Opinion

Telling staff to 'buck up' breaks management's golden rule

When I was at primary school there was a particularly fierce dinner lady who saw it as her duty to make sure all children always ate everything on their plates. Whenever we tried to sneak some vinegary beetroot or a nasty bit of gristle past her she would send us back to finish it with the admonition: "Think of the starving children in Africa."

Even when I was nine I did not find this argument terribly compelling. I wanted to tell her to give my beetroot and my cold, powder-mash potatoes to the starving children, but one look at her face assured me that this would be a bad call.

I thought of her last week when I read about Jeremy Mayhew, a senior member of the City of London's governing body. He told staff at its Barbican arts centre to stop feeling sorry for themselves because at least they still had jobs. He would have made a fine dinner lady. As would Bill Michael, UK chairman of KPMG, who told his underlings on a video call that they should stop playing the victim card and cut the moaning about pandemic working conditions. This went down so monumentally badly that a few days later he was forced to quit.

In a way, each of these plain-speaking authority figures is on to something. Compared with intensive care nurses, KPMG partners — with their easy, comfortable jobs — have less than nothing to moan about. Staff at the Barbican have it far better than soon-to-be-jobless pilots at easyJet. Equally, well-fed infants in north-west London in the 1960s had no business complaining when in Biafra children were dying in huge numbers.

But none of that is the point. All three seem ignorant of basic human psychology, which is that we live our lives from within. If you've just had a godawful day in interminable Zoom meetings, your back is killing you from too long on the kitchen chair and you can no longer see any point in what you do, thinking of the jobless easyJet pilot is most unlikely to cheer you up for more than a second or two.

In any case, if we outlawed moaning on comparative grounds, then no one — not even the intensive care hospital doctor — would be allowed to get away with it. The doctor might be exhausted and traumatised, but Michael, Mayhew and the dinner lady would doubtless argue they should stop complaining because at least they have their liberty — which is more than can be said for princess Sheikha Latifa, last seen sending out SOS videos from the toilet of her prison villa in Dubai.

The dinner lady, who is probably dead by now as she seemed ancient in 1967, ought to be let off the hook for misunderstanding this. Not so the others. They have done something worse than fail to grasp the basic human right sometimes to feel hard done by — they have failed an even more basic test of how to manage anyone.

In contrast to the dinner lady, whose thankless job may have been alleviated by browbeating children, they are both in positions of power and should know better.

> If you are above someone in the pecking order you must never tell them off for moaning

There is a golden rule of management that they both ignore: if you are above someone in the pecking order you must never tell them off for moaning. Not only will you fail to stop the moaning, the moaners will automatically double down and you will find yourself at the top of the list of the things they are moaning about.

Your reprimand will go down badly for two reasons. You earn more than they do, have more power and will be deemed to be having a better time — which disqualifies you from disparaging their frame of mind. Second, as their manager, you are meant to be motivating them — if everyone is moaning it is your job to find out why and do something about it.

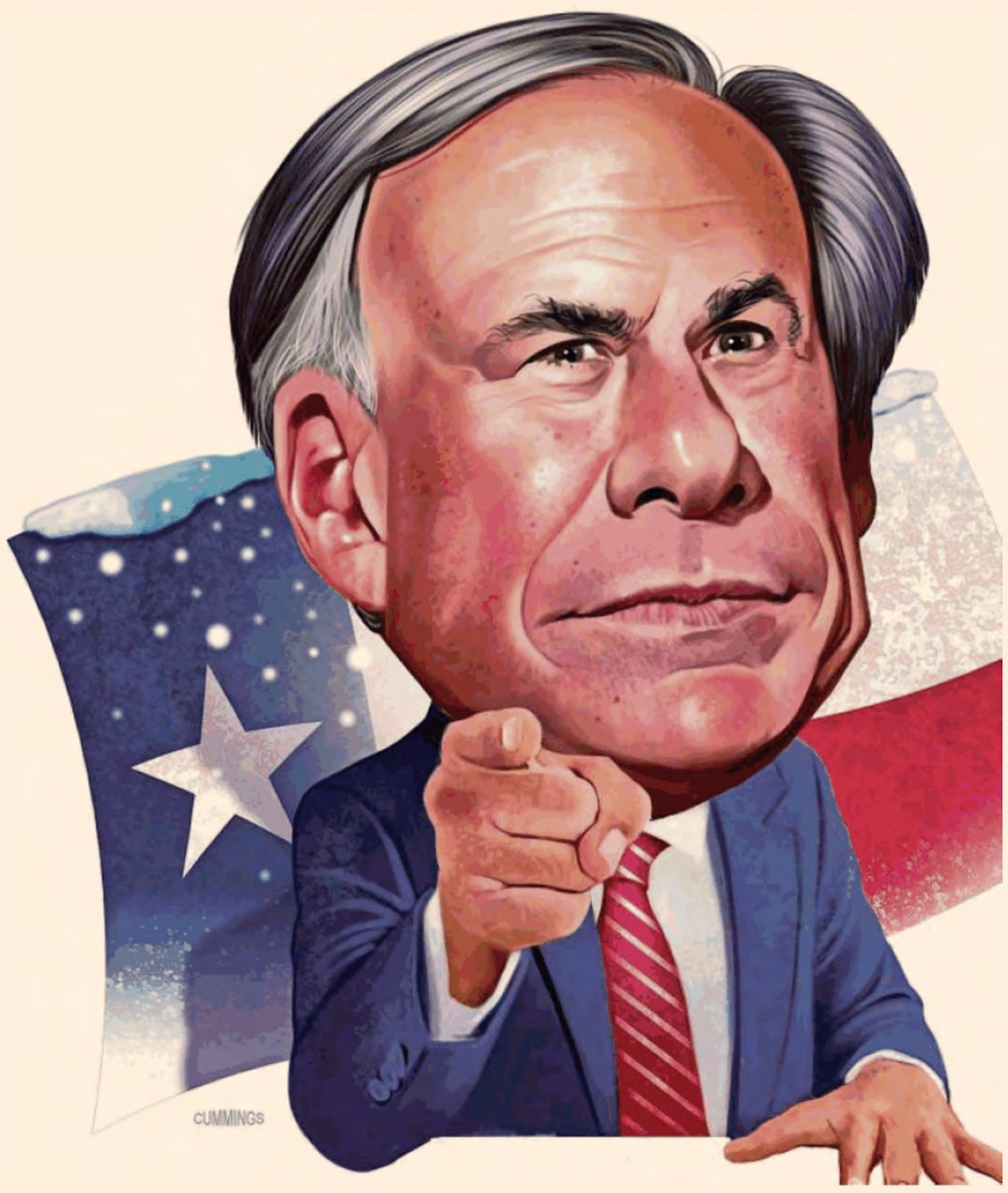
In normal times both men might have got away with it. But to choose this particular moment to tell employees to buck up means they roundly deserve the flak they've got. Pretty much everyone is having a rotten time in lockdown #3 compared with the only thing that counts: the time we were having a year ago. The only comfort is that we can feel as sorry for ourselves as we like.

I sit all day in my bedroom trying to keep my mind on marking students' work on Satchel One, the most hateful technology platform ever invented. Everything I love about teaching — ie being with students — has been taken away. Everything I hate about it — ie Satchel One — is with me all day long.

Obviously I know it's worse for the kids. Obviously I'm grateful to have a safe job. But still I detest it and seek solace by texting fellow teachers and saying: "Assume you're hating this as much as I am?"

What all managers should be doing right now is gritting their teeth and saying "thank you" to their whingeing employees and "well done". Thank you has never been easier — it works on Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, text, FaceTime and phone — it even works on Satchel One. The other day I got a message from a senior colleague: "I miss our chats." It was less than a full-on thank you, but it did the trick and stopped my moans — at least for an hour or two.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and co-founder of Now Teach, an organisation that helps experienced professionals retrain as teachers



Person in the News | Greg Abbott

A savvy GOP governor runs into a storm

Republican stalwart fumbled through a power outage as millions of Texans shivered, writes *Courtney Weaver*

At the beginning of the week — as nearly 3m Texans sheltered at home, without power — Greg Abbott, the state's Republican governor, went on Fox News to offer an explanation for the deepening crisis.

Asked whether renewable energy was to blame for the rolling blackouts, Abbott, 63, launched into an attack of the Democrats' Green New Deal climate proposal. He claimed that the shutdown of the state's wind and solar energy had "thrust Texas into a situation where it was lacking power in a statewide basis". He warned that every US state would be "constantly" experiencing the same sort of challenges if President Joe Biden tried "to eradicate fossil fuels" — something the Biden administration has not said it will do.

Abbott's explanation for the state's blackout was quickly debunked. According to the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which manages 90 per cent of the state's grid, wind power has accounted for less than 13 per cent of the total outages, with frozen instruments and limited supply at natural gas and coal facilities creating a bigger part of the problem. "He's actually wrong," the billionaire Bill Gates said.

By Wednesday, Abbott was walking back his earlier explanation. He had only singled out renewables because of the way the question had been phrased: "Every source of power that the state of Texas has has been compromised," he said.

For longtime Abbott observers, the manoeuvre was the latest example of the governor's political dexterity. He has simultaneously managed to cultivate the state's hardcore conservatives without alienating Texas's more moderate business community, which has given generously to his campaigns. That positions Abbott as a potential 2024 presidential contender.

Abbott's adroitness has been particularly evident during the age of Donald Trump. The governor was among the very few Republicans who succeeded in neither distancing nor aligning himself with the 45th president.

Brendan Steinhauser, a Republican strategist who has travelled with Abbott on the campaign trail, describes him as a "prolific fundraiser" who is "very smart" and "very cautious". He adds that Abbott knows when to "test something" and when to "pull it back". While Abbott would face a crowded field in 2024, it is naive to assume he is not looking at federal office, Steinhauser says: "He clearly has higher ambitions."

Born in Wichita Falls, Abbott excelled as an honours student and a track star and was voted by classmates to be "most likely to succeed". He met Cecilia, his wife of 40 years, when both were students at the University of Texas at Austin, before he went on to law school at Vanderbilt in Tennessee. They have one daughter.

His life changed at the age of 26, when he was back in Texas studying for the bar exam. While he was jogging around his Houston neighbourhood, a 75-foot oak tree collapsed on him, out of nowhere. "The pain", Abbott recalls in his memoir, "was immediate, excruciating, and unrelenting". To save his life, doctors reassembled his vertebrae and inserted two steel rods along his spinal cord. Abbott was left in a wheelchair, paralysed from the waist down.

Abbott declined to pursue experimental treatment that might have restored movement or feeling in his legs, instead accepting his fate and deciding, as he wrote in his memoir, "to do as much as possible with it". After serving as a lawyer in a private practice, he became a judge on the Texas Supreme Court and successfully ran for Texas attorney-general in 2002. During three terms as the state's top lawyer, Abbott gained prominence for suing the Obama administration more than 30 times on issues such as environmental regulation, transgender rights and healthcare reform. As he once put it: "I go into the office in the morning, I sue Barack Obama, and then I go home."

In 2014, he was elected governor by a margin of more than 20-percentage points, and won re-election in 2018. He is up for a third term next year. During his tenure, Abbott has battled a series of crises, notably Hurricane Harvey in 2017, and more recently the coronavirus pandemic, where he faced criticism for reopening the state too early, forcing the governor to hit the pause button.

> He gained prominence for suing the Obama administration more than 30 times

The current outages, which left millions without power in temperatures as low as minus 18C, represent one of Abbott's biggest challenges to date. But on Thursday, the governor was rescued from the headlines by a fellow Texan Republican, Senator Ted Cruz, who briefly escaped the crisis by flying to a Cancún beach resort with his family, only to return after a public outcry.

Still, Abbott is likely to return to the spotlight. "Governors, like presidents, often get more credit for good things and blame for the bad things than they actually deserve but in the end, like Harry Truman said, the buck stops here," says Mark Jones, political science professor at Rice University in Houston.

Jones notes that the current crisis puts Abbott and his allies in a particularly tough spot. The GOP has had complete control of the state's executive and legislative branches since 2003, yet it has not required or incentivised energy companies to invest in back-up capacity.

The "one saving grace" for Texas Republicans, including Abbott, is that they don't have to face voters again until November 2022, Jones says. "Much will depend on how long people's memories are — and what else occurs in the interim."

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Music makes more money but has more mouths to feed

Will Page

In 1984, a mere 6,000 music albums were released in the UK. Today, streaming services make available a similar volume — 55,000 new songs — every single day.

There are not only more songs, but more musicians. Since Spotify launched in 2009, the number of British songwriters has increased by 115 per cent to 140,000 and the ranks of UK recording artists have ballooned 145 per cent to 115,000. Twenty years ago, there were five UK major labels and at most two dozen independent distributors; today Spotify hosts music from 751 suppliers.

Unsurprisingly, there are also more genres to classify all these songs. In 2000, the industry classified all the world's music into no more than a dozen-and-a-half genres. Today, Spotify's "everynoise" acoustic map tracks 5,224 genres, including Coptic hymns, Russian romanticism and the new lockdown hit of shanty, of course.

Music was one of the first industries hit by digital disruption. Its fate shows the rest of us the future. When digitisation removes barriers to entry, there is so much more of everything.

Last year saw a flood of new books (more than 3.5m titles, although only a fifth were new titles), podcasts (885,000 new episodes — almost two new podcasts every minute), mobile games (88,000, up 50 per cent on 2019) and scripted original TV series (493 in the US alone — more than one a day).

Investor money is pouring into digital media at the moment — there have been seven acquisitions of podcasting companies for more than $100m each in the past two years — but that has not translated into newfound wealth for many creators. Here's why: the music industry is indeed making more money thanks to streaming, but there are far more mouths to feed.

There lies the conflict. When a music label has splashed out on a big upfront payment to a star, it has every reason to spend more to cover the promotion and advertising needed to make the songs into hits. For lesser known artists, it is often easier to hand out lots of small advances, and simply wait and see if some of them go viral. It's a bit like the adage about finance: if you owe the bank £100,000, you've got a problem, if you owe them £1m, they have the problem.

Partly in response, artists are increasingly trying to go it alone. Rather than signing a 30-page record contract that requires hiring an expensive lawyer to negotiate, some musicians are turning to DIY services like Distrokid and EmuBands. These summarise their offer in three simple bullets: pay a fixed fee, retain all your rights and keep all your revenues.

As lockdown took hold, major labels released 1.2m songs in 2020; DIY artists released a staggering 9.5m. That's an 8 to 1 ratio of artists doing it themselves to labels doing it for them.

While artists choosing to "go it alone" may not receive the same kind of promotional muscle, streaming means they can increasingly draw on many of the same data and outreach tools as the major labels.

Using YouTube, SoundCloud and Spotify, artists can access analytics that show who and where their fans are. Platoon, purchased in 2018 by Apple, allows artists to retain their rights and have access to bespoke global services.

> Three big labels make more than $1m an hour from streaming as artists struggle to pay rent

Amazon-owned Twitch's live video streaming platform saw a jaw-dropping 1tn minutes watched in 2020, with music playing a prominent role.

Patreon, a platform that allows artists to sign up members and receive fees from them, took seven years from inception to distribution of $2bn to creators. The global music industry took 12 years to do the same from streaming revenue. These tools are available to all, and the more independent artists are, the more they make use of them.

For many artists around the world, these tools are their best hope of survival. The pandemic has all but wiped out live performances, which had been the primary breadwinner for most artists. (Britons alone spent £2.5bn on live music in 2019.)

Even as the UK considers whether to update music copyright rules, everyone else should be watching this industry as a living demonstration of what happens when barriers to entry fall. The pie definitely grows, but the number of creators wanting a piece of it grows even faster.

The writer, formerly Spotify's chief economist, is the author of 'Tarzan Economics' due out in April

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