

Leadership Is More About What You Relinquish Than What You Hold Tight

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There's a lot of talk right now about the caliber of leadership required to guide employees through the debris left by a global pandemic. With the workplace in a chapter of rapid change, and many employees still working remotely while others return to the physical office, the characteristics that will unify today's great leaders are fairness, resilience, and self-awareness. Effective leaders are direct when they need to be. They take risks and know how to build a team. Above all, they are humble, empathetic, reflective.

On this last point, I'll admit there may be some incongruity in what's been expected from men and women leaders in the past. Societal norms have led many of us to believe that women need to be, first and foremost, *nice*, and that when we're in positions of power, we must take pains not to be perceived as emotional or weak.

The pandemic has invited both men and women leaders to demonstrate what may once have been considered feminine traits, such as warmth, grace, and kindness. Women no longer need to act like men to survive in the business world. Women should just be the leaders we are. Rather than talking about what it takes for a man or a woman to succeed, the conversation we should be having is about the behaviors we all need to adopt to succeed in a leadership position. Period.

What I've learned is that, in many cases, great leadership is really as simple as trusting your people to do their work. Empowerment is a nice buzzword to throw around these days, but

not many people really know that to truly empower your employees—versus simply delegating things to them—make them directly accountable for something. When people feel like they own something, they begin to contribute meaningfully to a greater goal.

I had an experience many years ago with a leader that I think is a perfect example of this. A controversy broke out about one of our R&D facilities and employee morale was taking a hit. I'll never forget what my boss said when I brought the situation to his attention. Without missing a beat, he turned to me and said, with the right tone and intensity, "Okay, what are you going to do about it?"

This was one of the most vivid moments of empowerment in my career. He could have said, "This is what we're going to/what we should do/who we should call." Instead, he felt gave me an opportunity to lead through a crisis. By putting the onus on me, it created trust and helped me grow. Because depending upon where a person is in their career, they are either are up for a challenge like that or they're not. Until you give your employees opportunities for growth, you'll never know what they're capable of.

Empowerment also means picking and choosing when to step in and say, "Okay, we're going to fix this together," and then leading a team member through that. It's about doing this in such a way that they can learn to find answers themselves. Teach them to self-correct. This builds confidence both ways—between leader and team member.

Finally, great leaders have clarity in common. All the more difficult to come by now that we're so digitally connected, clarity requires time to decompress. Do this by getting your yoga or kickboxing in or taking a run. Whatever works for you; it doesn't have to be about movement. Rather, it could be about stillness. It could be finding 15 minutes a day to meditate or to have a cup of coffee while you sit and think

about the world around you. Be unapologetically selfish about it.

Empowering yourself in these ways will also empower those around you, and empowered people make for great leaders.



About the Author: *Bessie heads up PMI's global internal communications team at Philip Morris International (PMI) based in Lausanne, Switzerland. Her focus is to engage the 77,000 employees across the organization as PMI transitions its business toward better alternatives for adult smokers on the road to delivering a smoke-free future. In her 15-year career with the company, she's worked in multiple functions including research & development, sales, commercial planning, and communications. Before joining PMI, she worked as a healthcare consultant and as a linguist. She studied French literature and political science and holds an MBA. She's an avid runner, practices yoga regularly, and is currently reading about Renaissance art and working on her Italian.*