

# **TRUSTED LEADERSHIP ADVISOR**

**Accelerating the Leadership Journey of Others**



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## INTRODUCTION

# TRUSTED LEADERSHIP ADVISOR



I believe everyone ought to be able to explain what they do for a living to a five-year old in a simple and compelling manner. If you can't do that, then either your job is outright boring or you aren't sure what you do to begin with. That being said, I sometimes have a hard time explaining what I do as a leadership and organizational development consultant – even to other adults. Usually I retreat to my five-year old explanation and say that I “help bosses become better bosses.” It's technically true, but there's a lot more to it than that.

At any rate, I'm privileged to get paid actual real money to help everyday, ordinary people grow into and succeed as leaders in their own right. It's never been more exciting. It's never been more challenging. And I believe it's never been more critical. That's why I need your help.

A “trusted advisor” is someone we go to when we have questions, ideas, challenges or concerns. He or she is someone we count on for feedback, encouragement, direction, or just plain help. A trusted leadership advisor is a personal support system when it comes to leadership.

Here's the thing: you don't need to be special to be a leader. You can just be yourself. What a relief! And if my life is any indicator thus far, you also don't have to be special to help other people succeed as leaders, whether they see themselves that way or not. All it takes is being willing to get your hands dirty and give it a try.

The following pages of this ebook will give you some ideas of how to get started.

Don't worry about getting everything right the first time. Don't worry about messing up occasionally (hint: you will!). Make it an experiment. Just pick an idea and give it a shot. Find a buddy and let him or her know what you want to try and then tell how it went.

Just remember this: the best investment you can ever make is in other people. And if you stick with it, I promise the investment will be worth it. Together we can make a difference.

Let's go!

# HOW TO BECOME A TRUSTED LEADERSHIP ADVISOR



Has anyone ever asked you how to become a better leader? I remember the first time someone asked me. And it wasn't by a buddy, it was a dentist who had just bought out her practice and was trying to make it as a business owner as well. We had been working on some of her challenges together. I think I was 21 or 22 at the time. All of a sudden she put me on the spot and everything I thought I knew about leadership started to jumble together. How do you give a definitive answer when leadership is so broad a topic?

Since then, I've come to realize that most people don't start thinking about leadership until they experience a leadership challenge. Think about it. You don't call your auto mechanic to tell him your car has been running well lately. You probably don't call your counselor to tell how well your relationships are going (although I'm sure he or she would love to hear it!). You seek them out when things aren't going so well. It's usually the same with leadership.

So what can you do when people ask for your leadership input? Here are the three approaches I take:

### **Make leadership seem easier**

Let me first point out that leadership isn't easy. It can be extremely tough! But effective leadership is always easier in the long-run than the alternative. Poor leadership results in inferior outcomes and bruised followers. Like [Truett Cathy](#) said, "*it really is easier to succeed than to fail, because when you fail you have to start all over again from a lesser position.*" But at the same time, anything worth doing is worth doing wrong... until you can learn to do it right. Many decisions that may be difficult in the moment will make things exponentially easier over the long haul.

### **Make leadership seem less complicated**

Leadership can be incredibly complicated. It's a pretty broad subject! John Maxwell says that "*everything rises and falls on leadership,*" which can seem pretty daunting. But you can make it seem less complicated for others by helping them identify the nature of their leadership challenge. When I take my car to the mechanic, I tell him what I've noticed and then he helps me diagnose the root issue. He doesn't keep me there until I understand everything about how my car works. (Thank God, because I'd be there forever!) Usually most of my car is working the way it should. Neither you nor the ones you advise need to (or should) get a PhD in leadership in order to enjoy leadership success. Helping others distinguish between what is working well and

what is actually the pain point makes leadership challenges much less complicated and easier to address.

## **Make leadership seem more fun**

One of the first lessons I've learned about leadership is that not everyone gets as excited about it as I do. But just about everyone gets excited about winning. And leadership almost always plays a role in success. You can help leadership seem more fun by helping others win on their own terms. [Zig Ziglar](#) was fond of proclaiming, "*You can have anything in life you want if you will just help enough other people get what they want.*" When you are able to help others understand how leadership will help them succeed at the things that matter most to them, it will all of a sudden seem very relevant and a lot more fun. On top of that, you might be surprised when your not-so-enthusiastic-about-leadership friends start seeking your input.



# THE THREE LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS I ALWAYS ASK



How do you talk with other people about leadership? Unless I'm already a trusted leadership advisor, most people don't just come up and ask me to help them evaluate their personal and organizational leadership effectiveness. (And when they do, it's a little more organic than that!) It's true the more responsibilities people acquire, the more complicated their leadership situation gets. Executives usually have funds to invest in consultants or solutions to address the leadership challenges they experience. But everyday leaders often have to figure things out on their own. You may be able to help, but how do you get the conversation started?

One of the things I've come to learn over the years (many times the hard way) is that people are often sensitive about their leadership challenges. They won't want to talk about it if they sense you have an agenda (even if the agenda is just to be helpful). And most of the time, it doesn't matter how much or little you know. You have to be invited. Another thing I've learned is that, among other things, *leadership is a conversation*.

So instead of trying to solve folks' leadership challenges for them, I've simply focused on taking an interest in them as a person and inviting them into a natural conversation without having an agenda. I don't start with what I know, but with the other person's situation, as [Stephen Covey's fifth habit](#) "seek first to understand, then to be understood" advises. This way, whether or not I'm asked for my input, the other person at least knows that I care.

What I've included here is a list of my three favorite three leadership questions to ask, whether I'm talking to a client for the first time, to a friend or to a new acquaintance. Instead of inviting myself to solve their problems, these questions help me invite others to talk about themselves. Here they are:

### **What are you working on that you're really excited about?**

This is a great opening question because it engages the other person's positive emotions. People like talking about the things that get them excited. It underscores what is really working for them. No matter how challenging things may be, if there is something to get excited about, then hope is alive and well.

**What would you like to get to next when you're able?**

This is a great follow-up question because it speaks to the other person's foresight or planning process. Do they possess a clear direction or are they just hanging in there day-to-day? Are they likely to be even more excited down the road or have more concerns?

**What concerns are you experiencing right now?**

This is essentially a very mild and non-intrusive question about problems they may be facing. Instead of insinuating that they may have caused a problem, this question merely inquires about a feeling *they possess*. Everyone possesses concerns of some kind. Once you've engaged their positive emotions, it's much easier to talk about the slightly negative ones.

By the end of a short conversation based on these three questions, I have a great grasp what's working, what the plan is, what the challenges are, and what might not be working. In other words, I know all of the important things. This puts me in a great position to offer a solution I'm confident will help, a resource I trust, or to simply ask, "how can I support you?"

Theodore Roosevelt insightfully claimed that, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Will you join me in leadership conversations that are unmistakably others-centered?



# IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW MUCH YOU CARE



When I first starting studying leadership years ago, I'd find myself in conversations with friends and invariably a leadership challenge they were experiencing would come up. Sometimes, I'd even know how to solve it. I'd usually reference a book or an idea I had recently studied. Sometimes in my enthusiasm, I'd even go out and purchase the resource for them. Unfortunately, when I followed up a few weeks later to see what had happened, they had rarely bothered to look at what I had provided them.

Several years later, I got a consulting assignment to develop a plan to significantly improve an organization's corporate culture. In fact, I was told this was my chance to "really shape the project." I spent the next few months analyzing employee survey data, referencing strategic plans and carefully crafting a solution. Finally I got to present my plan to a senior client in a boardroom meeting and was thrilled when he accepted it. Now it was time to get to work. But much to my chagrin, a bigger problem soon emerged: no one wanted to take responsibility for seeing the plan through.

These experiences have taught and confirmed for me a simple but poignant lesson: you can't want something for other people more than they want it for themselves. It doesn't matter how much you care if they don't.

This seems to go against the nature of unconditional love and basic altruism. But as a leadership principle, it's proved to be true for me.

So what do you do *when you do care*? Here is the new approach I've learned to take:

### **Inquire About Priority**

When you talk, coach or consult with others, hopefully they trust you enough to share their challenges with you. I always try to ask three specific questions to quickly understand where another leader is coming from. But just like our own thoughts or mindless complaints, at any given time their concerns can range from short-term, immediate and inconsequential to long-term, significant and overwhelming. Not every problem is equal and requires an immediate solution - or even a solution at all. Instead of assuming that a person is looking for answers, try to get a sense of the priority the challenge brings. There is a big difference between a level 1 "would be nice to fix" challenge and a level 5 "front page headline" challenge.

## **Understand Commitment**

If I had to do the culture transformation project over again, I would have asked a simple question before I even got started: who from the client team will be the executive sponsor for this solution? The perfect plan with no commitment is no better than the worst plan. Not only will commitment help you manage your expectations, it will help the other party decide if a solution is worth pursuing in the first place.

## **Ask the Ultimate Question**

I mentioned above how I used to take the responsibility to try and solve the leadership challenges I encountered. I don't do this anymore. It was hard to resist at first, but I've learned a much better way. It comes in the form of an ultimate question:

*How would you like me to support you?*

This question almost works like magic. It leaves all the responsibility where it belongs: with the party who has a challenge. But it communicates that you are willing help. And it gives them a variety of choices to make: do they prefer to tackle this challenge on their own, would they like a helping hand or do they prefer to leave it be for another day.

[Jack Welch](#) said that if you don't like people, you need to find another job because leadership is 70% people development. If you're going to be a leader, you need to care about other people. But caring about them shouldn't supersede the principle of boundaries. For change to be possible, you can't care about others more than they care about themselves.



# HOW TO BECOME A LEADERSHIP EXPERT (PART 1)



At a social function recently I found myself in an engaging conversation with a psychologist and a fitness coach. We took turns sharing the interesting nuances of our professions. (For the record, I think psychologists and fitness experts are some of the most interesting people out there!) After my turn explaining the exciting ways I get to be involved in leadership as a consultant, coach and writer, one of my new friends commented that leadership seemed to go hand-in-hand with both psychology and fitness. I asked what he meant. He clarified that commitment to developing a healthy body and a sound mind are some of the first traits necessary to lead both oneself and others. “But,” he added, “I feel awkward presenting myself as a leadership expert. Who am I to say I know what leadership is and that people should listen to me?”

It was such a great question. Who are the real leadership experts anyway? Are they the people who manage Fortune 500 companies, hold elected positions, or write bestselling books? They certainly qualify, but are there others?

As I’ve said before, I believe everyone can be a leader because everyone has the ability to influence others. That means you! I would hate to see anyone stunt their own leadership potential because they felt unqualified. So I want to share some reasons you can be a leadership expert right where you are today.

### **You are most likely already a leadership expert to someone.**

Everyone has a [leadership community](#): people we’re responsible for, people we influence and people we look to for support. Some of our leadership communities are large and some are small. Most likely, they will grow over time. But regardless of the size of your leadership community or platform, it is almost certain that someone looks to you for influence. This means you are an “expert” to them. If you are a supervisor, your leadership expertise probably influences your subordinates more than another other person’s. The same can be said of your children if you are a parent. If you own or operate a business, at some level you are an expert to your customers. If you write or blog, you lead your readers. If you interact with, instruct, or teach others, you are an expert to them. Friends who ask your advice on anything consider you an expert enough to ask.

### **A title does not make a leader.**

Just because people don’t introduce you as a “leadership expert” doesn’t mean you can’t be one. John Maxwell says that *everything rises and falls on leadership*. That means no matter what title you hold or what profession you’re in, you are also in the leadership business. Very few people

are solely leadership specialists. Virtually all of the high profile leadership experts are considered as such because of knowledge, skill or experience in a certain industry or organization. So whether you are in psychology, fitness, or anything else, succeeding in that field makes you a leader. Taking the opportunity to share your knowledge or experience with others makes you an expert.

### **Leadership is a journey, not a destination.**

If no one could become a leadership expert until they figured out everything there is to know about leadership, we simply wouldn't have any leadership experts around. There's always so much more to learn! You'll never get it completely figured out. But that doesn't mean you can't be an expert at what you've learned so far. Then, as you continue to learn, you will be even more of an expert tomorrow than you are today. What you learn today can be the thing someone else learns tomorrow – provided you share it with them.

### **You're never too unqualified to set a good example – and that includes setting a good leadership example.**

If you don't remember any of the other points, remember this one. Sometimes we do need certain titles or certifications to make specific leadership decisions. But we are never too unqualified to set a good leadership example. At its pure foundation, leadership is about serving others – something anyone can do. Many times it's not particularly glamorous, but it's one of the only ways to truly earn the opportunity to influence.



# HOW TO BECOME A LEADERSHIP EXPERT

(PART 2)



You don't have to wait until later to be a leadership expert. You can begin to be one right here, right now, no matter who you are. If you've bought that idea, then let me share several practical ways you use your leadership expertise to benefit others.

### **Engage others in leadership conversations and listen well.**

Leadership isn't always about sharing what you know with others. In fact, that's never where you start. The better you become at encouraging others to talk about themselves, listening to them, and truly being able to understand their situation, it is simply uncanny how much you will grow as a leadership expert in their eyes. As we've already discussed, ask what is going well, what they hope to do next and what concerns them. Then ask how you can help.

### **Share what you've observed.**

No matter how much or little "real world" experience you have, you've observed leadership in action. You've seen things that have worked well and things that haven't worked at all. You've seen things that started out well but ended up poorly. *Always pay attention to the leadership mindsets, decision-making, and execution that happens around you.* Use those learning points to inform what you know about leadership, and then share them with others. ***Learning from the successes and failures of others is as free a leadership education as it gets.***

### **Share the things you've learned through experience.**

It's hard to learn how to lead if you never do it yourself. Therefore, your own experiences in leading others can be quickest and sharpest developmental points you get. It won't take long before you have a list of what works well and what doesn't work at all. Don't keep this to yourself! Help others go further faster by sharing what you've learned through experience. And incidentally, don't be afraid to share your mistakes – sometimes people relate to them much more than to your successes.

### **Share the ideas you've developed.**

As a student of leadership, you're probably on the lookout for ways to lead more effectively. At the beginning, all you have are untested theories. Keep it up and eventually you may discover the Higgs Boson of leadership. (Hey, it's possible!) But regardless of where you are in your progress, don't hesitate to share your ideas with others who could use them, whether it's over

coffee or by publishing a article. Even scientists have to start with a hypothesis in order find the solutions they are looking for. So just like a scientist, make sure to get your own peer-reviews. Even if your ideas aren't perfect, they are better than none, and often a great place to start.

### **Share what other experts are saying.**

Don't just develop your own ideas in isolation. Even the top leadership experts pull from what others have said about leadership. You can use the best of the incredible things you've found that others have said. Another perk is that you benefit from the association. On top of that, if people don't like what you've shared, it's not you they disagree with, it's the other person!

### **Subtly self-promote around areas of competence.**

Depending on your personality, you could be the most competent leadership expert available but still have a hard time tooting your own leadership horn. (Okay, I've never actually seen a leadership horn.) [Reconciling humility and leadership](#) can sometimes be difficult. Learn to subtly self-promote around your areas of competence. If you don't, not only do you miss a huge opportunity to increase your influence, but more importantly, those around you could end up following second-best (or just plain terrible) leadership ideas instead of yours.

### **Serve.**

It always bears repeating. You are never too unqualified to set a good example, and that includes a good leadership example. Leadership is about putting others first and working toward the success of something bigger than yourself. We cannot earn the opportunity to influence others unless we are willing to serve them – and this is an opportunity we always have.



# LISTEN YOUR WAY TO THE TOP



In recent years, we've seen a new emphasis on the art of listening. It can't be because listening is all of a sudden more important than it ever was before. Maybe the nature of work in the information age means the the cost of misunderstanding is higher. Or maybe our experts and trainers have been burned by poor listening and decided to produce more thought leadership on the topic.

At any rate, many studies demonstrate the importance of listening. We are apparently able to listen about 3 times faster than we can speak, but we also forget most of what we've heard. Listening been identified as one of the top qualities employers seek. And the ability to listen well has been tied to the ability to lead.

Everyone wants to be hired, to lead well, and to experience true understanding in the communication they engage in. So how can we learn to listen more effectively? There are many solutions for growth, but one of the first may be to understand the various levels of listening that exist. Here are five of the most common ones:

### **Passive Listening**

Passive listening occurs during virtually all of our waking moments. In passive listening, there is no difference between communication we are receiving and the white noise within hearing: traffic, hustle and bustle on the street, background music, the sound of nature, etc. The reason we listen passively is often that we are speaking, concentrating, or listening to something else. No communication with any of these passive elements occurs unless we stop to give our full attention.

### **Selective Listening**

Selective listening occurs when we tune in and out of our present circumstances or conversations. If you are in the car waiting for the traffic report on the radio, you likely let your attention span wander until the report comes on. We often do this with people as well. Picture yourself at a dinner party. When the conversation either holds no interest for you or is not in your area of expertise or knowledge, you drift. But when it comes around to a topic where you have an opinion, you are much more likely to stay engaged. This can often occur in one-on-one conversations as well. If you've ever tried to talk with someone who was looking at their cell phone at the same time, you were likely the recipient of selective listening.

## **Self-Focused Listening**

Self-focused listening listens for meaning, but only as it applies to one's self. If you have been in a work meeting where new upcoming changes were being communicated for the first time, it's likely you were applying self-focused listening. You considered what the implications meant for you and whether they were positive or negative. If you see a news clip talking about changes to the tax codes, you probably apply self-focused listening. The same thing often happens in one-on-one conversations. Suppose you have a friend who tells you about his recent heart attack. If your reaction is to start figuring out if you have the same symptoms, you are engaged in self-focused listening.

## **Solution-Focused Listening**

Solution-focused listening can require immense amounts of skill but also be the most irritating of all the levels. It occurs whenever we simultaneously listen and begin to form our response to what is being communicated. In that sense, we quickly translate the input (what we hear) into new output (what we say). It requires a high level of engagement. Solution-focused listening is a must for situations where it's important to think on your feet, such as public debates. But it can create a lot of misunderstanding or disillusionment in more intimate conversations. When a communicator is not seeking a solution, offering one can be very abrasive, especially since it is likely to be inaccurate, (based on limited understanding), inadequate (the listener doesn't have the same circumstances or resources), or inappropriate (the communicator isn't seeking a solution at all).

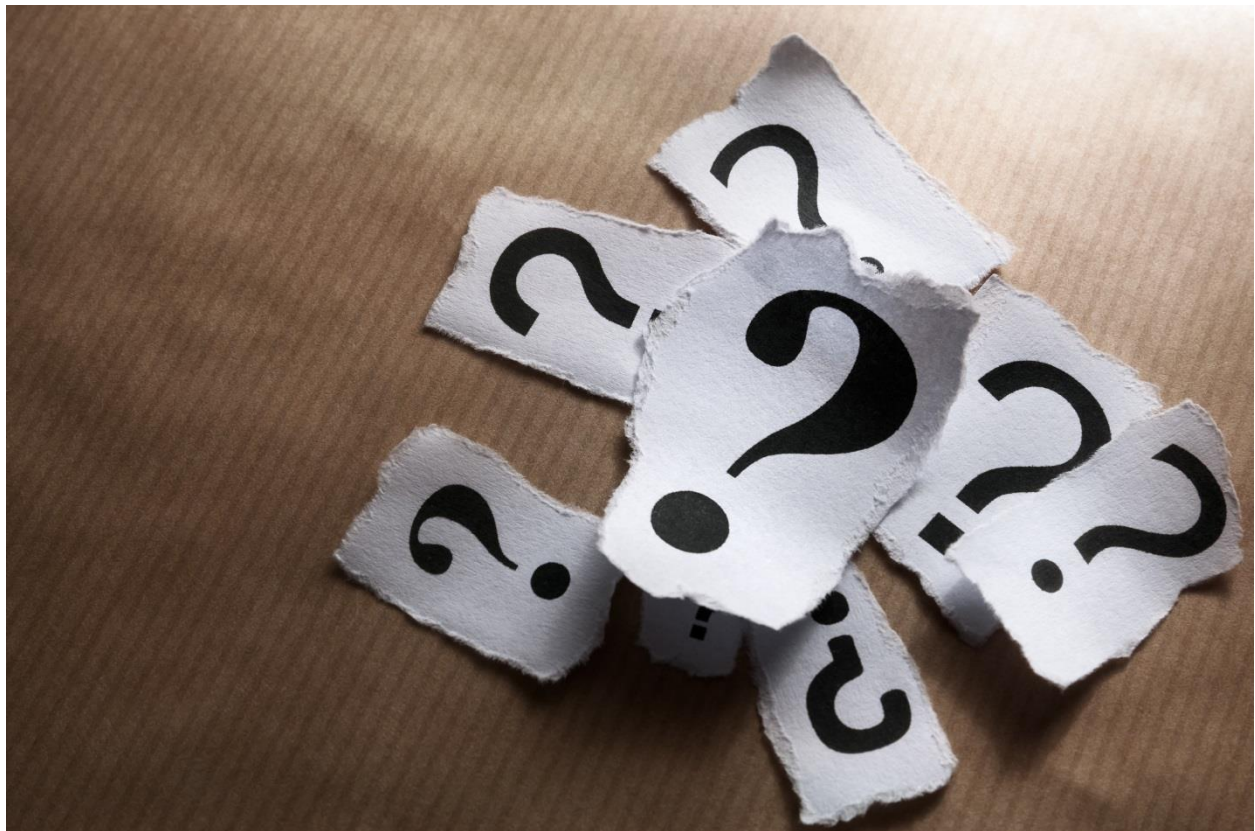
## **Active Listening**

Active listening is the highest level. It is listening for the purpose of determining what the communication really means. Stephen Covey calls this "empathetic listening." Other experts refer to it as "intuitive listening." Since the listener "turns off" the voice in their head that is crafting a response, all of the focus is on the communicator. Folks who listen actively don't assume they have the complete picture once the other person stops talking. They repeat back or ask if their understanding is accurate. Then their curiosity allows them to probe deeper in order to understand more fully. The result is that once understanding truly occurs, future communication and solutions are likely to be much more effective.

There they are: five levels of listening. Some come naturally. Others require lots of discipline. And if you want to grow your influence, active listening is far and away the most effective option.

# HOW TO ASK GREAT QUESTIONS

**NM**



What if I told you you don't need to have a great solution for every single problem that comes your way in order to be a competent and mature leader? Well that's exactly what I'm about to propose. Hopefully it's as refreshing to you as it is to me. And the best part about it is that it can dramatically improve your leadership influence as well.

## Why Ask Questions?

Many leaders hesitate to ask questions because they fear it will make them appear weak. Leaders are supposed to have the all the answers, right? Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), the world we live in has become so complex that it is simply not possible for *anyone* to have all the answers, no matter how tenured he or she is. But there are all kinds of benefits to asking questions, regardless of how much you know. Here are a few:

**Great questions lead to great discoveries.** Author and consultant Bobb Biehl likes to say, "If you ask profound questions, you get profound answers. If you ask shallow questions, you get shallow answers. If you ask no questions, you get no answers at all."

**Great questions are the anecdote to advice.** Our own advice can be great sometimes, but lousy or misinformed other times. Giving advice is easy and costs little, at least on the surface. In organizational settings however, a leader's advice can quickly get translated into a "direct order" with no room for further discussion.

**Great questions develop the critical thinking skills of others.** If you're a leader, the critical thinking skills of your team will likely determine how far you go. When you give answers, you get followers. When you give questions (and coach through the process of determining the best answer), you develop leaders.

**Great questions delegates responsibility.** At the end of the day, if you're the person everyone comes to with every problem, your leadership bar will remain low. Leaders need followers who can solve problems on their own. And keep in mind that a person is always more motivated to act on and own a solution he's come up with himself than to follow the guidance of someone else.

## What do Great Questions Look Like?

It's true that most leaders don't become great at asking questions until they become great at listening (something that should cause each of us to pause and consider). There's a learning process for everything. But in the meantime, let's consider some examples of what great, powerful questions look like.

**Leading vs. Non-Leading Questions:** A leading question proposes a solution in the form of a question. A non-leading question opens up the possibility for multiple solutions. Consider the differences between these two examples.

- Leading: "What would happen if you tried having training meetings on Tuesdays?"
- Non-Leading: "What are some different options for conducting training?"

**Closed vs. Open-ended Questions:** Closed questions require a "yes" or "no" answer while open-ended questions can have many outcomes.

- Closed: "Have you thought about creating a new task force?"
- Open-ended: "What are some ways you could approach this challenge?"

**Advice vs. Possibility Questions:** An advice question is basically just advice in the form of a question.

- Advice: "Couldn't you address that situation at this afternoon's meeting?"
- Possibility: "When (or how) could you address that situation?"

**Why vs. "Tell Me More" Questions:** Why questions can be abrasive and feel accusatory, regardless of intent. No one likes being on trial. Using a "tell me more" approach opens up the dialogue.

- Why: "Why did you decide to ship only seven orders?"
- Tell me more: "Can you tell me more about the thought process for this shipment?"

Actually asking great questions instead of giving advice is probably one of the hardest disciplines leaders encounter. I know by personal experience and from conducting training with seasoned leaders. The first step is to stop yourself from giving unsolicited advice. The next step is to respond with a question. The next step is to make that question a powerful one. My encouragement is to give it a try and actually stick with it. Ask someone to give you feedback on your question-asking ability. It'll be slow at first, but eventually start becoming natural. And the leaders you serve will develop right along with you.

# WHAT COACHING LEADERS DO DIFFERENTLY



The term “coaching” has been trending as a corporate buzzword for some time now. We’re all familiar with athletics coaches. But when someone advises us to find a coach to learn a new skill or solve problem, it’s usually in a professional context. What does it actually mean to coach someone?

The interesting thing about coaching is how dynamic of a leadership role it is. Supervisors can coach. Mentors can coach. Peers can coach. Executive coaches can coach (obviously). Just about anyone can coach at one time or another.

Whether you have the opportunity to be coached or to be a coach, let’s take a look at six things coaching leaders do that set them apart.

### **Coaches Don’t Set the Agenda**

Leaders are proactive people and that means setting the agenda in many situations. But a coaching leader is most concerned with the developmental process of the leader he or she is supporting. That means allowing the him to take responsibility for determining the desired outcomes – and then working together to create a strategy to reach them.

### **Coaches Focus on the Future**

Counselors often focus on understanding or interpreting the past. Coaches, on the other hand, focus on helping to create the future. The reason is that the past never changes. Coaching leaders don’t get sidetracked wading through past experiences of others. They help them focus on the future they want to create.

### **Coaches Listen**

Listening is hard work. If you don’t think so, practice active listening the next time someone walks into your office. In most conversations, we either don’t pay attention, listen with preconceived biases or simultaneously try to come up with solutions while the other person is talking. Coaching leaders have mastered the art of listening for the sake of understanding so that the dialogue takes place on the same page.

## Coaches Ask Questions

Questions are the anecdote to unsolicited (or in some case, solicited) advice. It's not that advice is bad, it's just that advice often short-circuits the development process in others. Following advice is a lot easier than exercising critical thinking. And it's also easier to avoid taking responsibility if the advice doesn't work. Even when they have great advice, coaching leaders start by asking powerful, open-ended questions to give the other person the chance to come up with their own best solution.

## Coaches are Action-Oriented

A nice conversation is nice, but ultimately fruitless. An action-oriented conversation drives change. Coaching leaders demonstrate value to others by helping them take their ideas and translate them into action items. They do this by helping them make a decision or choose a direction among multiple options. Another way is by helping to craft [SMART goals](#) to clarify next steps.

## Coaches Give Responsibility

Taking responsibility is Leadership 101. Giving responsibility is Leadership 102. Think about the difference. When we take responsibility, we are developing ourselves. When we [help someone else take responsibility](#), we are working to develop them. It's often easier to take responsibility for outcomes by providing quick direction and then moving on to the next thing. Giving responsibility – and working with someone along the way – takes more time and more effort, but that's where true leadership growth happens.

If you want to help others succeed, you've chosen a noble pursuit. But that's not enough. You've got to work at it – and it's hard work! But the reward is always worth it – especially when you find that the leaders you've coached start coaching others.



# THE POWER OF BELIEVING THE BEST



Several years ago I had the pleasure of participating in a 16 week leadership coaching training course with the Center for Coaching Excellence. Since that time I've had the pleasure of coaching a number of business owner or organizational leaders. I enjoyed the insight and techniques I was taught, but the most significant thing I came away with was the relational effectiveness of CCE's core values for coaching. For anyone wanting to influence others, I think it represents the bottom line.

The value that stood out the most was "believing the best" about other people. Think about that one for a minute. What does believing the best actually mean? How often when we talk or relate with someone do we believe or assume the absolute best about the other person? What could happen if we did? What would it take to get there?

I believe there are three areas we can all improve that will make the difference.

## **How We View Ourselves**

It's impossible to believe the best about anyone else if we are unable to believe the best about ourselves. Think about it - it's on the inside that our beliefs are formed and held. Our standard usually starts with us. Zig Ziglar says, "It's impossible to consistently behave in a manner inconsistent with how we see ourselves. We can do very few things in a positive way if we feel negative about ourselves." If we're going to believe the best about anyone, we need to start with the way we think about, talk about, and believe about the person we see in the mirror everyday.

## **How We View Others**

Joyce Landorf Heatherley gives a simple illustration in her small book [\*Balcony People\*](#) that spoke volumes to me. She differentiates between two types of people: people who evaluate and people who affirm. We've all been around people who tend to critique our words, actions, and even our existence as a person. It's like we are being compared to some unspoken ideal or standard. Nobody appreciates this. It's near impossible to stay authentic and positive around people who always meet us with scrutiny. Take affirmers on the other hand. These are people convinced that we are up to something good and would love to hear about it. They are incredibly interested in our lives and often take the opportunity to suggest that we are capable of much more than we think. In short, they always believe the best.

Here's the word picture that Heatherley uses. She calls the affirmers "balcony people" and the

evaluators “basement people.” Basement people (whether they realize it or not) are always pulling us down to their level. Ultimately, they fear the worst about themselves. On the other hand, balcony people stand tall and lift you up (where they are). They are smiling down on us encouraging us to press on. Sometimes they are even hollering and cheering!

## **How We Relate and Communicate With Others**

So how can we become balcony people and show that we believe the best about others? Samuel Johnson once commented that, "the applause of a single human being is of great significance." Wouldn't it be unfortunate to never take the opportunity to significantly influence the lives of others? Here are some approaches we can use:

***Be proactive.*** Speak up. Any word of encouragement is better than no word at all. Your first attempts may be awkward, but each new time you will become more articulate in communicating that you believe the best.

***Be specific.*** This goes beyond merely [catching someone else doing something right](#). When you notice someone doing something especially well, instead of just stating the obvious, point out *what about* the particular action you noticed and the benefit it brought to you or someone else.

***Assume and affirm noble motives.*** When you encourage someone, make sure to place the most emphasis on how it reflects a part of their character, not just their actions. Don't just appeal to the noble motives, like Dale Carnegie said. Call them out when you see them.

Embracing the value of believing the best can potentially accomplish a number of things. It develops discipline to see the positive instead of the negative. It increases our capacity to genuinely care about others. And in many circumstances, when we are "heartily in our approbation," others are inspired to reach for greater heights than they previously thought possible.



# ABOUT NATHAN MAGNUSON



I began writing as a kid with a monthly editorial *Nate's News* which was sent to family and friends. Since then I've experimented with various articles, newsletters, blog posts and book projects. Maybe someday I'll land on the bestsellers list. You can follow my writing journey on my website [NathanMagnuson.com](http://NathanMagnuson.com).

Somehow “leadership” got into my system as a college senior and I haven't been able to shake it since. In addition to writing, I consult, coach, train and speak on many of the topics in this ebook and online. It's been a privilege to contribute to many different types of organizations in many different industries and places. I do my best to read the best leadership material I can find, attend various events and meet leaders who are doing a great job so my ideas stay fresh. And of course there's no substitute for gaining ongoing personal experiences.

When I'm not taking leadership quite so seriously, you might catch me on a run, tinkering on the piano, playing softball or riding my motorcycle. Or agonizing over my Kansas City sports teams.

The best way to keep in touch with me is to subscribe to my website at [NathanMagnuson.com/subscribe](http://NathanMagnuson.com/subscribe) or follow me on Twitter at [@NathanMagnuson](https://twitter.com/NathanMagnuson). You can also [contact me](http://NathanMagnuson.com/contact) directly from my website – I'd love to hear from you!

I keep saying it because it's always true: there's so much work to do. Together we can make a difference.



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