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# The Generous Leader

7 Ways to Give of Yourself for Everyone's Gain

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## Leadership

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### Take-Aways

- Become a “generous leader.”
- Connecting by communicating.
- Listen to others’ points of view.
- Include everyone in the conversation.
- Promote greater diversity at the highest executive level.
- Identify, cultivate, and develop talent.
- Small gestures make a big difference to the people who work with you.
- Develop your better self.

## Recommendation

When high-level leaders behave in cold-blooded, cruel, or vindictive ways, that ethos dangerously trickles down to society at every level, including the ordinary workplace, writes Joe Davis, managing director and senior partner at the Boston Consulting Group. Employees who remain bruised by the struggles of the pandemic, especially those at lower income levels, are now aware that they have choices about where they work and under what circumstances. Today, leaders in politics or business must practice compassion and empathy to form genuine connections with the people they lead. Davis offers both a solid leadership philosophy and a practical guide to becoming a generous leader.

## Summary

### Become a “generous leader.”

Traditionally, leadership is top-down and derives from deliverables. The work each company counts as a deliverable depends on the organization and its goals. For example, corporations seek to maximize shareholder returns. Governments aspire to enable growth and prosperity. Charitable organizations strive to increase fundraising, so they can fulfill their philanthropic purposes. Under the transactional leadership model, leaders push to reach the top of their sector with excellent products or services and a ruthless focus on efficiency and profit.

*“I want to be very clear that I am not defining the generous leader as one who offers their employees an incredible pay package.”*

The new, emergent form of “generous leadership” doesn’t have anything to do with economic generosity. Generous leaders seek to benefit and develop the people who work for them. Such a development might enable someone to get a promotion or find a new career direction. Generous leaders promote their employees’ personal and professional growth, seeking to benefit them and their organization honestly and transparently.

### Connecting by communicating.

Communicate with your employees and colleagues. People in a business context usually focus on accurately transmitting information, such as data. However, you can convey important information while establishing an emotional connection. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, author Joe Davis felt the need to connect with the people who worked for him – all 7,000 of them. He spent nearly an hour crafting a personal note to send to every employee. He worried that his note was too personal – after all, he knew nothing about most of the people he was writing to – but they responded with warmth.

*“That experience, among others, led me to firmly believe that the generosity of real and humanized communication at work is a conduit for true collaboration.”*

Emotionally deep communication helps create a positive, productive work environment, and it can connect leaders to their colleagues and employees. This kind of “generative environment” helps people feel that they have something valuable to contribute to the group and enables team members to trust one another.

Typically, leaders try to keep the person they are at work partitioned from their day-to-day private selves. But if you leave your ordinary self at home when you head to work, you’ll end up with shallow, work-related relationships with your colleagues and employees, mediated by data and numbers. This is a loss for many reasons. For instance, it thwarts engagement, since employees who feel emotionally connected to their leaders and their organizations are more engaged in their work.

People thrive and make an effort when they believe their leaders and companies care about them. That makes establishing personal connections meaningful and important. To ensure that your colleagues or staff members feel connected to you, always be responsive. People want their leaders to pay attention to them.

### **Listen to others’ points of view.**

Generous leaders give people space in which to articulate how they see the world. They take the trouble to understand other people’s perspectives. Listening and understanding exhibit your respect for the other person and make people more likely to reveal their thinking. Extending that level of understanding breaks down hierarchical, job-related roles and establishes a time and context for people to share their experiences and perspectives. The benefits of understanding other people’s viewpoints include growing and expanding your worldview.

*“As you ask and try to understand others’ point of view, be attuned to whatever information, facts and insight they can offer that can be added to what you do know.”*

In a business setting that prioritizes quantitative deliverables, people often fail to acknowledge the value of understanding one another. The best managers exhibit at least these two core traits: They excel at asking questions and at listening to the answers.

### **Include everyone in the conversation.**

Include your colleagues and employees in your company’s discussions by inviting them to collaborate. Such deliberate inclusion acknowledges the importance of other perspectives and the different ways people experience the world. In this context, “inclusion” means everyone. Genuinely inclusive discussions bring in participants from all income, skill, and education levels, from unskilled workers to senior executives. They also include people from ethnically diverse backgrounds, life histories and experiences.

*“The burden is on you to ensure your tables are inclusive, which means you may need to expand your mindset, humility, confidence and patience; this is the mindset of a generous leader.”*

For better results for your individual employees and your organization as a whole, include a diversity of people in corporate-wide conversations and encourage people to engage from their unique points of view.

Done properly, including people in broader conversations inspires and motivates everyone. A young financial analyst at Boston Consulting Group (BCC) found his approach to work transformed when Davis, a senior executive, invited him to attend meetings with far more senior employees. Being present for these high-level discussions gave the young employee a sense of how he fit into the larger company and how his role was pivotal to the organization. He could recognize that his work has significance.

Despite the broad value of including diverse employees and colleagues at every level, “blind spots” often hold corporate cultures back. Many leaders are more comfortable with a straightforward, top-down approach to decision-making than they are with a more lateral, inclusive strategy.

Other issues that might prevent leaders from adopting a more inclusive approach could include anxiety about being challenged, unease about how to interact with people who aren’t typically at their meetings, and reluctance to introduce confusion and disorder into meetings that might compromise their effectiveness. One way to practice inclusion, for example, is to create short-term work groups to address a specific problem or to convene occasional regular “update” meetings that include employees who don’t usually attend routine sessions.

### **Promote greater diversity at the highest executive level.**

Today, more than half of the managers at *Fortune* 500 companies are women, compared to only 25% two decades ago. Still, more than 75% of the people in executive positions are white males. Many groups remain underrepresented in the corporate hierarchy. Only 6% of executives are people of color and only 1% of CEOs are Black.

*“Leaders who want to lead from the heart must recognize the ongoing disparity between the makeup of our executive leadership and our population as a whole.”*

Strong, generous leaders who are engaged and compassionate can have a profound impact on the lives of their employees and on their company’s culture. Such leaders commit to realizing an organization’s diversity goals and are willing to address any structural discrimination against groups based on race, religion, gender, and sexual identity.

A generous leader seizes opportunities to support others. Standing up for your colleagues to promote workplace diversity requires you to lift all voices to the same level of relevance and to make time and space for other people even when doing so doesn’t serve your immediate self-interest.

The great majority of working people find that having allies at work helps their careers. A BCC study in Canada found that people who have an ally at work are also significantly more likely to think that discrimination does not affect their workplace. Research shows that diverse companies also garner higher financial returns.

### **Identify, cultivate, and develop talent.**

People want to be good at what they do – and want to be valued and respected for it. People also want to get better at their work through effort and experience and to embrace a trajectory that leads to mastery. A leader

can identify talented people and, with encouragement and helpful direction, help them cultivate and develop their abilities.

*“The gift of recognition is taking a real interest in someone’s work, paying attention to detail, setting your own ego aside, and celebrating another’s effort and achievement. You must really see what they achieved and genuinely want them to build on what they do best.”*

Leaders need to be attentive and sensitive to those they work with and to have the confidence and courage to communicate honestly. Giving your employees positive feedback for work well done has tangible results. For example, it can help people feel respected, take pride in their work and attempt to achieve even more in the future. Generous leaders expend time and effort to identify and develop their employees’ abilities. When you commit to developing another person’s abilities, you also commit to getting to know that person more closely.

In 2020 and 2021, a survey polled 9,000 people around the world about the character traits they most appreciated in their leaders. The top characteristic listed was the ability to recognize value in employees. The second was the ability to “coach” employees and help develop their skills. If you are going to acquire and exercise the leadership skills necessary to help your employees expand their abilities, you also need to develop strong relationships with them.

Provide useful, positive feedback or “reinforcement,” rather than constant criticism. Such feedback should help people take advantage of their strengths. Make your feedback precise, straightforward, and honest, always keeping in mind that feedback should fuel improvement and growth.

### **Small gestures make a big difference to the people who work with you.**

The process of identifying, acknowledging and developing people’s abilities unfolds with individuals and whole teams over time. Not all gestures need to be large and encompassing. Sometimes, relatively small efforts can make an enormous difference. Precise, personal interactions indicate that you are paying attention to the people you work with and genuinely care about them. Sometimes modest outreach can have a lifelong impact.

*“These actions create a lasting bond, even coming from the smallest old-school symbolic gesture, and they convey a thoughtfulness and generosity of spirit that people remember and appreciate.”*

Small gestures add up – often to something big – over time. When you address people, individually, at an important moment, you make them feel valued as a vital part of their work community. As a generous leader, your challenge is to determine how to incorporate small gestures into your ordinary work routine. After all, you’re busy, and you might wonder whether such bits of attention make much difference. Research suggests that small gestures are worth the trouble. They make people happy, reduce their stress, and increase their life satisfaction.

## Develop your better self.

Just as generous leaders help develop other people's abilities, they can bring about change within themselves. For example, you can weave your personal and professional lives together, applying the principles of generous leadership to your daily life to foster a deeper, more solid and grounded sense of self and warmer relationships with those around you. And as you develop a more grounded self, you become even better equipped to create both a home and a workplace culture in which people thrive.

*“Employees want to be seen as more than people who accomplish objectives — rather, as whole individuals. And they want to work with you to contribute to a better world — one that is larger than you, the people on your team or your organization overall.”*

How can you, as a leader, evolve in a positive direction that benefits you, your team and your company? Making changes and moving past old ways of doing things isn't easy. First, get out of your own way, and don't let analytical thinking paralyze you. On your journey as a generous leader, don't erect a wall between yourself and others – allow yourself to be vulnerable. Acknowledge that you're not always right and have a lot to learn. Recognize that you can meet your professional goals only within a team, and you want that team to be as cohesive, communicative, and inclusive as possible.

## About the Author

**Joe Davis** is a managing director and senior partner at the Boston Consulting Group.



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