



## David Smith

### BUSINESS LEADER

Culture claims and cultural reality rarely match. Most transformation programmes address structure, process, and strategy while leaving the daily experience of being managed – the actual source of engagement or disengagement – untouched. The result is change that looks complete on paper and stalls on the floor.

David Smith helps organisations close the gap between the culture they describe and the one their people actually experience, drawing on 15 years as People and IT Director at Asda and four books on high-performance culture and performance management.

## David Smith's 2026 Biography

### Why organisations work with David Smith

- His 7 Principles framework is grounded in a specific, documented corporate turnaround – Asda’s recovery from near-bankruptcy to the UK’s No.1 Sunday Times Best Place to Work – giving boards a case study with traceable outcomes rather than a theoretical model.
- His book “Culture Trumps Strategy” gives leadership teams a direct, contestable argument: that most organisations are investing disproportionately in strategy and structure while the cultural conditions that determine execution go unmanaged.
- His book “Bad Bosses,” drawn from interviews with more than 200 CEOs and senior executives, documents the specific leadership behaviours that most consistently destroy engagement – giving HR directors and transformation leads a diagnostic, not a philosophy.
- He spent a decade on the Executive Board of a 170,000-person, £15bn-turnover business, which means his credibility holds in a boardroom conversation, not just an HR function.
- As a Companion of the CIPD – the body’s highest membership grade – and former Chairman of the Board of the Institute for Employment Studies, he can position people practice as a serious performance variable rather than a support function.

### Biography highlights

- People and IT Director at Asda (2000-2009); Executive Board member for 10 years, responsible for a workforce of 170,000 across a £15bn-turnover business
- Asda named No.1 Best Place to Work in The Sunday Times Best Companies survey during his tenure; Asda’s People Team also won the Personnel Today Rebus HR Award for Best HR Strategy in Line with Business

### AVAILABLE FOR

- Consultancy
- Speaking

### DAVID'S SPEAKING THEMES

- Change Management
- Culture Transformation
- Employee Engagement
- Executive Development

### LANGUAGES: English

- Author of four books: “Asda Magic: The 7 Principles of Building a High-Performance Culture” (2012), “Culture Trumps Strategy” (2016), “Performance Management for the 21st Century” (2018), and “Bad Bosses” (2019)
- Companion of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development – the highest membership grade in the UK’s principal HR professional body
- Former Chairman of the Board, Institute for Employment Studies; former Commissioner, Equal Opportunities Commission; former Vice President of the CIPD for Organisation and Development
- Recipient of the Sam Walton Award for driving Excellence in People Policies
- MBA, Henley Management College; BA Business, Sheffield Hallam University

## Biography

Most large organisations treat culture as a byproduct of leadership behaviour – something that forms over time, rather than something that is actively built. David Smith’s 15 years at Asda, where the people-led turnaround from near-bankruptcy to the UK’s No.1 Best Place to Work took roughly a decade and a half, produced a different conclusion: that culture is an engineered system, and that the principles governing it are specific and reproducible.

His first book, “Asda Magic: The 7 Principles of Building a High-Performance Culture” (2012), translated that experience into a practical framework. Its argument – that employee engagement is the product of specific managed behaviours, not general sentiment – gave HR directors and CEOs a diagnostic tool rather than an aspiration. “Culture Trumps Strategy” (2016) extended the thesis: that organisations consistently over-invest in strategy and structure while underinvesting in the cultural conditions that determine whether strategy executes.

Two further books addressed adjacent dysfunction. “Performance Management for the 21st Century” (2018) made the case against annual review-based systems, arguing that only regular performance coaching – not periodic appraisal – actually changes behaviour at scale. “Bad Bosses” (2019) drew on interviews with more than 200 CEOs and executives to document the leadership pitfalls that consistently destroy engagement from inside an organisation.

A Companion of the CIPD and former Chairman of the Board of the Institute for Employment Studies, Smith bridges executive credibility and evidence-based people practice. His audiences include CHROs, chief executives, and transformation programme leads asking why significant investment in organisational change is not translating into measurable performance.

## Key speaking topics

- High-performance culture and employee engagement
- Performance management and performance coaching
- Culture transformation and change leadership
- Leadership in tough times
- The relationship between culture and commercial performance
- Communication as an organisational performance lever
- Managing and retaining talent in a high-performance environment

## Ideal for

- CHROs and HR directors leading culture or engagement programmes
- CEOs and executive teams mid-transformation seeking a cultural diagnostic
- Board-level and C-suite leadership development programmes
- Senior leaders in large, complex, or multi-site organisations

## Audience outcomes

- A specific, practical framework for diagnosing the cultural gap between stated values and daily managed reality
- A clearer understanding of why performance management systems fail – and what a coaching-based alternative requires
- Named leadership behaviours that most predictably drive disengagement – and the organisational cost of tolerating them
- A case study with traceable outcomes that makes the business case for culture investment to a commercially focused audience
- Practical language for communicating culture and engagement priorities to boards and executive teams

## David Smith's 2026 talks & topics

### The Seven Principles of Building a High-Performance Culture

Uses the Asda turnaround as a live case study to give leaders a practical, principle-based framework for engineering culture rather than hoping it forms.

#### Key takeaways:

- The seven specific, manageable behaviours that distinguish high-performance cultures from average ones
- How to diagnose the current gap between stated culture and the one employees actually experience
- A practical agenda for beginning culture change without waiting for a burning platform

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### Leadership in Tough Times

Addresses what leaders must do differently – not just think differently – when an organisation is under pressure and the usual management playbook stops working.

#### Key takeaways:

- The leadership style adjustments that protect engagement during periods of uncertainty and change
- How to communicate with clarity and credibility when the outcome is not yet known
- The specific pitfalls that accelerate disengagement during transformation – and how to avoid them

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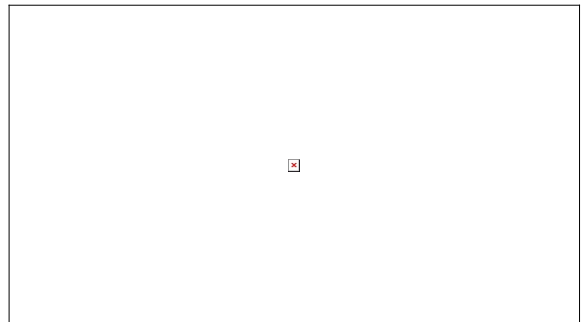
## Performance Management for the 21st Century

Makes the case for abandoning annual review-based performance management and replacing it with regular coaching conversations as the primary mechanism for driving results.

### Key takeaways:

- Why traditional performance appraisal systems produce compliance rather than commitment – and what the evidence shows
- The practical shift from periodic review to ongoing performance coaching across a large workforce
- How to build manager capability for regular coaching conversations without a wholesale restructure of the HR function

## David Smith's Videos



## What David Smith's clients say

The Team were really impressed and inspired. We learned a lot. Your contribution exceeded my expectations, and to be honest, I had pretty high expectations already. Great stuff.

*Marketing Director, Liverpool Victoria*

Thank you for a truly inspirational and very enjoyable Masterclass. I don't think I have ever been to such a practical and relevant session.

*Red Bull*

David was excellent and provided a very good speech - we are already receiving lots of questions about when the next event will be.

*RAF Wyton*

We are still using our version of some of the recognition techniques which we discovered from you.

**John Timpson**

Thanks for your session with the Priory leadership team. It absolutely hit the mark and for me there was a real lightbulb moment with regard to culture and leadership style.

*Priory Group*

Thank you for a fantastic job, the feedback has been excellent!

*Property Academy*

The feedback was unanimously positive about you, your presentation style and the content.

*Challenging Leaders*

The feedback has been quite frankly outstanding.

*Local and Regional Building Societies Conference*

I want to thank you for a terrific day yesterday. Very practical and actionable, great stories and a great presentation style.

**Ian Windle**  
*Vistage Chair*

The feedback received on your keynote speech was excellent, with many delegates citing it as their most memorable aspect of the conference. Delegates particularly enjoyed your use of stories to highlight your key messages, and many said they found your speech inspiring.

*NHS*