

**DON'T BLAME THE
LETTUCE**

DON'T BLAME THE LETTUCE

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

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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)

2

LESSONS ON INFLUENCE FROM UNLIKELY PLACES

BY WENDY LOEWEN

Friday is date night for my husband and me. Typically, we order take-out, play a round or two of cards, and then watch a movie. The sign of a good movie is when I go to bed and can't stop thinking about it, which was the case for me this past weekend. My husband and I watched *The 33* (2015), a film based on the true events of the San José mine collapse in Chile.

The story is a testament to the power leaders have to inspire individuals and rally a team to work together. In the movie we see the astounding teamwork that occurred in 2010, when 33 miners were trapped 2,300 feet underground. The miners were stuck underground for 69 days, 17 of which they did not have contact with the outside world. Each miner had no one else besides the 32 others who were standing beside them in the dark, wet mine. As the story unfolds, we witness the profound influence of their leader, Luis Urzua, to inspire, mobilize, and motivate the group despite their difficult circumstances.



SURVEY QUOTE

A great leader is someone who isn't afraid to get their hands dirty and join the team in the trenches. They support their staff to get to their goals and quietly urge them to be leaders without them even knowing it.

Three things in particular struck me about Urzua's leadership. First was the way he inspired his team by articulating his belief in a hopeful future. Second, he quickly organized the men into 12-hour shifts, rationing food and completing daily tasks. Third, he created opportunities for the team to share stories about their lives, play checkers, and participate in daily prayer sessions. Urzua's leadership through this crisis illustrates the three things I see as the crucial elements for positively capitalizing on the influence of any leadership position.

Provide Inspiration

Urzua was a reassuring influence on the group. He recognized that part of his role was to manage the fear of the miners and help them see beyond their current circumstances. He clearly communicated to the miners that their survival ultimately depended on helping each other. Urzua stressed that the group uphold each other's dignity and build each other up. He repeatedly reminded them to focus on the hope of a rescue and to remember their families and friends that were counting on them to come back home.

In our role as leaders, we need to encourage the people we supervise to persist despite the challenges they face and regularly remind them of our organization's mission, vision, and hope for the future. We should remember that we may not be aware of the obstacles that they are working to overcome as they complete their day-to-day tasks. We should be checking in regularly with staff to see what challenges they are facing and what struggles they are encountering. As we do so, we

want to acknowledge their experience and remind them of the long-term goals and outcomes of their efforts. Hearing how their work contributes to our organization's mission serves as a long-term motivator despite the demands of the work.

Provide Structure

Under Urzua's leadership, the group divided work tasks, established living and waste areas, and even decided to use the lighting to create day and night conditions. For the first 17 days, they managed to stretch rations that were originally only intended to last for two days. This consisted of two spoonfuls of tuna, half a cookie, and half a glass of milk every two days. They drank water from a spring and a radiator. They broke into three teams, where they rotated in eight-hour shifts between sleeping, working, and playing – yes, playing!

In our workplaces we too need to have clear structure. Similar to the miners, when our staff face pressure or uncertainty, they look to their leaders to provide the stability that comes from structure. We can provide this by setting direction, outlining priorities, and articulating our clear expectations. Without these things it is easy for people to lose motivation and fall to chaos. Structure allows people to know what they can anticipate so they don't have to spend time worrying or wondering what to do; rather, they can focus on doing good work.

Provide Opportunities to Communicate

Urzua encouraged the miners to emotionally support each other by openly sharing their hopes and fears. The group of miners quickly began calling themselves “Los 33” and engaged in a daily ritual they referred to as “Show Your Cards” where they would voice their disagreements, highlight accomplishments, and make plans for what was next.

In all of our leadership roles, we too should be actively asking for the input, thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and opinions of the people on our team – those we agree with *and* those we don't. We should be

doing this in our one-on-one check-ins as well as when we bring our team together. When we provide opportunities for people to gather, share their experiences, celebrate successes, discuss ideas, and wrestle with problems, we set the stage for effective teamwork to emerge.

On October 13, 2010, the last miner to be rescued from the collapsed mine was Luis Urzua. When he emerged, he said, “I have delivered you this shift of workers, as I agreed I would.” He was greeted by the rescuers with a sign that read “Mission Accomplished.” Urzua’s leadership created the conditions that allowed for a celebratory ending. The leadership lessons from this story remind us of the power of leadership in valuing people and mobilizing them to work together. And when we do this, we can anticipate a team of motivated and inspired people who are energized to work toward the success of our organization.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think of the experiences where you have learned valuable leadership lessons through books, movies, events, or other people. What were those lessons and how have they impacted your leadership?
2. In what ways do you inspire your team to persist when they face challenges? How are you providing structure for their work experience? And how are you creating opportunities for communication with the team(s) you lead? What more could you do?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

This week, meet with your team and take 10 minutes to create a list of ways in which you could provide inspiration, give more structure, or communicate more effectively as a team. Commit to implementing at least three of your ideas in the following month.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine, and the Miracle That Set Them Free by Héctor Tobar
(HarperCollins Publishers, 2014)

COACHING IS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

BY WENDY LOEWEN

My son is passionate about science. This weekend he was talking about his first university chemistry course and enthusiastically drew graphs as he described to me how a catalyst works. He explained that a catalyst is a substance that speeds up a chemical change. The change happens not because more heat or pressure is applied, but because the catalyst creates the *right conditions for change to occur*. As he described this phenomenon, I couldn't help but think that, as a leader, one of my primary roles is to be a catalyst for the growth and development of others.

Over the years I have encountered leaders who think that to create change they need to apply more force, more reasons, or more pressure. They act as if people are objects that can be pushed, pulled, or prodded – like a table you move from one end of the room to the other.

My experience has been that people don't typically respond well to being pushed, regardless of how well thought-out the leader's reasons, facts, figures, or ultimatums are. Often their reaction is to push back, argue, or internally find a rationale to oppose. They think of all the reasons they *don't* want to do what the leader hopes for, digging in their heels until the leader feels stuck. Alternatively, they may simply give in to the pressure and comply. This may result in them

internalizing resentment or anger – and this damages both personal and team well-being.

Early on in my current leadership role, I was struggling with how to move forward on an important project. I sent a quick message explaining the issue to Eric, our CEO, and his response was that he was more than willing to help me think through the problem. He asked questions and helped me identify the root of the issue, encouraged me to explore options, offered his perspective, and then we mapped out some goals together. A few weeks later, he checked in to see how things were going. The conversation was a catalyst both for me to find possible solutions to the problem and for facilitating my own learning.

This interaction helped me clarify my understanding of what kind of leader I wanted to be – a leader like Eric, who draws on people's strengths and helps them figure out their next steps. I don't want to be the kind of leader who tells others what to do when they are struggling with something – I'd rather act as a catalyst for learning.

One of my favorite ACHIEVE workshops to facilitate is Coaching Strategies for Leaders because I believe that leaders can have a long-term impact on employees through coaching. Coaching encourages people to explore options and build on their own capacity. A coach becomes the catalyst for change. Coaching, however, is often misunderstood.

The word *coach* has the following definitions: “a horse drawn carriage”; “a railway car”; or “one who instructs others.” At first glance, the third definition may seem like it's the most relevant to coaching for leaders, but the first two are more in line with what true coaching is about – the *journey*. Coaching is a vehicle to move people along in the right direction rather than telling them what to do.

Coaching is knowing when to share your knowledge and expertise – and when not to. Both have a place in creating successful organizations. It's about drawing out the best in people, and good coaching requires leaders to build on the skills of others, allowing them to bring their unique gifts to the organization.



SURVEY QUOTE

A great leader knows the balance between when and how to “push” a staff member and when and how to guide and coach them, so they feel empowered to challenge themselves.

I believe that change and growth are longer lasting and deeper when the goals and steps involved come from the individual rather than from an outside force or authority figure. It struck me that Eric didn't tell me what to do, but rather asked questions to help me find the direction for myself. Sometimes you may be approached for guidance; other times you may want to approach an employee when you see they might need some added support. Either way, the following five-step framework can be used to guide conversations as you coach employees and act as a catalyst who helps them to build on their strengths.

1. Help Identify the Issue

It is helpful to clearly identify the issue that you are trying to solve. Verbally acknowledge the value in discussing and working through the problem together. Focus on providing a supportive message and keep the conversation informal. Ask questions to clarify the issue or situation.

2. Listen to Their Perspective

Ask the person to share their thoughts on the matter. Ask about what they are noticing and why they think it is important to address. Also help them consider what they have already tried. This will help you decide what your response should be and what you will say next. It is important to summarize what they have said so they can hear their own thoughts in someone else's words.

3. Provide Your Views

If you have dealt with a similar issue or situation, it may be helpful to share your experience and what you have tried and found to be helpful. This is not meant to direct their actions but to expand their thinking on the issue.

4. Develop Goals Together

Explore what they think their options are and the possible outcomes for each. Be sure to discuss any barriers to their goals and what support or training may be necessary to meet them. Make sure you communicate that you believe in their ability to address the issue.

5. Follow Up

This is an easy step to overlook, but to have a long-term impact you will need to plan a follow-up meeting. Schedule a time to check in and remember that more than one follow-up meeting may be needed. When you meet, be sure to review the progress on their goals – this builds accountability into the conversation and will let you know if more support is needed.

A big part of being a leader is creating an environment that facilitates the development of those around us. When a leader coaches their staff, they act as a catalyst for positive change by helping others find better ways of working together. This creates positive momentum and energy and builds stronger contributions to the important work of our organizations.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What have you learned from people who have been a catalyst to your own development? What might be important for you to remember from your experience as you work to be a catalyst for others?
2. In what ways are you already a catalyst when it comes to developing those you lead? How can you use the five-step coaching framework to build on employee strengths and help them overcome obstacles in their work?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Take some time this week to consider an employee who may need additional support. If appropriate, meet with them and use the five-step coaching framework to guide your conversation. Also, be sure to use this coaching framework the next time you are approached by an employee who is looking for help.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Coaching for Performance: The Principles and Practice of Coaching and Leadership by John Whitmore (Quercus, 2017)