

Short Bio



MARIA
JAMES

Maria James gives leaders a clear mirror — showing them exactly how their behaviour is experienced by the people whose trust they depend on, and a tested model for what to do about it.



Compulsory deployed as a Royal Military Police Reservist, she served in Basra under daily small-arms fire and RPG attacks. Asked by higher command to lead on security sector reform, she returned with a Military Commendation — proof that where authority cannot be assumed, behaviour determines whether people follow.

She supported a \$2bn merger at Virgin, led People, Culture and Communications across a Virgin telecoms joint venture in India, and drove organisation-wide behaviour change at Vodafone and Deloitte. Those who have worked with her describe someone who makes the complex simple, connects culture with commercial delivery, and ensures every voice is heard in the design.

A student of human behaviour and a qualified yoga teacher, Maria is known for her grounded, direct approach. She holds a clear line on ethics and integrity, and challenges leaders to take visible ownership.

Just ask anyone who has heard the line that tends to follow them home: *"If people don't feel safe or seen around you, you're not leading — you're just in charge."*

Maria James explains why leadership has changed – and gives leaders the model to stay credible when everyone is watching.

She began her career as an Executive Assistant to CEOs of major global organisations – close enough to see exactly how leadership decisions were made, communicated, and experienced by the people who depended on them. That proximity became her education, and sent her into culture work across multiple industries. Then came Basra.

Compulsorily mobilised as a Royal Military Police Reservist during a militia uprising, she led a national community police training programme for the Iraqi Police Service, working with local communities and coalition partners. In a context where women were rarely seen in authority, authority could not be assumed – it had to be earned in real time. She returned with a Military Commendation and a lesson that has shaped everything since. Behaviour under pressure determines whether people follow you, long before a word is spoken.

She carried that into more than two decades at the seam between executive strategy and operational delivery – supporting the build and scale of a Virgin telecoms joint venture in India and driving culture change across Vodafone and Deloitte.

Every environment revealed the same pattern. Leaders who retained trust owned their outcomes and stayed visible. Those who lost it hid behind process and policy. Maria calls this **leadership in the age of Radical Visibility**.

The Doughnut Principle™: Earn • Protect • Rebuild, is the model she created to help leaders navigate it.

Audiences leave her keynotes with a clear mirror and a tested framework, understanding how their behaviour is actually experienced by the people whose trust they depend on. One statement tends to follow them home: *“If people don’t feel safe or seen around you, you’re not leading – you’re just in charge.”*

Outside work, Maria volunteers her time teaching yoga and mindfulness to people who need it most, runs marathons, and supports dementia research in memory of her Nana. She has always believed that showing up for people is never optional in any environment.

A lifelong advocate for people in the workplace, Maria will tell you straight: leaders who cannot see how they show up cannot change what they do not own. And those who cannot change become irrelevant.