Why Donald Trump Doesn't Lead

An examination of what makes for strong leadership through the lens of the current U.S. president

Why Donald Trump Doesn't Lead

His penchant for chaos, demand for adoration and rejection of criticism are the antithesis of strong management.

BY PAUL NOLAN

This is an examination of business leadership — what it looks like, how it is developed and what positive impacts strong leadership can have.

It is not an article about political leadership or politics in general. However, this examination of leadership will begin in the world of politics.

There is, perhaps, no tougher leadership role than president of the United States. The approval rating of the past six presidents has hovered around 50%, and more often is below that. Only George H.W. Bush cracked 60%, according to Gallup — and he was a one-term president.

Those who run for president presumably possess the hubris to believe they have the leadership skills to take on what is a decidedly complex and, in many ways, unwinnable role.

"The presidency is a bad job, but it's one some people will do anything to get. I never thought that reflected well on a person," wrote Blair McClendon for *The New Republic* in January 2021, a day before Joe Biden began his single term in the White House.

McClendon writes that throughout history, U.S. presidents have come from a select few universities and have accumulated wealth beyond most Americans' grasp. Many presidents have worked in the public sector for decades, spending their days surrounded by aides and other politicians who stoop lower than seemingly any self-respecting colleague would stoop to curry favor.

Presidents and presidential candidates are far removed from the American citizenry, yet they profess to be qualified for the job precisely because they understand and empathize with the daily concerns of farmers, small-business owners and stay-at-home mothers alike.

"These are the kinds of people who see a nation with millions of inhabitants, a history of nearly unceasing war, the power to extinguish all human life, and think to themselves, 'That is a job I would like; a job I deserve,'" McClendon writes.

The More Things Change...

All of this came to mind when I heard *New York Times* columnist and podcaster Ezra Klein recently interview political analyst and academic Yuval Levin. Levin is an Israeli-born American conservative political commentator, the editor of National Affairs, and the director of social, cultural and constitutional studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a public policy research body that is broadly considered to be center-right in terms of its politics.

Klein, whose politics lean left, said he wanted to talk with Levin because "he's conservative, and one of the smartest thinkers on how the government actually works that I know."

While many have pulled their hair out over a flood of executive orders, budget-slashing departmental shutdowns and sweeping terminations of federal employees that the Trump administration enacted in its first two months, Levin is more measured about the real and long-term impacts of the president's actions. His composure is less a result of his conservative viewpoints aligning with Trump's policies, and more an expressed view that Trump and his team of advisors are no more competent or capable of enacting effective, long-

term change than they were during the first Trump term, which wasn't estimable in his opinion.

"A lot of what we've seen is actually a lot like what the first term's first few weeks felt like," Levin said. "There's a lot of ambition; there's a lot of action. There's more than there was the first time, but there's also a kind of inclination to chaos that I think is actually intentional. That's part of what they're trying to do. It didn't really work all that well the first time, and I'm not sure it's working all that well this time."

To be sure, leading a team of sales reps or even an entire company is vastly different than heading the executive branch of the U.S. government. That said, many of those who voted for Trump in 2016, 2020 and 2024 stated they did so because of his business acumen and leadership skills. (Never mind that he was born on third base, has filed bankruptcy six times, and agreed to pay $25 million in a 2017 settlement with students who claimed they were defrauded by his failed Trump University.)

Politics in America finds its way into a lot of conversations these days. It seems timely to examine what makes for strong leadership and how leaders can be developed through the lens of our current president. Political viewpoints aside, are the actions of President Trump during his first four years and now in the early stages of his second term indicative of what thought leaders believe are some common and important indicators of strong leadership? Signs point to no.

1. Leaders Build a Sense of Stability

"The science is clear: people do best at work when their environment is predictable, when they have some sense of control over their immediate surroundings, when they are part of a stable set of relationships, when they feel connected to place and ritual, and when the point of their efforts is readily apparent to them." Ashley Goodall, a leadership expert, wrote for *Harvard Business Review* last year. "Constant change emerges as the enemy of performance, not its catalyst."

Goodall's article is headlined "Creating Stability Is Just as Important as Managing Change."

In 2021, the Brookings Institution compared the turnover rate for the last six presidential administrations. It measured departures from each president's "A Team" (defined as the most influential positions within the executive office excluding cabinet secretaries), as well as turnover in each administration's cabinet.

While presidential executive-level staffs are historically more fluid than executive leadership in the private sector, Trump's "A Team" turnover during his first four years in office was 92%. The next-closest turnover rate was Ronald Reagan's (eight-year term) at 78%. George W. Bush had the lowest "A Team" turnover rate—63%.

Turnover among Senate-confirmed cabinet members in the first Trump administration totaled 14, according to the Brookings Institution report. The next-closest was George H.W. Bush, with eight. George W. Bush had two and Barack Obama had three.

In a recent article written for Forbes, Nancy Adams recounts working as the chief people officer at a 250-employee organization that experienced five senior-level resignations in as many weeks. The departures came from sales, service and IT, but there was a common thread to all of them, Adams states—leadership blindness.

"This phenomenon emerges when there's a significant disconnect between how leaders perceive their own performance and how their team members and colleagues view it," Adams writes. "Leadership blindness isn't a minor inconvenience. It's a silent killer of talent retention and employee engagement."

Self-awareness is a ubiquitous characteristic that gets mentioned in discussions about what makes great leaders. "Leaders who lack self-awareness are typically missing fundamental leadership skills like effective communication, adaptability, empathy and decision-making. They tend to communicate poorly, fail to provide regular feedback or ignore different perspectives, leaving employees feeling undervalued and uncertain," Adams states. Leaders who lack self-awareness contribute mightily to unstable environments.

2. Leaders Focus on Developing Workers, Not Firing Them

Under Trump's direction, Elon Musk has carelessly cut staffs at several federal departments by half or more, only to turn around and try to repair mistakes by rehiring workers in key positions. There have been some serious immediate negative effects; long-term impacts have not yet been felt.

A main difference between a culture of performance and an average organization is the perception of accountability, says James Chitwood, author of "Leadership Is Not Enough." In a performance culture, accountability is focused on helping people within the organization improve. In organizations that don't perform as well, Chitwood says accountability is viewed as a way to identify who isn't performing so the company can replace them with those who can.

In the 1980s, Jack Welch became a corporate leader with celebrity status while serving as CEO of General Electric. He wrote vainglorious books on business leadership, sharing strategies he used to propel GE to the most valued stock position in the country. One of his more notable practices was having mid-level managers rank employee performance and fire the bottom 10% every year. Internal competition and a steady flow of "new blood" was good for the company, Welch reasoned.

But Chitwood argues Welch was a classically short-sighted leader who focused on the company's stock price and basked in the fame and fortune it brought him. Welch inflicted a lot more damage than good for the company, which had to "de-Welch" the organization after his departure, according to Chitwood, and ultimately devolved into a collection of divisions that epitomize mediocrity.

"A philosophy that drives an organization to fire the bottom 10% of employees annually creates a very unhealthy accountability environment where people will do anything to make their numbers look better. Highly competitive organizations with cutthroat environments do not motivate people to help each other improve," Chitwood adds. "If your coworker succeeds, it could be your demise. What kind of system is that?"

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, who President Trump appointed as his national security advisor one month into his first term and then fired him 13 months later, told CBS News, "President Trump does enjoy kind of pitting people against each other. You get used up in that kind of environment. That creates a lot of angst in people."

Strong leaders are keenly focused on assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each team member and putting them in a position where they can be most effective. Rather than removing underperformers, consider offering training to help those who wish to improve and become valuable contributors in the long term.

Chitwood said he spent several years steering turnarounds at companies and you can count on one hand the number of people he had to fire. "I viewed it as a personal failure," he said. He emphatically endorses a philosophy espoused by his Uncle Roy Chitwood, a longtime sales consultant and the author of "World Class Selling: The Science of Selling." Roy said "an organization's greatest asset is the underdeveloped potential of its people."

"I've never met anyone who actually wants to do subpar performance," James Chitwood states. "When performance starts to slip, it's a much better strategy to say, 'This isn't like you. Is something going on?' than to assume the person simply doesn't care anymore or is up to something.

"Rather than cutting them loose and starting over with someone new, you've established yourself as an employer who cares — something many people feel is a rare find these days.

That employee who was impressive enough to hire on a good day will surely want to stay connected to you when they know you'll be there for them on a bad day."

3. The X Factor of Truly Great Leadership Is Humility

Jim Collins, author of "Good to Great," and one of the most highly regarded authorities on business leadership in the last 50 years, states matter-of-factly that the difference between Level 5 leaders (the pinnacle in his hierarchy of leadership) and those just one level lower is humility.

"Level 5s lead in a spirit of service, and they subsume themselves in sacrifice for that," Collins says.

It's counterintuitive, Collins says, but level 5 leaders are typically not larger-than-life leaders who reach celebrity status like Lee Iacocca and Jack Welch. Rather, they are people who blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will. They let their teams bask in the successes while taking personal responsibility for setbacks or poor results.

Contrast that with comments from individuals who have worked with Donald Trump. "I don't think it's possible to quantify the size of his ego. It's too big," said Barbara Res, who was hired at age 31 to oversee construction of Trump Tower, and who worked in senior-level positions at the organization for 18 years.

When *The Guardian* spoke with 12 former employees of Donald Trump while he ran for his first term as president, the "consensus emerged of a businessman obsessed with minute detail, prone to micromanagement, who takes little interest in the diversity of his executives or the welfare of lower-level employees. Some said Trump lacks the temperament to deal with setbacks and becomes instantly impatient with those who do not support or agree with him, while remaining resolutely loyal to those who do."

Steps to Elevate Others

According to a study headed by Yuan Zou while she was assistant professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, when a company exchanged a less inclusive CEO for one who brought others into conversations, the firm's stock market value increased the year after.

Here are Zou's tips for elevating others:

- **Focus on small wins.** Ask for more feedback and be more interactive with colleagues. During decision-making, appreciate opinions from colleagues and lower-level employees.

- **Encourage impromptu meetups.** Increased opportunities to exchange opinions helps employees feel more included.

- **Hire with an eye toward inclusiveness.** Watch for signs of a hero leader during the interview process. Look instead for expressions of inclusiveness and celebrating team success.

The president notoriously employs a former cable TV news anchorwoman who follows him throughout the day and whose main role is to print out news articles, social media posts and other materials that are flattering to him.

True leaders possess the confidence to make success about the team.

"Before, your mission was to generate the work. Now, however, your mission is to create and hold the container for others to generate their best work," says Sabina Nawaz, author of "You're the Boss: Become the Manager You Want to Be (and Others Need)." Nawaz is an executive coach who previously led Microsoft's executive development and succession planning, advising Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer directly.

"The goal is not to burnish your brilliance, but to empower [the team] to feel brilliant. Showcasing your output may be what got you where you are, but now you need to rewire who gets showcased and what 'output' means. Recalibrating to focus on driving your team's success is the critical distinction between being a standout employee and a standout boss," Nawaz states.

4. Leaders Embrace Constructive Criticism

In a March 2023 Gartner survey of nearly 100 HR leaders, only one in five said managers at their organization are aware of their own strengths and development areas. Four Gartner directors who co-authored a *Harvard Business Review* article entitled "4 Reasons Why Managers Fail" reported that managers who are unaware of their own strengths and development areas are nearly three times more likely to fail as those who possess this self-awareness.

Nawaz says of all the power gaps that develop between bosses and their subordinates, the lack of a manager receiving honest feedback and constructive criticism can be most damaging. However, when an individual controls employees' salaries, career paths, the projects they work on and other key elements of their work lives, it can be challenging to attain honest feedback from them.

Emphasizing to team members that specific and candid observations, both positive and negative, are encouraged is vital to effective leadership. President Trump does the opposite, surrounding himself with sycophants and politicians (*New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman recently called them "bobbleheads") who are willing to reverse positions they stated only a year or two ago to protect their jobs and avoid being the target of Trump's penchant for retribution.

In his interview with Ezra Klein, Yuval Levin said Trump had more success in his first term when Republicans in Congress pushed back on some of his proposals and guided him to more amenable measures. There doesn't seem to be any willingness to do that in this second term, in part because Trump has made it clear he wants no obstructions.

"The insistence on loyalty — on being part of the team — is really intense. You see that in their hiring. You see that in their

Workarounds for Getting Candid Feedback

Executive coach Sabina Nawaz recalls working with a client who was so hungry for praise that her people doled it out simply to please her. Sound familiar?

Receiving honest feedback from those you manage can be challenging because of the power gap. But constructive criticism can be the most effective means for a leader to illuminate their blind spots. Nawaz offers these tips for managers to get authentic assessments from those they supervise:

- **Ask for specifics –** Instead of "How did I do?" ask, "What's one thing, if I did more or less of it, it would make your life easier?"

- **Use scaling –** Have someone pin feedback to a number. If someone rates your management performance at 7, ask them what it would take to move to an 8 or 9.

- **Externalize the ask –** Take the individual out of the answer. Ask, "What would someone who was super critical say about my management style?"

The ask is only half the assignment. Be a good listener. "If you want quality feedback, you need to bring quality presence," Nawaz says.

As a former executive in charge of leadership development at Microsoft, Nawaz said she experienced in person how intently Bill Gates would listen to input from employees and then ask follow-up questions.
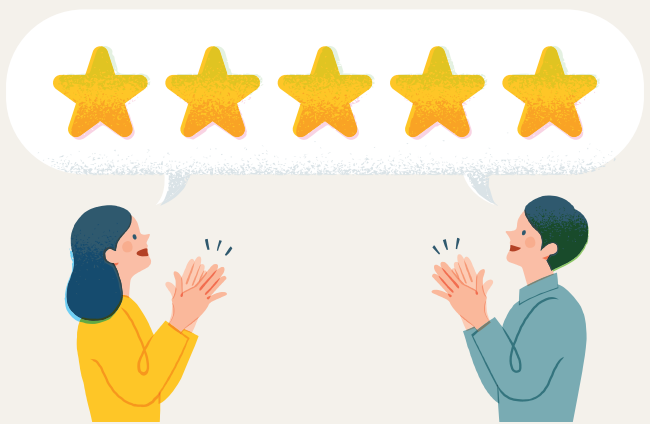
senior appointments. They're really placing an enormous premium not on having the experience to run this department but on never saying no to Donald Trump. I think they're going to pay a heavy price for that," Levin said. "The sense that if I step up and say, 'I don't know, this one's not a good idea,' that I'm going to be treated like a traitor and ultimately, I'll be out of here is very bad for decision-making in any institution or situation."

5. Leaders Excel at Strategic Planning

A blog post on the website of the European Institute of Leadership & Management states "as a leader, strategic management is one of the most important skills you can possess. It allows you to set clear goals, develop a roadmap to achieve them, and make informed decisions based on data and analysis."

The post lists tips for developing strategic planning skills that include defining goals clearly, setting priorities, creating action plans, monitoring progress and communicating all of this to the team.

The environment described by those who served in the White House during the first Trump administration would hardly be described as strategic. In the first week of his presidency, Trump famously caused chaos at airports around the country by issuing an executive order that closed America's borders to travelers from some Muslim-majority countries and refugees from around the world. Vox reports "the ban was implemented four hours after it was made public, with no time for the various agencies involved in its implementation to even get on the same page about who, exactly, was banned under the executive order, much less train the field operatives enforcing it on the ground."

The ban policies were ultimately rewritten and changed substantially to withstand judicial review.

Similar poorly thought-out executive orders were issued in the first few weeks of the second Trump presidency. He reversed massive spending freezes on federal grants and loans in the face of legal setbacks; he has enacted a dizzying series of tariff announcements and postponements on goods from Canada, Mexico and other countries that triggered retaliatory tariffs and a plunge in the U.S. stock market. In February, he proclaimed that the U.S. would permanently resettle Palestinians who were forced to leave Gaza due to Israeli military strikes and take control of the redevelopment of the territory. The latter plan caught most of the president's senior advisors off guard.

Whether or not you agree with the politics of these policies, Levin said, the travel ban in 2017 and the sweeping funding freeze enacted earlier this year were similar in their lack of detail and the complexity of carrying them out.

"They were not thought through in practical administrative terms: 'What's this going to look like on the ground?' It's because they're thinking about presidential power as a concrete reality and the people affected as an abstraction—when it's actually the other way around."

Strategic planning requires dutiful preparation, which is not one of President Trump's strengths. Staffers and former staffers have told reporters that Trump doesn't like long or complex documents, and generally reviews briefing documents only if someone guides him through it. McMaster told CBS he was fired soon after he tried to prepare Trump for a call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Trump rebuked him and said he'd trust his own instincts. The call didn't go well.

"He found [preparation] to be tedious," McMaster said.

Help Workers Hang One Before They Hang 10

Asked by *Harvard Business Review* for the best way to pass down knowledge that you've accumulated over the years, Laird Hamilton, one of the best big-wave surfers of all time, said this:

One of my favorite things to do is observe people in the water learning to surf and figure out the one thing I could say in the fewest words to get the biggest result. Maybe it's "put one arm back" or "lift your chest up." You don't give somebody three things to do when they haven't learned to do one yet. You give them one and when they have it, you go to two. Once they have two, you can maybe go to four.

They are Principles of Leadership for a Reason

Longstanding leadership tenets exist for a reason, just as enduring investment advice—diversify your assets, minimize costs, keep a long-term mind-set—haven't changed in more than a century.

The best leaders understand that it's extremely challenging, that they will make mistakes, and that they can't do it alone. They do not seek hero status. There's no "I alone can fix the system" inclination.

"I like to say that management is about helping people do a job, and leadership is about helping people *want* to do a job," Chitwood said.

Ralph Nader said, "I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers."

So, we end where we began. This is not an examination of whether Donald Trump's political views are right or wrong. Rather, it's an examination of a U.S. president who has been elected to office twice, largely on the basis that he is a strong leader who can steer the country through changes that many feel are necessary.

Unfortunately, the evidence indicates that President Trump lacks many of the characteristics that effective leadership requires: humility, self-awareness, respect for others, a desire to lift others up and celebrate their successes, strong communication skills, transparency, clarity of purpose, creativity, compassion, a willingness to own mistakes... The list goes on.

The good news is that many people—maybe you—do have some of those qualities. It's unlikely you have them all, and that's OK. In an article written for HBR in 2007, a team of educators from the MIT Sloan School of Management praised what they called "the incomplete leader."

"It's time to end the myth of the complete leader: the flawless person at the top who's got it all figured out," they stated. "In fact, the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organizations will be."

A leader's job, they emphasized, is to build an excellent team and let them perform. Leaders certainly look for opportunities to further develop the capabilities they are weakest in, but they are comfortable relying on others' strengths to help the team succeed.

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism, said, "A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, 'We did it ourselves.'" **smm**

Not All Leaders Need to (or Should) Manage Others

BY PAUL NOLAN

Falling into a management role that's not well-suited to the individual happens in sales perhaps more than any other area of a company.

Sales leaders who consistently exceed expectations are asked to manage the team. The company envisions the rainmaker coaching middle performers up, while the high performer embraces the promotion as a natural next step in their career and a chance to share their skills with others.

What could possibly go wrong? Statistics indicate quite a lot.

Over the decades, companies have learned the hard way that the skill set that makes a great salesperson is not the same skill set needed to be an effective sales manager. There are numerous reasons for this, including companies failing to provide proper training for new sales managers.

Frank Cespedes, a senior lecturer in the Entrepreneurial Management Unit at Harvard Business School, said sales leaders who are promoted to manage a team must shed their former identity and recognize their role has changed. A new manager can't micromanage other reps, nor should they aim to turn team members into mini mes.

Cespedes said they must learn how to hire and nurture talent, understand key performance metrics and commit to administrative tasks.

An accidental sales manager can disrupt a strong sales team and cause irreparable damage. Other reps may quit and the misfitted manager may resign or be fired. Such a situation can be avoided if everyone involved recognizes that management isn't a good fit for an individual ahead of their promotion.

A report from Gartner states that one in five managers would prefer not to manage others if they had a choice. James Chitwood, author of "Leadership Is Not Enough," argues that companies are not being creative enough with their compensation structure and organizational charts to allow high performers to carve out career advancement within an organization while not taking on oversight of others.

"Can one remain an individual contributor and still have an ascending career path? I think so," he states.

Many tech companies, Chitwood said, have adopted a player-coach model, where leaders continue to contribute individually while overseeing others in a less formal manner.

Former *Wall Street Journal* columnist Rachel Feintzeig, who wrote the paper's "Work & Life" column for over a decade, profiled several workers in a column last year who requested to move out of management roles after discovering it was not a good fit — a process dubbed "unbossing yourself."

In a LinkedIn post from 2023, Hera McLeod, a former Microsoft executive who now works as a principal technical program manager for Amazon, emphasized that it's not necessary to manage people to be a leader. In fact, McLeod advises colleagues who seek her counsel on how to make it into management to first become a leader. She offers these ways to lead without managing others:

- **Champion, endorse and advocate.** "When opportunities for impactful projects come up, a great leader will ensure that everyone on the team has access to projects that allow them to stretch to the next level and get the necessary visibility."

- **Encourage risk taking and celebrate mistakes.** "As a leader without direct reports, being able to teach someone else and stepping back far enough to let them try it allows you to scale your talents across the team for larger overall impact."

- **Embrace friction.** "Leaders understand how to bravely and respectfully disagree – challenge ideas – and push others to think outside the box. They're also people who create space for others who aren't as comfortable speaking up to share their perspective."

- **Be vulnerable and authentic:** "A blind spot that I've seen many people in leadership suffer from is the belief that vulnerability equates to weakness. It's this belief that often has managers placing up walls when they should be bringing them down."

- **Be self-aware.** Know your strengths and be open to others giving you honest feedback. Actively listen and follow up with additional questions on how to improve. To grow as a leader, you must start with self-awareness.

The best leaders begin practicing leadership long before they are promoted, Matt Mayberry, a corporate trainer and speaker on the subject, states in an article published by HBR. "In its purest form, leadership at work is the ability and desire to accept responsibility for your career. It involves having a vision that benefits not just yourself, but your organization and colleagues. Leaders are skillful at influencing others to believe in that vision and gaining followers that will help them make an impact."
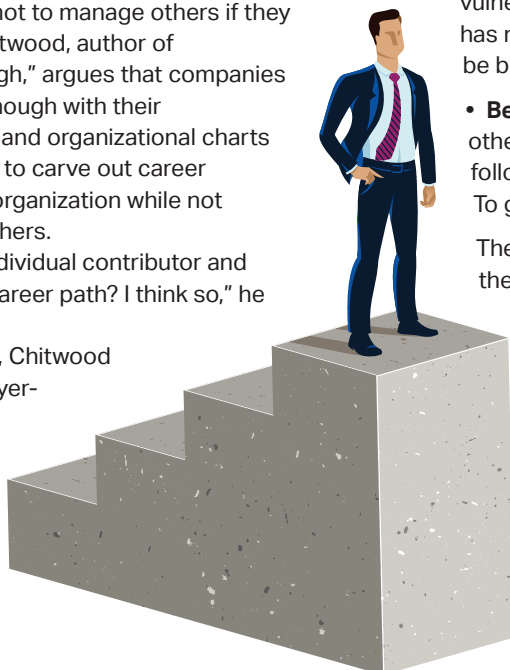
Top Leadership Developers Invest in Building These Skills

BY SMM EDITORS

There may be no singular right or wrong way to lead, but there is widespread agreement on what skills are the most important for effective leadership. Not surprisingly, being an effective communicator is chief among them. Emotional intelligence — or emotional aperture, as one behavioral scientist calls it — is another. And if your leaders are do-it-alls who can't get comfortable with delegating and empowering others, chances are they won't have long-term success in leadership roles.

Since 2019, *Training* magazine and Wilson Worldwide Inc. have partnered on an annual Leadership Development Survey, asking learning and development (L&D) professionals how they invest their training budgets (and how much they invest), what learning methods they favor, and what leadership skills they prioritize in terms of development.

Over the seven years the survey has been conducted, data has been collected from approximately 7,500 professionals. All were employees of companies that create and use leadership development services with their own employees. Organizations were evenly distributed in company size, ranging from less than 100 employees to greater than 50,000, with the largest group (24%) having 1,000 to 5,000 employees.

The Skills That Matter

The Leadership Development Survey asks respondents to identify their top five priority leadership skills. The top two skills — coaching/developing others and communication skills — have remained constant every year of the survey. The skills rounding out the top 10 have shuffled around somewhat over the history of the survey, but most have remained somewhere in the top 10.

In the 2024 survey, 11 of the 19 skills ranked changed their rank, which is the greatest number of changes in the history of the survey. The greatest decrease was in interpersonal relationship skills, dropping from 7th in 2023 to 12th in 2024.

The skills that rounded out the top five in the 2024 survey were team leadership, emotional intelligence, and strategy development and alignment. Here's a closer look at some key leadership skills and how they impact teams.

Emotional Intelligence – The ability to manage your own emotions and understand (tune into) the emotions of those around you is an increasingly vital characteristic for effective leadership. Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, a behavioral scientist at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, calls it "emotional aperture."

The ability of a leader to read the room, recognize the emotional landscape of their team, and identify gaps in understanding, helps build stronger relationships and fosters deeper connections, which in turn increases engagement and drives employee loyalty, Sanchez-Burks told Harvard Business Review.

Sanchez-Burks recommends seeking resources that can build and further understanding of group dynamics and collective emotions. Journaling about team interactions and your interpretations of them can heighten awareness.

Communication – This is less about expressing thoughts, strategies and opinions more frequently, and more about expressing them more thoughtfully. At times, it's about communicating in a way that emphasizes you want all team members to be heard.

"True listening goes beyond waiting for your turn to speak — it involves empathizing, understanding the speaker's perspective, and managing personal and group biases," strategic consultant Alexander Loudon wrote for MIT Sloan Management Review.

Sanchez-Burks encourages skills building in what he calls adaptive communication — adjusting your behavior and message to fit the situation. Allowing a mix of emotions can generate different ideas. "Emotional diversity sparks creativity," he states.

Strategy Development and Alignment – Strong leadership requires not only having the vision to see and plan for what your team needs to achieve in the long term, but also the boldness to identify when plans — even when they're your plans — are taking you off course and quickly correct.

Listening and Empowering Others – This skill covers or is closely tied to half of those mentioned on the Training/Wilson Worldwide Leadership Skills Development list. Team leadership, coaching, providing feedback, motivating others, creating engagement, creativity and innovation... It all begins with listening to the smart, skillful members you work with and making everyone feel heard.

Kirstin Lynde, founder of the leadership development firm Catalyze Associates, told HBR, "Think about how you can, as a leader, get into a habit of dredging [team members'] imaginations and minds for ideas. Not only are you broadening your own thinking, but you're also making others feel that their contributions matter."
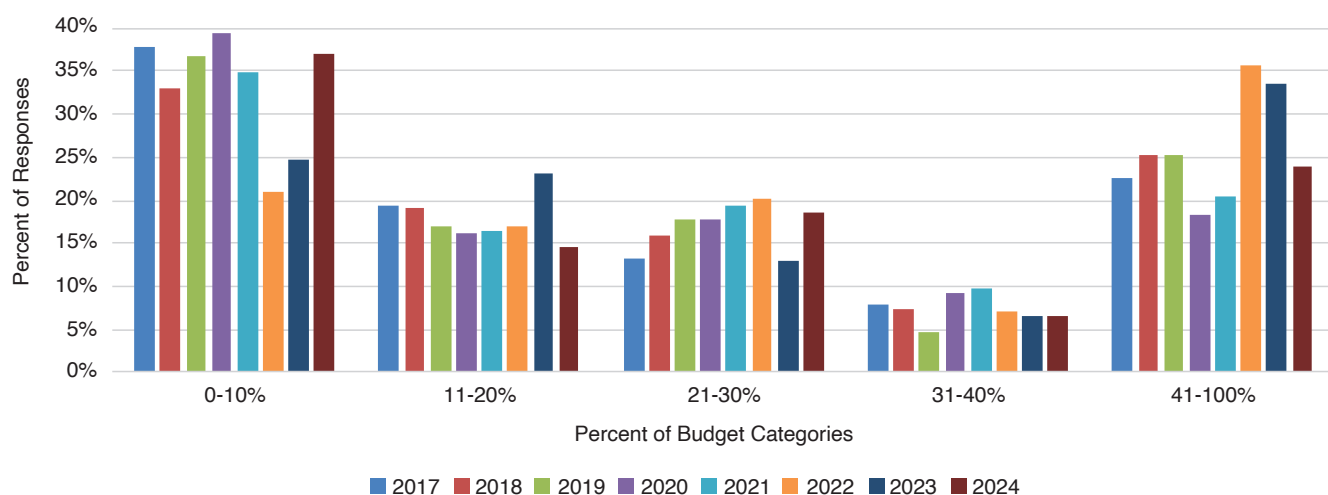
There may be no more powerful means of building trust among team members, boosting their confidence and increasing their engagement than delegating responsibility. Wellness writer and coach Yvonne Lee Hawkins calls it "the art of letting go." But she cautions leaders not to simply delegate and disappear. Make sure that along with delegating responsibility, you supply the resources and support necessary for others to be successful. **smm**

Priority Skills for Leadership Development

Numbers next to arrows indicate the number of ranks up or down a skill has changed from 2023 to 2024.

Leadership Skill	2019 Rank	2020 Rank	2021 Rank	2022 Rank	2023 Rank	2024 Rank
Coaching/Developing others	1	1	1	1	1	1
Communication skills	2	2	2	2	2	2
Team leadership	7	5	5	3	3	3
Emotional intelligence skills	3	4	4	4	5	4 ▲1
Strategy development and alignment	6	7	7	5	4	5 ▼1
Performance management	4	3	8	7	8	6 ▲2
Change leadership	5	6	6	9	6	7 ▼1
Providing feedback	9	10	14	13	13	8 ▲5
Adaptive thinking and problem solving	10	8	10	10	9	9
Motivating others	15	14	13	12	10	10
Creating engagement	8	9	9	11	11	11
Interpersonal relationship skills	13	13	12	8	7	12 ▼5
Using emerging technologies (i.e., AI)						13
Diversity and inclusion		12	3	6	12	14 ▼2
Creativity and innovation			11	15	16	15 ▲1
Self-development	11	11	16	14	15	16 ▼1
Taking accountability	12	16	15	16	14	17 ▼3
Business and financial acumen			18	18	18	18
Influencing others	14	15	17	17	17	19 ▼2

Percentage of Training Budget Allocated to Leadership Development

Chart: Percent of Responses by Percent of Budget Categories (0-10%, 11-20%, 21-30%, 31-40%, 41-100%), years 2017–2024.

Keys to Successful Leadership Development Training

While good training is part of effective leadership development, results indicate that effectiveness goes beyond just training, according to Michael Leimbach, vice president of Global Research and Development for Wilson Learning Worldwide. The Training/Wilson Learning annual Leadership Development Survey identified six critical elements to ensure leadership development training is successful:

- **Using the right learning methods –** Different learning methods work better for different skill development needs. What might work for a technical skills program may not work for leadership development. Organizations are not always choosing the most effective methods for their leadership learning experiences. (Refer to the survey's learning methods usage effectiveness map to drill deeper on this.)

- **Transition support –** High-performing organizations develop potential leaders early in their career, provide more advanced leadership skills throughout their career, help manage their expectations, and mentor during their transition.

- **Executive involvement –** High-performing organizations are significantly more likely to engage their executives in modeling effective leadership behaviors, setting clear expectations for leadership development, sponsoring leadership community efforts, leading sessions and recording videos for leadership programs.

- **Manager coaching and involvement –** Current leaders of high-performing organizations are more likely to let go of responsibilities, document critical processes and provide coaching and support.

- **Encourage leaders to take responsibility for their development –** High-performing organizations support this effort by making leadership development a key performance indicator (KPI), using stretch assignments to guide development choices, and providing 360-degree or self-assessments of leadership skills.

- **Develop leadership character –** High-performing organizations are more likely to provide leadership programs specific to developing character or incorporate character into leadership programs, while low-performing organizations are more likely to offer no character development at all.

The 3 Groups Desperate for Leadership Training

BY RUSS HILL

The newest data from a massive, year-long survey involving more than 1,000 executives, managers, and learning and development (L&D) team members reveals a common theme of where organizations have the greatest need for training. No matter the industry or location of an organization, the research shows the same three groups inside companies need the most development.

Group 1: All People Leaders

"We need help at every level," Wendy, a retail training leader, explained. Her organization struggled with a fragmented leadership development approach. The survey, conducted by Lone Rock Leadership and the faculty of Lead In 30, found that 31% of respondents identified training all people leaders as their top priority.

- **The Challenge:** Companies lacking leadership training for all managers often suffer from misaligned priorities, inconsistent communication and poor cross-functional collaboration.

- **The Solution:** L3Harris needed to train over 2,000 managers across multiple continents without disrupting operations. A scalable program that created clarity, alignment and movement within 90 days was implemented. "We weren't sure we could reach all our managers and create that kind of impact. It was remarkably effective," the client noted.

Group 2: New Managers

Twenty-one percent of respondents prioritized training for new managers. "They feel overwhelmed," said Lisa, who oversees leadership development at a national restaurant chain. While her company provided content on trust and communication, they lacked a structured approach to helping new managers succeed.

- **The Challenge:** Organizations need simple, clear training that helps new managers shift from individual contributors to effective leaders who drive results.

- **The Solution:** Joan, head of Care Solutions at Cigna, ensured that all new managers were trained in establishing team key results (TKRs) before receiving any other leadership development. By focusing on shared priorities and measurable outcomes first, she laid a foundation for success.

Group 3: High-Performing Teams

Nineteen percent of respondents highlighted the need to develop managers responsible for performance-critical teams. Brittany, a corporate training leader, shared that her company struggled with low engagement in certain departments, while
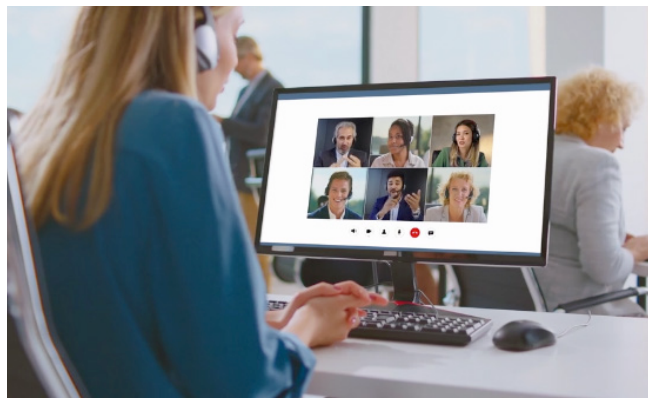
Michael, chief people officer at a pharmaceutical firm, needed to set a new product innovation team up for success.

- **The Challenge:** Rodney, who led the delivery team at Kenvue during the pandemic, faced supply chain disruptions that prevented essential products from reaching retailers. Parents of sick children didn't care about logistics — they just wanted medicine on store shelves.

- **The Solution:** Rodney focused leadership training on his managers and directors, implementing a 30-day cohort training program designed to drive immediate performance improvements. "Not only did we solve the supply chain issues, but we also had the highest engagement scores in the entire corporation," he said.

Where's Your Greatest Need?

Every organization faces unique challenges, but the need for leadership training is universal. Whether your focus is aligning leaders across departments, equipping new managers or driving performance in key teams, targeted leadership development can transform results.

The experiences of L3Harris, Cigna and Kenvue demonstrate that leadership training goes beyond soft skills; It develops leaders who deliver measurable outcomes.

Where does your organization need leadership training the most?

Russ Hill is co-founder of Lone Rock Leadership, which specializes in leader development training.

Learn more about Lone Rock Leadership's "Lead In 30" workshops, which aim to transform managers into effective leaders within a 30-day timeframe. Find an upcoming class at https://www.lonerock.io/leadership-programs/lead-in-30.
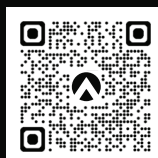
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The Lesson That Changed Everything

A Story of Leadership, Loss and Legacy

BY CASEY CUNNINGHAM

There are moments in life that shake you to your core — moments that redefine how you see the world, how you lead and who you become.

For me, that moment came in the form of an unexpected friendship. A friendship that started with frustration, turned into respect, and ended with a lesson I carry with me every single day.

I didn't always live by the words "I am responsible." The phrase wasn't something I learned in a leadership seminar or picked up from a book.

No, those three words became the foundation of how I lead because of *him*.

Let me tell you a story.

The Man I Almost Wrote Off

Years ago, I walked into a room where a group of new salespeople were being trained in my company. They were on a break from studying and were excited to almost be done with their training, as they were in the seventh or eighth week of training.

I asked how it was going and if they felt ready. What happened next was a pivotal moment for all of us. I shared real-world scenarios they would encounter to see if they were equipped to enter their new role. They were stumped and I was shocked. So, I asked, "Want to meet me at 6:30 tomorrow morning and I will teach you how to answer those scenarios?" They collectively all agreed and were eager to learn.

I showed up the next morning and there they were, all six of them.

I poured into them for two solid hours the expertise they would need to master key elements of their job. They eagerly wrote down what I was sharing.

Well, all but one of them did. One guy stood out, but not in the way you'd want. He didn't take notes. Didn't ask questions. Didn't even pretend to be interested. He sat there, arms crossed, barely engaging. I remember thinking, *This guy? He's not going to make it. He doesn't care. He's not even trying. How did he get hired?*

I was relieved he wasn't on my team. But life has a funny way of humbling you. A few weeks later, I learned that he had been assigned to my team even after I adamantly refused.

I was frustrated. I didn't want to deal with someone who clearly wasn't engaged. I was a proud leader, and I wanted only the best people. He seemed far from the best!

But leadership isn't always about convenience. It's not about getting the perfect team. It's about taking responsibility for the team you have.

I had a choice to make: Complain about it or step up and figure out how to lead him. Trust me, I complained but that didn't change the circumstances. So I got in the car with him figuring I would start by helping him close some sales.

The Ride-Along That Changed Everything

In sales, there's nothing like a ride-along. It's where you see the real magic — or the real mess.

I expected to watch my new team member struggle, to see firsthand why he wasn't coachable. What I saw instead left me speechless.

His phone rang and he answered on speaker. The client asked for information that I had shared in training — the class in which he didn't write down a single word.

He responded as if it was me, word for word.

He was brilliant. Not good. Not decent. *Brilliant.*

When he hung up, I said, "Talk to me!"

His answer, "I have the mind of a genius and I remember everything someone says, word for word."

In that moment, I realized the truth: He had been paying attention. He had absorbed every word of my training. He just didn't need to take notes because he had a photographic memory.

The problem wasn't him; It was me. I had written him off because he didn't fit into the mold I expected. I assumed disengagement when, in reality, he was processing everything at a level I didn't recognize.

How many times do we do this as leaders? How many times do we mistake different for deficient?

That day changed everything.

I stopped training this rep the way I thought he should learn and started coaching him the way he actually did learn. He became one of the best salespeople I have ever seen. More than that, he became one of my closest friends.

> # Leadership isn't just about driving results; It's about helping people live. Helping them believe in themselves. Helping them step into their full potential.

The Words That Broke Me

If the story ended there, it would be a good leadership lesson. But life doesn't tie things up in neat little bows. At just 27 years old, my friend passed away. The news shattered me. He had so much more to do, so much more life ahead of him.

After his death, I had the privilege and responsibility to clean out his desk. In the process, I found his mission statement—something everyone on my team was required to write. It said, "If I die today, you'll know that I lived yesterday."

I sat there holding that piece of paper, unable to breathe. That was *him*.

He lived with joy. He loved fully. He didn't waste time worrying about the small stuff. He taught me that life isn't about waiting for the right moment, it's about embracing this moment.

In that instant, I knew: This was his final lesson for me.

Leadership isn't just about driving results; It's about helping people live. Helping them believe in themselves. Helping them step into their full potential.

That's the moment when "I am responsible" became more than just a phrase. It became a commitment.

The 3 Leadership Lessons That Changed Me

His life—and his death—left me with three lessons I carry into every room, every conversation, every team I lead.

1. Leadership Means Owning Responsibility

It's easy to lead when things are going well. It's easy to take credit for a successful team.

But real leadership? It's about taking ownership even when things aren't going well.

When I first met my friend, I wanted to blame him for his lack of engagement. He helped me learn that I was responsible. It was my job to figure out how to reach him.

If you lead a team, their success or failure is on you. You can blame them or you can own the responsibility of helping them succeed. The choice is yours.

2. One-Size-Fits-All Leadership Doesn't Work

People learn differently. They think differently. They work differently. Great leaders don't force everyone into the same mold. They adapt. They pay attention. They see people for who they are, not who they expect them to be.

I almost missed out on leading one of the best salespeople I'll ever meet because I wasn't willing to adjust my approach.

How many people on your team are struggling not because they lack potential, but because they don't fit the mold you've created?

3. Replace Blame with Belief

It's easy to say, "This person isn't cut out for this." It's much harder to say, "Maybe I haven't led them the right way yet."

What if I had let my frustration dictate this excellent salesperson's future? How often do we give up on people when what they really need is a leader who believes in them?

Poor performance is rarely about a lack of potential. More often, it's about a lack of the right leadership.

The Challenge for You

When I think about my friend, I think about the note he left behind.

"If I die today, you'll know that I lived yesterday."

That's how I want to lead. That's how I want to show up. Not half-hearted. Not frustrated. Not making excuses. Fully present, fully engaged, fully responsible.

Someone's future success may just be waiting on you to see it, so my challenge to you is this:

Who on your team have you written off too soon?

Where do you need to shift your leadership instead of expecting others to change for you?

Are you leading in a way that helps others live, not just work?

Leadership isn't about power or authority. It's about impact. It's about people. When you take responsibility for that? Everything changes.

This is how I lead. And this is why, every day, I remind myself I am responsible. **smm**

Casey Cunningham is the CEO and founder of XINNIX, which offers sales training, performance development and leadership coaching. Email info@XINNIX.com to schedule a meeting.

The Most Important Skills for Leadership to Develop

BY ANDRES LARES

Leadership is no longer defined solely by technical expertise or hierarchical authority. Instead, today's most effective leaders cultivate a unique blend of interpersonal and adaptive skills to guide their organizations successfully. According to a recent study by Training Industry, which collected responses from over 2,100 leaders and contributors working in organizations across various industries, communication skills (45%) and interpersonal abilities (44%) are among the most important characteristics they desire in leaders.

As technology reshapes workplace dynamics, leaders must prioritize negotiation, influencing and communication skills—core competencies that AI and automation cannot fully replicate. A study from Harvard Business Review found that employees already have more confidence in AI than in human leaders in certain areas. However, the more leaders embrace their humanity, the better the outcomes for their teams, organizations and themselves.

To be truly effective, today's leaders must strike a balance, leveraging the benefits of AI while fully embracing the human qualities that set them apart. The ability to navigate complex stakeholder relationships, inspire teams across digital platforms, and bridge the gap between data-driven insights and human decision-making is more crucial than ever.

Mastering Negotiation for Strategic Success

Negotiation is an essential leadership skill that enables leaders to foster strategic partnerships, build consensus and resolve conflicts effectively. In a world where businesses must manage intricate stakeholder relationships, leaders who can negotiate successfully ensure their organizations thrive amid complexity. This skill is about closing deals, understanding different perspectives, identifying common ground and crafting mutually beneficial solutions. Unlike AI, which operates on logic and predefined parameters, human leaders can adapt their negotiation strategies based on emotional intelligence and situational awareness.

Moreover, negotiation extends beyond traditional business transactions as organizations become more decentralized. Leaders must negotiate with internal teams, cross-functional colleagues and remote employees to align goals and ensure smooth collaboration. The ability to compromise, persuade and maintain positive relationships sets exceptional leaders apart and positions them to drive long-term success.

The Power of Influence in a Digital Workplace

Influence is another indispensable skill for leaders, mainly as companies become increasingly distributed and digital. A good leader should be able to effectively communicate across

multiple channels, including personal interactions, voice calls, email and the various text-based messaging platforms modern businesses use to maintain productivity across great distances.

Inspiring and aligning teams across virtual spaces and cultural boundaries requires more than just authority; it demands authenticity, emotional intelligence and relationship-building expertise. Leaders who can influence others create a shared sense of purpose, fostering motivation and commitment even in remote or hybrid work environments.

A key component of influence is storytelling. Leaders who clearly articulate their vision, values and strategic objectives help employees feel more connected to the organization's mission. This skill is crucial as AI-driven workflows become more prevalent. Leaders must ensure that their teams understand and embrace new technologies rather than fear them. Leaders can build a culture of collaboration and resilience by cultivating trust and demonstrating a genuine investment in their teams.

Communication: The Bridge Between People and Technology

While AI can analyze data and generate insights, it cannot replace the human ability to communicate with empathy and context awareness. Leaders must refine their communication skills to translate complex technical information into actionable strategies that resonate with diverse audiences. Effective communication fosters clarity, reduces misunderstandings, and ensures that teams remain engaged during times of change.

Understanding and connecting with others is a crucial yet overlooked aspect of effective communication and leadership. Too many leaders take a detached, top-down approach, only stepping in to micromanage or address issues without truly understanding what it's like to be on the front lines of their organization. To foster genuine empathy, leaders must engage with employees professionally and personally, gaining insight into their daily challenges and experiences.

Empathetic communication becomes especially critical when implementing new technologies. Employees often face uncertainty when adapting to new tools or processes, and a leader's ability to address concerns, provide reassurance and highlight the benefits of these changes can significantly impact adoption and overall success. Moreover, communication is a two-way process. Leaders who actively listen to their teams gain valuable insights that inform better decision-making and drive continuous improvement.

Balancing Technology with Human Leadership

As AI and automation continue to transform business operations, the role of human leadership becomes even more essential. Leaders must balance leveraging technology for efficiency and maintaining the human elements that drive organizational success. While AI can enhance productivity and data analysis, it cannot replace human creativity, trust-building and talent development.

Future leaders will combine their interpersonal strengths with technological literacy. By understanding and embracing

AI Versus Human: A Matrix of Leadership Activities

A guide for leaders to assess where they should leverage AI versus where they should leverage being human.

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW, POTENTIAL PROJECT

digital advancements while prioritizing the human aspects of leadership, they can create environments where employees feel valued, empowered and motivated. This means fostering innovation, encouraging diverse perspectives, and ensuring that technology is a tool for enhancement rather than a barrier to meaningful work.

Future-Ready Leadership

The most successful leaders continuously refine their negotiation, influencing and communication skills to meet the evolving demands of the workplace. These skills enable them to navigate stakeholder relationships, inspire and align distributed teams, and bridge the technology and human decision-making gap. As AI and automation reshape industries, the human elements of leadership—building trust, fostering creativity and developing talent—will only grow in importance.

By mastering these critical leadership skills, future-ready leaders will drive organizational success and create adaptive, inclusive and resilient workplaces. The ability to connect, communicate, and lead authentically remains at the heart of effective leadership, ensuring that organizations thrive in an ever-changing world. **smm**

Andres Lares is managing partner at Shapiro Negotiations Institute and co-author of "Persuade: The 4-Step Process to Influence People and Decisions."

Cultivating Conditions for Transformative Leadership

BY PAUL NOLAN

Wendell Berry, a novelist, essayist, environmental activist and farmer (among other things) stated, "The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it, we can have no community, because without proper care for it, we can have no life."

Britt Yamamoto, an entrepreneur, college professor and sustainable farmer, shares Berry's reverence for soil. "Soil is dirt transformed. Before I learned how to farm, I didn't know the difference," Yamamoto writes in his book "The Soil of Leadership: Cultivating the Conditions for Transformation."

Yamamoto draws from his experience living, working and learning on a sustainable farm in the Japanese countryside and weaves them into insightful metaphors that illuminate best practices for humble, transformative leadership.

"Natural systems and our relationship to them taught me so much about how to become a more connected leader; They also have become my most powerful teaching framework to help others to become more connected leaders as well," Yamamoto states. He has consulted over the past two decades with leaders based in Latin America, the Asia-Pacific region, Africa and North America.

The framework of Yamamoto's leadership philosophy is rooted in one of the first and most important lessons he learned on the Japanese sustainable farm he worked on: A conventional farmer grows plants; a sustainable farmer grows soil.

"In leadership, a narrow focus on the things we can see and measure can prevent us from more truly understanding what is happening in and around us, and we lose sight of the long-view work of building lasting systems and processes," he writes. The metaphors Yamamoto explores between sustainable farming and leadership include:

Soil building – The journey from dirt to soil first requires you to put your hands into the soil and connect with it. That simple intent, followed by a commitment to exploration and inquiry, changes everything. We are so deeply conditioned to think that leaders are obligated to fix, and fix as soon as possible, but putting your hands in the soil is about reaching for connection.

The weeds of inquiry – It's exciting and satisfying to drop new seedlings into freshly prepped earth and imagine the potential. Less gratifying is the process of identifying and pulling weeds that will suck up precious resources the plants need to thrive. Often, however, a weed is more than a weed; it's an open door to inquiry and a provider of important information.

"Inquiry is about finding the broadleaf plantains in our life that we are certain lack utility or benefit—the things we want to rid ourselves of as quickly as possible—and revisiting them with new eyes and a curious, open heart," Yamamoto states. "When we stay longer in that place of inquiry, suspending judgment, if even for a brief time, we discover new ways to see the things around us and what they may be telling us."

Fallow – Letting a field lay fallow shouldn't be viewed as a period of nonproduction. In fact, it's the opposite—a prioritization of restoration and rest that's necessary for long-term production. It's an important lesson for business leaders who are stretched thin and who in turn wear their teams down.

"It took me a long time to learn (and accept) that taking space—my space—was not an act of weakness or failure. I am speaking to the importance of what it means to know your needs and tend to them. Or, put differently, to understand your soil and how to best steward its journey toward well-being," Yamamoto writes. **smm**

Podcast Interview with Britt Yamamoto

Editor Paul Nolan speaks with Britt Yamamoto about the lessons of sustainable farming that translate well to the challenges of leading teams. Find it under the podcast tab at SalesandMarketing.com.