



Overriding Our Instincts in Order to Become Caring Leaders



WE OFTEN THINK of ourselves as good leaders — or at least somewhat good. Afterall, we got this far in our careers by following our instincts, practicing what we learned, and applying appropriate business strategies. But are we leading? Truly leading people? Before we answer that question, let's think about what's really happening.

Over the course of a career, we gain a myriad of tools and tips on how to lead. It's easy for us to deduce that implementing everything we've learned has gotten us where we are now. We follow the acronyms, rules, and checklists we've learned from the innumerable books we've read, classes and symposiums we've attended, and mentors whose wisdom we've sought. We rely on this vast collection to get us through the daily challenges.

Let's call this methodology what it is: a recipe for leadership. We seek these quick fixes to leadership dilemmas like we're shopping on Amazon.com and expecting next-day delivery, especially if we're new leaders. Perhaps it's because as managers, we face a horde of challenges. Bottom-line pressures, competitive marketplaces, and maybe a little self-doubt. We're forced into decisions that answer a time crunch but do little to nurture high-performing organizational cultures. So, we rely on the leadership recipe.

This "formula for leadership" approach occurs at all levels. Executives at the highest level of the company are quick to check the big boxes. Did I send out a monthly newsletter? Did I host a

strategic planning offsite or a town hall? Did I say hello to a stranger in the cafeteria? Mid-level directors and managers don't fare well either. They're focused on getting the job done, meeting deadlines, analyzing data, and meeting quarterly performance goals. They rely on instincts, while the organization's culture continues to support mediocre performance.

Our brain loves the recipe approach. The human brain is a miracle of survival and, from a psychological and evolutionary perspective, this makes sense. We have a human need for steadiness and predictability. We like consistency. When the brain performs its neural magic, it creates a pathway that can quickly become our default way of thinking. The result is the brain is very comfortable with the knowledge it's already mastered. These neural pathways and leadership formulas make us feel safe, and we become comfortable and confident with our expertise. We trust what we know, and we shun new ways of thinking.

Recipes are, by definition, detailed processes that allow us to get to a final product — and voila, mission accomplished. They're at least partially designed to reduce uncertainty and stress. And while they admittedly have some value, they don't account for the human aspects that yield high performance. They don't have an answer for how to build an emotional connection with the people that we lead. To accomplish that as leaders, we must stray from our comfort zone, override those instincts, and start caring. Really caring, not just saying that we do.

Veering from our path of coziness makes us feel unsafe and vulnerable. Straying into the uncertainty of caring is uncomfortable. But when we fail to do this as leaders, we fall short of what leadership really is — letting go and getting real. True leaders are about inspiration, not expertise. Relying on past prescribed practices relinquishes us to stay on autopilot. We have no authentic connection to those we lead. Taking an exit ramp from those instincts and the recipe approach may be the most meaningful step we'll ever take towards really leading.

Here's how to make that swerve:

1. Start with self-reflection. Challenge yourself to expand your thinking capacity. Begin with mindfulness or meditation exercises that allow you to descend deep within yourself to assess what's really important to you. As you become more comfortable with who you are, you'll become more approachable and connected with others.

2. Try something completely new. Take a pottery course or learn to play an instrument. Read more fiction and let your mind wander. This will help your brain develop new neural conduits that expand the way you think and the way you experience the world. This exercises the imaginative portions of the brain and opens doors to prospective solutions.

3. Let go of the control you think you have. Do you have millennials working for you? Here's a shocker: you don't control them. Actually, you don't really control anyone. If this is your bag, you aren't leading, you're coercing, and your employees will give you their bare minimum effort. In today's competitive business world, we need the discretionary energy your employees and teams hold.

4. Take a fourth-person perspective. Far too often, we congratulate ourselves on taking a third-person perspective on a problem. We pretend that we can see it through someone else's eyes. Try looking at yourself looking at a problem and ask yourself what biases and tendencies you're carrying and what you can do differently.

5. Embrace positivity. Leadership recipes can't guide your attitude, nor can they influence how you see the world. Try to view your role as a leader through a positive lens — one that assumes noble intent, seeks the best in people, and presents an optimistic view about the future. Your employees aren't the problem. They're the answer to your problem. Fashion optimistic environments where people feel engaged and where they trust one another.

If it sounds like this is work, it is. When we take a step away from prescribed approaches to leading, we step into a world that's full of doubt and risk. We enter a universe where human emotions can vary greatly, and we're left to deal with them. We may be hardwired for survival, but we're also hardwired for belonging — to create a sense of connection with others. One size doesn't fit all. Take a step beyond the recipe, override that instinct, welcome the human aspect of leadership, and become a truly caring leader.

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