organizations between management and leadership. The desire to control, measure, incentivize, and punish, is

aligned with *management*. This topic, which we have been discussing, around freedom, growth, happiness, and getting people engaged in their work, is much more aligned with *leadership*.

The corporate world is changing. I don't believe that people will be satisfied with staying in a job when they are not enjoying themselves. And for that reason, the final piece of advice is, if you don't find a way to challenge your behavior, you are going to end up looking like a dinosaur in the organization.

We all have that fear, that as we progress in our careers, we are going to look like the old bloke who was out of touch when we were the young recruit. My final piece of advice: *you have to consider the level of input that you are giving people, of yourself.*

We are way beyond seeing organizations as machinery. That was a view from the last century, even longer. We have to start to evolve our thinking. Turn off PowerPoint; get talking to people; start talking about *different* topics; start revealing more of yourself; start *involving* them in conversation. These are not difficult things to do. They just require a change in behavior.

CC: You are right. It is best to start now rather than wait until we are forced to change.

CA: It can only be great for your career. The sooner you get onto this stuff, the sooner you are going to see people responding differently. Your team will start to get noticed. *You'll* ►

start to get noticed. Even from a purely selfish point of view, it's a better tactic.

CC: And I think it's a far more enjoyable, fulfilling way to work. It creates a much nicer environment.

CA: I hope so.

CC: Where can listeners go to find out more about you and your book?

CA: The book has its own website. We have some sample chapters so people can get a feel for the tone of the book. We've got some free downloads, videos and all sorts of things. The easiest way to find all that is to go to my website which is www.chris-atkinson.co.uk. You can find all the links there. You can go through to the book from there.

You can also find other things I have written and some videos of me speaking. That's the place to go. You can order the book from there as well as Amazon.

CC: Brilliant. Thank you Chris for sharing your valuable insights. As leaders it's important we take responsibility for inspiring and engaging our team. And as you so eloquently explained there is a real commercial reason for us to do so. Your book [Corporate Energy](#), is not only insightful but I found it comprehensive. And the best thing is it's filled with practical tips and techniques anyone can apply straight away. Chris thank you for your time today.

CA: Thank you so much. ■



Chris Atkinson

Chris Atkinson is an international business speaker and author who combines a strong commercial approach with a deep understanding of human psychology.

He has qualifications in the fields of psychology and counselling from the University of Bristol, UK.

Starting his speaking career in 2001, Chris has now worked with diverse

business sectors in over 22 countries worldwide with more than 43 different nationalities. He has spoken in front of an estimated 30,000 people worldwide.

He is renowned as a speaker, master trainer and facilitator who specializes in audience engagement, organizational culture and inspiring leadership.

Chris has been featured on the front covers of international publications and has written numerous magazine articles with a readership covering the UK, Europe, North America and Australia.

His latest book, [Corporate Energy: How to Engage and Inspire Audiences](#) is due for release on the 26th of August.