

DON'T BLAME THE LETTUCE

Insights to help you
grow as a leader and nurture
your workplace culture



ERIC STUTZMAN, WENDY LOEWEN, RANDY GRIESER

ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership

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To our staff, who have taught us the most.

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INTRODUCTION

We believe that leadership development should be a priority for both aspiring and experienced leaders. Great leaders never stop learning – instead they seek opportunities for reflection, search for new ideas, and know they must keep growing in order to be effective in an ever-changing world. Effective leadership is important because it is an essential ingredient to creating healthy workplace cultures, which in turn sets the foundation for organizational success.

ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership (ACHIEVE), where we (the authors) are all leaders, is in the professional development training industry and offers training in the areas of leadership and workplace culture. We know that learning changes lives, and while we believe that attending online or in-person workshops is an impactful way to learn, another powerful way to develop and grow is through reading. This is due in part to the fact that reading is so accessible – you can read almost anywhere. Reading also makes it easy to access the knowledge of experienced thought leaders that might otherwise take you years to cultivate on your own. We have observed how our own thinking and practices related to issues of leadership are frequently propelled by what we read. In fact, we often exchange books with each other to enhance our leadership philosophies and management practices.

The insights found in this book have emerged from our own individual leadership journeys. They have come from many years of trial

and error while leading our own organization, along with hours of focused, intentional reflection related to our leadership roles. Additionally, we have extensive experience coaching and training other leaders and consulting with organizations of various sizes to create healthy workplace cultures.

Our perspectives on leadership are undoubtedly shaped by our own leadership context, which is a midsized, non-unionized organization. We recognize that not all workplaces are the same – some organizations are large, while others are small; some are unionized, while others are not. So, you will need to think about how to apply our insights and suggestions to your own context.

We have honed our leadership practices and philosophies by working together and communicating about our own thoughts and struggles. In this way we have helped each other grow as leaders. And while each of the insights is written by us as individuals, you will see similarities in some of our approaches to leadership.

Some of the common themes you will find in these insights are people, relationships, and workplace culture. This is because we are driven by the belief that everyone should be able to like where they work. And to accomplish this goal, leadership qualities related to trust, empathy, listening, and communication are crucial. Yes, vision, strategy, and innovation are also important to organizational success – and we write about these things as well – but it's very difficult to be productive and thrive as an organization without first focusing on people.

Although *Don't Blame the Lettuce* was first a title of one of our insights, we also chose it for the book's title because its meaning is applicable to our philosophy of leadership. This phrase is inspired by the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh. To paraphrase him, if a gardener plants lettuce and it doesn't flourish, the gardener can't blame the lettuce. Instead, they must look at their garden and determine what can be changed to ensure the lettuce has a healthy environment in which to thrive.¹ As leaders we must understand that our workplace is like a garden, and like all gardens it must be tended to so that our people can

grow in healthy ways. And just like gardeners, we also need to develop our own knowledge, tools, and skills in order to help our workplaces flourish. Essentially, we must work to become master gardeners.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book features insights on a variety of topics related to leadership. At the end of each insight, we have included questions for reflection, a practical application idea, and additional resources related to the topic. Whether you are reading this book on your own or with others, we encourage you to fully consider each insight and spend time reflecting on the questions and application ideas. To get the most from this book, we suggest developing a specific action plan for implementing the practical application ideas contained in each insight.

As part of the development of this book, we conducted a Leadership Development Survey, which over 1,100 leaders participated in. You will find results, insights, and quotes from those who participated in the survey incorporated into some of the insights under the Survey Quote and Survey Statistics headings. *A more detailed analysis of the survey can be found on page 262.*

While this book is helpful and applicable to the individual reader, our greater hope is that you will read it *together*, with others from your organization. Reading and learning with others is one of the best ways to integrate new approaches and ideas not just into your own practice as a leader, but throughout your organization. For example, implementing this type of collective approach may take the form of a weekly meeting to discuss each insight. Another option could be to take 10 minutes at the beginning of your regular meetings and have those in attendance share one key takeaway, question, or application from a previously assigned insight. In the same way that our own leadership development has been enhanced by talking about and working through the challenges and opportunities of leadership, our hope is that this book will be a resource that encourages collective leadership development within organizations as a whole – not just in individuals.

Our goal in writing this book is to inspire you to intentionally consider your approach to leadership, provide ideas to strengthen your leadership practices, and help you further develop your leadership philosophy. We also hope these insights will provide you with ideas for nurturing your workplace culture. While you may gravitate toward the insights that will help you cultivate the areas where you need the most support, our hope is that all of these insights will inspire you to action.



DON'T BLAME THE LETTUCE

BY ERIC STUTZMAN

I recently had an unsettling experience when I went to pick up some dry cleaning. The employee behind the counter couldn't find my garments, but instead of apologizing or saying she would look into solving the issue, she muttered under her breath, “*I hate working here.*” Then she said things like, “I don't know what *they* were thinking,” and when she couldn't find a pen, “Why don't *they* keep any pens around here?” After finding a pen, the conversation ended with me suggesting that she write down my name and number and have a manager call me the next day once my dry cleaning was in.

Curiously, I didn't feel angry as I walked away. Instead, I felt sad – sad for the missed opportunities for the person helping me and for the company she represented. Given her negative attitude toward her organization, it was obvious that the employee was unhappy. Something was clearly impacting her feelings about her workplace.

It would be easy to blame the employee for her poor customer service. Although she could have done things differently, I think finding fault with her would be an unhelpful place to start. Instead, it would be better to look at management practices and the organizational culture in which she worked. To paraphrase one of my favorite writers, Thich Nhat Hanh, if we plant lettuce and it fails to thrive, we do not blame

the lettuce.¹ Instead, we look at the conditions in which it is growing and seek to change them so that it can thrive. If it needs more water, we give it water. If it needs different soil or sunlight, we might plant it in a different place. In the same way, we should not blame people when they make mistakes, act inappropriately, or, as in my situation above, provide poor customer service. Instead, we should seek to understand the conditions around them.

What I experienced at the dry cleaner was certainly a symptom of a deeper problem within the company. I wondered what opportunities had been missed to fully orient the employee to the work, support her capacity to problem solve, and show her how to resolve a missing clothing issue. It also struck me that there were likely missed opportunities to help her feel connected to her peers and respected for who she was. Her repeated use of “they” told me she did not feel she was part of the team.

People in organizations are like lettuce plants in a garden. Just as lettuce is influenced by conditions in the garden, so too are people affected by the conditions of their organization’s culture. Our staff are not disconnected individuals, but rather interconnected parts of a whole organization. Their actions affect other people, and they are highly influenced by the culture around them. As leaders, we can make a real difference in the actions and experiences of our people by tending to the culture. Instead of blaming people when something goes wrong, we can change the conditions in our culture to elicit different behavior.

Throughout the years, I have frequently seen leaders blame their employees for a range of things. When something is broken on a job site, a leader might say, “It’s broken because that crew doesn’t care or take pride in their work.” When someone comes in late, a leader might say, “That employee is lazy.” When someone is involved in a conflict, a leader might say, “That employee is toxic.”

While it is true that some employees may not show they care or act in lazy or combative ways, it’s always more useful for the leader to look

at the conditions that led to the employee's actions. When tools are broken at a job site and the leader diagnoses the issue as one of "care" or "pride," they should then ask themselves, *what conditions have I helped to create at the job site through my words or actions that make it difficult for people to care?* If an employee often comes in late, instead of judging them as lazy, it would be more fruitful to ask them if something else is going on in their life that might be leading to this behavior and then find ways to address those conditions. If an employee is engaging in gossip, the leader should be asking, what in the environment leads this employee to feel they need to act in this manner?

Let's also acknowledge that not all plants flourish in every garden – some are better suited for other climates or conditions. In the same way, not every person will be able to flourish in every type of organization. When we look first at our culture rather than blaming someone, we can see that we may not have the right conditions for them to grow. This leads to a different kind of conversation that is focused on fit rather than one that is founded on finding individual blame.

In order to have healthy workplace cultures where employees have the best chance to thrive, leaders must stop blaming and replace that impulse with curiosity and a need to understand. When examined through the lens of context, almost any behavior will be much more understandable. By seeking to understand the context behind a behavior, leaders can become much more proactive in addressing aspects of their culture that permit or lead to undesired behavior.

The work of a leader is really all about creating the conditions and setting the context in which staff can flourish. It is about preparing, nurturing, weeding, and feeding the soil so that the plants can thrive and do all the things we know beautiful, productive, healthy plants are



Just as lettuce is influenced by conditions in the garden, so too are people affected by the conditions of their organization's culture.

capable of doing. In order to have a healthy garden, we have to take responsibility for it; the same applies to our workplaces.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The last time someone disappointed you at work, did you focus more on the individual and their behavior or the workplace conditions that led to that behavior? What was the result of your focus?
2. If you were to think about your staff as plants in a garden, what could you and other leaders do to tend to the garden to create ideal growing conditions?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

As you move through your week, notice when you are irritated with people or when you are tempted to find fault or blame. Write down your thoughts, and then write down a question or two that would help you look more deeply at the conditions in your culture that created space for that behavior. At the end of the week, make a list of things in your workplace culture that you could adjust or change to help your employees thrive, and then discuss them with your team.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life by Thich Nhat Hahn (Bantam Books, 1992)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ACHIEVE CENTRE FOR LEADERSHIP

Eric Stutzman

Eric is the Chief Executive Officer of ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership and co-author of *The Culture Question*. He is a Chartered Mediator with diverse experience working in the field of conflict resolution. Eric has a particular interest and skill set in helping groups experiencing conflict bring about stability and resolution. He is an insightful leader who believes that building authentic relationships is the best way to lead people effectively. In his spare time, Eric likes to camp, challenge himself on a mountain bike, and listen to his children play folk music.

Wendy Loewen

Wendy is the Managing Director of ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership and co-author of *The Culture Question*. She has a master's degree in Conflict Analysis and Management, and bachelor's degrees in both Psychology and Education. Early in Wendy's career, she was a teacher and director of a health and social service program in a northern Inuit community. She is a thoughtful and empowering leader who believes in the value of listening to people. In her spare time, Wendy likes to read, go for walks on her family farm with a coffee in hand, and host meals with friends.



Eric, Randy, and Wendy

Randy Grieser

Randy is the founder and Chief Vision Officer of ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership, author of *The Ordinary Leader*, and co-author of *The Culture Question* and *A Little Book About Trauma-Informed Workplaces*. Randy has a Master of Social Work degree and, earlier in his career, worked in the field of mental health. He is an intuitive and visionary leader who, together with a team of staff and trainers, has positioned ACHIEVE to be one of the premier providers of professional development training. In his spare time, he likes to travel, go hiking, and eat good cheese.

ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership

We believe that everyone should be able to like where they work. ACHIEVE provides training (in-person and online), consulting, books, and free resources in the areas of leadership, workplace culture, and conflict resolution. Be sure to check out the Free Resources section of our website.

GREAT LEADERS ARE ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR NEW IDEAS

and approaches to their work because they know they must continue to evolve in order to succeed in an ever-changing world. And, just like a gardener who knows not to blame their lettuce for failing to thrive, great leaders know that it's the *conditions* of their workplace that affect how their people perform and grow.

This book explores a variety of leadership insights that will help you meet challenges, respond to opportunities, and nurture a healthy workplace culture in new and innovative ways. In addition to each insight, you'll find questions for reflection, a practical application idea, and additional resources related to each topic to help spark your own thoughts and discussions among your teams.

The common themes in this book are workplace culture and relationships. Although there are insights about vision, strategy, and innovation, you will learn that you must first focus on people to be productive and thrive as an organization.



“The authors of *Don't Blame the Lettuce* understand how important relationships are and give practical ways for leaders to improve their workplace culture. This should be required reading for any organization's leaders!”

—ERICA KESWIN, Author, *Rituals Roadmap: The Human Way to Transform Everyday Routines into Workplace Magic*

“This book offers accessible leadership insights with real-world wisdom. The reflection questions, additional resources, and practical applications are valuable for putting what you've learned into practice.”

—CURT COFFMAN, Co-Author, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*

“*Don't Blame the Lettuce* is a charming and inspiring collection of insights from the authors' own life experiences. They each illustrate important lessons about leadership in a memorable and quotable way. I highly recommended this book.”

—JOHN ZENGER, Co-Author, *The Inspiring Leader: Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate*

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