

1 Be the Leader They Want to Work For

Let's face it: People aren't quitting jobs—they're quitting *bosses*. Workplace disillusionment is higher than ever, and "quiet quitting"? It isn't just a TikTok trend but a survival tactic. Being a leader worth sticking around for isn't optional, folks. It's your competitive edge.

But want to know something reassuring? The best leaders aren't bulletproof superheroes in capes. They're approachable. They're grounded. *They're human*. They set the tone for how work *feels*, not just how it gets done. They're willing to shield their teams from nonsense, amplify their people's wins, and create a space where showing up feels like an opportunity—not an obligation. (*Plus, come on, capes would totally get caught in those heavy office doors while you're trying to badge in with your ID.*) This chapter isn't about "management buzzwords" or performing leadership. It's about actionable, real-talk strategies that make you the kind of leader others willingly follow—even when things get tough. We'll cover everything from being the team's "sh!t umbrella" (yup, you read that right) to rethinking urgency culture and giving difficult feedback like a pro.

And I get it—personally. I've worked for toxic bosses who made me question my worth, I've managed teams, gotten promoted, and been laid off, and in my consultant roles I've assessed great workplaces to help them become even better, coaching leaders on embracing

people-first leadership. Every insight I share comes from lived experience and a deep commitment to finding practical strategies that work. You're not alone in this journey. And I'm here to equip you with tools that can make a real difference. (And trust me, if I survived those kinds of bosses, you can too! I'm practically OSHA-certified in workplace chaos and re-orgs.)

Know this: You don't need a C-suite title to lead like this. You just need to decide you're done with outdated boss tropes and committed to be a leader people actually *want* to follow. Ready? Let's build something worth staying for.

Tip 1: Be the Sh!t Umbrella

Shield Your Team from the Storm

We've all been there: Work can be a circus of chaos—urgent-but-not-really deadlines, endless meetings that should've been emails, and last-minute “fire drills” that no one saw coming. Your team is in the thick of it, but that, my friend, is where you step in—not as a micromanager, but as the ultimate *sh!t umbrella*.

What's a sh!t umbrella, you ask? It's the leader who shields their team from workplace nonsense—unnecessary stress, fake emergencies, and random distractions—so the team can focus, thrive, and actually *enjoy* doing great work. Being this umbrella challenges you to manage upward, set boundaries, and sift through the demands that keep your team from shining. (And don't worry, this isn't shirking—it's just being the “do not disturb” setting they didn't know they had.)

A great illustration of this came from a leader I coached, Stefan. He managed a marketing team launching a big campaign. Just days before launch, an executive swooped in with “urgent” changes—wanting to rewrite key messaging and redo graphics last-minute. The worst part is that my client didn't even feel like the changes made sense! Instead of

yanking his team into chaotic all-nighters, he calmly asked, “What’s the larger goal of these changes?” and then “What’s the consequence of staying the course?” After some light discussion and awkward silences, the exec admitted the campaign was solid as-is. The team stayed on track, the launch went smoothly, and Stefan protected his people from unnecessary hits and burnout. *That’s leadership.*

Filter the Faux-Urgency

You know the pattern: “We need this *ASAP!*” (Translation: “I just remembered this existed.”) One of the most powerful things you can do as a leader is ask *why*. Try “Tell me more about the actual deadline,” “Why is this urgent?” and “What happens if it’s done next week instead of tomorrow?” Challenge false urgency before it hits your team’s plates. Yes, if it’s a real fire, rally the troops. If not, challenge ridiculous timelines, negotiate for more realistic ones, or take on the task yourself if it can’t wait.

Kill the Chaos Meetings

You’ve seen ’em: meetings scheduled with zero context or 30 minutes’ notice that somehow become *your* team’s problem. Before you forward that invite to your team member like it’s a hot potato, pause. Then try this: Get clarity before committing that you or your staff will attend. Ask, “Hey, what role do you need me/Sarabeth to play here?” or “What decisions need to be made?” Those who invited you might grumble at first, but they’ll get used to you vetting attendance (and usually, respect you for it).

If it’s just a status check or a meeting for the sake of meeting, skip it or ask for a quick update of minutes instead. Protect yours and your team’s focus time—don’t let it go to waste. And hey, sometimes being a little unconventional is exactly what’s needed to protect their time. I still laugh thinking of my former manager who was working on

setting more assertive boundaries for our team. He said he channeled his inner fierce bouncer at the most VIP club in order to do it. Ha! I liked to imagine him giving the “bouncer stare” to anything that didn’t have a legit invite.

Provide Air Cover

The dreaded “Can you *just* ...?” requests are the silent assassins of productivity. Teach your team to recognize these quick hits and back your teammates up when they push back. If the request isn’t a priority, encourage them to protect everyone’s focus by tactfully saying something like “We’re all hands on deck with [current project]. Can we revisit this late next week?”

Or, if someone tries to add extra tasks beyond the agreed scope, remind your team it’s okay to set a boundary with a statement like “This wasn’t part of the original plan, and adding it now will impact our budget/schedule/outputs. Let’s discuss how we can fit this in once we’ve completed [priority task].” If, as a last resort, your team needs to send the request to you, let them know they can.

Have Their Backs—Loudly

When leadership starts piling on, step up as your team’s advocate. Say, “We can take this on, but it’ll push back these projects. How do you want to adjust the timeline?” Framing it this way not only shows you’re solution-focused, but it also ensures your team’s efforts get the recognition they deserve.

And when your team is killing it, don’t keep it quiet—be their PR machine. Shine a spotlight on their wins and make sure everyone knows who’s behind the success.

Let’s not pretend: Being the sh!t umbrella isn’t glamorous; in fact to be fair, the daily blocking and tackling can be exhausting. But for

your people, it's game-changing. It's the shield they need from the stuff that doesn't matter so they can *crush* the stuff that does. When your people know you've got their backs, that you're willing to act, not just say words, they'll show up not just because they *have* to but because they *want* to. And that's how you lead a team that people never want to leave.

Ready to wield that umbrella like a pro? Let's go.

Tip 2: Open the Floor (Not Just Your Door)

I once coached a director-level client who was losing employees left and right. When I asked if she thought her team felt comfortable approaching her, she proudly said, "My door's always open." To that, I countered, "So what?"

She blinked, taken aback, shifting slightly in her seat. After a beat, she let out a nervous chuckle. "Well ... I mean, they *could* come to me."

Here's why it's not enough to say, "My door's always open." For a start, anyone can say that. Heck, even a vending machine could have an "open door." Second, just because there's an open door doesn't automatically mean your team feels safe or empowered to walk through it. Remember, employees are acutely aware of the power differential between you and them, so honest input won't just come on its own. You have to create an atmosphere where upward feedback is not just welcomed, but actively encouraged. Without that, the door ... well, it might as well be closed with a steel padlock!

It's About More Than Access

True approachability should feel like a real invitation, one that says, *I'm ready to listen, no judgment or defensiveness here* (and no rushing you out the door with my iced cappuccino in hand). So how do you

make your office feel like a safe zone? A sanctuary where your team knows their voice matters?

Break the seal yourself. Regularly ask your team members what they think—*really think*—about things like project direction, team dynamics, a transition they’ve been making, and their workload. For example, you just announced a new directive to your team. You might say something afterward like “Okay, I’d like to hear from each of you about one concern you have and one opportunity you see with the new direction.” Doing this regularly demonstrates that you want and need their input. Of course, just as important is *how* you receive their responses. People won’t just wander into your office if they don’t feel like their concerns will be heard with curiosity, respect, and attention. (*Basically, you’re aiming for trusted-advice-giver energy, not “this better be good” gatekeeper.*)

Make Feedback Feel Safe, Not Scary

You know what’s worse than not having an open door? Having a door that’s always open but a boss who’s always glancing at the clock, turning toward their screen or canceling check-ins like it’s a sport. When someone finally speaks up, they get rushed through their thoughts like they’re holding up the line at the deli.

The goal isn’t just being accessible. It’s making sure that when people *do* come to you, they feel heard, unrushed, and taken seriously. That kind of psychological safety doesn’t appear overnight. It’s built in the quiet, repeated moments when you stay present and listen all the way through.

Start small: regular check-ins, both formal and casual, where you actually have the time and attention to ask things like “What’s working for you? What’s not?” or “What could make things easier right now?” If an interruption bursts through, go out of your way to defer it until later. Because if every conversation feels like a speed

round, don't be surprised when you only get surface-level stuff. Build in a beat. Sometimes the best feedback shows up in the final minutes, right when someone realizes you're actually sticking around to hear it.

Receive Feedback Without Ego

You want your team to be open with you? Then show them how. Lead by example. Be transparent about the feedback you receive and what you do with it. Perhaps you and your team are discussing ideas for how to improve ongoing communication. If you get upward feedback that says, "Hey, I think you could set clearer expectations at the start of meetings. People seem confused about what they're supposed to weigh in on," you could respond with something like "That's a great point. Next week, I'll try kicking things off with a quick 'Here's what we're deciding today' so we stay on track. Let's see how it goes."

And if you're caught off guard by some input, my go-to response in that situation is "Thanks for sharing that. Let me take a day to reflect on it, and I'll get back to you with what I'll do differently next time." When you show that you're taking others' feedback seriously, your team will be more likely to speak up in the future.

And remember, feedback runs both ways. Encourage your team to hold one another accountable too. Peer feedback can often be more immediate and impactful than top-down suggestions. For example, once a team member shares their approach for an upcoming presentation, prompt the other members to offer constructive suggestions or additions. It builds a culture where everyone is invested in mutual success and continuous improvement.

So do more than open the door. Bake probing questions (looking at the positive and negative) into your meeting designs, invite peer feedback, and model that you yourself are receptive to others' views. Start there, and the conversations will follow.

Tip 3: Humanize the Hard Stuff

Leadership is being an unshakable mountain, immune to doubt and criticism, with a halo glowing above your head, making flawless decisions in your sleep. Ha! If you believe that, we've got an Everest-sized problem. No, the best leaders aren't perfection or omniscience in SVP form—they're human. And that same latitude they give themselves to be real and fallible gives others permission to be human.

Research backs this up. One study by Dr. Jasmine Hu and colleagues at the Ohio State University found that when people have a humble leader who acknowledges their own limitations and mistakes, team members are more likely to share their knowledge, voice their concerns, and engage in improvement-oriented behaviors.¹ Sounds like a pretty welcome ripple effect, doesn't it?

If your memory is a highlight reel of awkward leadership moments, good—you're halfway there. But it's okay too if you don't know where to start in terms of mining your own mistakes. You can consider these examples of mistakes that are the most common ones I hear as a coach—shown by category. Like any good misstep, they make ideal teachable moments:

- **Collaboration:** Misaligned goals, poor communication (*You dropped the ball on sharing updates or assumed everyone was on the same page.*)
- **Relational:** Lack of empathy, conflict avoidance (*You steamrolled someone's concern or ghosted a tough conversation.*)
- **Decision-making:** Analysis paralysis, risk aversion (*You sat on a choice so long the window closed, so someone else made it for you.*)
- **Leadership:** Micromanagement, lack of recognition (*You hovered like a drone or forgot to shout someone out for great work.*)
- **Customer/client:** Overpromising, ignoring feedback (*You said yes to keep the peace ... then scrambled to deliver—or didn't.*)

Own Your Mistakes and Share What You've Learned

I get it—nobody likes being wrong. Just ask my husband what kind of dinner table debater I am. But here's the truth: When you as a leader own your mistakes, you communicate to your team: "We don't have to pretend to be perfect to do great work." You're not *acting* vulnerable (when it's not genuine) for sympathy or martyrdom. It's about showing your team that vulnerability isn't the liability they worry it is, but a strength that facilitates openness and growth. That could mean you feel uncertain and name it aloud, or that you're being emotionally honest with your colleagues about something uncomfortable or new for you. You're choosing sincerity, candor, and realness over your ego.

I remember one presentation I was giving to a pharmaceutical company, where I asked the president ahead of time how I could tailor my material for the audience. His response really struck me: "Two things I hope you'll hit home: truth and courage. We had a major drug fail recently, and I'm convinced it's because I created a culture where people didn't feel they could air their concerns."

I've never forgotten that moment because of how much ownership he took. He wasn't blaming his team or the regulators or external circumstances. He was standing up and saying, "This is on me," and acknowledging how the culture he built—or didn't build—impacted the outcome. *That's leadership at its best.* By taking responsibility for a dysfunction in the culture, he not only showed integrity, but he also set a powerful example for his team: *I didn't get it right—and I see how that shaped where we are. Let's use that so we can move forward.*

Why Vulnerability Builds Trust

When leaders are open about mistakes, it unclenches the whole team. No more hiding errors like you're smuggling snacks into a movie theater. If your team sees you as someone who can admit when you're

wrong—without a wall of defensiveness—they’ll feel safer doing the same. What’s especially cool is that this creates a more innovative, communicative, and resilient team. People aren’t afraid to raise concerns or admit when they’re struggling. Instead of hiding problems, they air and tackle ’em head-on.

So next time you make a mistake—whether it’s a process breakdown, a missed deadline, or a miscommunication—don’t sweep it under the rug or deflect blame. Stand up, own it, and share what you’ve learned. It can be as sweet and simple as “I think I made a mistake on this,” or “I think I was wrong about that earlier.” Then encourage your team to do the same. Create an environment where it’s okay to be imperfect, because in doing so, you’re telling your team: *Nobody’s flawless, and nobody needs to pretend to be.*

Tip 4: Rethink Urgency Culture

Let’s start with the obvious truth: Urgency isn’t some virtue. Too much of it destroys people’s focus, not to mention their equilibrium and well-being. And yet the “need it five minutes ago” mentality dominates so many workplaces, turning a task into an emergency and deadlines into a game of constant whack-a-mole. And sometimes leaders don’t even notice they’re just going along with it—not even questioning why things need to be done yesterday!

Since when did we decide that no one should ever have to wait for anything?!

As a young management consultant at a fancy firm, this thinking was so culturally normal, so ingrained in us, that we’d treat every client request like a leak in a boat; if we didn’t attend to it ASAP, we’d surely sink. Cortisol spikes were practically built into the job description. If a client asked to change the font color on a slide, we’d drop everything because, clearly, *Arial Blue* was a

matter of corporate survival. If they wanted a data point rechecked (even one we'd triple-verified), we'd scramble to rerun the numbers *immediately*, just in case. The urgency was often artificial, but the stress? Very real.

The result of an “urgency culture” isn't productivity; it's burnout. Employees aren't more effective when they're in a perpetual rush. They're stressed, drained, and distracted. And you, as a leader, are part of that equation. You might be unconsciously reinforcing the very thing that makes your team feel like they're on a 70-mile-per-hour hamster wheel: always spinning but never getting anywhere. Or you can be a different kind of pacesetter.

What “Urgency Culture” Does to Your Team

When urgency becomes the default setting, it tricks people into believing they should be constantly sprinting, never slowing down to think. That can hurt decision-making—prioritizing speed rather than substance—and make people hesitate to admit mistakes, ask questions, or challenge ideas for fear they'll be seen as “slowing down the process.” Here, creativity takes a backseat to quick fixes. And innovation? Forget about it.

It can even cause adverse health effects over time. In the *Harvard Business Review* article “The Insidious Effects of Hurrying,” burnout expert and author Kandi Wiens writes:

This relentless urgency can result in a phenomenon known as “hurry sickness,” a term first introduced in 1974 by cardiologists Meyer Friedman and R.H. Rosenman to describe the damaging effects of Type A (i.e., high-achieving) behavior on cardiovascular health. Hurry sickness isn't a diagnosable condition, but it encapsulates a set of behaviors and emotions—impatience, chronic rushing, and a constant sense of time scarcity—that can wreak havoc on a person's physical and mental well-being.²

The Solution: Prioritize with Intention

It's time to turn the dial from "urgency culture" to a more intentional, grounded, and care-driven approach. You do not need to respond to every email in an hour or race to meet an unrealistic deadline. It's about lining up your team's efforts with meaningful priorities and creating the space for thoughtful decision-making. If you want to stand up to urgency culture, take it step by step, using these guideposts:

- **Step 1: Set clear priorities.** As a leader, part of your job is to sift through the noise and help your team focus. This means clearly defining what matters most and what can wait—*you're the shit umbrella, remember!?* Instead of cramming everything into one week or day, take a step back and assess your team's workload. Think: "Here's what matters most today, and here's why. Let's focus on this first, then we'll tackle the rest."
- **Step 2: Give your team time to breathe.** Once priorities are clear, normalize a workflow that allows your team time to work at a sustainable pace. Encourage breaks, manageable workloads, and flexible deadlines (where appropriate). Urgency culture breeds a sense of scarcity and exhaustion but you're replacing that with *sustainable work over time*. Think: "The work will still get done. Let's just do it in a way that doesn't leave us all feeling like wet noodles by Friday."
- **Step 3: Model the behavior you want to see.** As with everything in leadership, it starts with you. If you're setting a standard of rushed work and constant pressure, your team will follow suit. But if you take the time to pause, reflect, and say "Enough" at times, your team will feel empowered to do the same. Think: "If I'm constantly scrambling, they'll think that's the only way to work. I need to show them there's value in thinking things through before diving in."

The Power of Protecting Your People

Wanna make work a place where people feel seen, heard, and valued? Stop rewarding hustle at the expense of well-being. Communicate to your people that it's okay to take the time necessary to do the job right. That'll encourage them to view their work as something worth putting thought and care into, rather than something to hurry up and check off the list.

So the next time you feel questionably rushed, ask yourself: *Is this the most important thing right now, or are we just moving quickly for the sake of it?*

Tip 5: Signal Belonging

Do you actively cultivate belonging? The kind where people feel like they're truly part of something important—like their experience is valued, their contributions count, and their voices matter? (Notice we're not talking about token gestures or repeating empty platitudes about inclusion.)

If you miss the mark on making belonging part of your culture, you risk disillusionment, apathy, and that awful sense that there are insiders and outsiders. But nail this, and you'll create a team that's motivated, engaged, and loyal. Here's how you do it.

Give Meaningful Intros

How you introduce people is not a trivial thing! In fact, it can make all the difference in integrating a person into your team and helping them start with momentum and credibility on their side. Instead of the breezy and vague "Here's Sarah, who'll be working with us on IT," try "This is Sarah, who'll be our director of IT—she's the engine behind the new features in our website and app and we're excited to have her

expertise in A, B and C.” Another example might be “Please meet [Name], who’s not only our [title], but also especially talented at [skill or trait, e.g., creativity, leadership, problem-solving]. They’re a big reason our team has been able to [specific success].” When you boost someone’s status by highlighting their unique contributions, expertise, or qualities, you emphasize their value to the group. And you’re telling your team, “Hey, I see you and you matter here.” Simple but effective.

Don’t Hoard Credit Like It’s Your Last Cookie

I’ll never forget working days, nights, and weekends on a tedious Excel project as a young consultant—only to have my boss stand up and present it at an offsite, saying things like “I led the entire effort by ...,” “I figured out the best way to ...,” and “I tackled the challenge by ...” Ugh! Hearing her continually say “I” effectively covered me in an invisibility cloak, and it stung. There’s nothing more demoralizing than doing great work and having it go unnoticed.

So when someone on your team crushes it, shine the spotlight on them. Don’t just throw them a generic “good job” and move on. Recognize the details that made their contribution stand out. Say something like “I want to shout out Leo for totally elevating that design project. It was his idea to do X that took it to the next level, and we wouldn’t have landed that client without it,” or “I know this was a particularly tedious task, Deena, but your commitment to quality is noticed and appreciated.” When people feel like their hard work is seen and appreciated, they’re more likely to stick around and keep delivering (a clear upgrade from rage-applying to jobs at 2 a.m. with a pint of ice cream in hand).

Yield the Floor

Yes, you’re the leader, but sometimes stepping back is the best move. Defer to others when it’s their area of knowledge or expertise.

This is less about giving up control, and more about recognizing that the best outcomes spring when everyone's strengths are valued and used. If your marketing lead is the expert on customer data, don't step in by default. Instead say, "This is your area of strength, [Name], so I'll leave it to you to guide us," or "I'll defer to you on this, [Name], you know it best." When you yield and put the mic in someone else's hand, you help them grow in confidence and ownership of their work. It's a win-win that fosters a more collaborative, belonging-oriented team dynamic.

Respect Different Workstyles

Here's another way to stoke belonging. While working at Deloitte, I got to consult to their "crown jewel" clients on their teams' strengths and the composition of their different workstyles. So while I might've discovered a diverse team at a bank that was heavier in logical, analytical driver types, another team I'd work with at an ad agency may be composed of more big-picture thinkers and future-oriented folks.

My big takeaway from advising dozens of teams at the world's most innovative companies? That *difference* in workstyle that annoys you about your teammate or boss is very likely a hidden superpower for your team. Whether it's someone's tendency to dive into the details when you prefer to focus on the big picture, or a colleague's cautious decision-making style when you lean toward taking risks, those collective differences are actually the ingredients for a stronger team. When you don't challenge your own disdain for people who work differently than you, you miss the chance to see how that contrast can actually be your team's secret weapon. Like how Sarah's meticulous tracking keeps big ideas from floating into the ether—and how Mark's bold pitches push the team beyond Status Quo City.

Belonging Is an Invitation You Extend Every Day

Creating a culture of belonging is something you actively choose to do every day. It's in the words you use and the small actions. It's a gentle prompt, like "What do you think about this, Maria?" When you make people feel like they belong, as full card-carrying members of the team, you create a space where they can flourish. I'll dive deeper into these topics in Chapter 8, *The Inclusion Power Moves That Matter*, where we'll explore more strategies to help you elevate others. Remember, belonging isn't some bonus; it's the baseline.

Tip 6: Hold Your Horses (and Your Hot Takes)

You know the feeling: Someone presents an idea, and your brain is already two steps ahead—thinking of ways to solve it, fix it, implement it, or improve it. But before you race to be the first one to speak, try this: Hit pause rather than hitting the gas. Give a person space to voice their thoughts fully. Some pretty cool magic happens when you wait a beat and give things air. It's like people hear you saying, "I'm not the only expert here—and the more we tap into our collective wisdom, the stronger we get." Then a real conversation can unfold.

Don't Rush In—Let Them Speak First

As a leader, your insights are valuable—but so are everyone else's. Let your team speak first, and you're showing them that you value their perspective, even when it's different from yours. So how can you put this into practice? Try giving yourself a substitute for speaking. I've coached leaders to make a bodily movement if they need to—to replace speaking up with "the answer." They can make a body shift in their chair, simply take a swallow, or even take a nice deep breath, expanding their chest, to allow for that cushion of silence. That's where the blank canvas for your team lies. Let them talk before you hand down conclusions, and watch your team's trust and ideas blossom.

Oh, and here's an important signal to look for. If there's a silence in your meetings and everyone then looks to you, it might mean that your team is used to you jumping in. This is a great opportunity to invite others to speak instead. If they always default to you to start speaking, well, now you have your action item! So sit in that quiet for a moment—looking at them with anticipatory interest—and they'll start to speak.

Let the Ideas Breathe

Giving people's inputs some oxygen creates the space and freedom for ideas to develop and evolve. And part of that is embracing the early, messy phase of ideation. So instead of seeking out polished proposals, you're encouraging even half-formed thoughts. This often leads to unexpected, innovative insights. Example prompts might include "This doesn't need to be fully fleshed out—what's your initial thought?" "Let's hear the rough version first—we can refine it together," or "How might that look in practice, even if the details aren't clear yet?" In short, "Let the Ideas Breathe" is about resisting the impulse to judge or resolve too quickly. It's allowing space for collective thought to unfold naturally. That right there is what makes collaboration more fun, dynamic, and innovative.

The Art of Really Listening

The next time you feel the urge to speak, pause for just a moment longer than usual. Don't just hear the words—*listen*. This is the same technique my kids learned in the third grade. It's called *whole body listening*. If a kid is technically listening with their ears but their back is facing the teacher, and their right hand is fidgeting with their sneaker laces while their left hand is fishing around in their desk, then they're not *really listening*, are they? The same goes for adults. That means your ears are intently perked up but your body is also in alignment.

You're squarely facing the person speaking, and you have an engaged, encouraging, and expectant look on your face. This communicates "I'm here, I'm following, and I value what you're saying."

Ask Provocative Questions, Not Just for Quick Fixes

Great leaders know that the right question can spark powerful conversations and lead to breakthrough thinking. Rather than just jumping in with your own solution or feedback, you can also try asking questions that challenge your team's thinking. For example, "How would you approach this if there were no limitations or constraints?" or "What's the one thing we haven't considered yet?" These questions shift the focus from you to them. Let your team wrestle with their ideas and discover solutions you might never have anticipated.

Quiet Leadership Is the Real Power Move

As a leader, you don't have to fill every silence. Sometimes doing less is actually doing more. When you resist the urge to always step in with your thoughts, you're multiplying the moments your team can shine. Let them lead and be prepared to be amazed.

Tip 7: Skip "Do You Have a Minute?"

You know when you're deep in work mode, fully focused and in the flow, and then ... knock knock. "Hey, got a minute?" *Poof. There goes your genius, mid-sentence—it packed its bags and left the building.* Multiply that practice by a few times a week, expanded to your whole team, and you've got a recipe for frustration and lost productivity.

For leaders, the "Do you have a minute?" approach feels efficient. It's quick, casual, and gets your question answered. But for *your team*? It's disruptive. It's stress-inducing. And it signals that your time is more valuable than theirs. Contrary to what your calendar might

suggest, it's not. Besides, has anyone ever met a "just a minute" request that *actually* takes only one minute!?

Respect the Mental Bandwidth Bank

Think of your team's mental energy like a bank account. Focus-intensive tasks—like writing reports, crafting strategies, or coding—require hefty withdrawals. Every unexpected interruption is a surprise fee they didn't authorize.

When you pop in unannounced, you're essentially saying, "My immediate need trumps whatever you're working on." It's not intentional, but it's the message received. Respecting someone's mental bandwidth means recognizing that uninterrupted time is sacred in today's distraction-packed world.

But What If It's Urgent?

Of course, emergencies happen. True urgency—think system outages or client crises—warrants immediate action. But you know as well as I do that most "urgent" issues are just things we'd prefer to resolve right now. A recent study in the journal *Work & Stress* actually showed that interruptions from bosses take up more time compared to interruptions from colleagues, and—wait for it—employees feel a stronger need to respond to interruptions from their supervisors.³ So before you interrupt, ask yourself:

- Can this wait until our next scheduled check-in?
- Could I send a quick message summarizing the issue and asking when they're free?

That little, momentary pause can prevent unnecessary disruptions while keeping things moving.

How to Break the Habit (Without Feeling Disconnected)

Just because you're popping in unannounced less often means you can't stay synced with people. Try these alternatives for connecting with your people purposefully:

- **Schedule office hours.** Set designated times for open-door chats. Communicate this clearly: "Need to bounce an idea off me? My office hours are Tuesdays, 2–4 p.m."
- **Use a shared calendar.** Encourage team members to block focus time on their calendars, and do the same yourself. This visual reminder makes it clear when someone is heads-down and when they're open for collaboration.
- **Embrace asynchronous updates.** Not everything requires a real-time conversation. Use project management tools or shared docs for updates and questions that can be handled without interrupting someone's workflow.

Be the Leader Who Gets It

Leaders who respect their team's time earn loyalty and trust. Skipping "Do you have a minute?" shows you value their focus, not just their availability. It also makes your team more likely to want to come together when it truly matters.

So before popping in with a quick question, take a breath and consider your team's time (and maybe ask yourself if it's Slack-able, schedulable, or just unnecessary). You're modeling a culture of mutual respect. And your team's productivity (and sanity) will thank you.

Tip 8: Praise Publicly, Coach Privately

People are starved for recognition. In fact, nearly 80% of employees feel they'd be more productive if they were recognized *more frequently*.

Talk about a hunger pang! The thing about acknowledging wins—particularly in an open, public way—is that it creates what I call a “triple ripple” effect: The person being praised feels valued, their peers see what success looks like, and the team’s morale lifts. *That’s* what I call a leadership power move.

Imagine an ordinary team meeting where you shout out someone’s brilliant client presentation, something you know they prepared for thoughtfully. Suddenly, the vibe shifts—the person’s effort feels worthwhile, others are motivated to step up—the acknowledgment creates buzz.

The best bosses do this in a way that’s specific. Skip vague platitudes like “Great job!” and try “You handled that tough client call with such grace. Even when it would’ve been easy to overpromise, you kept the project in scope. Well done!” Precision and authenticity in what you share shows you’re paying attention. Plus, it gives them a clear template to use for future behavior you want to see more of!

Make Coaching a Private Affair

Feedback usually stings the most in front of an audience. When you critique someone publicly, you risk embarrassing them, damaging trust, and creating a culture of fear. No one does their best work while bracing to get publicly body-slammed. Now let’s apply this to a common-enough situation. Imagine that a team member mishandles a meeting. If you correct them on the spot in front of their peers, they’ll likely feel self-conscious and shut down. But if you pull them aside after and say, “Let’s talk about how to steer conversations when things go off track,” they’re more likely to listen, learn, and improve.

Now as much as I love a good BLT or my hometown Philly cheesesteak—and I really love them—I have to caution you against using the “feedback sandwich” (good feedback, followed by bad,

followed by good). It can feel forced. Instead, be straightforward yet compassionate: “Your presentation had great insights. Let’s work on tightening the data points next time so your message lands even stronger.”

Balance Recognition and Reality

Be intentional about both praise and coaching. Overpraise can dilute sincerity, while too much critique can deflate spirits. Strike a balance: Shout out wins regularly, but coach behind closed doors when improvement is needed.

How do you put this into action?

- 1. Create a praise ritual.** Start meetings with a “Win of the Week” or “Shoutout Spotlight” to celebrate success stories. It’s fast, energizing, and team-building. And you share the load of calling out good work; it doesn’t have to come only from you.
- 2. Develop a coaching habit.** Schedule monthly one-on-ones focused on growth, with no agenda other than development. Think, “Let’s workshop the core business development techniques that make the biggest difference.”
- 3. Be consistent.** Praise shouldn’t happen only when the whim strikes. Beyond building recognition into your agenda, give yourself a shorthand for recognition that makes it easy to initiate. You don’t need 43 lines to memorize, but even two or three sentence starters you regularly reach for like—“I noticed how you ...,” “I appreciate that you ...,” or “I’m impressed that you ...”—make it part of your natural day-to-day language.

There’s a Time and a Place

When people trust that you’ll celebrate them openly but correct them privately, it promotes an essential kind of security. No more

flinching, second-guessing, or playing small—they're free to do their best work. Public praise fuels motivation. Private coaching fosters growth. Do both consistently, and you'll be the kind of leader people trust, respect, and choose to follow—even when times get tough.

Tip 9: Ditch the Boss Image: Embrace the Leader Persona

Let's play a little matching game:

Management is about tasks.

Leading and mentoring is about people.

Now look back at your last few workdays. For each significant interaction you had, would you categorize your primary focus as *management* (tasks) or *leading and mentoring* (people)? What's your current ratio? Where would you *like* that ratio to be?

If you want to lead a team that sticks around, stops dreading Monday mornings, and actually cares about their work, you need to make the conscious shift from managing projects to mentoring people. And let me say, having coached many a leader, that change is entirely within your reach.

Managing Is Bare Minimum Behavior—Start Mentoring

Think about it like this: Managing is transactional. It calls for checklists, deadlines, and updates—essential, sure, but uninspiring. Anyone can manage a to-do list, but not everyone can inspire people to *want* to crush it.

Imagine being known as “the manager who tracks deliverables” versus “the leader who builds careers.” Which legacy sounds better?

Be the Career Catalyst

Think back to the best leader you ever had. Chances are, they didn't just assign tasks. They challenged you, believed in you, and opened doors. They were career catalysts.

I can still remember my mentor, Jane, suggesting the unthinkable when I was 24: "Why don't *you* give the client presentation?" It felt like a huge leap, but her faith in me sparked something I didn't know I had. I took her up on it, and it gave me a boost of self-belief I've carried ever since. Be that leader. Swap "How are we going to get ready for next week's presentation?" for "What are some skills you want to grow when it comes to client presentations? Let's see if there's a chance to put them into practice next week."

You can make this an even more regular topic of conversation by implementing "Grow and Go" check-ins. Every few months, ask your team two things: "What's one thing you want to *grow* in your role?" and "What's one thing you want to *go* after next?" Then help them map a path.

Oh, and if you really connect with this topic, sit tight: I have more on this in Chapter 4, Tip 2.

Feedback That Feeds Growth

Just like we've explored in other tips, good feedback is specific feedback. Make a point to offer precise input, then check your tone. Is it fueling them or flattening them? Here's an example to show you the difference.

- *Bad feedback:* "You missed the mark on that client presentation."
- *Mentor-style feedback:* "Your presentation showed tons of depth, but next time, let's tighten the key points to make the message land faster."

See the difference? One demoralizes; the other energizes.

Lead Like the Mentor You Wish You Had

Mentors lead by example. If you're asking your team to innovate, take risks, or level up, show them how it's done.

Share your own learning curve stories. Admit when you're still figuring things out. Leaders who say, "I'm working on that skill, too," create a culture of continuous improvement. It's not weakness—it's relatability.

For example, here's a personal story I like to share with my mentees. I once submitted an audition video to teach an online course and received brutally honest feedback from not two or three but seven producers. Reading the page-long list of bulleted feedback I felt like I'd been punched in the gut, about as vulnerable and exposed as a person standing naked in Times Square. But you know what? The producers were right. I took their suggestions to heart, and not only did it land me the gig, but it also set me on a path where I spend a significant part of my career in front of the camera—and today I actually enjoy it.

So share your "gut-punch" moments and what you learned. It can help someone else learn a lesson quicker, show them they're not alone, and humanize you and build trust.

Mentorship Wins Loyalty

People don't usually quit jobs where they feel seen, heard, and developed. They quit managers and environments that underinvest in them.

When you become a mentor-leader, you're creating a movement of leaders who'll develop other leaders. The cascade keeps going. And you're someone they'll remember long after they've outgrown their roles.

So, manage less. Mentor more. Your ultimate contribution as a leader won't be the answers you provided, but the capabilities you nurtured in others.

