

## The Insider: Leadership Isn't About a To-Do List

1 message

Harvard Business Review <noreply@a.email.hbr.org>  
Reply-To: Harvard Business Review <noreply@a.email.hbr.org>  
To: stuart@concap.cc

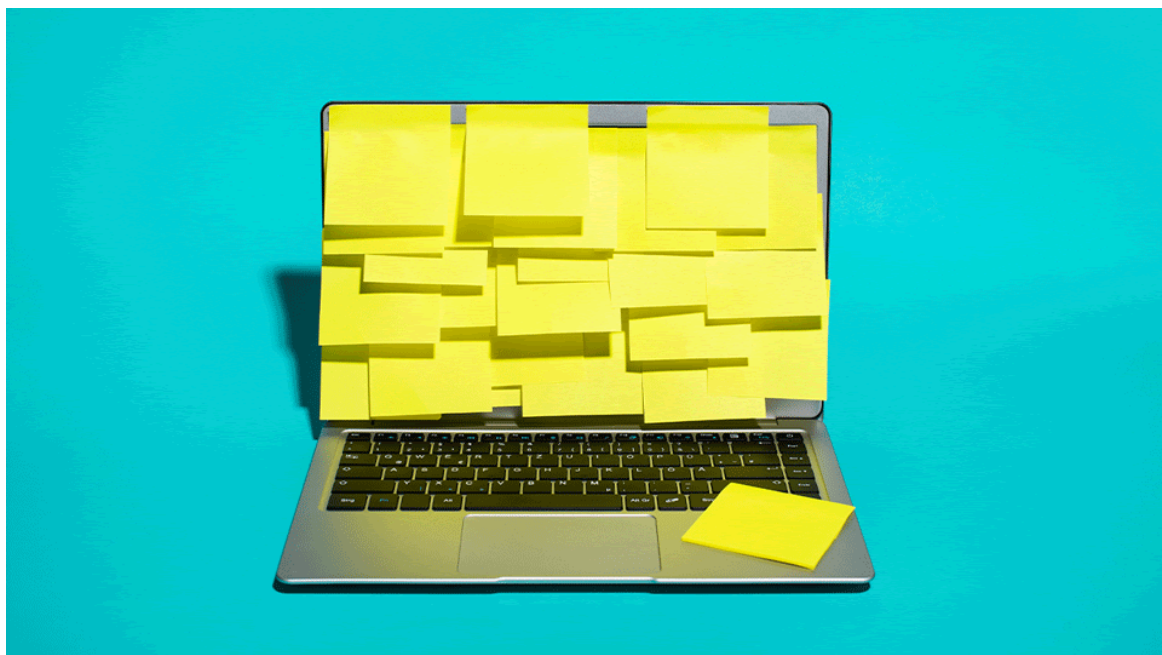
29 January 2021 at 19:12

Just for subscribers

Harvard  
Business  
Review



The  
Insider



[Read online](#)



From Maureen Hoch, Editor, HBR.org | January 29, 2021

So many stories of success, failure, and everything in between come down to leadership. At HBR, we're always trying to understand how we develop as leaders: How can we be better? How can we guide others? And how do we hold those who are leading us accountable?

As HBR subscribers, I know that you're striving to be better leaders too, which is why I think you'll enjoy our new podcast on the [HBR Presents network](#). [Coaching Real Leaders](#) lets you listen in on real-life sessions with longtime executive coach and [HBR](#)

**contributor** Muriel Wilkins. As she guides her clients through professional challenges, Muriel helps lead them to “aha” moments that are relatable and insightful.

I recently asked Muriel a few questions about leadership, career advice, and what she hopes to do with her new podcast. Here’s an edited version of our conversation:

**Let’s start with a classic HBR question: What’s the difference between a manager and a leader?**

I think about a manager as the individual who aims to keep things within the lines and the leader as the one who creates new lines. What I mean by that is that the manager is there to make sure things are working according to the plan, whether it’s the people, the process, the system, the culture.

A leader is a creator: They can see a need or an opportunity in the future, and they turn that vision into reality. Oftentimes what they’re creating is new. It’s not something that’s been seen before. And they’re not only able to create, but they’re able to rally and inspire others to also see those new lines and follow along.

Do I think people can be both? Absolutely. Does a leader need to be able to manage? Yes, to a certain extent, or at least surround themselves with good managers. But a manager isn’t always necessarily a good leader.

**What are some of the biggest misunderstandings about leadership that you see in the people you coach?**

I think the biggest one is that the leader has to have the answers. The leader’s more important responsibility is **to ask the right questions**. That’s how they actually grow capacity within their organization.

Another thing, which is more of a lack of awareness than a misunderstanding, is that leadership is all about doing. People boil

the job down to their to-do list and all of the actions that they can cross off the list, rather than asking: How did my team experience me today? What is the energy and tone that I set when I led that conversation? It's an intangible, but that presence, that energy sets the tone for the culture of the whole group.

**In your first episode, “Am I C-Suite Material?,” you talk about how leaders need to be both authentic and relevant. Can you explain that a bit more?**

I think authenticity has been misconstrued as, “I just need to be me, and I don't care what anybody thinks.” But you need to be authentic in a *relevant* way. We walk into a company, a system, and a dynamic every single day, and we contribute to it. So, the question is: Can I be authentic in a way that also makes me effective here, in this place? Can I be effective in this particular context without losing sight of myself?

Authenticity ultimately comes down to your values and how you are able to exercise them. Can you get your point of view across in a way that will resonate with the people you're working with? Or do you have to make choices about yourself and others that fully compromise your sense of self? And, of course, the organization needs to meet you in particular ways too, such as being inclusive and providing space for us to be who we are.

**What's the best career advice you've ever gotten? And the worst?**

I actually think the best career advice came from my mom. She was not a career woman, her profession was taking care of us. The advice she gave me was: “Don't call your aunts only when you need them.” That's about cultivating relationships from a genuine place. I don't see networking as give-and-take or as just transactional. Even if the connection to someone isn't deep, those are still people I value. So, I never call people only when I need them.

The worst advice I got was from a manager in a job I had fresh out of business school. I sat down next to him with my work, and I was holding a pencil. He paused and said, “Let me give you a piece of really serious career advice.” And then he said, “Only people who lack confidence use pencils.” In that moment I was like, should I drop the pencil and get a pen? Continue using the pencil and stand my ground?

It was useless advice, but what it taught me is to be cognizant of the impact of your words, especially on those who are looking up to you for guidance and for leadership. Be aware of how those words will land and how they might impact someone. And I still use my pencil.

### **What else would you like us to know about the podcast?**

Everybody has their own leadership story. If there’s anything I want to demonstrate through the show, it’s that, yes, you are unique and you have your own personal story — but you are not alone. My hope is that these conversations will be of service to the person receiving the coaching, but that they also will have a ripple effect as folks gather around and listen to those stories and relate to them.

You can find *Coaching Real Leaders* wherever you listen to podcasts. I hope you subscribe, listen, and **let us know what you think**.

\*\*\*

As always there are many great pieces on HBR.org this week on topics spanning **the rocky vaccine rollout in the U.S.**, the role of **Tesla’s EV charging stations** in its success, how to stay motivated **when you’re still stuck at home**, and a **two-minute morning practice** that could make your day better. I’ll be trying out the advice in that last piece, and I’ll let you know how it goes.

Thanks for reading and listening — and be well,  
Maureen