

# 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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*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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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## IS YOUR FEEDBACK FAIR?

BY ERIC STUTZMAN

We all need feedback in order to grow. It helps us learn how our actions impact other people and whether we have been effective in what we are doing. Despite our need for feedback, the word often carries a negative association. This is because when it is given in unhelpful ways, it often does more harm than good. Many of us even fear feedback because it has been delivered to us so poorly in the past.

A friend of mine was recently caught off guard and hurt when his manager handed him a letter at 4:22 p.m. on a Friday. The letter outlined a series of complaints, some of which he didn't even remember. He asked if he could discuss the letter, but the manager responded with "No, we'll talk about it on Monday."

In my view, this is a very unfair approach to feedback – and it's ineffective. Let's imagine that the manager did have something that was important for my friend to hear. By delivering the feedback right before the weekend and shutting down the opportunity for dialogue, any chance for it to be well-received was eliminated. Instead, my friend was left to stew with his unanswered questions all weekend long. It did not enhance his desire to enthusiastically engage in a conversation about ways he could improve when he came back on Monday.



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## **SURVEY QUOTE**

*A great leader is someone who actively listens, coaches, and gives relevant and timely feedback.*

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There are many things leaders can do to strengthen the effectiveness of their feedback. Here are eight principles for giving feedback in a way that is fair and maximizes the chances for it to be well received.

### **Remember That Feedback Is about Learning**

Begin by remembering that feedback is about learning and improvement. As with all teaching or coaching, keep the desired outcome at the center so that you remain focused. It is ineffective if feedback is delivered in such a way that the recipient cannot internalize and act on it to reach the desired outcome. The question we should ask is, “What conditions and approach to feedback will lead to the desired outcome?” One of the most powerful ways to promote learning is to affirm what someone has done well. When you notice what someone has done right, they are more likely to repeat and build on that behavior.

### **Start with a Question**

It is too easy to misunderstand what we see or experience from another person. Before launching into your feedback, take a moment to pause and get curious about what you have seen. Then name the action or behavior and ask the other person for their perspective on what they did. As you listen to their response, consider whether there is a disconnect between what they say their intention was and the impact of their actions. If you have misunderstood the situation, you may be able to let your feedback go at this point. However, if they need to understand the impact of their actions, then proceed with your feedback.

## **Provide Feedback Immediately**

It's easy for managers to let small things slide and store them up for a larger conversation. However, if you bring up multiple issues at once, you run the risk of overwhelming the employee. Most people learn best when their mistakes are pointed out to them soon after they happen. This allows them to reflect on the issue while it's still fresh in their memory. It also prevents them from forming a habit based on an incorrect way of doing things. Instead of making a list of things someone has done wrong and then giving it to them in a meeting, talk to them about issues as they arise.

## **Be Mindful of *When* You Give Feedback**

When it's not possible to give feedback in the moment, consider other times when the employee will be receptive to what you have to say. Avoid giving feedback right before the person has to attend a meeting, office party, or give a presentation – and don't discuss the issue right before they have days off. People often ruminate on feedback, and it is not fair to the employee to have them do so on their time off. In addition to this, I think people need to consider the feedback they receive while they are in the midst of their work so they can immediately apply what they have heard to real situations. This helps with integrating the new information. If you are planning to give feedback, try meeting earlier in the employee's work week so they can immediately consider and implement what they have heard.

## **Be Mindful of *Where* You Give Feedback**

Depending on what the feedback is about, consider whether it should be given privately. If your feedback is related to a specific behavior, you risk embarrassing the receiver if it's given in front of others. This will make it much harder for them to accept what you have to say. Although your feedback might not seem like a big issue to you, it may be significant for the employee. Some people will want privacy so that they can process what you are saying without distraction, even if it is mild or positive.

## **Focus On Behavior, Not Character**

One of the most common mistakes that managers make when giving feedback is making assumptions about the employee's character. For instance, you might think an employee has been coming late to meetings because they don't care, or that someone didn't volunteer for an assignment because they are trying to get away with only doing the bare minimum. Speculating in this way ultimately clouds your ability to give feedback about specific behaviors. It can cause you to focus on something you don't like about the person, or treat a person differently based on a false assumption.

If you want to be an effective manager, concentrate on a specific behavior that needs to change. Focusing on character creates defensiveness; focusing on behavior and its impact creates an opportunity for learning.

## **Make the Conversation about Their Interests, Too**

As a manager, you should always try to include the employee's interests in the feedback conversation in addition to yours. That means focusing on why you want to have the conversation from a management perspective *and* why this might be valuable for the employee's own interests. Practically speaking, your interest in giving feedback is normally to help the employee do their job better. An employee's interests will often include being seen as competent, valuable, and doing their job well.

To bring the employee's interests into the conversation, express your positive intention in giving them feedback. Explain how you are confident that they want to do their job as well as possible and that you believe they would want to know if they were doing something that could be preventing them from performing at their best.

## **Discuss a Positive Vision for the Future**

Your conversation should finish with a plan so that the employee knows what their next steps should be. Talk with the employee about what they can do differently based on your feedback. Make sure the conversation is specific and framed in the language of behavior, not character.

Remember to also build in a plan for assessing how the changes are going. This can be as simple as planning a follow-up meeting to check in. Let them know you are there to support them as they integrate the feedback and make any necessary changes. You might even want to provide training or other supports. Thank them for taking the time to have the conversation with you.

Everyone needs feedback to improve – and everyone deserves to be treated with respect when receiving it. Feedback should be a conversation that protects the dignity of the employee, upholds your professional integrity, and clearly communicates what changes need to be made. Following the principles outlined above will help you deliver feedback that is fair and well received.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. When have you received feedback in a way that made it easier to accept, learn from, and implement the changes? What made that possible for you?
2. Consider how you and other leaders in your organization currently provide feedback. Using the principles above, what practical steps can you take to improve your delivery so that feedback has a better chance of being received well?

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

The next time you need to give someone feedback, review the principles above and discuss your planned conversation with a peer. Have them give *you* feedback on what might improve the clarity of what you're trying to say and to ensure the feedback is reasonable. This will help you approach the feedback conversation with more confidence and clarity.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCE**

*Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* by Marshall Rosenberg (PuddleDancer Press, 2015)