

Chapter 1

Serving as a People Leader Is a Privilege, Not a Rite of Passage

*Career Affirmation: I will lead my team in the way
I would like to be led.*

When I started writing this book, I envisioned writing my next book solely about managing people. However, it is especially important to include information in this book about becoming a people leader or currently serving as a people leader because your management experience can be an overlay to your entire career. *Sadly, in most professionals' careers, management opportunities have become a rite of passage instead of an intentional move.* When you do great work, you get more responsibilities. To manage more responsibilities, frequently you must manage people to get all the work done. In many organizations, upward mobility may be dependent upon managing people, but one of the biggest pieces of feedback I hear from clients seeking more senior-level roles that involve managing people is that they do not have management experience. It's a vicious catch-22. The only thing that makes this worse is that managers who have never had a great manager model positive behavior can become terrible managers.

Throughout my career, I've taken the most pride in being a people leader. No matter the individual tasks I have been charged with, executing them with precision has never been a concern for me. Despite managing priorities, tight deadlines, and sometimes conflicting information, I know that I can deliver impactful work. However, nothing has given me more joy than developing talent.

Doing your job is what you have been hired to do; leading people is a form of art in the workplace. As a manager, it is my duty to ensure that the professionals who report to me execute their assignments at a high level and that I prepare them for their next role inside or outside the company. It is mismanagement to ignore that there is a next step for everyone on your team after their current role. Whether that person desires to be in their manager's role or another role at the company, it's important to prioritize his or her development and the day-to-day assignments he or she must complete.

When I spoke with my husband about adding this content to the book, he asked me if I have ever had a great manager. If I am brutally honest, the answer would be that I have only had one.

I have had several bad managers, one or two good managers, but only one I would consider great. At that time, *great* meant that I felt protected in the workplace. The whole notion of needing protection in the workplace is an indication of a toxic work environment, but at the time, this particular manager advocated for fair practices for our team, stood up to senior leadership that constantly devalued the work of employees, brainstormed solutions to complex problems, and fostered an environment in which the team would be able to disagree openly but respecting other team members during tough conversations was always top of mind. My ideas of what a great manager is have continuously evolved since that role early in my career, but I define a great manager by the following behaviors:

- Creating dedicated time on a weekly or biweekly basis to discuss my work, receive feedback, and remove roadblocks preventing me from executing at the highest level.
- Advocating for me and my work when I am not in the room.
- Regularly engaging in career development conversations (outside of weekly/biweekly check-ins).
- Providing consistent feedback on my work performance with specific examples to highlight where better decisions or a higher quality of work could have been produced.
- Providing detailed, written feedback in mid-year and end-of-year performance reviews.
- Creating an environment that fosters collaboration and healthy competition among all team members.
- Fostering a working relationship that allows for co-creation of ideas, strategies, and joint execution, when possible.
- Providing radical transparency, when possible.
- Allowing me to shine brightly without reservations about my work potentially outshining theirs.

Some will look at this list and say that it is too much weight to put on a manager, but that is why I believe management is a privilege. *People leaders need to be held to a higher standard due to the*

increased responsibility of managing a team. This alone has encouraged me to learn as much as possible about becoming a great manager to anyone who reports to me in the workplace and my company.

During my time in higher education, I always had a small but mighty team to execute various initiatives in the office. My teams consisted of work-study students, graduate students, workforces for specific projects, part-time employees, and full-time employees. When working in an industry with notoriously small budgets, I quickly learned to do the most with the least, including managing small teams to get the work completed.

In one of my interview processes for a full-time candidate, I vividly remember the day she walked into my office to have her one-on-one interview with me. I am known for having whiteboards in my office to map out upcoming projects or systems, and my whiteboard was covered in notes and a mockup of how I wanted my team to run. I was in an inaugural role, so it was crucial that I created a roadmap for my team so we had something to anchor ourselves toward. After interviewing several candidates, I had gotten used to people being immediately intimidated by my whiteboard. While my handwriting was neat, it was filled with ideas, processes, goals, and potential key performance indicators. It was a lot of information, but I knew I needed to get it out of my head to create a plan that was ready to execute once I had a team.

This candidate walked into my office, and she understood the method to my madness that I had mapped out on my whiteboard. After we went through a few of the traditional interview questions, I walked her through my vision on the whiteboard, and she jumped right into the conversation with excitement. Most importantly, I saw that she was excited about working on a team where we would co-create new solutions to existing problems that had never been solved. She enjoyed working in a white space where the role had a lot of room to grow and evolve versus being contained to a job description that was a bit ambiguous in the first place because the work had never been done. After several rounds of interviews, she joined my team.

Looking back, I was never concerned in our professional relationship about her ability to do her job and execute on a high level. She took on every task thrown her way and improved upon it well past my expectations. We got to the point where she would solve problems without me having to ask. Since I was never concerned about the work, I turned my attention to her overall development as a professional in the workplace.

In speaking with her references toward the end of her interview process, they all confirmed that she was known for making herself indispensable to whatever team she worked on. You could tell that she took pride in not only the work her name was attached to but that she wanted to drive results in a meaningful way. Again, her performing well in her role was never an issue; in fact, I learned that I needed to proactively manage her workload to ensure that she did not take on too much work outside of the assignments she got directly from me or created for herself. I know that any manager reading this would agree that she was the dream employee.

However, what I did uncover is that I had an opportunity to work on her personal development as it related to her unique skill set in the workplace. *When someone is known for driving execution in any arena, he or she can quickly become a generalist versus a specialist.* Unless you are a project manager or chief of staff, this may not be a great trait to possess. A generalist can do just about anything, which can make it hard to brand yourself in the workplace for more senior-level roles. As you grow in your career, it is important to have “a thing,” something you are known for doing well outside of task execution. Again, task execution is your job – it is the reason you get a paycheck each month! Becoming a specialist means there is a reason to hire you over another professional when there are two candidates for a role because you have an edge. You have something unique, a refined approach, a special experience that makes you uniquely qualified; you are not just another “hardworking employee” applying for a job.

During our weekly one-on-one sessions, I started asking more in-depth career-related questions to better understand where she wanted to go in her career. I asked questions like:

- *Are you interested in growing your career in higher education?*
- *Is career services the only office you would like to work in?*
- *Would you like to prepare for a role like mine?*
- *What other industries are you curious about?*
- *When are you generally ready to move on after being in a role for a certain amount of time?*
- *When you think about your day-to-day work, what are you the most uncomfortable with?*
- *What types of tasks and projects are you great at, but would prefer not to be responsible for?*
- *What types of tasks and projects do you enjoy most (regardless of your level of proficiency)?*
- *What skills do you feel like you need to build?*
- *How do you envision I could assist you in getting to the next level in your career?*
- *Is there anyone I can introduce you to in my network to assist with your career exploration or development?*

As a manager, my goal was to create a safe environment for her to explore where she would like to go in the workplace while working on high-visibility projects and leaning into the tasks and projects she enjoyed most. This is not to say I never assigned projects that she was not excited about; it is much more about awareness. *When you know your direct reports, you can create an environment where they can thrive.* In the same way married couples joke and say, “happy wife, happy life,” happy employees are more productive and loyal and they have higher rates of overall work satisfaction. Even the highest-performing employees will leave a company when they do not have a positive rapport with their direct manager.

Over time, we tackled the questions I listed above and moved toward working on more developmental goals like public speaking,

building strategic plans for our areas of focus, leading a technology buildout, and ultimately positioning her to move into my role once I moved on from the institution. We created an unofficial career development plan with milestones, key tasks, and long-term goals. Sure, we had a mid-year and end-of-year document that was more formal from the institution, but with high performers, there is only so much you can incorporate into that document when the focus is task execution like most performance reviews.

The plan developed through our conversations because we developed a rapport and outlined the end goal for her career. Now, if you are reading this, you may wonder what advice you should be taking from this story if you are not currently managing people. Your goal may simply be to transition into a role where you can ask some of the questions I listed earlier. However, the key to this story is that my unofficial career development plan worked so well for my direct report because she managed up, and I managed down.

In the workforce, we have been trained to think that managing down is the only way people leadership occurs. A senior-level person is responsible for creating the plan and mobilizing the work of a less senior colleague. However, managing up is just as important. Unless you are the founder, chief executive officer, the board of directors, and the client all at the same time, there will always be someone to “report to” in the workplace. The only way you can opt out of some type of managing is by being independently wealthy and not needing to work at all.

It is important to stop looking at your manager as the person who has the ultimate power in the workplace because all managers have flaws. You must advocate for yourself in this workplace relationship to ensure that your professional needs are met. Managing up is the process of managing your manager. *While the manager may be in the position of power, managing up is key to ensure that you are an active participant in creating a mutually beneficial relationship and receiving what you need most in the workplace.* If I had not asked my direct report the questions I listed, she could also have asked similar

questions of me to ensure that her professional development was top of mind. She could have asked questions like:

- *What types of career development opportunities are available to me in this company?*
- *Based on my past experiences and current role, what do you feel would be my next step in this company or industry?*
- *What skills do you feel that I need to build to do my job even better?*
- *What relationships do you feel would be helpful for me to build at this company?*
- *Is there a required “time-in-role” for transitioning into my next role here?*
- *Is there anyone you can introduce me to in your network to assist with my career exploration or development?*

You are capable of initiating career conversations with your manager to ensure that you are in charge of your own personal and professional development.

Additionally, for many managers who fall into the bad or good category versus great managers, there may be something they need to see from you to help correct their negative behaviors. Unless they are ill-equipped to be a manager and found themselves in this role through their contribution to the workforce and managing was simply a rite of passage versus a piece of their developmental journey in the workforce that they were equally excited about, change can happen. You cannot help someone who is just a “bad apple.” Just like romantic relationships, the person must want to change behaviors that hurt his or her partner. The same goes for the workplace.

When managing up, it is important to notate the specific moments when managers exhibit less desirable behaviors. A few common examples are:

- When assignments are submitted and there are avoidable errors
- During weekly one-on-ones where they desire more information

- When they are stressed about presenting to their manager about the information you are responsible for submitting in advance
- When they do not have enough information and must circle back to get up to speed
- When they are receiving constructive feedback about their team's work by more senior leadership and your work was called out for needing improvement

Those are just a few common examples that you may be able to identify to preemptively plan to create a more favorable experience. For example, in the scenarios that allude to not having enough information, how can you share more information before it is needed? Often, managers labeled as micromanagers desire more information because they have found themselves in situations with leadership where they could not accurately share what was needed.

There are bad managers, good managers, and great managers. Great managers ensure that developing their team is a part of their professional development plan, even if it's just ensuring that their team members have a clear succession plan when they move onto other roles inside or outside the company. And bad managers are never a reason to halt your career development plan. That is the reason I wrote this book. *You and only you can be responsible for your career movement or lack thereof.*

If you have an amazing manager, that is incredible! You are extremely fortunate. But suppose you have a manager who gives you nightmares. Well, in that case, you will need to take an active part in finding mentors, coaches, and sponsors (see Chapter 6, "Relationships Are Still Everything") who will provide you with the support you will need that you are currently not receiving.

Remember, a bad manager does not make or break your career. In the same way you are in any given role for a specific season of your tenure in the workplace, you will only have that manager during that season. And if the current situation is unbearable – well,

that may be a sign to consider whether your next move will be to another department or external to your current company (see Chapter 12, “How to Know When It’s Time to Go”).

Management is only a piece of your career and leadership development.

Your Next Move

This chapter is one of the few chapters where I would like you to simply take a moment to reflect on your current manager relationships and determine how you need to manage up and manage down to better align with your career goals. As you begin to create your career strategy in this book, how you manage yourself and others will be an element of your plan that will take careful consideration.

After spending so many years in the career development space, I have learned that it’s very hard to serve as a great manager if you cannot manage your own career well. Additionally, if you have never had a great manager and have not had the opportunity to learn best practices on leading a team, it’s very hard to serve as a great leader.

If you are currently a manager, once you have your own strategy in place, you will be able to manage and mobilize your team to align with your goals and the goals of the organization. You will understand not only the end goal for your team, but also how each person plays a vital part in the long-term vision. Moreover, you’ll support your team members in reaching the milestones for the team and have the strategic vision to help them create their own career development plan. Sure, you’ll read this book to understand how you create your own career strategy, but great managers will be able to apply this information to empower individuals on their teams, too.

If you are an individual contributor reading this book and you don’t currently manage a team, this context will help you manage

your career and articulate your needs to your manager when you need to manage up. Most importantly, when the interview question comes up asking you about the type of people leader you will be, you will have the information needed to answer that question expertly.