The ABCs of Leadership



26 Management Lessons That Matter More Than Ever

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Contents

Introduction 4

A (Learn Your) ABTs 7

B Be Quiet 12

C Consensus Is a Feeling 15

D Dependents Not Dependencies 18

E Earnest Skeptics 22

F Friction 25

G Give & Take 28

H Humane Not Just Human 31

I Impostor Leadership 34

J Jeopardy Method 37

K Know-It-Some 40

L Lede Not Lead 43

M Moment of Decision 46

N Nothing's Important 50

O Oversight 53

P Place Your Words 56

Q Question vs Prompt 59

R Resicum 62

S Selling Yourself Short 65

T Title Does Not Equal Story 70

U Undivided 75

V Verbs Not Nouns 78

W Why Wait? 81

X X Can Do Y 84

Y You're a Plastic Bucket 87

Z Zero-Sum 90

Epilogue 93

Introduction

If you've ever wanted to be a great leader, or wondered whether you'll be able to effectively manage a team, I have some good news.

The basics of leadership are pretty simple.

How do I know? Well, think about it.

Leadership principles need to work for a lot of different people in a lot of different businesses and industries, so almost by definition, they can't be too complicated or specific.

And they need to be easy to understand, because there's no such thing as a born leader. Leadership is a skill, one anyone can learn.

That's why I've spent the last few years sharing some of my thoughts and insights – things I've figured out over the course of three decades as a leader and manager – with others, in person and on platforms like LinkedIn and TikTok.

I believe that becoming a better leader shouldn't mean having to wade through a 300-page textbook, or sign up for a six-month course. Whether you're a first-time manager, or a long-tenured executive, there are easy ways to be better.

I've been fortunate in my career to have learned a lot about how to lead (and how not to!), and there are things I know that can help others. Sharing some of those insights is a small way I can pay it forward for the next generation of

folks who will help make people's working lives more productive and enjoyable.

So, are you a first-time manager? Are you taking on responsibility for a larger team? Are you someone who's been managing for a while but isn't sure you're doing your best? Have you wondered how you might need to adapt your leadership style to the age of AI?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, this e-book is for you.

And the truth is, especially in the AI era, human leadership is more essential than ever. Despite the advances made by chatbots and agents, our ability as managers to help guide others through the job market's disruptions and the changes to how we all operate is (and will be) key to the future of work.

All of which is a preamble to the short e-book you currently hold in your (digital) hands. As you'll see, it's not didactic or long-winded, and the advice I give is not specific to any one industry or field.

It's the basics. The underpinnings. A foundation to build on.

The ABCs.

Twenty-six lessons or ideas, many of which revolve around simple words or phrases (or a re-imagining of what those things have traditionally meant). Each chapter touches on something essential, from team culture to employee feedback.

There's practical advice and tips…a bit of philosophy…a few provocations…and some suggestions about how to change the way you think about long-held assumptions. It's simple, even if it's not always obvious.

You can read this whole e-book in one sitting, and despite its brevity I think you'll find it helpful in the moment, and also a good resource to flip back through over time for a quick reminder or refresher.

Maybe not everything here will resonate with you.

But at the very least, the 26 lessons on the pages that follow make a good case that anyone can become a better manager and leader.

How? Read on.

A

(Learn Your) ABTs

I'd like to start with something that's foundational to great leadership, and also happens to explain part of the reason I wrote this book.

And it's inspired by the "ABC" of selling, one of the key lessons many salespeople learn early in their career: you're never not trying to seal the deal. In other words, "Always Be Closing".

I believe leaders also have a key lesson that can be summed up with a three-letter acronym: ABT. Which stands for "Always Be Teaching".

You probably already know that mentoring is important – think of all the people you've turned to over the course of your career for advice, or counsel. And as they rise through the ranks, a lot of leaders continue to find ways to give advice or insight to those around them.

But sometimes, managers get to a certain point, and a funny thing happens. They stop being mentors. They stop trying to teach, or train, or impart wisdom or advice. Which is a big mistake. For two key reasons.

One: Mentoring makes you better at your job.

I used to teach an advertising class at FIT, the Fashion Institute of Technology. The class was focused on helping aspiring ad students learn how to start developing ideas.

In order to teach the class, I had to create a semester-long curriculum that took all the things I knew about advertising and made them accessible and understandable to a bunch of college kids. And as it turned out, that exercise – having to really think about not just what I did, but HOW I did it – made me significantly better at my day job. Because it helped clarify, and codify, the keys to my success, in a way I could explain to others, and could use as a reminder to myself when I got stuck, or frustrated.

In the same way, when you mentor others – when you have to sit down with someone and explain to them not just

what you do but how you do it – you often end up identifying for yourself the things that you need to do to succeed. And that exercise can give you helpful insights into the things that will continue to fuel your career.

Two: When you have a team that keeps improving, you're more likely to be promoted.

Over the years, I've often encouraged people who lead teams to think about succession planning – if they left the company, or got promoted, who on their team could take over their job? This is important not just for business continuity, but because it makes it clear that part of your job is to ensure that there IS someone on the team ready to succeed you. And that requires mentorship.

The truth (which some people find hard to grasp) is that you should always be training people on your team to take your job. Not because it will make you redundant. Because it will lead to a high-functioning team full of superstars. And that will make YOU look like a superstar.

It may sound like a paradox, but if you don't try to make yourself redundant...you will become irrelevant.

What I've often seen is that leaders with the most impressive teams under them – the ones who are doing the best, most effective work – are the ones who end up getting promoted.

So make sure that you're always finding ways to mentor others. Become a teacher. That doesn't mean you have to get a job at a local college. It's about a mindset shift. James Clear explains this in his incredibly useful book "Atomic Habits" which is all about how to build good habits, for life. He says at one point, "The goal is not to read a book, the goal is to become a reader."

In other words, think about who you want to become, and the identity you want to embody, and then use that to imagine what a person who IS those things would do. Decide that you're a teacher...and then ask yourself, what do teachers do to be effective?

Maybe you hold a class for team members after hours. Maybe you offer scheduled coaching sessions. Maybe you host an offsite learning seminar. Maybe you write down some of your ideas and suggestions in an e-book...? How you go about it is up to you...the important thing is just to do it.

If you don’t try to make yourself redundant…you will become irrelevant.

B

Be Quiet

For many creative people, there's nothing scarier than a blank sheet of paper (or a blinking cursor on an empty digital screen), waiting to be filled with ideas.

So over the years, I've developed some tips and tricks to help copywriters and designers on my teams get past that fear, in part by helping them see the potential and opportunity in nothingness.

And I eventually realized that a similar issue often comes up for leaders. Not the fear of a blank sheet of paper, the fear of a different kind of nothingness: silence.

You go to a meeting – a large group, a small group, or even a one-on-one – and you feel a need to fill the empty space. To talk. To offer ideas and thoughts and suggestions. To paper over even just a few seconds of quietness.

But here's my advice: leave space. Don't try to fill every gap.

Because something interesting often emerges out of the void. And sometimes, what employees need in order to feel confident enough to say something is, well...nothing.

Leaders sometimes forget how intimidating it can be for teams to sit in a room with them, and so they assume if people have something to say they'll just say it. But that's not always what happens.

Especially if you don't leave space.

Leaving space means doing more listening than talking. Allowing time for casual interactions. Being flexible with agendas.

And it also, by the way, means making sure you give people a workload that's no more than eighty-five percent of their capacity. Leave gaps in people's time and calendars for them to think, reflect, and tackle the unexpected. A workweek with blank spaces in it is essential to ensure people don't feel overwhelmed and overworked.

Leaders sometimes convince themselves that blank spaces are uncomfortable or unproductive. But just like with creative ideas, it's often in the open spaces that we discover the greatest potential.

It’s often in the open spaces that we discover the greatest potential.

C

Consensus Is a Feeling

One of the things I found challenging as a leader, especially early on, was that I wanted everyone on the team to agree with me…but I knew they wouldn't.

Accepting that took time.

Now, don't get me wrong – building consensus is important.

But consensus is not conformity. After all, think about the word and where it comes from.

It's from Latin and it's derived from another word, consentire, which is a combination of the prefix "com" meaning with or together, and "sentire" which means to feel.

So the word is literally about a feeling – about getting people to FEEL like they're on the same page.

Getting someone to nod their head and say, sure, I agree that's the strategy we should employ, is definitively NOT the same as getting that person to feel that what they're signing on to is the right approach...not just rationally, but emotionally.

Forging consensus is, on one level, about bringing people together who may have different points of view and getting them to agree on one course of action so the business and the team can move ahead. But any success you have won't last if all you've done is force people to nod their heads because they feel railroaded or they don't want to rock the boat.

On the other hand if you get people to FEEL heard, supported, encouraged, excited and energized, you've done more than just move the process along...you've brought your team with you.

Feelings are often pushed to the side in business. But we don't turn into robots the minute we swipe our badge at the office door.

Rational arguments matter. But if you want your team to think smarter, first get them to feel together.

Feelings are often pushed to the side in business. But we don’t turn into robots the minute we swipe our badge at the office door.

D

Dependents Not Dependencies

It all depends. That’s a phrase you’ve probably heard a million times.

Essentially, it means that the answer to a question can vary. It's a phrase people use to convey the idea that lots of situations aren't absolute and it's important to consider a range of factors.

And especially when it comes to managing a team, that group's ability to complete a task often has dependencies. Things that can make a simple question like "will this be done on schedule and on budget" more complicated to answer. Sometimes, it just depends. So leading a team means you need to understand those dependencies and factor them into how you focus your team's time and energy...and also how you manage up.

But there's another related word that may be even more important for leaders.

And that's "dependent".

The dictionary says a dependent is a person who relies on somebody else for support. It's like when you file your taxes, and they ask you about your dependents – the people you are, in some sense, responsible for.

When you're a leader, your job is not just to manage all the various dependencies that impact projects... it's to understand that your team is also, in a sense, your dependent.

They depend on you for support. To have their best interests at heart...to provide things they need in order to succeed...to have their back.

And teams are also "interdependent". They're ideally made up of folks who have skills and insights that complement each other.

And of course you want people to feel like they have some "independence" – the freedom to make decisions and not be

micro-managed. (Which can only happen when they demonstrate that they're "dependable"...that they deliver, time after time.)

It's not that you, as the leader, are solely responsible for whether others succeed.

But it IS on you to create a team culture that's built on partnership, understanding, and mutual support. Can you succeed if you don't do that? I'd like to say it all depends, but sometimes...it just doesn't.

Your team is also, in a sense, your dependent.

E

Earnest Skeptics

I believe one of the most essential skills of the AI era won't be writing prompts, or building agents.

It'll be the ability to lead and manage other people.

It's not that using AI won't be important. It will, obviously. But what'll be just as important is people who are good at leading people, especially through times of disruption and change.

And if I can help by sharing some of the things I've learned over the years as a leader and a manager, well, that just feels like something I should do.

Everything I just wrote probably sounds a bit... earnest. Right?

That tracks. I'm a pretty earnest person. Although not in the way that word is generally thought of.

People tend to think earnestness is about being serious, or intense. But the word earnest also means sincere, dedicated, and purposeful. It means feeling things deeply.

And I'd argue, that's not a bad thing. Quite the opposite, actually.

There's a podcast from The New Yorker called "Critics at Large" and they once did a whole episode called "Why earnestness is everywhere". It's a good listen.

I've also been thinking about something Jerry Saltz, the New York Magazine art critic, said: "Be a skeptic not a cynic."

I realize it's easy to be cynical these days. But I've always believed that two key qualities of effective people leaders are positivity and empathy. And a third essential quality, especially for the AI era, is to be great at asking questions – helping people rethink their assumptions in order to elicit their best thinking. This is part of what it means to be a skeptic – to ask, to probe, to be a critical thinker.

So, keeping all that in mind, who will be the best leaders for the next decade of work?

It might just be the people who combine two traits that are often considered mutually exclusive: The Earnest Skeptics.

Two key qualities of effective people leaders are positivity and empathy.

F

Friction

Leaders often spend time trying to figure out how to eliminate friction.

Getting rid of roadblocks…improving processes… streamlining workflows and approvals.

But it's worth remembering that sometimes, friction can be a good thing.

Friction is, by definition, a form of resistance; it slows things down. And that pause, even if brief, can help create space for debate and discussion…which can unlock more effective solutions and smarter execution.

It's tempting when you manage a team to want to make everything run smoothly – to get rid of anything that slows people down.

But if you aren't leaving any room for folks to push back, or propose alternate solutions – if you eliminate all disagreement and dissent – then you've likely gotten rid of more than just friction.

You've probably gotten rid of the thing leaders need most from their teams: critical thinking.

Because unexpected ideas fuel success. And success brings teams closer together.

So while the dictionary might tell you that friction and cohesion are opposites, when it comes to leadership the funny thing is, they might actually be synonyms.

Eliminating friction gets rid of the thing leaders need most from their teams: critical thinking.

G

Give & Take

The words “caretaker” and “caregiver” are sometimes used almost interchangeably.

Which is odd.

After all, “take” and “give” are opposites!

But when it comes to leadership, BOTH words are helpful ways to think about your role.

If you think of yourself as a careTAKER, you’ll focus on ways to keep your team operating smoothly and efficiently, ensuring they have the resources, tools, and environment that they need to succeed.

If you think of yourself as a careGIVER, you'll focus on giving people the emotional support, individualized encouragement, and positive reinforcement they need to stay focused on whatever task is at hand.

Leadership. It's all about a little give and take :)

When it comes to leadership, BOTH words are helpful ways to think about your role.

Humane Not Just Human

Here are a few more words about a couple of words.

The words are “human” and “humane”. Until the early 1700s, they were pretty much interchangeable. They both described someone who (biologically) was part of our species, and who also demonstrated traits like compassion, warmth, and kindness, that were seen as core to who we are.

But then, something happened.

"Humane" started being used to imply something distinct from "human". You could be a human being and NOT be humane. (Just like you could be, say, an urban dweller and not be urbane.)

I bring this up because I often talk about how one of my core values is empathy. And as we grapple with the role AI will play in the workplace of the future, I think empathy will become more important than ever.

OpenAI's Sam Altman once said something interesting: that even with more advanced large language models, AI will only ever produce "a real poet's okay poem". Because AI lacks the lived experience – relationships, connections – that inform true art.

Similarly, our ability to empathize with what our co-workers are feeling – because in some way, we've been there before, ourselves – is what can make us increasingly indispensable as managers and leaders.

The way we solve interpersonal problems, the way we imagine ourselves as partners and collaborators – the more that these things are informed by a sense of empathy, the better we'll be at our jobs...and the more essential we'll become, despite AI's advancements.

In other words, the sooner we get back to thinking of those two words as interchangeable, the more likely we are to create a future workplace that's humane...because it's human.

The more our work is informed by a sense of empathy, the better we'll be at our jobs.

I

Impostor Leadership

I once heard Jon Meacham, who's a presidential historian, say something interesting about the history of people in high positions. He said "great leaders make tough decisions that others can't."

What made that statement interesting to me is not what it means on its face. What's interesting is what you realize when you take that line and flip it around.

The opposite of that line is: those who are NOT great leaders make easy decisions that anyone can.

Which is a perfect definition of what I call "impostor" leadership.

You've probably heard people talk about "impostor syndrome" – the all-too-common feeling people have that their success isn't legitimate.

But I think "impostor leadership" might be just as widespread…and maybe even more problematic.

I've written a lot about how important it is for leaders to be decisive; in fact, I've done it in this book (see the letter "M"). But not all decisions are created equal.

When all you decide are the easy things…when you make decisions that anyone can make, that don't require any deep thought, or expend any personal capital, or take any risk… and you pass that off as leadership, you're selling an illusion.

You may look like a leader…but you're not a great one.

And definitely not one for the history books.

Those who are NOT great leaders make easy decisions that anyone can.

J

Jeopardy Method

At some point, every leader has to give somebody on their team negative feedback.

And the way you do that is critical, not just to ensure your message lands, but to strengthen your long-term working relationship with the person you're critiquing.

There are obviously a lot of ways to give feedback, and no single approach is right for every person, or situation. But there is one way I've found to be particularly helpful.

I call it "The Jeopardy Method".

Why? Because like the game show, it's all about saying something in the form of a question.

Whether you're talking to a teammate, a peer, or even a manager, when you want to bring up something that could be improved, instead of starting the conversation by saying "I need to point out something you did wrong", try opening the conversation with a question:

"Is it ok if I give you some thoughts?"

"Can I offer a quick observation?"

"Do you mind if I point something out?"

Now, stating the obvious, this isn't (technically speaking) a real question. You're not expecting a "no".

But a Harvard study found that asking questions can significantly improve the questioner's likeability.

And one of the most determinative factors in whether someone is open to feedback is how they FEEL about the person the feedback is coming from.

I'm curious, does this approach resonate with you?

One of the most determinative factors in whether someone is open to feedback is how they FEEL about the person the feedback is coming from.

K

Know-It-Some

Is it better to be born a genius…or to be a lifelong learner?

Well, according to Satya Nadella, who's the CEO of Microsoft, the answer's clear.

Here's how he put it: "the learn-it-all does better than the know-it-all".

What exactly does that mean…and why is it an important insight for leaders?

Well, it means that innate intelligence – no matter how great – can only take you so far. At a certain point, even if you're Einstein, you'll inevitably be confronted with something you don't truly understand. And at that moment, if you think you know it all, you'll likely meet the moment incorrectly.

On the other hand, if you love to learn, when that moment arrives, you'll know how to ask the right questions…the ones that'll make you smart enough to do or say the right thing.

Lots of leaders, especially those who've been doing it for a long time, convince themselves that they have everything figured out – they're sure of exactly what to do, even in situations they've never encountered.

And those leaders will eventually lead their teams in the wrong direction, because they've gotten out of the habit of asking, learning, and using new information and insight to respond to circumstances they've never seen.

In a world that's changing so incredibly rapidly, no leader – no single person – is smart enough to have it all figured out without asking…being curious…seeking new inputs…and listening to new voices.

So, while I stand by my advice way back in letter "A" to become a lifelong teacher, it's equally important to keep on learning. To acknowledge what you don't know. To be humble. Because at the end of the day, it's more important to find out how to get it right…than to always be right.

It’s more important to find out how to get it right… than to always be right.

L

Lede Not Lead

The word “manage” contains an interesting contradiction.

Because it’s about both a job – looking after a group of people, being a manager – and also how lots of folks feel when they’re doing it: like they’re just getting by…barely managing. After all, overseeing a team isn’t easy, and a lot of people struggle with it.

But here’s the good news: there are simple things – principles, approaches, mindsets – that can help.

In that spirit I have a thought about a word that's very related to manage: lead.

When you spell it "l-e-a-d" it's about taking charge of a team. (Obviously.)

But there's another word that sounds the same but gets at something different – the word "lede".

Lede is a term that's often used in the newspaper business to describe the opening sentence of a news article – a concise way to summarize the most important aspects of a story.

And it's also a helpful way to think about your job as a leader.

Why? Because while it's true that leaders have to assign projects, approve strategies, implement processes, and motivate employees, one of their most important jobs is to take in information (sales data, consumer research, executive feedback) and cull those things down into concise, specific direction. To give people focus.

Think of yourself like a funnel, with a filter on it: a lot of stuff pours in, and you let out the most important things, the things that will actually help the team do their jobs and succeed, while filtering out the distractions.

Leading a team – managing – is hard. But if I was going to write the lede of this chapter, it'd be simple: To unlock your team's potential, help them understand what's most key to their success.

To unlock your team’s potential, help them understand what’s most key to their success.

M

Moment of Decision

Leadership is often framed as being about decision-making.

But when it comes to decisions – whether it's a big, industry-altering merger, or a small, incremental policy change – you (the manager) may not always be the actual decider. You may, for example, just be announcing or implementing a decision that others have made. Or you may be following through on something that you're legally or contractually required to do.

But even if that's the case, there is one thing you can ALWAYS be: decisive. Which is, interestingly, not the same as being a decider.

Being decisive is about not being hesitant or wishy-washy. There's nothing harder for a team than a boss whose decisions are unclear, or ever-shifting. Decisiveness inspires confidence.

And certainty? Well, there's nothing more paralyzing for a team than uncertainty. I'm sure of it! When the team is spending time waiting for you to make a decision, adjusting as you equivocate, or wondering what it is that you really think, that's time and mental energy they're NOT spending on their job.

Which is all well and good – it's great to be decisive. But how?

Let me give you a tip that's very much in keeping with the wordiness (or lack thereof) in this book: Just say less.

Leaders often fall into the trap of being long-winded, or preachy, or, frankly, exhausting. Think about meetings you've been in where the person leading the meeting went on and on and at the end of the meeting, assuming you were still awake, you weren't even sure what you were supposed to do next.

Taking in information is important. Reading reports, or decks…interviewing key stakeholders…poring over data. All of that matters. I'm not suggesting you shortcut those processes and just issue proclamations willy-nilly.

But always remember that when you're a leader, the people on your team are waiting for you to give them marching orders. In Joseph Addison's 1713 play "Cato", one of the characters says, "The woman that deliberates is lost"

(which is the source for the modern saying "He who hesitates is lost").

Hesitation can lead to missed opportunities.

So, do the research (efficiently) and then decide. Tell people what you think and what they need to do. Cut out unnecessary words. Give clear direction. Say what matters.

As Teddy Roosevelt put it, "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

There is one thing you can ALWAYS be: decisive.

N

Nothing's Important

Here's something I wish I'd embraced earlier in my career: "Nothing in life is as important as you think it is when you are thinking about it."

That's a quote from Daniel Kahneman, who wrote (among many other things) the book "Thinking, Fast and Slow".

And it's great advice for leaders.

Not because it means that the project or assignment you and your team are working on isn't important. Because it reminds you to have perspective.

Leaders are often presented with challenges that, in the moment, can feel existential. Which can make it hard to do your best work.

You're stressed…you're agitated…and often, by extension, so is your team.

But when you take a (metaphorical) step back you often give yourself the (metaphorical) space to realize that even if this project doesn't go the way you want…even if you try your best, but you end up not succeeding…it's ok. You're ok. Because it's only one chapter in a very, very long book.

It's a way of thinking that has helped me get past a lot of panic and uncertainty and focus on the task at hand, without losing sight of the big picture.

And nothing's more important than that.

Never lose sight
of the big picture.

O

Oversight

Here's a word you might not be familiar with (I wasn't, until recently): the word is "contronym". It's how you describe a word that is also its own opposite.

For example, the word "screen" can mean both to show... and to hide.

The word "cleave" can mean cutting...and also bonding together.

But the contronym I want to highlight here is one that has an interesting connotation for leaders. That word is "oversight".

On the one hand, it describes the role of a manager: taking responsibility for a project…being on top of things.

On the other hand, it describes missing something: forgetting to complete a task…neglecting to provide what people need to do their jobs effectively.

Which makes it a perfect reminder for leaders (in just one word) of both your job, and your responsibility: look after your team…and don't forget the small stuff.

After all, just because you're a manager doesn't mean you should ONLY focus on the big picture. Lots of managers don't realize that a key aspect of the job isn't looking down on their staff from above…it's doing their best to ensure they get the small things right.

Importantly, I'm not talking about micro-managing. I'm talking about realizing that small things you do for your team can have a big impact.

Like, saying thank you for a job well done.

Following through on a promise.

Sharing helpful insights that you've read, or heard.

Running efficient meetings with a clear agenda.

Encouraging people to take time off when they need it.

Scheduling emails rather than sending late-night requests.

Being an active listener.

In the end, it's pretty simple: if you OVERsee a team, don't lose SIGHT of the little things.

If you OVERsee a team, don’t lose SIGHT of the little things.

P

Place Your Words

"Choose your words carefully."

Usually when someone says this, they mean it as a note of caution or a heads up.

A warning that you might, even if it's unintentional, insult or anger someone if you say the wrong words at the wrong time.

And of course, it is important to think about what you want to say before you say it.

But there's actually a better way for leaders to think about how to talk to their team.

Rather than “choose your words” try thinking about it this way: “place” your words.

“Choose” is about word selection – the actual words you’re going to use. And if that’s what you’re fixated on I can almost guarantee that you’re going to be focused inward – thinking about yourself and your vocabulary. Assuming that finding a good synonym or two is the key to communication.

It’s not.

The word “place” encourages you, instead, to think about your audience – where the words are going…to whom.

And that’s key.

Because there’s no way to figure out what words you should be using if you aren’t first and foremost focused on the people who are going to hear them.

How they’re feeling, what you know about their work and their experience, where they are, how they think about their co-workers…the list goes on.

It’s like an artist who wants to complete a painting that they’ve been working on for months, or maybe even years. Choosing the right paint color is important, sure. But placing it in the perfect spot on the canvas, based on a deep understanding of the whole picture? Well, that’s how to make a management masterpiece.

There’s no way to figure out what words you should be using if you aren’t first and foremost focused on the people who are going to hear them.

Q

Question vs Prompt

I'm a fervent believer in the importance (and power) of asking questions. Because questions are not (and never have been) just about information. They're relational acts. They're how trust is built between people.

And one of our most pressing issues in the AI era is the way in which chatbots are degrading both our desire to ask questions, and the quality of the questions we do ask. It's actually quite clear when you think about the language we use.

The word “prompt” goes back to the Latin word promptus, meaning “brought forth”.

The word “question,” on the other hand, comes from the Latin word quaestio, which means “a seeking, an inquiry, or an examination.”

A question is about seeking: a quest for information. A prompt is meant to elicit a response or action.

Those aren’t the same thing.

A prompt extracts. A question connects.

Which is a perfect reminder that especially for leaders, asking questions of their staff and their peers is more than just a way to gain knowledge or insight…it’s a way to build bridges and form bonds. Everyone likes to feel as if their thoughts matter; asking questions helps convey that you see value in what others have to say.

And more importantly, in an era where answers are abundant and essentially free, presenting yourself as someone who just “knows things” is a quick route to irrelevance. On the other hand, being the person who knows how to ask great, thought-provoking questions…and who seems to always be interested in the things other people know, or have to say? Well, that’s unquestionably the answer to better leadership.

A prompt extracts. A question connects.

R

Resicum

Leaders are often encouraged to take risks. We all know great risks can lead to great rewards.

But especially in uncertain times, that can feel hard.

So the question is, how do you make risk-taking feel less nerve-wracking? Well, one way might be to think about it differently.

Because “take” is actually an odd word to describe a risk.

It implies that you’re picking something up and holding onto it – literally taking it.

And if you think of a risk as something that might not work – that might have unpleasant consequences – do you really want to be the one holding it?

Instead, what if you reframe the way you think about risk?

You're not "taking" a risk…you're embarking on one. Which actually makes a lot of sense given where the word "risk" comes from.

The origin goes back to a Latin word (resicum/risicum/riscus) that means "cliff" or "reef"; it was a sailor's term meant to refer to the act of sailing into a potentially dangerous area.

In other words…a risk is a journey, with a destination in mind – somewhere new and unexpected. It's active and mission-oriented.

Now, it's true that you might run aground. But you also might discover somewhere new and wonderful!

If you think about a risk as a journey with others (enlisting your whole crew), then it can be easier to wrap your head around why you're sailing into uncharted waters. The potential reward (finding a new land together) is worth it.

You might hit the rocks. But if you do, your team is with you to help get everyone safely onto land.

Uncertain times – like today – are often when it's most essential to try things; the solutions to yesterday's challenges rarely work today, or tomorrow.

But you don't need to "take" a risk. You just need to venture into one.

You don’t need to “take” a risk. You just need to venture into one.

S

Selling Yourself Short

I used to be surprised at all the talented people I met who struggled with self-promotion. But then I realized…I was also one of those people. Maybe you are too?

So many folks fail to tell others how great they are. Maybe because they feel like it's bragging, or their expertise should be obvious (and they shouldn't have to talk about it)? Whatever the reason, they're selling themselves short.

Which is an interesting phrase. Metaphorically, it means undervaluing yourself, or not giving yourself enough credit for what you've done (or can do). It was originally a financial term; "short selling" is a bet that a stock's value will drop. The idea is, you sell shares you don't own, expecting the price will fall so you can buy them back later for less.

In the nineteenth century the phrase came to describe treating someone (perhaps yourself) as having less value than they actually do...like an undervalued stock.

And while I'm sure most people don't want to intentionally treat themselves like something that's going to decline in value, the idea of self-promotion makes a lot of folks uncomfortable.

So here's one thing that helps me: the phrase "victory lap".

A victory lap is a term used in motorsports to describe an extra lap around the race track after a race is over. The winning driver celebrates their victory by giving the spectators an opportunity to congratulate (and honor) them.

And that makes the fans feel good. Which is...good!

Doesn't this seem obvious when it comes to sports? If you go to a baseball game and a player does something extraordinary, and then (after returning to the dugout) steps out to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd, the fans love it – it makes them feel good and validates their enthusiasm. That's not a bad thing.

With that in mind, it can be helpful to think of self-promotion as a way of taking a victory lap of sorts (in a corporate setting). The key, though – and this is really important – is that you frame it as something you're not just doing for yourself.

Would it be helpful to share something that went well for you as a way to motivate your partners or collaborators or team? Would doing that demonstrate a behavior others could (and probably should) do themselves to help their own careers?

Yes, it would. And this is not just my theory.

A study from a few years ago by three professors at the University of Pennsylvania, Vanderbilt, and George Mason found something really interesting. When you talk about your own accomplishments, complimenting a colleague or peer at the same time – what they called "dual-promotion" – can significantly improve your standing with others.

They said, "By talking positively about other people, you signal that you aren't self-centered – you're a well-intentioned, warm colleague…In every context we studied, people who dual-promoted were evaluated the most positively."

So, how do you dual-promote?

Here's what they recommended: Identify someone else, and acknowledge their accomplishments or positive attributes when you talk with others. When you're on a team, compliment your teammates. When you're in a competition, compliment your competitors. Be genuine – and then be sure to say something positive about yourself, too.

One other quick tip: I don't really love the term self-promotion, so I often think of "self-marketing". As someone who's worked in marketing for a couple of decades, I understand the value of marketing; when I marketed great shows like "Suits", or "Mr. Robot", I enjoyed the opportunity

to help people discover them. Why not give the same (enjoyable) marketing treatment to myself?

So, in closing, if this has been helpful for you, I'd like to acknowledge the great work from those three professors, whose work I think is really insightful – and to also say, I think I did a nice job with this chapter!

When you talk about your own accomplishments, complimenting a colleague or peer at the same time can significantly improve your standing with others.

Title Does Not Equal Story

Stating the obvious, job titles are important to people.

VP, SVP, EVP, CEO, CMO, CCO…these acronyms may only be a few letters, but they can be highly motivating, and drive a lot of effort from employees who want to append those letters to their resume. They can also create meaningful and important signals to other people both inside and outside your company about your role and your responsibilities.

But those titles don't tell the whole tale. Which becomes clearer when you dig into the roots of the words in all those acronyms and think about what they mean, or imply.

Let's start with a reminder of where the word "leader" comes from. It's from an Old English word lædan, which means "to guide". So when you're a leader, you're a guide. You need to successfully help others find their way.

What about the word "executive", as in "Executive Vice President" or, more broadly, "senior executive"? Well, the Latin root of executive is exsequi, which means "carry out", implying that an executive is someone who carries out plans and actions. So, as a leader and an executive, you both identify the path and clear out the underbrush so others can more easily follow.

Some of you may have "chief" in your title – Chief Executive, Chief Marketing Officer, Chief Creative Officer. The word "chief" traces its origins not just to the French word "chef" – a person who's the "head of the kitchen" – but to the Latin word "caput" which means, literally, "head." So if you're a chief, you need to always be thinking about how to deal with whatever comes next for the team.

If you're any kind of president (vice, senior, executive, or just plain president) the origin of that word is also Latin and is meant to identify a person who can either preside over or "sit before" a group. Not rule...not order around...not lord over. "Sit before".

OK – one more. Maybe some of you are Directors, or Senior Directors. Which, in a very obvious way, has a connection to the job a theater director or film director does: figuring out how to put everyone in the perfect spot at the perfect time, so they can play their role to perfection.

How do the roots of all these words relate to what it means to actually do those jobs? If you mush them all together, you'd describe someone who's a guide, whose job is to sit before the team, and to think, plan, direct, and then to carry out a campaign successfully.

Which actually makes a lot of sense!

The problem comes when you only focus on one or two of those words, and their more narrow (modern) meanings. That's when leaders do things that are more focused on themselves and their position than on what they can do for their team. Which is why I actually love another way of describing what a manager's job is, one that I first heard several years ago on a trip to London.

I had recently been asked to help launch NBCUniversal's direct-to-consumer streaming service, and our small team took a trip over to the U.K. to visit with some of the folks at Sky, a recently acquired European content & distribution business.

We came to the Sky campus – a massive and beautiful complex of buildings outside London – where we sat in meetings for a couple of days with key leaders from Sky's business units. In those meetings, we'd all go around the table introducing ourselves, and almost without exception, the Sky folks, in describing their roles, used a simple but wonderful two-word phrase: "look after".

As in, "I look after marketing" or "I look after social" or "I look after product design". Not "I'm in charge of" or "I oversee" or "I run", which are often the ways American execs describe their jobs.

And it immediately struck me that "look after" was much closer to describing what they had actually been hired to do.

"Look after" implies that you're a caretaker of sorts… someone who carefully tends to the business at hand and offers guidance and input when necessary.

And in a way, to me, that description is a really nice distillation of what all those words in all those job title acronyms boil down to.

Yes, of course, titles are important. They have meaning, and they provide motivation. But when you think about what they imply, they don't really get to the heart of what those jobs are all about. Which is, simply, taking care of your team.

The issue is when leaders do things that are more focused on themselves and their position than on what they can do for their team.

U

Undivided

Here's a myth I'd like to bust: the myth of the multi-tasker.

One of the things I noticed working from home during the pandemic was a rise in multi-tasking. You'd be on a video call and at the same time you'd be reading a deck, writing an email, surfing the web.

And now, despite many folks being back in the office, that habit has persisted, even though there's lots of evidence that humans aren't actually great multi-taskers.

But that's not what I wanted to highlight. My concern is about the message you send to your team when you try to multi-task.

And to be clear, it's not just an issue when you're physically in the office. On a video call it's often pretty obvious when you're doing something else. Your eyes wander over to a different screen…you nod or "uh huh" a bit less emphatically.

What kind of message does that send? Not a good one. It implies that the person you're meeting with is less important than someone or something else.

And especially for a leader, when you (implicitly) tell your team they're not the most important thing to you, they will take you at your (non-verbal) word.

But when you give people your undivided attention? Well, you get a whole lot in return.

There are a lot of people who become leaders and figure that all they need to do to get their team to listen to them is talk, even if what they're saying isn't helpful, or relevant. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just because you have a certain role, or title, doesn't mean people owe you some recognition. It's kind of the opposite. If you want your team to PAY attention to you, you need to make it WORTH their time.

Think about the words "paying attention." "Paying" means that people are literally giving you something of value when they decide to listen to you. And so they expect something of value in return. That can be advice, information, support, empathy…but it needs to be something they can't get elsewhere. So if you want to receive great work and smart ideas from your team, make sure you're always prepared to give them something valuable first.

When you give people your undivided attention? Well, you get a whole lot in return.

V

Verbs Not Nouns

I learned something about myself listening to an interview on Adam Grant's podcast "ReThinking" with the author Ann Patchett.

Some of the things I enjoy (personally and professionally) I'd describe this way: cycling…writing…speaking… mentoring…leading.

And I didn't see the connection between those words until Adam and Ann articulated it: they're all verbs, not nouns.

I don't usually describe myself as a cyclist, or a writer (although I could). I use the active form of the word. Because I don't tend to think about "being" something; I think more about "doing" something.

And when you think about yourself through the lens of a verb not a noun, you're focused less on labels or titles and more on actions and process.

Which has real benefits.

There's evidence that in the short term, "noun framing" can be motivational; we like being able to claim some kind of aspirational identity. I'm a runner. I'm a leader. But in the long run, "verb framing" has an advantage. In one study, kids who were told they were "helpers", and then tried to help and had it go badly, helped less afterward than kids who'd simply been asked "to help."

That's because failing at an action is just feedback; failing at an identity can be devastating. This can be especially true for people who've lost a job. If your profession is your identity, you're more likely to experience unemployment as a loss, not a problem to be solved.

Calling yourself a writer isn't bad; it's a label that might get you to sit down at the desk. But when you focus on the enjoyment you get from WRITING, that framing can keep you sitting there even on days when the work is bad.

Nouns are claims, verbs are evidence. A label is a claim about yourself the world might argue with. An action is something that's already happened, or is happening... right now.

All of which is a lead-up to this simple advice: try not to think of yourself as a leader. Think of yourself as someone who's leading.

When you think about yourself through the lens of a verb not a noun, you're focused less on labels or titles and more on actions and process.

W
Why Wait?

Too often, we let occasions motivate our expressions.

What I mean is, we wait for an OCCASION – something external, or a milestone of some kind – before we EXPRESS how we feel, or what we think.

We wait for an offsite to tell a co-worker that we've admired what they've been doing the past few months.

We wait for an annual review to tell a team member they're doing a great job.

We wait for someone to get promoted to tell them how much we enjoy working with them every day.

Why wait? You can tell your co-workers what you think about them, and how you feel, anytime!

Expressing admiration or appreciation doesn't require a formal occasion, or an invitation. There's a wonderful proverb that I think about all the time: "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is today."

It isn't about not having regrets; it's perfectly fine to look back and acknowledge things you wish you'd done. But what ISN'T alright is using those regrets as an excuse not to do something productive.

So if you're a leader, and you find yourself in July wishing you'd written some goals for the team back in January – write them now.

If you didn't compliment someone on the team for a great presentation they gave at the last quarterly meeting – do it today.

Sure, maybe it would've been better if you'd done those things then. But that doesn't mean you can't do them right now.

Expressing admiration or appreciation doesn’t require a formal occasion, or an invitation.

X

X Can Do Y

"You can't fit a square peg in a round hole."

I've always really disliked that expression.

Why? Because it assumes there's a correct peg for every hole. Or, to put it in the context of leadership, that there's a perfect person for every job in your organization – someone who's an obvious, easy fit. And that your task as a leader is simply to find round pegs for all the round holes (a.k.a. open positions) on your team.

But in my experience, the most talented and effective leaders are often open to seeing things in others that might, at first, be less obvious…but in the long run can be just as (or even more) valuable for the team.

Like, the way someone's skills and experiences can be applied in new, different, and maybe unexpected ways.

Not "you did X job at one company so you can do X job at our company", but "your experience and insight from doing X might make you an interesting, inspired choice to add something new, different and maybe even brilliant to Y job".

It's tempting to default to the easy answer. Round peg = round hole. But when you're thinking about the best way to "shape" your team…the perfect "fit" might be the person who, at first glance, doesn't.

The most talented and effective leaders are often open to seeing things in others that might, at first, be less obvious.

Y

You're a Plastic Bucket

This chapter is about those brightly colored beach pails that kids fill up with seawater, or shells, or sand.

What do buckets have to do with leadership? Well, a bucket turns out to be an interesting analogy for a senior executive.

One of the things I used to do at the beach as a kid was to take my plastic bucket, fill it with damp sand, pack it tightly, then turn it over, carefully tap the sides, and gently lift the bucket up, revealing a tower left standing there, in the shape of the bucket, with all the little lines and details from the plastic still visible on the sand.

And one way to think about your role as a leader is to imagine you're that bucket.

You help shape the team. You provide structure, and guidance. And then, if all goes well, you slowly remove yourself, letting the team stand on its own, like that sandcastle. And even when you're gone – when the bucket has been removed – you've left an impression. The tower lives on, without you.

Meaning you can bring some shape and structure to another group, or team.

The goal of the manager is not to always be there, between the team and other folks in the organization. It's to set the team up for success, and then to get out of the way. Because if you don't, well…no one will ever see that wonderful castle you've helped create.

Even when you're gone,
you've left an impression.

Z

Zero-Sum

Managers often get perks.

Some of them are contractual – a bonus, or stock options. Some are experiential – the chance to attend an offsite, or a conference in another city. Others are physical – company swag, a larger office, or a prime parking spot.

And it's easy to get caught up in all the things you "get". But I'd argue that one of the most important things you can do as a leader is to rewrite that internal monologue and think, instead, about the things you can GIVE.

To help explain, let's think for a minute about the word "selfless". Being selfless means you're more concerned with the needs of others than with your own needs or desires. Something many people think is a good quality in a leader. But it's often hard for folks to embrace that mindset. Why?

Maybe in part because when you break down the word (SELF + LESS) there's a subtle implication that acting in a SELFless way somehow makes you...LESS than.

Which couldn't be further from the truth.

Being selfless doesn't make you any LESS...I'd argue, it makes you MORE. More relatable, more grounded, more admirable, more well-liked, more trustworthy...and a lot more "mores".

When you're a leader who puts your team's needs ahead of your own, or highlights their accomplishments not yours, a funny thing happens. That SELFLESS behavior often turns into goodwill and good energy that is very much in your own SELF-INTEREST.

You GET by GIVING.

Because leadership is not zero-sum. Nobody has to lose. Everyone can win. So a focus on giving not getting isn't a path to defeat. It's actually quite the opposite.

And one more thing: since we're on the last letter of the alphabet, that little insight might be as good an indicator as any of why I've "given" away all the advice in this book.

Leadership is not zero-sum. Nobody has to lose. Everyone can win.

Epilogue

You made it to the end! Thanks for reading – I really appreciate it. And to show my appreciation, rather than a summary, or some parting words, I'd like to leave you with three more pieces of advice. Think of them as my Leadership 1-2-3, to supplement the ABCs you've already mastered.

1 (REASON)

I read a great book once called "Difficult Conversations" by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen.

The book is about how to approach conversations we don't want to have in ways that are more likely to lead to success.

And one of my favorite insights from the book for leaders is how to handle someone on the team who's underperforming, or not doing things the way they should.

Obviously, it's important to talk to them about it. But if you go into that conversation with the intention of "changing" them, you'll almost surely be disappointed.

Trying to change someone rarely results in change.

BUT if you think of the conversation as an opportunity for both of you to LEARN something, well...that's when change often happens.

So imagine that your goal is to learn WHY that person's not on task. And then think about how you can help them LEARN to approach the assignment differently.

The #1 reason people don't listen is that they don't feel heard. If you can make them feel heard – if you do your best to learn where they're coming from – they'll be a lot more likely to listen to, and learn from, you.

2 (WORDS)

Do you know what a portmanteau is? I didn't until I was researching this insight.

A portmanteau is a word that combines 2 words into one.

Like, Motel: Motor plus Hotel.

Or, Brunch: Breakfast plus Lunch.

I bring this up because there's a portmanteau I've heard some leaders use to describe themselves that I have an issue with.

The word is: Workaholic.

Work plus Alcoholic.

People who use it are clearly trying to imply they have an addiction to working.

Now you might ask yourself, why would someone describe themselves that way?

Usually because they want to make it seem like their excessive hours in the office, their aversion to taking vacations, and their habit of sending emails at 3am, aren't their fault. They're addicts. They can't help it.

I don't buy it.

I'm not debating whether or not it's possible for someone to be addicted to working.

What I'm saying is, when you lead a team, a key part of your job is to set a good example. But when, instead, you do things that downplay the importance of work/life balance,

and your excuse is that you're a workaholic...well, that's dishonest. And it's detrimental to the long-term success of you and your team.

So if you manage a team, don't squander the opportunity to model things I've seen build real leadership success: empathy, balance, connection, sensitivity, awareness.

Insert appropriate emoticon (emotion + icon) here :)

3 (RIGHTS MAKE A RIGHT)

Finally, I'd like to share with you my "Management Rule of Three": 3 rights make a right.

A key part of a leader's role is to delegate – to give out assignments. But of course there's more to it than just saying to a random person on the team, Hey, you – do this.

A manager's task is to find the RIGHT person for the RIGHT job (or assignment) at the RIGHT time. 3 rights!

But, how do you make sure you're distributing work in a way that gives you and your team the best chance to succeed? Here are 3 tips.

ONE...you can ask! Make a regular habit of asking people on your team what kinds of projects they (ideally) want to work on. Encourage people to ask for assignments they're interested in, or career development opportunities they're looking for, and then keep an eye out for ways to give them those assignments.

TWO...make sure you're not setting someone up to fail. If you give a person a task to complete but you haven't given them the resources they need, the necessary training, or the time and space to do their best work, and they ultimately don't succeed, well, you (the leader) are the one who's failed.

THREE…just because someone WANTS to do something, doesn't mean they're ready. You should always try to have a good handle on your team's skills as well as their development needs so you know when they're ready to take a big swing.

And if you do all that (along with the other things I've shared in this book), well…you'll be doing leadership right!