Your First Leadership Job

Introduction

BECOMING THE VERY BEST FIRST-TIME LEADER

Congratulations! You’re now in charge. Perhaps it’s your first time as a leader, or maybe you want to fine-tune your skills. Either way, you’ve begun one of the most rewarding chapters of your career. But, like many beginnings, the first few years can be challenging. Fortunately, you don’t have to tackle this challenge on your own. Your First Leadership Job gives you practical advice straight from others who have walked in your shoes. Not only does it include dozens of tools to ensure your success, it’s also based on the authors’ and DDI’s extensive experience and research, which ultimately have led to the development of millions of leaders around the world. In fact, a quarter-million leaders will be developed this year alone via DDI training.

Your First Leadership Job is divided into two sections. Part 1 introduces the concept of catalyst leader—one who sparks energy, passion, and commitment in others. Your transition to catalyst leader is a major step in your leadership journey. This book provides essential tips to put you on the catalyst path. Ultimately, leadership is about the many conversations—frequent, clear, authentic, and occasionally difficult—that you will have daily. Your First Leadership Job builds awareness of the fundamental skills you’ll come to rely on to make every one of these interactions successful.

Part 2 devotes 13 chapters to critical core leadership competencies, including coaching for success, hiring the best employees, turning dreaded appraisals into discussions that propel performance, and handling difficult employees. It also includes a chapter for first-time female leaders.

Look at Your First Leadership Job as an indispensable companion to becoming an awesome leader—one who will make a positive, lasting impact on your team, family, and career. Visit www.YourFirstLeadershipJob.com to learn more.

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Foreword

Leadership makes a difference.
You might not know that now. But you will.

I’ve been in banking my entire career, primarily with Fifth Third Bancorp, which operates in a dozen states in the Midwest and Southeast. Banking is an interesting business for many reasons, but one of them is this: We don't make anything. Our product is exactly like our competitors'—We borrow it for the most part, and it all looks the same. It's green, rectangular, and has the same relative value on a given day. In order to stand out in a crowded field, the focus needs to be on how we deliver that value—100 percent through our people.

I believe that leadership happens all around you. It happens in the tone you set and in the many, many conversations you have to accomplish one simple, but complex thing—bring people into the vision of the outcome you need.

But most people don't think about those things until they get their first leadership job. You're good at being an expert, and then you get promoted for your expertise into a completely different job. And so you experiment, because no one ever tells you—except for DDI—the right or wrong way to get the most commitment from the people around you.

Let me rewind the clock a bit. My first big leadership job was what my organization called a “broadening” responsibility—an assignment that addresses a challenge a company is having and that also helps a leader grow and develop. One day I was called in to see my boss's boss, the Vice Chairman, and I found myself being asked to take on a division in which I had no expertise. None. I was being asked to leave my job in human resources to run operations for the much larger holding company. And I would be leading folks who were highly technical, very proficient, and very experienced. I was in my mid-thirties, with three kids under 10 at home. My new reports were, in many cases, 20 years older. It was a challenging division in need of some significant change and facing big new performance goals.

I talked to some people who knew more about the challenges facing the operations division. I was worried, but I took the job. I knew going in that I didn't have a quarter of the knowledge of the people who had been there for years. And, I was going to need all of them to teach me.
That was the moment I knew I needed to rely on leadership.

We did a number of things, all of them focused on gaining people’s trust. We began something new, what is now commonly called “one down” or “two downs.” We would regularly gather in large groups (some of the teams had 15 or 20 people), and I would encourage managers to talk about what they had accomplished. They could, in essence, brag to me. And then I would use those accomplishments to talk about what we could do if we all had the same vision. It sounds simple, but they were powerful moments. These conversations supplied the backbone for the kind of trust, vision-building, and engagement that, over time, helped everyone see how we could be recognized in the organization for the magnitude of the changes we were contemplating. I created a parade and gave them the opportunity to jump in front of it.

In the end, we accomplished one of the most significant changes in our company’s history. We centralized operations, cut costs to the tune of 40 to 50 percent, improved service-level agreements and delivery, and boosted customer satisfaction.

So, now it’s your turn. What will you do with the opportunity you’ve just been given?

I learned the concept of catalyst leadership from DDI early in my career, and this book will help you learn it too. You’ll find out how catalysts can ignite a flame in others, gain their commitment, and drive productivity. Now, I’ve never met a perfect supervisor. I’ve never been one. Leadership takes work. But, the upside is tremendous—helping people achieve their goals and dreams.

We all approach leadership from different angles. But if you focus on the goal of catalyst leadership and put it in practice every day, then you’ll bring out the best in others in surprising ways. You’ll bring it about in yourself as well. And you’ll love what you do.

Kevin T. Kabat
Vice Chairman and CEO at Fifth Third Bancorp
Preface

When we decided to write this book, we wanted to look at leadership through a fresh lens. After all, the last time we did a Google search, there were 392,000,000 entries for leadership books—double the number of cookbooks! There are leadership books written by or about the world’s greatest thinkers (Confucius, Machiavelli, and Gandhi). And thousands of books on leadership have been published by dozens of management experts (Peter Drucker, John Kotter, Tom Peters, and Jim Collins, to name a few). All offer great stories, opinions, and practices of what constitutes the DNA of great leadership.

Our book, however, differs from all the rest in three respects.

1. **It has a singular mission:** to give you the practical advice and tools to succeed as a first-time, first-line leader. The first section features nine chapters that will help you better understand what it takes to become an awesome leader—one we call a catalyst who sparks action in others. And it focuses on a set of fundamental skills—we call them *interaction skills*—that will serve as the foundation for every one of the dozens of conversations you’ll have with others every day. These are skills you can use, not only in the workplace, but also at home and in your community. The second section provides advice on a host of diverse, vital skills—we call them *mastery and leadership skills*—that you’ll need to call upon in your new role. These include coaching, selecting new employees, and promoting a culture of engagement, among others.

2. **The content of this book is based on unparalleled experience.** For the past four decades, our company, DDI (Development Dimensions International), has helped clients develop over 250,000 leaders every year, in 26 countries, across thousands of organizations. Nothing we say in this book is based on whim or theory. It comes from real-time experience—a lot of it.

3. **We carry our experience one step further to evidence.** DDI has helped hundreds of clients demonstrate the relationship between our leadership practices and principles with metrics that matter: improved skills, higher engagement, better safety records, and gains in productivity. We don’t rest on our laurels; we rest on our proof.

Whether you read our book in detail or focus on those chapters that are the most relevant for you, we’ll have accomplished our goal if you use three or four pieces of the advice we’ve provided. You know, in many ways you can look at this book as a hybrid between a typical leadership book and a cookbook. We provide the kitchen-tested recipes, but it’s up to you to do the cooking.

∗Trey and Rich∗
Part 1: Catalyst Leadership

Whether you are new to the role or have some experience with it, the road to being an effective leader is rife with challenges and joys. Catalyst leaders represent the gold standard—energetic, supportive, forward-thinking mentors who spark action in others. The first part of this book presents a clear picture of what catalyst leadership is really about. There are dozens of tips to make your journey as smooth as possible.

We also introduce the concept of leadership brand. Just like a company's brand makes it a distinct entity, your brand can cement your standing as an effective leader. And, there are clearly identifiable practices associated with your leadership brand that separate truly effective leaders from average or poor ones. So, in this section of the book we'll help you create a new leadership mind-set and get results for you and your team. Additionally, we provide guidance on how you can flawlessly execute in the face of competing priorities.

Finally, we share some secrets for making every interaction a successful one. As a leader, you have dozens of conversations with others every single day. Your ability to connect with them—by making people feel valued, heard, motivated, trusted, and involved—will go a long way toward making you a perfect leader!
Great leadership takes place every day, in the smallest of ways.

1

NOW YOU’RE A LEADER
The Journey Begins

So, now you’re in charge.

When you accepted your first leadership job—or even seriously considered putting your hat in the ring—you took one of the most important and courageous steps in your career. You’re a boss! You’re going places.

How’s it going? Are you sure? How do you know?

Chances are, you’re perched precariously on an emotional range from “awkward excitement” to “abject terror” and back again, with a constant baseline of “stressed.” This shouldn’t come as a surprise; you have a lot to prove. (Or, if you’ve been in the position for a while, you might have a lot to repair.) For over 45 years, our firm, DDI, has been an innovator in the field of talent management, which is a fancy way of saying that we help companies transform the way they hire, promote, and develop leaders. This book is based on what we’ve learned from developing more than eight million frontline leaders over four decades, in virtually every country and industry around the world. First-time leaders who transition well are more able to make a positive, lasting impact on their teams, families, and careers. Our approach helps people become engaged and more productive more quickly.

Speaking of stress, our research shows that a transition to a leadership position is among life’s most challenging adjustments, ranking somewhere between personal illness and managing teenagers. In fact, only one in three leaders in our
first transitional study felt they were effective in handling transitional challenges. For first-timers, the stress can be particularly acute. You are taking on not only a new type of role, but also one that exists in a business environment defined by fast-moving challenges: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. And you’re in a unique position where your performance—or lack thereof—will determine whether your team will thrive or stall (along with your career). Are you as good as you need to be? Do you know what it means to get the best work from the people on your team? Will they hate you on sight? How will you determine if you’re on track before it’s too late?

The transition you’re experiencing is profound enough for us to make a bold claim: Nobody comes to his first leadership position knowing everything he needs to know to succeed. When you get into truly unfamiliar emotional territory, your instinct might be to throw up your hands and try to do everything yourself. Perhaps you’ll micromanage your team, take critical assignments away from direct reports as deadlines loom, or fail to give the kind of feedback that will help your team members do their jobs.

But let us make another bold claim: You’ll find few greater rewards in your career than on the leadership journey you’re about to begin. What you learn will transform the rest of your life in many wonderful ways. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is what you’ll discover about your own ability to grow and be effective in the world. We believe that over time, the skills you’ll learn can help you communicate more clearly with the people you love, become a more active member of your community, and make a difference for the causes you care about. This is a journey that leads to a happier life.

*When I first got the job, there was a lot of pressure,* Karen told us. She became a leader by surprise and default when her own supervisor took ill and needed an extended leave. Karen was an expert telecommunications engineer, but she suddenly had 30 more-senior people to manage and a big project to finish. *I could tell that there was a lot of skepticism about me. And there already had been many failures in the project, like when a contractor failed to deliver.* But Karen was able to find effective ways to get the work done—on time!—through the people around her, and has earned the respect of her peers. *It has been the most gratifying thing! I was able to help them work well, and I still felt like myself. And we’ve been able to deliver a lot, and move the project to the next level. And now the whole company knows who our team is.* Best of all, she now looks at her life differently. *I learned I could be a real leader. I can make a contribution in lots of places.*
Joe, a supervisor in a landscaping business, learned that deep satisfaction comes from being a key part of helping others reach their true potential. The very thing that is satisfying to me is watching the guys under me grow, he said. Joe had been unable to find a job in teaching, and instead worked his way up in a national landscaping company. Many of his direct reports were untrained, non-native English speakers, and their work could be a gateway to better things for them. That’s when he realized that he had a role to play in their lives. I saw the other supervisors, and all they want to do is show up every day, do the work, and go home. But Joe saw an opportunity to share what he knew about leadership and business and to develop his team in a deeper way. I got dirty with them in the field, worked with them side by side. They began to trust me. And now I’m in a position to really watch them develop. Now I see that leadership goes back to the very reason I was interested in teaching in the first place.

The real opportunity of leadership, as we see it, is a deeply human one. But precisely because humans are involved, lots of things can go wrong. As an example of the type of challenge you may encounter in your first leadership role, meet John, 42, an urban planner. I got ambushed! he says of his most problematic direct report. John ran a loosely knit team of eight, but it was one young engineer who derailed him. And he didn’t see it coming. She gave me no feedback of any kind. And then called me the worst boss in the world. It was John’s first attempt at leading a team—something he knew pretty well. Or, so he thought. He’d worked well as an individual contributor on interdisciplinary teams, and like most people, had strong feelings about what a leader should and shouldn’t do.

At first he was hands-off, figuring that everyone liked to work independently. I don’t like working for people who are looking over my back all the time. So my approach was “you go do your thing, and I’ll come to you when there’s a problem.” When he felt the need to give input, I came in and took over, and it seemed like micromanaging. But nobody said anything to me. Until his six-month performance review. I was completely shocked when my boss told me what she [the young engineer] bad said. Her complaints: John didn’t set priorities, didn’t pay attention to her work, took projects away from her with no explanation, and focused only on his own work. John realized too late that his hands-off style had backfired. And waiting for her to tell him what she needed out of a boss? I was told that because I was more senior; I should have known better. And I think that’s right.
In our experience, it takes about 6 to 12 months for a new leader to hit stride or hit the skids. And that's exactly what happened to John. And once a major problem occurs, it might be hard to find the advocates you’ll need to turn things around.

WE ASKED, LEADERS ANSWERED @Twitter

Q: The first time you managed people (not just a project) the emotion you felt was . . . ? #leadership

@nilofer awkwardness

@TonyTSheng terror that i would be revealed as not knowing what i was doing. Which i didn't. lol

@Mallory_C nervous that I would royally screw it up and be that awful, clue-less boss—always want it to be a productive experience.

@BigM5678 Overwhelmed. Many years passed before I could delegate w/o feeling I should be doing it myself or it's not going to be right.

This book is targeted to what we believe is the most critical role in any organization, the frontline leader. You’re more important than you might think! And now, you’re in a unique position to positively impact your entire company by working productively not only with your team, but also with other supervisors, peers in other departments, customers—everyone.

We can help you answer important questions about your ability to lead before you misstep. We can help you experience the joy of leadership sooner by managing the real and powerful human emotions that can block your success. And we’ll show you how to master the new skills leaders need to work effectively, such as coaching others, engaging people, delegating, tapping into your new network, hiring, and even running a meeting.

We wrote this book to help you master your new leadership role more quickly, while avoiding some of the headaches and heartaches many people experience. And for those of you who may have already made some key mistakes, we can help you put things back on track.
“Frontline,” “First-Time”—What’s in a Label?
Throughout this book, we use the terms frontline leaders and first-time leaders interchangeably. First-time is fairly straightforward, referring to people either in their first leadership job, or those pondering a move into one. Frontline is more about the level of leadership. A frontline leader directly manages individual contributors. This leaves out higher-level employees, like middle managers or senior executives, who manage other leaders. Other terms for frontline leaders include supervisor, team leader, foreman, or manager.

How Is This Book Different from Other Leadership Books?
This book isn’t based on one person’s theory, a cobbled-together dataset, or an inspiring true story of running one campaign or landing a plane under difficult circumstances. (Some of these books are terrific, and we love them. They’re just not what you need right now.) Instead, we’re giving you specific, actionable information about what to do and how to do it, based it on a combination of hands-on experience and decades of solid research.

We include what we’ve learned from helping companies make thousands of frontline leadership selection and promotion decisions each year. We tell you about the competencies and attributes that lead to successful frontline leadership performance based on extensive job analyses we’ve conducted with hundreds of organizations—and how to develop them within yourself, starting today. And perhaps, most of all, when we call something a best practice, that claim is backed by dozens of research studies that demonstrate the impact of that practice on organizational performance.

At DDI, we believe that better leadership is far more science than art. Yet, it is based in a deep respect for and understanding of the people side of leadership. We believe that people can transform their relationships in work and life by modifying their behavior in simple, clear, and measurable ways. We’ve trained and sat with hundreds of new leaders just like you and personally shared the advice that’s in this book. You’ll hear some of their stories in these pages.

Although you can open this book at any point and find immediate solutions to problems you may be experiencing, we hope you first spend some quality time on the first section. These nine chapters distill DDI’s work on early leadership and provide the best foundation for starting your leadership journey.
The second section is a deeper dive into some of the key skills you’ll need to master in order to succeed. These mastery and leadership skills chapters can be read sequentially, or you can jump to the chapter that best meets your current need. Expect short, specialized content to help you tackle the nuts and bolts of mastering your new position. You’ll also find checklists and discussion guides that you can use immediately in your working life. Revisit them often. And through our “Your First Leadership Job” microsite, we offer links to bonus chapters, online resources, content, and communities that can help you connect with other leaders in transition. You’ll want to bookmark this site and return to it frequently:

www.YourFirstLeadershipJob.com

The book also includes exercises, quizzes, diagnostics, and other interactive tools in every chapter. We encourage you to explore them. Designed by organizational psychologists, they’ve been proven effective over the years. Use them and you’ll be more successful . . . and find your job more enjoyable.

In addition to the research cited throughout this book, you’ll meet real people who have shared their experiences as first-time leaders. Each story conveys a lesson, insight, success story, or cautionary tale. (We’ve changed names and masked companies to encourage candor.) We’ve also queried people via Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Quora, looking for stories and inspiration from their own leadership journeys. You’ll find results from our questions and surveys throughout the book.

If you have one takeaway from this book, it should be this: Great leadership takes place every day, in the smallest of ways. It is reflected first and foremost in your conversations, the way you influence others, and how you interact with the people on your team and in your network. But the first step in your leadership journey is to think of yourself not as a boss, but as someone who can and should ignite a chain reaction of effectiveness that positively impacts direct reports, customers, vendors, peers, and supervisors alike. Your journey starts with a very specific kind of spark.

Citation: Now You’re a Leader

Early on, we made a statement that now bears repeating: Great leadership takes place every day, in the smallest of ways. Pieced together, these moments might not seem notable. But put them together, and over time they will make for a successful career and a happy life. By taking your leadership journey seriously, you will grow not only your own capabilities, but also those of the people around you. This is where the real work—and the satisfaction—will happen for you.

But it will take practice.

Think of this Mastery section as a practical guide to the situations you’ll face every day. As you lead meetings, when a nervous colleague knocks on your door, or as you wonder whether to click “Send” and launch that hasty email, you’ll find yourself making (or not!) a series of decisions about how to best meet your goals and keep your team feeling confident and engaged.

The next chapters are all about your behavior—what you’ll need to do, when, and why, to be a successful leader. You’re on a journey to become the best leader you can be and fulfill your leadership legacy. But, there is no magic button that will instantly transform you into a perfect leader. You’ll encounter unexpected diversions, tough challenges, and brand-new experiences.

In the following Mastery and Leadership Skills chapters, you’ll learn how to handle an array of typical leadership tasks such as coaching for success, influencing others, selecting new employees, and giving feedback. There are 12 Mastery chapters, each full of practical tips to help you bridge what you learn from these pages to immediate application to your job. Additionally, we’ve created even more resources for you online. Part 3, available on the microsite, includes bonus chapters and tools, along with a checklist that can serve as a “travel map” for your first six months as a leader.

This Mastery section is also chock-full of tools that can be used repeatedly to plan the challenging conversations you’ll need to have. We’ve also included tips for using technology to help you become a more effective leader. Technology is not just about doing more work in a fast-moving world. It’s about keeping your leadership voice alive for your team, colleagues, customers, and the people you care about—even when you’re not in the room.

There are thousands of books on leadership—twice as many as cookbooks! Many are very good, but most sit on the shelf. Very little is actually applied. We’re counting on you to change that. If there are four or five things you can apply right away, we’ll have accomplished our goal. If you do so, you’ll be well on your way to becoming a leadership master!
Mastery and Leadership Skills

12 ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION
Creating the Environment to Energize People

Pre:Think
Think about a time when you considered leaving your job. What was missing for you? Did you think things would be different? Did you have needs that weren’t being addressed? Think back to the moment when you just knew: *This isn’t working for me. I have to find something else.*

Perhaps you’ve heard senior leaders use the term *engagement* or *employee engagement* as a way to describe how people are feeling about their jobs.

The quest for engaged employees is a mantra at many organizations these days, possibly yours. It evokes questions such as these: *Are people showing up energized and ready to work? Feeling hopeful about the future? Bringing their best effort to the table?* And there’s another term permeating today’s organizations: *Retention.* Are employees happy enough to stick around? Or are you always looking for new people?

Employee engagement and retention are more than just buzzwords—they’re real vehicles for measuring the health and potential of any company. There are hundreds of studies showing that groups with highly engaged teams are more profitable, more productive (based on their stated business goals), have more satisfied customers, and suffer fewer accidents.¹ And as you learned in Chapter 10 ("Hiring and Selecting the Best"), losing, replacing, and then training new employees costs businesses and the global economy billions of dollars every year. But the cost to the economy is not the hot issue here.
No organization can afford a culture where unhappiness thrives. Nor, as a new leader, can you.

**Engage Early and Often**

Let’s talk about engagement first. It’s tempting to think that as a first-time leader you don’t have much power to keep other employees from jumping ship for other jobs or companies. And to a certain extent, that’s true. Some overarching features that attract talent—like the company mission and strategy, benefits, and other perks—are out of your hands. But our research has found that the most influential factor in a person’s decision to bring her total effort or energy to her job is her immediate leader—you.

When people show up for work feeling strong and full of enthusiasm, they develop a loyalty that makes them want to push through obstacles, bring new ideas to the table, and do their part to help the company meet its goals. And they stick around. Does this feel like a lot of pressure on you? It shouldn’t. This puts you in the driver’s seat in a very meaningful way. By authentically speaking to the hearts and minds of your team and colleagues, you’re more likely to drive higher levels of commitment, energy, and loyalty in the people around you.

*Few people leave a job; they leave a leader.*

*It wasn’t until my third week on the job that I realized that my manager didn’t remember my name. Worse, he thought I was someone else. Sure, we were both women and had blonde hair, but that was where the similarity ended. By the end of the second month—and eight excruciating staff meetings later—it was clear that he didn’t really know who any of us really were or what we were doing. And he didn’t care beyond the reports we filed. I was gone before the ninth staff meeting.*

—Tara, former data analyst

Some of what you’ll learn in this chapter will build on the important foundational work from Chapters 6 and 7. You’ll see how applying the Key Principles to everyday interactions with your team will help them feel engaged and want to stick around.

Engaged employees find meaning in their work and know that they are growing and developing. Your job is to create the best environment for that to happen. You’ll need all the skills you’ve developed to make sure you’re continually identifying how to keep your people engaged before they lose their drive. You’ve heard us
say in many different ways that leadership is getting work done through others. Engagement is the way you’ll do that.

Here are three examples of how leadership and engagement are intertwined:

- When you delegate tasks with an eye to helping people develop, your people have a real chance to gain experience and grow their skills.
- Focus on the why whenever you can. When you share the connection between the tasks people do and the company’s goals, they see where they fit into the big picture. Explaining the reasons behind something employees consider routine—such as a monthly report—helps people understand why their role is valuable to the greater whole.
- When you get good at coaching people along the way—before there’s a problem—they feel valued, protected, and ready to take on the next challenge.

The single highest driver of employee engagement is whether or not workers feel their managers are genuinely interested in their well-being. Only about 40 percent of workers actually believe that to be true.⁹

**Engagement Is Energy**

The **ENGAGED Employee** is positively charged, passionate, optimistic, and brimming with ideas.

The **STUCK Employee** operates in neutral, is checked out, has low energy, and does the bare minimum, but isn’t leaving. She slows everyone else down.

The **DISENGAGED Employee** is negatively charged, complains, spreads discontent, and causes conflict. He typically leaves, often with a bang.
Driving Engagement

When people are empowered and passionate about their work, their productivity, morale, and, ultimately, business performance increase significantly. As a leader, you can increase employee engagement by addressing three factors that get to the heart of what really matters to people and their job satisfaction. And they’re universal; we’ve found these categories to be largely true for most humans, regardless of generation, gender, job type, race, nationality or geography. We call them engagement and retention drivers, and they are fairly straightforward. They are:

- **Individual Value**—*I’m appreciated and encouraged to grow.*
- **Meaningful Work**—*What I do matters.*
- **Positive Environment**—*This is a great place to work.*

Part of your new role as leader is to help your people identify their source of job and career satisfaction. Through an ongoing series of engagement conversations, you can help your people make the connection between what fulfills them and the work they do. Then, it’s up to you to create an environment where they can thrive and grow by overcoming any obstacles that they might be experiencing. Each person on your team might need something different from you in order to be successful. Understanding these engagement drivers will help you do that.

Figure 12.1 lists the drivers, work values they represent, and a list of questions you might ask your team members during individual engagement conversations.

**Reflection Point**

Do you regularly meet with your team members to ask about their level of engagement? If so, do you cover all three engagement and retention drivers? If not, how would they react to the questions posed in Figure 12.1?
You’re probably starting to see why you’re so important to employee engagement. As a frontline leader, you have a direct influence on every one of the drivers just mentioned. Not only that, but you’re also personally influential. (See Chapter 20 for more on influencing others.) Your people naturally look to you to provide direction and support for their day-to-day work. But they also need you to recognize their unique needs, capabilities, and potential. And your voice will set the tone for the entire group. Sound familiar? It should. This is one of many, many direct real-world applications of the interaction skills—Key Principles and Interaction Guidelines. Your ability to address people’s practical and personal needs will go a long way toward fostering an environment where people feel they’re doing meaningful work. (You’ll also be a happier, more productive leader.) We encourage you to use the interaction skills to help you plan your engagement conversations to address both sides of these very human needs.

Just a reminder:

**Interaction skills have two parts:**

- **Key Principles**—to help address people’s personal needs.
- **Interaction Guidelines**—to help address people’s practical needs.
Everyday Engagers

If you’re having conversations with people about how they’re feeling, how much they matter, or what they’ll need to grow their skills, then you must prepare. Your first step is to make a real, human connection. This can be easier said than done, as starting a conversation about engagement can feel awkward. Figure 12.2 offers some pointers on how you can do this more comfortably.

FIG 12.2 Simple Tips for Getting People Engaged

Talk about it.
- Address people by name.
- Greet people and ask about their well-being.
- Other:

Communicate nonverbally.
- Make eye contact, nod, and smile.
- During interactions, give others your undivided attention; avoid multitasking. Put away electronic devices.
- Other:

Be sincere.
- Express empathy during challenging circumstances.
- Admit your own mistakes or errors in judgment.
- Other:

Ask questions to show that you care about an individual’s well-being and daily tasks.
- Ask questions like these:
  - “How are you doing?”
  - “How can I help you today?”
  - “How did the meeting go?”
  - “What will be your biggest challenge moving forward?”
  - Other:
Simple Tips for Getting People Engaged cont’d

Respect others’ time and efforts.

- Say “please” and “thank you” to genuinely express your request for an individual’s help or your appreciation for her work.
- Ask, “Do you have a few minutes to talk?” or “Is this a good time?”
- Respond in a timely manner to communications, even if only to say you need more time to respond or to express appreciation for people’s efforts.
- Be on time for meetings and teleconferences. If you’re running late, send a brief email or text to let people know.
- Other:

Listen first, then offer guidance.

- Quickly note your comments, ideas, and questions beforehand so that you can offer them after you’ve listened fully.
- Ask questions like these:
  - “Let’s hear your ideas first. What do you think?”
  - “Can you help me to better understand your perspective?”
  - “What concerns do you have?”
  - Other:

Compliment and recognize results, constructive efforts, and positive attributes.

- Write a personal note of appreciation showing that you cared enough to acknowledge the person.
- Congratulate the person face-to-face.
- Know and be able to share the specifics of people’s actions, efforts, and accomplishments.
- Other:
Simple Tips for Getting People Engaged cont’d

• Ask questions like these:
  – “What ideas do you have for ___?”
  – “What do you think we should do?”
  – “What would you like to see happen?”
  – “What do you need to be successful?”
  – Other:

• Ask questions to seek ideas.

• Ask questions to learn how you can support the individual.

• Use email or brief phone calls to connect regularly.
• Apply technology appropriately by matching the medium with the message.
• During teleconferences, address people by name and give them a chance to contribute to the conversation. Ask for updates on their work, including successes and challenges.
• Invite them to share their experiences and involve others when strategizing solutions.
• Remain cognizant of time zone differences. Rotate meeting times so that no individual is consistently inconvenienced.
• Be available to answer questions and to remove obstacles in a timely manner.
• Other:
Engagement Conversations: More Than Just Eye Contact

Every conversation you have with a team member is an opportunity to understand what he or she is thinking and why—and to show that the person’s work is important. But a formal engagement conversation at least once a year keeps focus on the drivers that are most likely to keep team members working with maximum energy. If that seems like a lot of emotional heavy lifting, it’s not. It simply means you recognize that each person is unique and that each has value to share. These small conversations need not be long or complicated, but they do have to be personal—to the people involved. You’re more likely to keep people happy and fulfilled at work—and solve problems more quickly—if you know them. And if you’re really good, you’ll ask questions that get them thinking about their own potential in new and exciting ways.

**KEY TIPS:**

- Prepare for an engagement conversation by thinking about which of the three drivers might be most important to the person, and why.
- Ask the person to talk about what means the most to him about his job *lately*. Notice if this changes over time.
- Ask what she’s been learning that excites her. Does it track with her job duties?
- Keep the conversation brief, informal, and friendly. If a work problem pops up unrelated to the conversation, get the information you need to address it and schedule a follow-up meeting.
- Think about actions you might want to take to raise the person’s level of engagement.
Praise: Recognizing Individual Achievement and Effort

The research is clear: Praise is good for the bottom line. People who receive regular recognition and praise for their good work increase individual productivity, receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from customers, have better safety records and fewer accidents, and are more likely to stay with their company.

New leaders tend to get tripped up on praise because they worry that it will seem unprofessional or that people will get overconfident and complacent. It isn’t and they won’t. So, we encourage you to overcome your resistance. Praise doesn’t have to be a big production, but it is a big deal to the receiver. And it can and should take place in the regular interactions you have with people.

We often think to offer praise when a team member has gone that extra mile—he completed a project ahead of time, volunteered to be part of the interview process for a new hire, or suggested a process improvement for the group. But it’s just as important to offer praise appropriately even when someone has delivered mixed or disappointing results on an assignment. Of course, this is also an opportunity to coach the individual for improvement. But chances are the person tried hard. Very hard. Her effort represents an opportunity for you to deliver authentic praise in a difficult coaching situation. Be sure to explore the effort she put into her assignment in detail and deliver specific, sincere compliments around it.

WE ASKED, YOU ANSWERED via Facebook

Q. What praise did you get from your boss that meant the most?

Chris Allieri—We need to have a strong presence at events, on stage and off. This feedback came after a particularly difficult presentation, one that we’d spent ages prepping for. Afterward, my boss said, “You are fearless in a room full of strangers. That’s good.” I was thrilled, and it gave me a sense of myself that I didn’t already have.
KEY TIPS: Recognition Do’s and Don’ts

• Find out how individuals prefer to be recognized. Some don’t like being the center of attention in meetings; some people prefer individual to group emails.

• There are three things to think about when you recognize others: their efforts, their contributions, and their results. If you praise just the results, you’ll miss mentioning the valuable work that was done to achieve them.

• Get to know how people approach their work and why others like working with them. Mention how their personal style affects others.

• Regularly inform senior management about individual accomplishments. (First, check with your manager to find out how she prefers to be informed.)

• Don’t forget about virtual team members! Even though they’re out of sight, you can foster their engagement with the team when you let them know they are valuable contributors, too.

• Send handwritten thank-you notes. On paper. Yes! They work! Now more than ever.

DDI PRO TIP: Don’t think that it always has to be you giving the high fives and good feedback. Consider ways for peers to recognize each other’s work. Think about informal approaches like employee achievement awards tailored to the kind of recognition that is meaningful to your team. Or, simply ask for peer recognition in your regular group meetings: We had a busy week. Who has a shout-out for someone on the team that went above and beyond?

But don’t stop there. You might want to lobby for something more formal at your company, like software that can give your employees a chance to publicly acknowledge each other and earn meaningful rewards. (DDI uses Yammer, but there are tons of good options.) Head to our microsite for a list of ways to recognize individuals. We can help you make the case that an acknowledgment culture is good business.
Retention Conversations

No matter how expert you’ve become at keeping your team engaged, sometimes people will think about leaving. Smart leaders understand that retention conversations—where they identify people who have become disenchanted or distracted by other job possibilities—can help them stop a valuable contributor from heading for the door. They might even learn something that can make the organization work better.

But with all you’ve got on your plate, it would be impossible for you to check in with everyone all the time. Although you do need to keep scanning the horizon for potential retention issues, you can’t take care of everyone all at once. Your first efforts should focus on people who (1) provide significant value to you and the organization and (2) are most likely to leave.

It’s important to prioritize your retention efforts by thinking about whom to focus on first and what you can do to make a difference in retaining that person. Use Tool 12.1 to help you think this through.
Identify Talent to Retain

1. Choose the person from your team whom you want to have a retention conversation with first. You can use the following parameters as a guide; check those that apply to this person. Then, use the space below “Other:” to note why you want to speak with this person first.

- Has expertise, knowledge, and experience that are significant assets.
- Has specialized skills that would be difficult to replace.
- Would be difficult for someone to assume this person’s duties quickly and competently.
- Consistently gets positive feedback from customers, team members, and internal partners.
- Generally earns high performance ratings.
- Is highly employable and marketable.
- Remains open to change and is unafraid to take risks.
- Would be a valuable asset to the competition.
- Other:

2. Think about the risk or likelihood of this person leaving the organization.

Now that you’ve identified whom you should talk to first, it’s time to have the conversation! Typically, these talks take place one-on-one. These are important conversations, so be sure to find a quiet time for your chat. After you’ve identified, in her own words, the person’s primary motivators, your job as leader is to take concrete steps to keep her on board. Although most people think that money is the primary motivator for anyone to leave his or her job, people most commonly cite lack of career advancement—with related promotions, of course—as the reasons why they are thinking about leaving.

At least 75 percent of the reasons for voluntary turnover can be influenced by managers. Find out what matters most to individuals on your team, and then take proactive steps to provide it as much as possible.3
KEY TIPS:

• Think back to earlier conversations with this person. What mattered most to him about his jobs?

• Let the person know this is a conversation about keeping her at the company.

• Ask him direct, relevant questions:
  - How are you feeling about where you are and where you’re going in your career?
  - Given your valuable experience and expertise, I’m concerned that you could be approached by another organization. What can we do to keep you?
  - What would make you feel successful in your job or career?

• Ask for specific ideas about what she wants or needs. Share your thoughts.

• Summarize what was discussed and plan next steps.

• If you discover that a top performer wants to move on to another team or project within the organization, do what you can to make it happen. The key here is that keeping the person in the organization is still a win.

Reflection Point

What about you? How engaged are you? Engagement is all about energy. Engaged leaders create an engaged team. Take a moment to reflect on your personal level of engagement:

• On a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being “not at all engaged” and 4 being “highly engaged,” how would you rate yourself? And, what impact does your level of engagement have on your direct reports?

• What will you say to share with your supervisor what matters most to you at work? What ideas will you suggest to your leader to increase your own interest and job satisfaction?
Part 3: Bonus Chapters and Tools

At last! Your journey is nearly complete. But, don’t worry—we’re still here to guide you. We’ve created a rich microsite featuring more research than you can shake a stick at, along with tips, tools, videos, and even a simulation that will help you practice your newly acquired leadership skills.

The microsite also includes three bonus chapters and a useful checklist:

**Change: It’s about People**
It’s no surprise that 70 percent of workplace change initiatives fail. This chapter helps you turn resistance into commitment and inspire team members to take ownership of change. It also helps you create an agile work environment where people are more open to change.

**Innovation: Be Prepared to Fail Early and Often**
The pressure to find new and creative solutions can be intense. To drive a culture of innovation, you’ll need to push your and your team’s thinking. This chapter prompts you to do that with tips and techniques to generate new ideas and add value to your organization.

**Your Next Career Move and Next Adventure: Reflect, Envision, Engage**
This chapter is about taking what you’ve discovered about yourself and using it to explore your career options as you map out your future direction—be it upward, across, or an enriched current role.

**New Leader Checklist: Navigating Your First Six Months**
This user-friendly, month-by-month checklist helps you successfully navigate through your transition. It calls out key administrative activities, suggests development activities for you and your team, points out areas you should clarify with your boss, and provides suggestions for creating an optimal cultural/social environment.

Be sure to bookmark the site and return to it often as you continue your leadership journey.

www.YourFirstLeadershipJob.com
About the Author

Tacy M. Byham, PhD

Tacy was named CEO of Development Dimensions International, Inc. (DDI) in 2014. She began her career there in the early 1980s as an intern in the video productions department and computer/technology groups. After graduate school she worked as a trainer in Europe and an assessor for tech clients in the United States. She helped develop innovations and eventually used her experiences to build DDI’s fast-growing executive development business.

An expert in creative, custom solutions to address talent management challenges, Tacy’s clients include Keurig Green Mountain, ADP, BNY Mellon, and Texas Children’s Hospital. Her writing has been featured in The Conference Board Review, CLO magazine, People Matters (India), and The ASTD Leadership Handbooks (2010 and 2014). She is also a frequent presenter for the Conference Board and ATD (formerly ASTD), where she speaks on topics ranging from innovation, to women and leadership, to mid-level leadership.

Tacy grew up in the home of a thought leader and entrepreneur. Her father, Bill Byham, founded DDI in 1970, and Tacy’s own perspective on leadership was developed over a lifetime of dinner conversations with her family about what makes people better stewards of the things that matter to them. She was immersed in the science of human possibility from day one as well as the importance of community service (her mother is a retired politician and community volunteer). We traveled the world as DDI grew, Tacy says of her early access to leaders and management thinkers. I had a bird’s eye view of how things actually worked and could work better. I was inspired. And, after working for a few bad bosses in the tech industry, I wanted to join DDI to work with our fascinating clients and help solve their people challenges.

On reflection, it’s not what you get, but what you give. Well, recently, one of Tacy’s teammates left DDI to pursue his life’s passion. In a parting note he wrote, I could write pages on how thankful I am to have worked for you. I really appreciate your genuine care and concern for me ... for all of us!

Tacy holds an MA in Mathematics/Computer Science from Mt. Holyoke College and a PhD in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the University of Akron.

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About the Author

Richard S. Wellins, PhD

Rich currently serves as head of worldwide research and marketing for DDI. He has loved every minute of being a leader (well, almost every minute). Since joining DDI more than 30 years ago, he’s held various leadership roles, including positions in sales, R&D, and marketing. Rich earned his PhD in Social/Industrial Psychology from American University. Prior to DDI, he served as a professor of psychology at Western Connecticut State University and as a research psychologist for the US Department of Defense.

This is Rich’s fifth book on leadership, including a best seller, Empowered Teams. He has worked with dozens of clients on leadership assessment and development projects, including Toyota, AXA, Nissan, Colgate, A.T. Cross, and Sunrise Living. He has presented dozens of conference keynotes on his research around the world, including the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), The Conference Board, Association for Talent Development, HRvoid (China), and People Matters (India). He currently serves as a judge for CNBC’s Asia Business Leaders of the Year Award (ABLA), interviewing the top-performing CEOs throughout Asia. Rich also spearheads DDI’s biennial Global Leadership Forecast, which features data on best leadership practices collected from over 75,000 leaders. His work has been featured in Forbes, the New York Times, National Public Radio, CNBC, Fortune, and the Wall Street Journal.

Rich’s interest in leadership came from two life-changing experiences. The first: My father owned two drug stores, and my mother worked with him running the cosmetics counter, he recalled. As a teen, Rich was assigned every dirty job there was, from running deliveries to cleaning restrooms. My dad wanted to make sure that nobody thought I got better treatment than anyone else. One of the stores served a neighborhood in New Britain, Connecticut, with a high poverty rate. His dad sent him on almost all the deliveries in the community to individuals who relied on the supplies he delivered. His objective was to teach me, and I’m grateful, Rich said. All of these were valuable lessons in leadership, sharing, and accountability.

His second leadership learning experience was with the Department of Defense as a research psychologist. He spent time on field exercises with the 101st Airborne, working with first lieutenants. As Rich likes to say, If you can do well as a military first-line leader, the rest of your leadership positions will be a lot easier.

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