

# DON'T BLAME THE LETTUCE

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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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**grow as a leader** and nurture  
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WENDY LOEWEN  
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*To our staff, who have taught us the most.*

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# THE SECRET TO BUILDING TRUST

BY ERIC STUTZMAN

In search of some writing inspiration one afternoon, I went for a walk to our neighborhood coffee shop. While I was waiting for my coffee, the barista asked what I was up to that day. I told him I was working on an article about workplace culture and leadership. Then I asked him what he thought made a great workplace. Without missing a beat, he replied: “Trust, both with your coworkers and your leaders. Also, kindness, gentleness, and self-control – especially in leadership.”

Curious about his response, I asked him what he thought was the secret to building trust. He paused and was deep in thought when his coworker jumped in and said, “Trust is the one thing that cannot be demanded – it must be earned.”

My barista then replied, “I’ll have to keep thinking about where trust comes from, but for now I’d say that when my leader cares about me, when they show kindness, gentleness, and self-control, I’m more likely to trust them.”

I agree that trust can’t be demanded, but the first barista’s statement – “Also, kindness, gentleness, and self-control” – really piqued my interest. It was different from what I often hear. As I thought about our conversation on my walk back to the office, it occurred to me that this list creates the conditions for trust to emerge.



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*Kindness, gentleness, and self-control are aspects of our character as well as intentional choices.*

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I think it's worth asking: What does it mean to act with kindness, gentleness, and self-control, and how does that relate to creating trust in leadership?

*Kindness* means that you care about the well-being of others. It means you consider how your actions will affect people. It means that you are showing empathy.

*Gentleness* means you try not to cause others pain. It means you consider how your actions as a leader could cause harm to other people. If you are gentle, you consider how each person is vulnerable and may make mistakes, and you act in ways that support their growth and security.

*Self-control* means you process and regulate your emotions so that you can *act thoughtfully* rather than *react* without considering the impact of your actions. It means you know your triggers and have learned to pause between stimulus and response so that you choose actions that are kind and gentle.

Kindness, gentleness, and self-control are aspects of our character as well as intentional *choices*. Taken together, these qualities and the choices that come from them demonstrate care to our employees. And when we show care to our employees, we create the conditions for trust to emerge.

As part of the research for our book, *The Culture Question*, my co-authors and I surveyed approximately 2,400 people on the topic of workplace culture. Of all the links we found in our survey, the strongest was between these two statements: "I trust my leader" and "My leader cares about me as a person."<sup>1</sup> Then, in the research for this book, we found the same result: the two most closely linked concepts were caring leadership and trust between leaders and staff. If someone



responded that their leader cares about them as a person, they were very likely to also say that they trust their leader. Demonstrating care and developing trust go hand in hand.

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## **SURVEY STATISTICS**

Nearly all respondents (94 percent) who reported that there are high levels of trust between staff and leaders indicated that leaders at their organization demonstrate care for their staff. Almost no respondents reported high levels of trust in organizations where leaders do not demonstrate care.

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This makes a lot of sense when you consider the opposite – if your boss is uncaring and does not exhibit kindness, gentleness, and self-control – you will be unlikely to trust them or think you have a great place to work.

Many of us are placed in management positions because we are good at the technical aspects of our jobs. When we take on our roles, we naturally focus on what we are good at, which is the work itself. We might be tempted to try to gain the trust of our teams through demonstrating our competence, but therein lies a problem – while technical competence is valuable, it rarely builds relational trust because the focus is on the person demonstrating competence. By contrast, demonstrating care puts the focus on the person who receives the care. As leaders, we must realize that our staff need us to balance our competence with demonstrating care for their interests. Caring leadership builds the trust we need to communicate well and work together effectively.

I don't believe that demonstrating care to the people you lead is difficult. However, like all leadership practices, we can get better at it with focused effort. Although kindness, gentleness, and self-con-

trol are attributes of character, they can be nurtured in ourselves with intentionality. Here are a few thoughts on how to demonstrate care.

### **Act with Kindness**

Consider whether your actions are building up your staff or doing the opposite. Speak positively about the people you lead and do good things for them. Take an interest in your employees' personal lives and interests – ask about those things occasionally and acknowledge their experiences.

### **Act with Gentleness**

When you face a tough conversation with a colleague, consider ways to support the person and their dignity while communicating truthfully about whatever the problem might be. Gentleness means that you listen before acting.

### **Act with Self-Control**

The impact of your words will be amplified by virtue of your leadership position. So, pay attention to your frustration levels and your triggers. Learn to breathe deeply and assume the best in others. Doing both will help you approach people in ways that are thoughtful and will take the negative charge out of your words and tone.

There have been times in my career when I've had leaders whose approach to leadership embodied kindness, gentleness, and self-control, and as a result they earned my trust and admiration. They help to remind me that, as a leader, when I show that I care, I create the conditions for trust to emerge in our work relationships.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. Consider the leaders you have trusted the most. How would you describe their character? What concrete actions either created or reinforced your trust for that leader?
2. What would happen if you had a conversation with other leaders in your workplace about demonstrating care to your employees? How could you talk about kindness, gentleness, and self-control as these qualities relate to caring leadership?

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

Over the coming week, be intentional about creating the conditions for trust in your workplace. Plan three ways that you will demonstrate care to your staff. Then watch for the ways in which this transforms your workplace environment for the better.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCE**

*Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*  
by Simon Sinek (Portfolio, 2017)

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We want to express our appreciation to the 1,284 people who participated in the survey we conducted for this book. Your responses provided rich material, and we thank you for sharing your insights and opinions.

Finally, we are eternally grateful to our families, who supported us in many different ways as we wrote this book. Thank you for your thoughtfulness and patience. We love you.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## **Blogs**

Eric, Wendy, and Randy regularly write blog posts about leadership and workplace culture. You can find Eric and Wendy's posts in the Free Resources section of ACHIEVE's website at [www.achievecentre.com](http://www.achievecentre.com). Randy's blog can be found at [www.theordinaryleader.com](http://www.theordinaryleader.com).

## **ACHIEVE Workplace Culture Podcast**

To listen to Eric, Wendy, and Randy's monthly podcast, subscribe to our newsletter or connect with us wherever you get your podcasts to listen to new episodes.

## **Free Workplace Cultural Health Assessment Tool**

Are you looking for a more accurate picture of your organization's health? ACHIEVE has a free Workplace Cultural Health Assessment available on our website in the Free Resources section. This assessment normally takes between two and five minutes to complete. You will be provided with an eight-page report that will help you evaluate, understand, and discuss your organization's culture.

## **Training**

ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership has over 40 different workshop topics in the areas of leadership development, workplace culture, and conflict resolution. We have a workshop based on this book: *Leadership Insights – Ideas to Take You Further*. All our workshops are designed to help organizations become places where people like to work. View trainings online, attend open-enrollment public workshops in a city near you, or, if you have a group of people to train, one of our facilitators can deliver a workshop at your location.

## **Keynote Speaking**

For your next conference, convention, or meeting, consider having Eric, Wendy, or Randy be your speaker. They provide engaging, inspirational, and humorous 30- to 90-minute presentations on topics related to leadership, workplace culture, conflict, and engagement.

For more information:



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## 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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