Blue Morpho

LESSONS IN
LEADERSHIP

Thoughts, ideas and stories to help new & aspiring leaders on their leadership journey

By Lianne Picot

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Welcome!

My name is Lianne Picot and I am the author of this collection of leadership lessons.

I am a lifelong change the world type that has spent a great deal of my career as a senior leader, wanting to make a difference and help create a better world. Here's what I have learned: we are only going to create a better world if we grow a different kind of leadership. Whether we are leaders in business or nonprofits we need to do things differently. We need leaders that care more about people than power. Leaders that can balance profit with purpose. Leaders that inspire. As leaders, we have the power to make a BIG difference in the lives of those that we lead and those we serve.

That's why I started my company Blue Morpho. To help new & aspiring leaders become inspiring leaders so that they are able to make our future a brighter place - for people and planet.

This e-book is made up of different blogs, articles and content I have created to support new & aspiring leaders on your leadership journey. In it, you will find a range of ideas, thoughts and stories that you can pull learning from for your own purposes.

Enjoy!

MORE TIDBITS ABOUT ME:

» 25 years' experience of leadership, coaching and training in the UK, Ireland and Canada

» Certified Executive Coach

» Part-time Instructor at Ryerson University

» Currently completing my Master's in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at University of Toronto (specializing in workplace learning)

» Ran a business as a Story Coach for several years, helping leaders and organizations to find and tell their stories of impact

» Was host of own international radio show about storytelling – **Story Powered**

» Once invited to a tea party with the Queen (UK) in recognition of my work. British grandmother very proud

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LEADING SELF

WHY YOU NEED A LEADERSHIP ROADMAP

I became a senior leader when I was 31. Previously, I had been very attached to the idea of never becoming a formal leader because I didn't want to be considered 'the man'. However, there came a time when I realized that being 'the man' might be better than being subject to being managed by 'the man'. So I stepped into my first senior leadership role and did not look back. Well, actually I did. I tried. But when I looked at all the leaders I had experienced, too often I found them lacking. Either they were too nice and spent far too much time trying to build consensus around decisions like what kind of coffee we would have for the staff kitchen or they were insecure, unskilled and took their lack of ability out on the rest of us. I often say I went to the 'what not to do' school of leadership. I thought this was just how leadership worked. It depended on our personalities and context.

However, over the years, I've realized that while personality and context play a part in leadership, they should not be the drivers. I have been in many different leadership positions so the context has fluctuated. And, even though my personality has not undergone any major change, my awareness of myself has grown substantially. So, the way I show up has shifted over time too. What has not changed in any significant way are my values. No matter what role I was doing or organization I was a leader in, my values stayed consistent. It has not always been easy to live them and it has sometimes led to challenging and difficult situations for me, but the clarity and the continuity helped me to sleep at night (mostly!).

My favourite quote about maintaining our values is this:

> "In matters of style, swim with the current. In matters of principle, stand like a rock."

Thomas Jefferson

Great quote right?

But you may be saying to yourself, that sounds nice but as a new leader, how do I stand anywhere firmly when I have so much coming at me? How do I even know what my values are as a leader when I have only just started?

That's where a leadership roadmap can help! Creating a leadership roadmap helps us to think more deeply about what we care about (hint! This is unlikely to change just because you have become a leader!), what we want for and from our leadership journey, and how we want to help the people we lead.

What is a leadership roadmap?
A leadership roadmap is basically a strategic plan for your leadership journey overall. It's a 'big picture' to help you make decisions within and about your leadership over the long term. A leadership roadmap focuses on your vision, values, mission and outcomes. What difference do you want to make in the world as a leader? What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind with the people you have led?

How can a leadership roadmap help you as a leader?
Clarity – Being clear about your big picture can help greatly in the day to day. If you understand that situations that arise are just a small part of our bigger plan, it helps you to focus and retain perspective.

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Self-knowledge – We often are just who we are in the world and may not take the time to reflect on WHY we do things, choose things or behave in a particular way. A leadership roadmap process enables you to truly look at who you are and what you care about and take that understanding into your leadership positions.

Big picture thinking – As already mentioned, the leadership roadmap is a 'big picture' approach to your leadership journey. It is not dependent upon where you work or the role you are doing.

Maintaining Integrity – Sometimes when we are in leadership positions, and particularly if we are in a middle management role, we are asked to do things that don't feel quite right. Having a clear roadmap that sets out your values and who you want to be as a leader can help you to navigate those situations and make better decisions for you.

Mobility – Gone are the days of staying with a company for our whole lives. Nowadays, individuals move around more to advance careers and try out new experiences. A leadership roadmap helps you to create continuity and keeps you centred when you move jobs, industries or even countries. You take it with you wherever you go.

Career Decision Making – We can't always rely on the organizations we work for to necessarily share the same values or have our interests be the forefront of our relationship with them. A leadership roadmap can help you to determine whether your organization's values and way of doing business is a good fit with your own. This is crucial for your own mental well being as well as for your opportunities for advancement. A bad fit can have a serious impact on both.

YOUR LEADERSHIP ROADMAP: THE LEADERSHIP LEAP

Whether you are a new leader and want to better at it or you hope to be one at some point, this roadmap will help you to get there. Often, leadership development is driven by company need and we are dependent on our organizations to decide whether we become leaders. This roadmap is about you and your leadership journey.

How to use the roadmap: Work your way from point A to point B. Think about who you are and what you bring to leadership. What impact do you want to have? What legacy do you want to leave behind? Then focus on self-leadership – self-awareness, self-reflection and self-care. When you know more about who you are and what you bring, you will have a better sense of the competencies you need/want to learn to be a more inspiring and effective leader.

PS. If you want some help to work through the roadmap with a wonderful learning community and some coaching, check out www.theleadershipleap.net!

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I clearly remember the day I first became a senior leader. I was 31 years old and although I had previously been a project manager, this was my first 'flying solo' leadership mission. I arrived at the new office on a Monday morning at 9am and my team was already situated at their desks. When I came in, I introduced myself and shook hands with everyone. We stood looking at each other for a minute. And then, one of the staff stepped forward, handed me a big bunch of keys, and said they normally had team meetings on a Monday morning, did I still want to have one? I almost turned around to see if she was speaking to some other 'boss' and then quickly recognized, I was it. I said sure why not and we went from there.

In the first few weeks, I literally had to make things up as I went along. It was a steep learning curve and unfortunately, I did not have anyone around me to learn or guide me. I had decided to step into senior leadership as I was fed up with having to deal with poor leaders all the time. And boy did karma bring that high level of criticism and judgement back into my own leadership zone for awhile! In my most memorable cringeworthy moment, my eyes started tearing up in the middle of my first firing of a staff member. I think she felt more sorry for me than anything else at that moment. However, she was likely very angry at me later as I really did take up a lot of the emotional room at a moment that should have been hers alone. No one had told me or shown me how to fire anyone and I prided myself as being a 'nice' leader at the time so I was truly out of my comfort zone. But I learned from it and from that time on, always remained emotionally neutral but kind when I was letting people go. Is it weird to say that it's something I am actually excellent at, and have received 'thank yous' for later? Yes, that's weird. Moving on...

As a new leader, I had no guidance and nor did I seek any from others. That was a mistake.

I hope I can help you to avoid this kind of mistake in your future leadership by sharing what I call the '10 Commandments of New Leadership'.

Here are your 10 Commandments:

1 Thou shalt seek guidance from others who have been there before you for they will help lighten the journey ahead.

2 Thou shalt listen to your staff for they know more than you think.

3 Thou shalt determine, and be led by, your own values as a leader.

4 Thou shalt decide on your big picture for your own leadership and be guided by it in the times that are tricky.

5 Thou shalt read, read, read. Leadership books are a plenty and can keep one up to date on modern ways of working.

6 Thou shalt seek out learning. Take a course. Do some online learning. Get some coaching. (Insert shameless pitch for my new online program for new & aspiring leaders - The Leadership Leap at www. **theleadershipleap.net)**

7 Thou shalt listen deeply to what is and isn't being said around you so that you are able to understand what is happening in the organization and act accordingly.

8 Thou shalt be open to constructive criticism from the people you lead. 'How am I doing?' is a great question to ask in a casual way or in a formal 1:1 meeting.

9 Thou shalt stay out of the weeds. Your job is to lead not do the work of those around you, even when it feels much more comfortable.

10 Thou shalt look after you. Being a new leader is extremely difficult. Self-care is crucial for ensuring that you are, and do your best every day.

FACING THE FRAUD - HOW TO DEAL WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Many years ago, a friend and I were walking back to our offices after a lunch together. We had both recently been promoted to managers and had a great time sharing the ups and downs of being a new leader. All of a sudden, we both stopped in the middle of the street and told each other how funny it was that we were now 'in charge' because 'what did we know?' Our laughter subsided into nervous giggles. The joke wasn't that funny anymore. We were both feeling like a bit of a fraud for taking the promotions, the money and gaining the power.

And, as I made my way into roles of more responsibility, that feeling came back to visit. 'How did YOU get here?' the voice would ask. 'You don't know what you are doing and everyone will find out'. It wasn't until years later that I found out it was actually a real thing – 'imposter syndrome'. It's a feeling of inadequacy and a fear of being exposed as a fraud. And it happens to everyone at some point. Even Michelle Obama talks about experiencing imposter syndrome!

Over the years, I have also figured out that it doesn't go away completely. With every new position where I have stretched myself, the fraud feeling returned. However, I have learned how to deal with it. And the most effective way to do that is to face the fraud head on. Ignoring the feeling can lead to an increase in anxiety and it doesn't go away. It's still hiding there. Like Pennywise in the sewer (sorry for the IT reference but it seemed most appropriate!) We don't want the fraud feeling to jump out at the wrong moment or sit there eating away at our confidence. So, direct confrontation is the only way to move through it.

Here's how to 'face the fraud' and deal directly with imposter syndrome:

1. Don't ask 'why' you are feeling this way. It's just a natural feeling when taking on something new. Trying to analyze it will lead you down a dark path toward all your insecurities. And, again, like Pennywise in the sewer, it will be impossible to get out (sorry, I did it again but that clown!)

2. Accept that the fraud feeling exists because you are in a new situation. Learn to recognize it.

3. Acknowledge its existence: 'Hello imposter syndrome. It's nice to see you. I guess I am stretching myself again and that's a good thing.

4. Invite it to leave: 'Thank you for visiting but you can go away now.'

5. Be on the lookout for it whenever you get more responsibility or try something new. New situations can trigger a lot of emotional responses. The fraud feeling is one of the worst because it is set deep in our insecurities and can make us defensive. And that's never a good thing in a new position.

6. Remind yourself that you are good enough. You were given the new position or responsibility because someone thought that you could do it. You just need to think you can too.

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LEADERS — LEAD THYSELF! WHY LEADERSHIP IS ALL ABOUT YOU!

We tend to think of leadership as relational. That it is about other people. Leadership is something we do unto others. However, I want to invite you to think about leadership in a different way. What if leadership was all about you? What if being a great leader meant it was absolutely crucial that you pay attention to you first?

When I used to get on planes before I had kids, I would sit and listen to the air steward tell me about the safety procedures. I always listened carefully as I was sure I would forget how to inflate my life jacket if/when it came time! The one thing I did not forget was the advice given that if we were travelling with children we needed to put on our own oxygen masks first. I thought it was terrible advice. I thought it was selfish and callous to leave little kids waiting for air.

And then I had my son and I realized 2 things:

1. He didn't know how to put on his own oxygen mask so I had to be of fit body and mind to look after him.

2. In a challenging situation, me panicking and falling apart because I can't breathe is not going to help him make it through.

These realizations shifted my view of parenting. They also shifted my view of leadership.

To be great leaders, we must put on our own oxygen masks first. We have to be able to lead ourselves before we can be any good at leading others. I say this in relation to self-care – we need to look after our minds and bodies. Get enough rest. Take breaks. Have fun outside of work. But self leadership is also about self awareness. Who are we and what do we believe in? What are our trigger points that set us off and make us mad or sad? What are our joy points that make us happy and excited? The better we know ourselves, the better we can come to know others.

Self-reflection is also a key element in self leadership. Being able to stand back from a moment or a situation and think about how it's making us feel can help us handle the moment better. Being able to sit back in a heated team meeting and just listen to our staff, to hear what they are saying and how it makes us feel helps us to retain our bigger picture rather than getting caught in the emotional charge. Thinking deeply about why we are doing the work, why we are or want to be a leader and what we bring to the table helps us to have more confidence and more passion for whatever we are doing.

So make sure that you are taking time in your day for you. Take time to look after yourself, take time to think, and take time to reflect on what's happening for you and around you. Otherwise, you will be less effective in helping others to manage their workloads, their time and themselves overall. Breathe first and be a better leader.

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SELF CARE IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE NAPS

I absolutely love a horizontal life pause (AKA nap). And I love a lot of the things that traditionally make up self care advice. I am not very good at it but I try to meditate. I write in a journal now and again and I take time out to do things that I enjoy that are unrelated to work.

However, looking after ourselves does not stop there when it comes to leading. We also need to re-energize and refresh ourselves in the work itself. Every day it is our job to inspire and lead our staff to do their best work. This requires passion. And passion requires energy. Not just 'I had 9 hours of sleep last night' energy although that is important. Passionate energy is also about jumping back up when we get knocked down, fighting the good fight wherever we can, and believing wholeheartedly that we can make a difference.

This kind of energy can be refreshed by 3 things: reflecting, learning and connecting.

Reflecting

Taking time to reflect on our work is crucial for any leader. It's easy for us to get caught up in the day to day. We see things that need to get done all around us. There is always another meeting to have or report to get done. Our staff need us and sometimes we have to spend a lot of time with them to ensure they are on the right track. It's all true. But as leaders we also hold the space for strategy and future development. If we are always stuck in the day to day, we cannot plan for the future or meet our strategic goals as a whole organization. Reflection is also important to being a

good leader for our people. Standing back and seeing the full picture equips us to direct our team more effectively, enables us to be less reactive and helps us to feel like we are making the change we want to see in the world.

Learning

Learning often gets put to the side as we feel we don't have the time or the money to invest in it. But we need to invest in order to grow. Leaders often have to figure out how to do our jobs as we go along. Prioritizing learning will help you to become more equipped and be a better leader, faster. Learning new approaches to leadership also helps you to stand up with confidence and stand out in your organization. And sometimes, just finding out that what we are doing is on track helps us feel more confident about ourselves and our abilities.

Connecting

It's crucial that we as leaders spend time with others doing similar work. It's revitalizing to meet new people who share our interests and passions as well as to catch up with those we already know and like. Being a leader can be a lonely job and so having the opportunity to spend time with others doing the same job too enables us to feel less alone. When we've had the opportunity to connect with others we often return to our work with renewed enthusiasm. Connecting is also important for our big picture. Having conversations with others about the bigger picture stuff helps us to find those with similar values and dreams and importantly, feel like we are progressing our desire for making a difference.

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I used to walk my dog with serious intent. It was a chore that needed to get done before I could get to the 'real' work of my to do list. I would take him around the neighbourhood, feeling impatient when he stopped and sniffed anything, always moving fast so we could get done and get on with my work. I felt like walking my dog was taking up crucial time that could be better spent elsewhere.

As leaders we often approach things in this task driven way. We talk about needing to be innovative and creative all the time and yet, rarely do we take the space needed for reflecting and thinking and dreaming - all important elements for growing innovation and creativity in our organizations. As leaders, we don't often build in or prioritize times that have no goals, no outcomes, and are not task related. We are so driven by the 'do' that we fail to see the importance of 'do nothing'. And creativity often needs that white space, that 'do nothing' time to emerge.

But time is not the only thing we need to get our creative groove on. We need headspace. And if we think we are pressured by a lack of time, that is nothing compared to the busy bee that takes up residency in our heads. Thinking about this, thinking about that, thinking about this again. Our brains are full of our to do lists, our what not to do lists, other people's to do lists, and often, a continuous cycle of negative self-talk for not getting as much done as we think we should. How is a person to be creative with all of that going on?

The answer is we can't. We can't be creative. We can't be innovative. We can't come up with new ideas or imaginative solutions when our time and headspace is so full up with other stuff. So, we have to be very intentional about making time and giving headspace to our creative side.

Now, I take my dog for a walk in the woods every morning for up to an hour at a time. I walk normally, taking in the sights and noises of the forest. I experience a real sense of joy watching my dog running freely, chasing squirrels and sniffing to his heart's content. And I let my mind wander. I might think about a blog I am going to write or a lesson I want to create for my online course. Or, I don't think about anything at all and the most interesting ideas and thoughts pop into my head. It is the most creative time of my day.

If you are wanting to get that creative groove on more in your leadership and your life, here are some helpful tips:

- **Make time to do nothing.** You cannot schedule 'creativity' but you can foster it by scheduling in some time for free-flowing thoughts. Leave work early and take your dog for a walk if you have one (see, my dog is even in my helpful hints!), turn everything off and stare out your window for 20 minutes, walk home or take the train rather than driving. Be sure to also clear your brain at the same time with a little deep breathing and purposeful emptying of the mind. This is the space where ideas pop up and creativity thrives.

- **Set the goals aside.** 'Productivity' is a whole new industry. Books, apps, and technology are all vying for our attention to get things done. ALL THE TIME. It seems as if every moment needs to be utilized to its full capacity or it's wasted. I say nonsense! We need to build in times of our day that have no end goals, no deadlines, and no work tasks associated with them so that we can process, reflect, and evaluate. Having every moment assigned to a task or a goal is actually counter-productive for leaders. We need to be able to focus on the big picture and being too task driven gets in the way of that too.

- **Commit.** Although I have said that we can't really schedule 'creativity', we can commit to it. We can commit the time and headspace. And we can commit to putting our ideas into action when they do come. I came up with the idea for this article while, what else - walking my dog, this morning but for it to happen, I needed to commit to sitting down and writing it.

- **Learn.** One of the best ways to expand our creativity is learning something new or immersing ourselves in learning of some kind. Take a course, read an article, or dive into a book. Learning exposes us to other people's ideas and gets our brains moving in a way that stretches us to think differently, or have our own big ideas validated.

- **Enjoy.** My worry about creativity now being viewed as a leadership 'competency' is that it will be seen as another thing to do or accomplish. The creative space can be challenging as we are pushing ourselves but it is also a fun or at the very least, an enjoyable space. Try not to take the fun out of it by viewing it as a must. Just go with the flow and get on with the groove...

LEADING OTHERS

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

I need a hero

I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night

He's gotta be strong

And he's gotta be fast

And he's gotta be fresh from the fight

I need a hero

I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light

He's gotta be sure

And it's gotta be soon

And he's gotta be larger than life!

Larger than life

(Holding Out for a Hero by Bonnie Tyler)

There has been a great deal of discussion in leadership about moving from the 'hero leader' to more of a shared leadership perspective. There are lots of benefits to shared leadership, some of which I share below. But before we can shift from something, it's important to better understand it. The 'hero leader' has been part of literary stories for centuries. It is a narrative that is particularly popular in the West and can be found in corporations, movies and TV shows. The hero leader is the man (almost always a man) that will save the company or the other characters who could not or would not step up. It's a great character and one that we are often drawn to follow so it's not surprising that it has lasted for so long. But life is changing in organizations and it makes less sense to just rely on one person when we could be equipping many more people to step up and help 'save the day' too.

Here are 4 main archetypes of hero leaders:

Hero Leader 1 – The Saviour

This is 'Superman'- the leader that thinks it's their job to save the company and staff from themselves. They tend to swoop in and take over, all the time talking about how they are going to make everything better. And we let them. We are drawn to being rescued and not having to take responsibility for ourselves or the work overall. It's a relief. At first. The infatuation wears out over time as we want

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While there may be some truth in these things, they are not badges to be worn in our organizations. It hurts the organization long term if the leadership salary is not at least somewhat competitive. And it is not good for us to not take breaks or time off because we think it will all fall apart. The reality is that at some point we will leave and someone else will come in. Do we want them to be successful or not? If so, we need to step down from our self-imposed pedestals. It's really easy to step into this role when we are tired, stressed and feeling isolated. Looking after ourselves better helps to reduce the need for martyrdom.

Hero Leader 4 – The Benevolent Mom

more control over our work and want freedom to explore and make mistakes. The hero worship wears off too as we discover our leader's 'kryptonite' tendencies and see that they are in fact just as human and fallible as we are.

Hero Leader 2 – The Trench Dweller

This is the leader that has been 'in the trenches' for years. This person has been there, done that in the work with clients and knows everything there is to know about the issue or service they are working in. We tend to have a lot of respect for this person as they have earned their stripes and really know their stuff. The challenge for this leader is that often an ability to specialize does not translate well into the ability to manage as a leader and this conflicts with the high expectations of the staff. It is also the case that when we are really good at something we tend to want to spend our time there. Therefore, this leader is too often in the way of the staff trying to deliver their work and other areas that aren't their strong point get neglected.

Hero Leader 3 – The Martyr

"Nobody, and I mean nobody can do this job." We've all said it and been this leader at some point. But some live it every day for years and years and years because obviously they can NEVER leave. No one would or could do this job on the pay being offered or with it being so dang hard.

This is the leader that wants to look after everyone else, whether they want them to or not. This leader is a hero because they are so caring and so giving to the staff. They stay up until 2am to bake treats for every team meeting, make sure staff all get to their meetings on time and get very disappointed when someone lets them down. While it's nice to have 'mom' look after us sometimes, it is actually disempowering to have someone do everything for us. Our performance may be based on their approval rather than the merits of the results we get. And let's face it, moms are often disappointed in our behaviour and choices. It's part of the gig! So, although it may seem rude to reject a mom's love, it's really more important that we give room for people to be grown-ups.

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I want to reassure you that I am not judging anyone with these caricatures as I have flowed easily between them myself many times in my 15 years as a senior leader. It is really tough some days not to see myself as a martyr and I had a steep initial leadership learning curve as someone with deep practice experience. I can't bake and I've never really seen myself as Superman so I'm off the hook with the other two I think…

Even the definition of 'hero' sounds like some leadership role descriptions we see these days: A **hero** is a person or main character who, in the face of danger, combats adversity through impressive feats of ingenuity, bravery or strength, often sacrificing his or her own personal concerns for some greater good.

Leaders are constantly overcoming adversity and trying to be brave. We are often sacrificing ourselves for the 'greater good'. Sleep, friendships, family and self-care all go to the wayside when a report is due or when we have a big meeting the next day. We ARE heroes, dammit.

However, the challenge with being a hero leader is that we can't lead organizations or even teams by ourselves. We need other people to step in and step up if the organization is going to function in a balanced and healthy way. And we need to share the leadership if we are to create sustainable organizations that can survive after our departure or unfortunate demise by a bus.

The good thing is there are major benefits for leaders to set the hero mantel aside that it should not be that hard if we work on it.

Some great reasons for leaving the hero leader archetypes behind:

Inclusivity – As mentioned earlier, the hero leader is very western and very male. Both of these characteristics are problematic when we are trying to create an inclusive sector and organization. We need to adapt a more neutral leadership lens when it comes to looking at the people that could contribute to leadership in our organizations.

Sustainability – This is crucial. We spend a lot of time growing our organizations. But we are not setting them up for success in the long term by holding all of the power and the knowledge at the top. Sharing leadership opportunities and enabling your managers and staff to take responsibility for decision making AND failures will help to build resilience and stability in dealing with an eventual leadership change.

Leadership Strength – As leaders, when we allow others to take the reins a little bit and trust that they are able to do a good job, we can take a breath. We can step back and look at the big picture more easily, identify points of organizational improvement and be more creative. We also look after ourselves better as not everything is on our plate. Being a good leader is about leading and not always doing. It's too easy to stay in the busywork and not really accomplish what we need to when we think everything is up to us.

Organizational Health – People are happier when they feel valued and have a sense of purpose. Having responsibility and feeling trusted to do good work contributes substantially to employee engagement. We don't get paid the big bucks in our sector so we need to have something other than money keep us interested. When staff are happier, they are also more effective with clients. That means that you get closer to your end goal of making life better for someone else. Everybody wins.

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HOW TO BE AN EMPATHETIC LEADER

I have always considered myself an empathetic leader. But I heard something awhile ago that made me question how I've been empathetic and helped me better understand what I can do as a leader to generate more empathy within my teams.

Historically, empathy has been defined as the ability to 'walk in someone else's shoes.' That seems to make sense. If we stand in someone's shoes metaphorically speaking, we can get a better understanding of their world. However, is it actually possible? Can we actually stand in someone's shoes and understand their life?

A little while ago I went to Value Village with my son. It is his new favourite store as he loves to look for interesting, used (and cheap!) toys. While there, I spotted a pair of shoes that I loved. I don't usually buy second-hand shoes as I enjoy the smell and the feel of new shoes. However, these were amazing so I got them. They seemed to fit fine in the store but when I wore them to work the next day they were uncomfortable. They were my size but they were worn in to the configuration of the previous person's feet. My feet are not quite as wide as the previous owner's and they are just contoured differently. So, my lovely 'new' shoes are sitting gathering dust on the shoe rack.

This makes me wonder about empathy and the shoe analogy. Is it ever a good fit to try on someone else's shoes? Won't they always be contoured by another person's life experience that we cannot possibly access and fully understand? All of the little moments, learnings, emotions and occurrences that weave together to make up our life history are too intricate and complex for another person to just 'try on' for awhile. What we are really saying when we talk about being able to 'walk in someone else's shoes' is that we can IMAGINE what we think their life or experience is like. And there lies the faulty premise in the analogy. If we have to guess, we don't KNOW what it's like at all.

So where does that leave us with empathy?

Awhile ago, Brené Brown addressed the terrible events in Charlottesville and America's race history in a video *(https://www.facebook.com/brenebrown/videos/1778878652127236/)* where she also talked about empathy. Her premise was that empathy is a key factor in growing unity. She also addressed the issue of the shoe analogy and recognized that we cannot ever fully understand another person's experiences. What we need to do, she said, is to '**Believe people when they tell you their story**'. This is one of the most important and in hindsight, obvious statements about empathy that I have ever heard. Often, we reserve our empathy for people and stories that ring true to us and that we can grasp. And we discount other experiences that we cannot fathom as untrue, made up or disingenuous.

As leaders, we are often worried about being manipulated or people 'getting one over on us' so our natural default may be suspicion when staff tell us things about themselves and/or their experiences of our organizations. Because we can't see what they can see we distrust what they are saying. Acknowledging that we will never experience what they do because theirs is a unique experience and particularly, because we are now leaders with more power is an important step toward enabling empathy to flourish. And that makes the next step really simple. As Brown says, just 'Believe them when they tell you their story' and work together from there. Make it a leadership practice and it will catch on with your staff and improve your customers' experiences too.

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The Leadership Leap

HOW TO FIRE WITH KINDNESS

I have fired many people. And I have been fired. Neither is a pleasant experience. But it doesn't have to be traumatic either. There is a way to let someone go that enables them to retain their dignity. And that is by firing with kindness. By kindness, I don't mean buying chocolates and hugging them. I mean by showing up as another human being and understanding this is hard for the other person. I mean that we put their feelings above our own in that moment. Because it's their moment. They will remember it for a very long time, if not the rest of their lives. Being fired from a job is the beginning of a very personal grieving process. It's important that we understand that and behave accordingly.
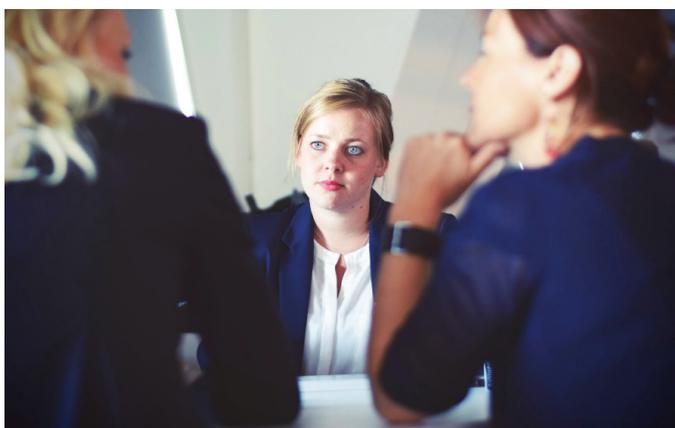

We make it worse for the people we let go by not bringing our humanity to the table. I understand the 'business risk' when you fire someone. I am not naïve. However, I don't believe that acting like a robot and wrenching their keys from their hands is necessary either. Many people go into shock when they are being let go, even if they have an inkling it's coming. It is still a shock to have someone sit across from you and tell you they don't want you anymore. It hurts big time. But when we assume that the person is going to de-rail our business somehow and we have security march them out of the building, we do them a disservice. On top of being rejected, they are now being treated like a potential criminal. If they have behaved in a way that gives you the idea that they may be disruptive, it may be more appropriate to pack up their stuff and send them out the back door. If they have turned up to work with integrity every day, reciprocate when you fire them. Maintain the integrity between you. Let them pack up their own desk. Let them say good bye to their colleagues. Let them send a few emails telling their contacts they will no longer be there. Let them have their dignity. The risk to your business is far less than the risk to them and their long-term mental health. And you look like a decent employer in the process, reassuring the rest of your people that they will be treated properly too. That helps build loyalty and trust.

Often, we leave our humanity behind at the firing table because we are scared. We hide behind the 'business continuity' argument because it helps us feel safer. It is hard to look another person in the eye and say you don't want them anymore. It's like breaking up with someone, particularly if they have been with you for a while. So, we avoid our own feelings by claiming 'policy and procedure'! Own your discomfort and get past it for the sake of the person who is about to have their entire life disrupted. Recognize that you are about to cause that disruption. It doesn't matter if they have not been performing or if their personality isn't a good fit. In that moment, you as the person firing them are the one making the change in their life. Stand in it and take responsibility. That's how you will find the strength to be kind. And that's how you will make it easier for them to move forward later.

Now, we do need to be cautious about going the other way too. We are also being kind by not bringing our own emotional baggage to the table in that moment and being overly empathetic. Maintaining a professional approach and being clear is being kind. I speak from experience on this one. In my very first senior leadership position, I had to fire someone within the first 2 weeks. She was nearing the end of the probationary period and was clearly not up to the job. I had never done it before and agonized over it. As I was telling her that I was letting her go, I teared up. I didn't full out cry but my voice started shaking. I had to stop at one stage and swallow so I wouldn't sob. She even offered me a tissue! It was awful. But I learned in that experience to put my own feelings last in the situation. I can be sad or feel bad later but that moment is the other person's not mine. It's kind of like wearing a big fluffy white dress to a wedding. We don't want to be a show stealer!

So next time you need to fire someone, be kind. Be kind to them by being clear and allowing them the dignity of saying good bye. Be kind to yourself by being human. Business does not trump humanity. When it does, no one wins.

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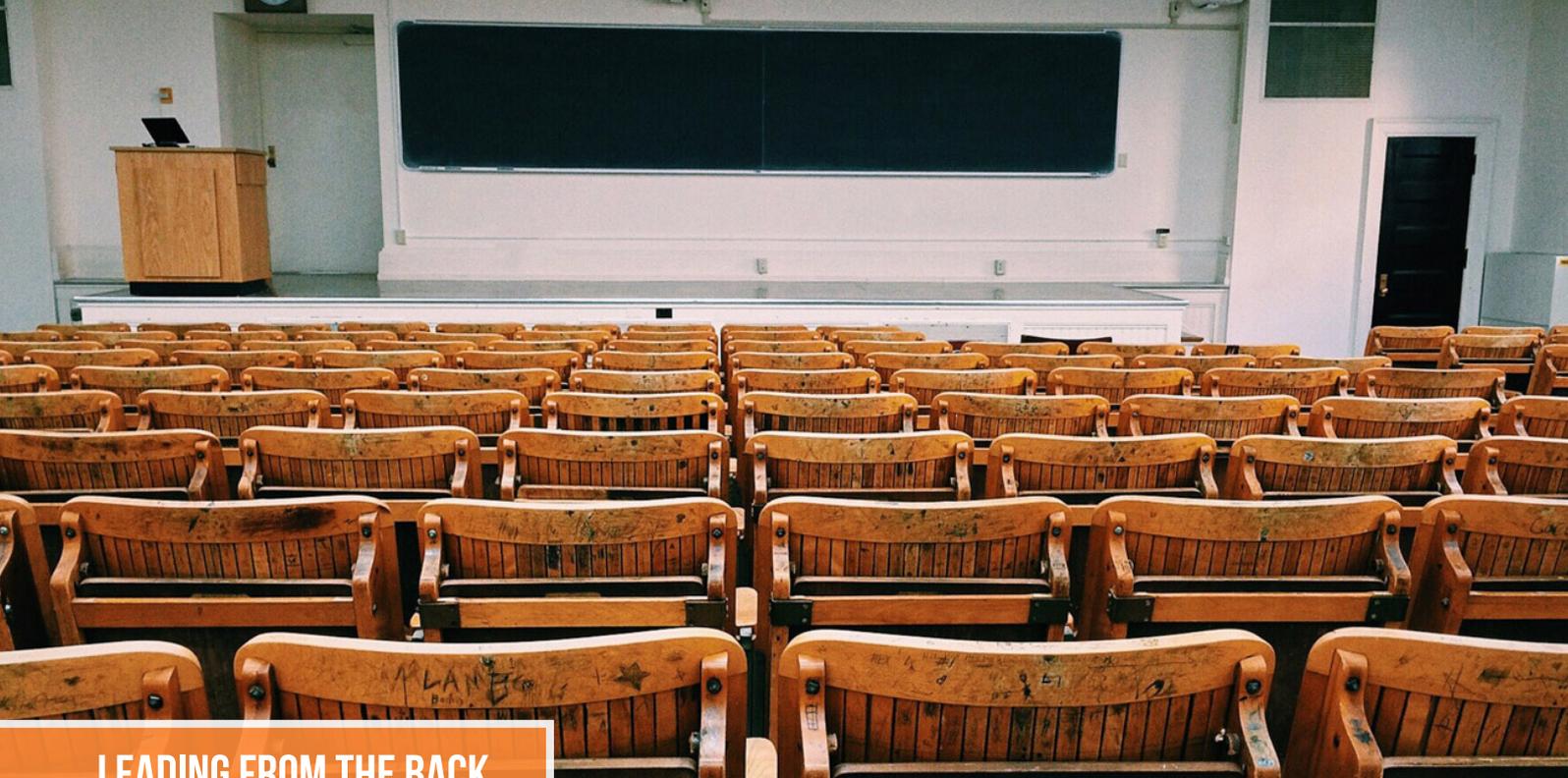
LEADING FROM THE BACK

When I was a kid, I was always the tallest girl in the class. And, until puberty struck, I was the tallest person. And that meant always standing at the back of the school photos. Every year from Kindergarten until Grade 7, when my new best friend was taller than me (probably no coincidence!), I took the middle spot in the back row. I did not enjoy this position for the first few years as I felt I stuck out too much and I didn't like being taller than everyone else. I also felt like I was somehow missing out not being at the front where the action always seemed to be. I would watch the boys jostling each other, the girls whispering in each others' ears and the teacher shushing everyone. After awhile though, I started to enjoy it. I realized that being at the back meant that I could see everything. I knew what was going on more than even the teacher probably as she/he was always to the side so did not have the same vantage point. I made my peace with standing at the back.

A little while ago I watched a leader (I shall not name names but you can probably guess what it is and which country he represents) push his way to the front of a group photo. At first, it made me laugh. Then, it annoyed me. And then it made me think. Now this person (still remaining nameless) has a particular affinity for wanting to be seen so it's easy to write him and the moment off. However, he is absolutely not alone in being a leader who believes their place is always at the front. We see it all the time. If we even look at the shape of a hierarchy, it's pretty much a triangle with the head of the organization being the tip.

And it makes sense. The word 'lead' implies being followed. And, we do want to take our people toward something so that does require being out front. However, when I was reflecting on my experience of standing at the back in my classroom photos, I realized that if we are always out front, we will never see what's going on behind us. And that's a problem. Our role as leaders of organizations is not just to have followers. We are trying to accomplish a mission of some sort. To do that, we need to have people working at optimal performance. We don't know if they are when we spend all of our time looking at the horizon ahead of us. If we stand at the back, we can see more.

Modern leadership is also more focused on a shared approach to leadership as we now understand that those who feel involved in decision making feel an increased sense of ownership and are more engaged. We can't involve others by being in front of them all the time. Turning around and facing them for a bit is good but then we lose sight of where we're going. When you stand at the back you can see everything. You can still see the horizon ahead AND you can see your people. And as I found being the tallest girl in the school photos, you will still stand out even when you are standing at the back.

It is important to be at the front in order to lead but try standing at the back sometimes too. You will see more of what you need to see in order to lead well. And when you are moving back up front, you won't need to push anyone out of the way to get there.

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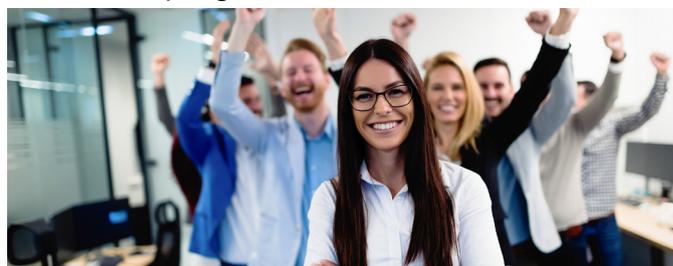
HOW TO LISTEN DEEPLY

Many years ago I was a Street Worker in Dublin, Ireland. Now that I have your attention, let me clarify! I did late night outreach with homeless youth on the streets of Dublin. It was me and one other person walking the streets from 10pm to 2am trying to engage young people sleeping out to come in and get some support from our daytime café and support service. I had worked in homeless shelters for a number of years but this was my first gig going out at night. I was also fairly new to Dublin, having lived in London beforehand so I did not know the city very well. We received safety training from our organisation and from the local police or the 'Garda' as they were known. The fact that we had the police working with us, telling us who and what to avoid did little to help my nervousness that first night we went out.

I had anticipated that it would be quiet but it was anything but to me. My heightened anxiety and awareness meant that I was picking up everything that was happening everywhere. I could hear cars driving, people chattering, doors slamming and the street sweeper moving slowly up and down the side of the road at the end of the shopping day. I jumped a little at every unexpected noise and darted my eyes everywhere. I felt like I needed to be on top of everything that was going on. But I wasn't really. I was just constantly reacting with my eyes and my ears.

However, over the next few days this changed. I barely heard the sounds of the street anymore. I stopped jumping and darting and walked calmly with my outreach partner, getting focused on finding the kids who were sleeping out.

I started being able to hear the unusual sounds, see the people who were in the shadows and trusting my body to tell me if there was danger ahead. It was almost like having a superpower. I knew what was going on around me without really looking. I was listening more deeply.

I also learned how to deeply listen to the young people. I would hunker down to speak to a young person smoking in front of a closed shopfront and deduce quickly how long they had been out, whether they had eaten and if they were high (Dublin had a terrible problem with Heroin at the time). Getting past all that and still tuning out the street noise, I would listen quietly and fully to their story. It was often the middle of the night, no one was around and I could have been at risk with sometimes very desperate kids. But my ability to really listen to what young people were saying with their mouths, their bodies and their eyes helped me to develop strong relationships from the start. They knew that I really saw them. That I heard them. And most of all, they knew I cared. Because of how I listened.

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP   Blue Morpho   The Leadership Leap
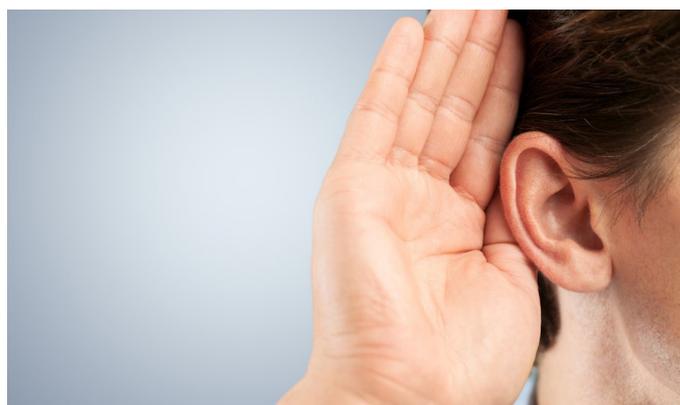
Several years later, I became a leader. And deep listening was one of the most valuable skills I brought to my leadership. I could see what was going on around me without saying anything or asking anyone directly. I could tell how people were interacting by their body language and their tone with each other. I was able to identify gaps in services and create new, innovative programming for my organizations. All because I could block out the noise and truly listen.

Deep listening is about listening beyond the obvious. Not just hearing the words but really tapping in to visual clues, emotional clues and almost immersing ourselves into the experience of the individual or group in front of us. Why is this important for leaders? Because we will never understand what is really going on with our staff or in our team if we only listen to their words. Getting a better understanding of the undercurrents, behaviours and emotional state of our staff enables us to communicate more effectively, see more clearly and make good decisions. Deep listening also enables us to move past the surface stuff and focus on what is really important to our organizations. It helps us to hear our customers and understand their needs in a way that truly matters.

However, being a leader often brings with it a very busy mind and body that is unused to stopping and paying attention more fully. There are decisions to make, things to do and people who are demanding our attention. Sometimes we feel anxious as we worry whether people in the room or on our team think we're smart, capable or a good leader. To listen deeply, we must put all of this noise to the side, in much the same way I did with the noisy streets of Dublin.

Here are some tips for deep listening with your individual staff, teams and clients/customers:

- **Clear your mind before starting.** Take some deep breaths and actively make your mind blank.

- **Relax your body. Tension only increases the blood flow and the adrenalin running around your body.** You cannot deeply listen in a heightened state.

- **Use your eyes.** Watch the facial expressions of the person or people you want to hear. See the little movements of their eyes or mouth. Look at their body. Are they relaxed? Are they twitching? What's going on for them?

- **Use your body.** How does your own body feel in reaction to what is going on? Are you feeling yourself tense up? Or are you getting more relaxed? Do you see yourself moving forward or moving further away? Your body is likely reacting to the other person's body and it gives you more clues as to what is happening for them.

- **Use your ears.** What do you hear in their voice beyond the words? What is the tone they are using? How is it coming out? Confident? Wobbly? These are big clues to how the other person is feeling.

- **Don't use your mouth.** Keep it closed. Say nothing. This is a bit of a departure from active listening advice. Do not repeat what the person has said. Do not acknowledge. You are not listening deeply to make them feel heard. You are listening deeply to hear more than what you are being told. You are listening deeply to learn about the other person or the group.

- **Practice.** It took me awhile to get past the initial street noise and calm down my internal anxiety. You are likely to find the same thing when you start listening deeply. Ignore the surface stuff, the comments people are making and your internal voice demanding your attention.

There are many other ways to deeply listen to yourself, your environment and others. But start here. Try it out. I guarantee that you will see things, hear things and learn things that will amaze you and help you be a better leader.

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

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STORY LISTENING FOR LEADERS

Story listening is not an art. It's a practice. And it's really easy to develop if you are willing and able to listen. Stories exist everywhere in your organization. You just need to be intentional about hearing them. A story does not have to be a particular length or a particular structure when it comes to listening. It may be a short anecdote about how an employee has helped a customer or an example of a time when a manager helped someone develop a skill. Or it may be a longer narrative of a long term employee's experience of the organization. Whatever the length or subject, there is always opportunity to become a better leader by listening to stories!

So why listen?

Stories provide rich information about customer experience, about the temperature of your staff team and about how you are doing as a leader and as a business. Stories exist whether you are listening for them or not. The people in your organization and who come across it are telling each other things about their experiences. Listening to stories enables you to respond to what is happening in your business. Note the word respond. Not react. Reacting may mean involving yourself in the conversation and taking credit or being defensive. Responding involves remembering the stories you've heard and allowing them to influence you in developing your policies, creating communications or evaluating progress.

Listening to stories also builds connection. As organizations grow, people can get disconnected from leadership and the company vision. They may be segregated into departments or work spaces. Strange silo behaviour can erupt into your corporate culture where it was never there before. Stories get created about which department is getting more money in their budget or is favoured by the CEO, etc. These are often based on not having enough information about what others are doing or not having better stories to latch onto and share. If you have a regular practice of listening to stories, you will be able to be proactive in heading off the negative growth of stories and steer your staff toward more positive tales of cross connection between individuals or teams. Creating a culture of story listening by modelling it yourself will also help keep staff connected to you and the bigger picture of making a difference in the lives of your customers.

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How to Listen

Surveys: Surveys are a great research tool. Unfortunately, too often we rely too much on the numbers and don't give room for people to actually tell us about their experiences. We go for the easy percentage rather than introduce the hassle of trying to bring together what can seem like random information. However, asking people to 'Tell us about' their experience can provide more benefits than are immediately obvious. Yes, the number of people who rated the service to be 4 out of 5 is important. That is good information. But what does it mean? For the business overall, maybe it meets some targets. That's great. But for the people on the frontline it means nothing. Collecting stories that they can read and share provides them with valuable information that informs their service delivery. Yep. It's unscientific. But I guarantee you that your staff will remember the story of why the customer gave them the 2 rating more than they will the overall percentage relating to their performance that month. And they will make changes along the way. Isn't that what customer feedback SHOULD do? These stories also provide great case studies for training or testimonials for your marketing.

Wander: This is my favourite leadership tool. I will admit to sometimes utilizing it because I was bored with some admin task but it is always a valuable thing to do. The key to wandering is being comfortable with not having an agenda or a reason to be talking to your staff. Drop in to an office and see how they are. Ask them what they are working on or about how things are going and listen. Really listen. Ask more questions. You don't need to stay there for too long. Then move on to another person. Doing this at least once a week makes a real difference to your understanding of what is happening in your organization. AND, it gives you lots of great stories to pull out of your back pocket when you have speaking engagements, meetings with potential partners or in performance reviews. Wandering takes you beyond the monthly reports and gets you in touch with actual experience. And that is where you will find the stories.

Ask: Beyond surveys is this little known ancient technique called 'asking'. We forget about this 'old school' way of finding things out in our world of being very 'busy' and relying on technology to communicate for us. But asking is the best way to find stories AND value the experience of your people at the same time. Ask your customers or employees to tell you a story directly. If you want to use Skype, Facetime or even your blog, go for it. Ask them how your business has made a difference in their lives. Ask them to tell you a story about how you or someone who works for you has helped them. If you are talking to customers, you will have discovered golden information for your marketing team and leadership that demonstrates your impact. If you are talking to your staff, you will find out how well your Managers are doing and how engaged your team is in their work.

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NO LEFT TURNS — RISK TAKING IN LEADERSHIP

I was once at a party and someone told a group of us that she had never in her life made a left turn in her car. She only turned right. I was taken aback and literally did not know what to say. In Canada, we drive on the right hand side so a left turn means that you have to go across the oncoming traffic. I guess I see her point. It's a risky move turning when cars are coming at you. You have to choose exactly the right time to make the turn and make sure there is enough time to get all the way across. She was clearly focused on always taking the route that's easiest and poses the least risk.

In thinking about this in relation to leadership, this is often the route that leaders choose too. The safest. They go with what the crowd wants or they do what they are told rather than coming up with solutions themselves. If a team member has an innovative idea they naysay it because it hasn't been done before. Or, they kill it by taking all the risk out of it so that it is a pale imitation of its former, creative self. They default to what is easiest. I have heard it often from the leaders around me. Doing something new would be too hard, require too much effort, be difficult to get approval for, etc etc. There is always a reason for not taking the left turn. Just keep going right as it's bound to get us there eventually. Right?

Not necessarily. Sometimes we just detour and never get to our destination because we didn't take a risk. I understand risk management. I think it's important to think about what might happen if we take certain decisions. But making decisions that create the same circumstances over and over again is not decision making. Nor is it leadership. Sometimes leadership is about going into the unknown. Sometimes it's about having people follow us into the unknown. Sometimes it's about saying 'I don't know but let's try it.'

Saying no or continually playing it safe to avoid uncertainty is not only poor business, it's uninspiring. The people you are trying to lead will get bored and they will move on. Or worse, they will stay and be dissatisfied. We see it in the poor engagement rates across the globe. Employees are experiencing high levels of dissatisfaction and extreme dissatisfaction. That impacts productivity.

So never taking a risk to make that left hand turn as a leader is a poor strategy. It's not really leading. It's following what's been done before over and over again. It's also missed opportunity. Think about all the great places a person misses out on if they never make a left hand turn! There are certain streets they will never travel on. Routes they will never take. Buildings they will never see. They won't know what it's like to get somewhere quicker and easier. Life will always be a series of circular right turns leading them further away from their destination. They may get there eventually but how much time will have been lost and effort expended? And, as we mentioned earlier, they will have lost their best passengers along the way because they got fed up. They got out and took the subway. The passengers that remained are sitting in the back feeling increasingly miserable.

So go ahead. Turn left. Close your eyes briefly if you must but commit yourself to the turn. You may not know where you are going to end up but you are likely to have a lot more fun getting there.

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LEADING ORGANIZATIONS

HOW TO CREATE AN UNHEALTHY CULTURE: TOP 10 TIPS

Not long ago, I delivered a workshop on organizational culture. One of the exercises was to come up with a list of what an unhealthy culture looks and feels like. The participants literally filled a wall with flipchart as they had so many responses. They found the exercise 'therapeutic' and 'helpful' as they said they rarely get to have that kind of conversation in their organizations. They also said that a lot of the challenges either come from or are perpetuated by leaders.

So, in the interest of therapy and helpfulness I will share some of what they came up with here.

If you are a leader wanting to create an UNHEALTHY culture in your organization, do the following:

1 Tell some of the people some of the information some of the time. This creates uncertainty and builds perceptions of favouritism quickly.

2 Ignore the dynamics between older staff wanting to retain status and newer staff with new ideas. It will all blow over soon when the new ones leave or assimilate and the status quo will remain in place.

3 Sideline anyone who looks different, talks different or has different (AKA weird) ideas.

4 Let the cliques lead. Seriously. Why hassle yourself with what will only lead to power struggles and conflicts probably?! The group that speaks the loudest should have the most say.

5 Maintain a 'closed door' approach. Don't let anyone in unless they have tea and cookies. If you must meet with them, tell them to bring solutions not problems. That way, you will never have to hear about the negative stuff happening in your organization. Phew!

6 Never take a break. There is so much work to be done. Modelling it means that others will also not take a break and everyone will be, well, grumpy. Who needs a happy and productive workplace when there is so much work to be done eh?

7 Take ALL the decisions. Don't let anyone participate. You're the boss aren't you?

8 Be a martyr. Oh yes. The pinnacle of leadership success. That time in your career when you can tell everyone else that no one, and you mean no one, will EVER be able to do your job because you have sacrificed so much. Well, until that bus comes along...

9 Don't onboard new people. They will find out soon enough what the stories and values are in the organization. Leave them to it. You enjoyed Lord of the Flies didn't you?

10 Don't say hello to anyone. Walk toward your office with your eyes down or pretend to be reading something on your phone. And for goodness sake, don't make eye contact and smile. They will think you like them. We can't have that.

P.S. If you want to create a HEALTHY organizational culture, do the opposite of all of these things!

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

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CREATING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

I once worked as an office temp. I had just moved from Dublin to Manchester and really needed a job. My role was to do data entry. I would receive invoices that had been paid and enter them onto the system. After the initial learning curve, I got faster at doing the work and often about 1pm I would be wandering around the office asking people if I could help them with anything. After a few days of this, my supervisor called me into her office. She told me that I was making them look bad and that I needed to 'slow down'.

I was 28 at the time and my supervisor had been there longer than I had been alive. So, I did what she asked. Well, I tried. I found it hard to try to be more inefficient as it went against my work ethic, my abilities, and my sense of accomplishment. I felt myself shrinking from the looks of judgement and irritation when I finished anything early. Luckily, shortly afterwards I got a job in my actual line of work. However, I have never forgotten that experience. In that office, there was no room for me to be myself. My ability to work fast and get things done was not welcome. In fact, it was a detriment for them.

I was reminded of that experience when I was facilitating a session on inclusion. One of the exercises I asked the participants to do was to tell stories of when they felt they included and when they felt excluded in a group or a workplace. We did a deep dive into what inclusion feels like and what it feels like to not be accepted for who you are. I shared this story to start them off. It may seem like a fairly minor thing now as I wasn't badly bullied or called racist names but it is an example of how exclusion starts.

It also gave me a very small insight into what it must be like for people of colour and whether they would ever be/feel included in environments like that.I am a white woman and the people in the office at my temp job were also all white women. And yet I stood out. We often judge people for 'assimilating' into organizations. The idea of standing up and standing out has been a rally cry for women and people of colour for many years. But here's the thing. It doesn't feel nice not to be included. It's hard to go to work every day and not be invited to go out for lunch or sit with everyone else. It feels pretty rotten to have your ideas knocked back every time you offer them because your supervisor doesn't like you or 'get' you. So, like I did at this job, we sometimes try to play down our skill sets, or mask our feelings just to feel part of the overall group. We're at work for most of our day. It's important that we feel part of something.

However, we give up a little bit of our soul when we make ourselves small in order to fit in to the overarching culture. We aren't as shiny. And here's the irony: we are likely to be skipped over for promotions and leadership positions. Because we are not standing out.

So, rather than relying on every individual to 'fight the good fight', the culture needs to change in order to ensure that we are not missing out on or losing some of our very best employees. We need to make room for everyone. As Mahan Tavakoli says in his article **'Creating a Culture of Inclusion to Attain Organizational Success':**

"When an organization creates a culture of diversity and inclusivity, it fully engages its workforce and creates an environment that supports increased productivity, enhanced collaboration, and inspired innovation."

Changing an organizational culture is not easy but as we can see from this quote, it's crucial for business success. There is no 'magic bullet' and it won't happen overnight but to create and sustain an inclusive organizational culture that promotes and celebrates diversity and equity, we need to build organizations with cultures that:

1. Embrace change
2. Are committed to learning
3. Make room for differences of opinions and approaches
4. Share decision making
5. Learn from failure
6. Can deal with conflict

In doing the workshop and thinking a lot more about inclusion, I am committing myself to getting better at looking for the potentially unseen talents of my staff, check my biases and to challenge myself more about hiring people 'like me' whether that be in terms of culture, ideas or abilities.

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WHY DISCOMFORT IS OVERRATED

Disruption', 'Out of your comfort zone', 'Getting uncomfortable', etc. This kind of language is currently being used in business rather a lot. It's one thing to talk about this within or about industries. It's a whole other thing to talk about it with regard to our people. We need to think about how effective it is if they are uncomfortable all the time.

My son went to dodgeball recently at a nearby community centre. He was a little nervous as he hadn't been before and probably wouldn't know any of the kids. He's 11 and is also at that age of being highly aware of the people around him. When I picked him up afterwards I asked if he had a good time. He said not really. His team kept losing and he was struggling because he didn't know any of the names of the other kids so couldn't let them know when the ball was going to be thrown at them. He said he didn't feel 'comfortable'. It was the first session of 12 dates and the instructor hadn't even gotten them to tell each other their names. She had made one of the biggest mistakes someone can make when leading a group or a team. She didn't help them get to know each other and she showed them she didn't care enough about them to ask them who they were. They will spend 12 hours together over the course of the next 3 months and may not know a single other person's name.

Now, you may be thinking I am a parent of the helicopter variety who wants her little schmookims to never experience discomfort. You would be wrong. My son has experienced plenty of discomfort and I have helped him to learn how to work his way through it. However, I don't believe in discomfort for the sake of it, for my son or anyone else. When people don't feel comfortable, you don't get the best out of them. Allow me to qualify what I mean by 'comfortable'. I mean 'safe'. I mean 'not anxious' because they know and have some trust in the people that are around them. This can take some time to build but a very basic first step is to get to know each other's names.

We could also put this incident down to the lack of experience of a young and poorly paid dodgeball instructor. However, this happens all the time in organizations. I was once training a group of 10 very well paid consultants from the same big company but from different divisions. At the beginning of the training, I got everyone to tell the group their name, what division they worked in, and what they hoped to gain from the training. As we went around the room, I realized that every single person was on their phone or their laptop. They were not paying any attention to each other at all. I stopped the process and asked everyone to put away their technology so that they could listen to each other. Two of the participants protested and actually left the room because what they were doing was 'too important' to put away. One of these participants

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was the team leader for the training and managed several people sitting at the table. She left the room for about half an hour and came back to a group that had already formed and had gotten started. She never really caught up and the fall out for the group was that they weren't as comfortable in the training as they could have been and achieved less.

Why is creating a comfortable space so important? As leaders it is our job to get the best out of our people and we often do our best when we feel connected. To our leader and to each other. People need to get comfortable before you can make them uncomfortable. People who are connected, trust each other and feel like they belong are more productive. They spend less time with the productivity killers - unhealthy competition, discontent and fear. They are also more likely to be innovative because they are more willing to try stuff out, make mistakes and try again.

So how do leaders create comfortable spaces where productivity and innovation can thrive?

Get a little personal
Learn the names of your staff. Find out what they like to do when not at work. Ask about their kids, their pets or their family. Ask how they are. This is basic stuff but if you step back for a moment and really think about how much you know about your people, you may surprise yourself by how little you have actually learned.

Remember your people are human
Again, this seems obvious but I have seen so many leaders who forget this and view their people as task fillers and money makers. They are surprised when they encounter emotional situations. Our employees are not robots (yet!). Yes, we need to see a certain level of 'professionalism' but that does not mean leaving our personalities and our humanity at the door.

Set Aside the Technology
When in team meetings or meeting individually with people, put away the phone and step away from the computer. We cannot really listen to each other unless we focus. Yes, you are very busy and important. But if you cannot put your tech away for a few moments to give your complete attention, you are telling your people that they are less important than the task you are doing. Encourage your staff to do this regularly too.

Lead by example
How you behave as a leader drives the culture of your team or organization overall. It doesn't matter if you have fancy values written on your wall if you are living them. People feel safe when they can trust that their leader is consistent and aligned with the way the company says it wants to be.

Encourage failure
This may seem counter-intuitive to what I have just been advocating. Failure makes us uncomfortable. However, it's how you deal with failure as a leader that impacts whether people feel safe overall. If you get mad every time a mistake is made, no one will feel good about doing anything more than what they know will work. And that is how companies get stuck. Creating an environment where failure is viewed as a learning opportunity lays the ground for continuous improvement and innovation.

Be purposeful
Creating an environment where people feel they can be their best is something you have to work on. Continually. Leaders need to build it into their systems and way of being. Have a check in at the beginning of each team meeting and ask how everyone is doing. Schedule in a time to wander every day to say hi to your people and ask them about the work they are doing. Share stories about your own experiences of failure and what you learned.

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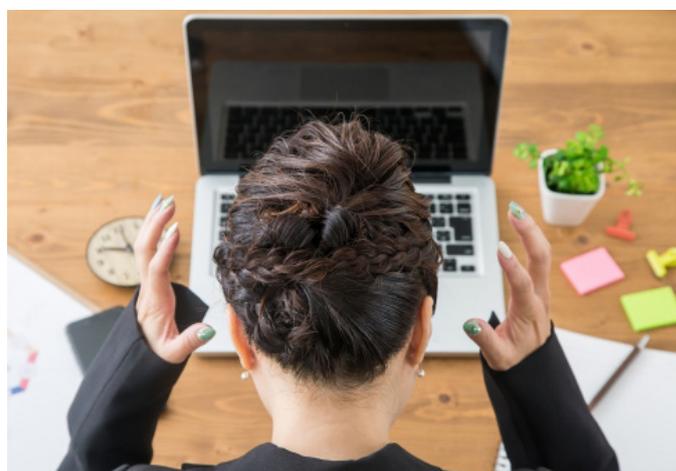
EMBRACE THE GENERATION GAP – WITH STORY

When I was 10 years old, I would pack a lunch, get on my bike and disappear for all of Saturday with my sister who is two years younger. We would choose a direction and just go. Sometimes it would be through the woods and other times we would stay on concrete. We would stay out until it was dinnertime and our parents had no idea where we were.

I told this story to in a workshop the other day focused on looking at leadership and the 'gap' between up to 5 generations in the workforce. Several of the younger millennials looked at me with shock, worry and perhaps a little envy. 'How could your parents let you do that?' was the unasked question filled with judgement hanging in the air. And I told them that everyone did it then. That was just the way it was. As we continued to share, it became clear that for those born in the generation after me this was a deep contrast to their highly structured, super managed weekend experiences.

Our exercise was to think like a Gen Xer which is what I am so it wasn't hard. Apparently, Gen Xers are much more independent, seek freedom, question everything and are the most likely to be an entrepreneur. Boomers, Traditionalists and Millennials all have different characteristics too. We have to be careful of stereotyping but these characteristics tend to make sense when related to the landscape of when we were born. Differences can be explained by our moment in history.

However, in the workplace, these differences are causing some serious clashes and are impacting productivity in many businesses. Millennials are viewed as 'entitled', Boomers are holding onto their leadership positions for longer, generating some resentment, Gen Xers are leaving to start their own businesses and although most traditionalists have moved out of the workforce our corporate structures were for the most part created by them. Generation Z is about to come of age and is starting to enter the workforce already. We don't even know what the impact of their super connected and technology driven existence might be on the work environment. The differences may be explained by history but that does not mean they are easy to work with or that the explanations about the different generations are translating into better understanding.

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

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What can we do to fill the generation gaps and develop a more cohesive workforce? How can we create connection, grow understanding and generate acceptance? How can we actually embrace the generation gap? The answer is in something we have been doing for thousands of years. Sharing stories. Stories are the most powerful tool we have in helping people of different generations really understand and accept each other. They have historically been the 'glue' in communities, tribes and cultures and could have the same effect in the workplace.

When I shared my story of my biking adventures, the rest of the group could see why Gen Xers tended toward entrepreneurialism. Several people said they could understand how being micro managed in current corporate structures was so challenging for a generation that spent much of their childhood unsupervised and able to roam. We talked about Millennials and the 'entitlement' label. They started to share their stories of growing up with parents who spent time with them every weekend and helped them feel confident about their abilities. They told us how much they wanted their work to matter as they were very aware of having a limited time on this planet. They have grown up knowing too much about terrorism, global warming, wars and natural disasters. The clock is ticking and they need to move fast.

In a short period of time, our story sharing got us to a place of continuity and caring. We had a better understanding of each other and the world as it was when we were growing up. Not only that but we valued the experience, enjoyed spending time together and now have a basis from which we could grow a better relationship.

Stories help us to find the similarities (and there are many!) between the generations and understand the differences. They create connection and grow compassion – both key elements in a healthy and productive workplace.

As a leader, are you struggling with the generation gaps? Create opportunities to share stories!

Here are some ideas:

- Create story sharing processes in your internal communications. Feature a story each week of an employee from a different generation in your e-newsletters or on your intranet. You can even go old school and post them on your bulletin board!

- Turn meetings into story sharing sessions. Dedicate the first part of the meeting to enabling your people to share a story with another about when they were growing up, starting out in the working world, etc. Get people to talk to someone different each time you meet.

- Have dedicated team story sessions. Get people of different generations together for a couple of hours and tell them talking about work is off limits. See where they go from there!

- Grow your own and your team's storytelling and story listening skills to embed story sharing in your business

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CONCLUSION

Thank you SO much for taking the time to read this book. I hope the thoughts, ideas and stories have been helpful to you as you navigate your own leadership journey. The lessons I have learned have helped me to be a more inspiring and more effective leader so it's been wonderful to share them. Being a great leader is about more than just turning up and getting the job done. It's about engaging and inspiring your people. It's about loving leadership and helping others to do their best work. That's how you will make a difference in this world. And then I encourage you to share your stories and the lessons you have learned onto the next generation of leaders too!

Best wishes for your leadership adventures and remember that help is only a click away:

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Helping new & aspiring leaders to become INSPIRING leaders!