

# **THE IMPORTANCE AND ANGUISH OF FIRST-LEVEL LEADERS**

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# Want a guaranteed conversation starter? Ask someone if they've ever had a bad manager.

And then brace yourself, because almost all of us know what it's like to work for a soul-crushing, morale-killing, please-don't-make-me-go-to-work kind of manager.

But if we're fortunate, we've also worked with a great manager—one who cared about us, believed in us, and helped us do our best work. Legendary Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen believes management is one of the most meaningful roles in the world. In *How Will You Measure Your Life?* he writes, "If you want to help other people, be a manager. If done well, management is among the most noble of professions. You are in a position where you have eight or ten hours every day from every person who works for you. You have the opportunity to frame each person's work so that, at the end of every day, your employees will go home ... living a life filled with motivators."

And the data proves it. According to Gallup, "Managers account for at least 70% of variance in employee engagement scores across business units." Being a great manager is one of the most influential roles—and one of the hardest.



First-level leaders have never been more relevant. Executive adviser and bestselling author Ram Charan observes that the rapid digitization of information has eliminated massive layers of leadership in organizations. Work is collapsing down, not up. Which means that the vast majority of people are reporting to first-level leaders, who now assume unprecedented influence and responsibility.

For example, *Harvard Business Review* writes, "About 20% of the world's websites are now on the WordPress platform – making it one of the most important internet companies. And yet, Automattic, the firm behind WordPress, only employs a couple hundred people, who all work remotely, with a highly autonomous flat management structure." Decades ago, the company would have had an organizational chart like a London Underground map; now a few developers on a Slack channel keep one-fifth of the web going.

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In the “olden” days, first-level leaders had multiple managers above them who had steadily climbed the leadership ladder, accumulating experience along the way. Junior managers could draw on their expertise for mentorship and feedback. But today, most of those layers are gone, often leaving first-level leaders without sufficient resources or support.

In this role, you’re supposed to know the strengths and weaknesses of your team members, appear to have all the answers, and transition from focusing on your own results to achieving the team’s results. Overnight. You have to make sound decisions under ambiguous conditions, hold people accountable, and hit goals you may have had nothing to do with setting.

Despite being the new performance linchpin in your organization, you’re often the least experienced and least trained. You’re learning by trial and error because you have no other choice. Researchers in the Harvard Business Review found that, on average, people take on their first leadership role at age thirty—but don’t receive their first leadership training until they’re forty-two. As the researchers said, “They’re operating within the company untrained, on average, for over a decade.” Imagine a physician, a pilot, or an engineer operating untrained for a decade—it’s unfathomable. Why would we tolerate a lower standard for the linchpins of our organizations?

FranklinCovey has spent nearly four decades researching leadership, and we’ve found that first-level leaders are increasingly frustrated by the lack of mentoring, overburdened by impossible demands on their time, and worried about conducting difficult conversations. And if they don’t have a path forward, the odds are high that they’re going to abandon leadership—and maybe their employer too.



We know your role is difficult, but it is worth doing—and doing well—because you can truly improve the lives and careers of your team members. That’s not hyperbole. Work stress can manifest as physical, mental, and emotional challenges for everyone, including you. As a leader, you will have an impact (for better or worse) on your team’s ability to successfully overcome those challenges.

## **THE 6 CRITICAL PRACTICES FOR LEADING A TEAM**

To give you the confidence and competence you need to meet the inevitable challenges of managing, FranklinCovey has shrunk the bewildering world of first-level leadership down to the six most critical practices for leading a team:

**Practice 1: Develop a Leader’s Mindset**

**Practice 2: Hold Regular 1-on-1s**

**Practice 3: Set Up Your Team to Get Results**

**Practice 4: Create a Culture of Feedback**

**Practice 5: Lead Your Team Through Change**

**Practice 6: Manage Your Time and Energy**

These practices have been field-tested by thousands of actual leaders working with real teams. This content expands upon FranklinCovey’s leadership solution The 6 Critical

Practices for Leading a Team, now adopted by thousands of companies, governments, nonprofits, school systems, and universities around the world.

Employees often report that their relationship with their direct leader is the most meaningful relationship in their professional lives, and determines whether they stay with a company or move on. If you become a great leader, you'll find greater job satisfaction, opportunities for advancement, and the chance to affect the lives of others for the better. You'll become the manager you and your team deserve.

If you have the common mindset of achieving results on your own, it's important to accept once and for all that your work isn't just about you anymore; it's about them. It's time to let go of your past successes. You earned the leader's chair because you performed at a superior level. Take a victory lap. Now, let it all go and focus on the job ahead.

**Being a great manager is one of the most influential roles—and one of the hardest.**

## BECOMING THE LEADER YOUR TEAM DESERVES

Keep the following questions in mind while you read the rest of the practices. At the conclusion of this book, you'll take your insights and craft a plan for becoming the leader your team deserves.

- What kind of leader does your team need right now? What kind of leader does your organization need you to be?
- What do you need to learn (or unlearn) to become the leader they need?
- Picture yourself ten years from now. What do you want your team to say about this time in their lives? What results will you and your team have delivered? How would you want your team to describe your leadership?
- What do you need to do in the coming months to make your vision happen?

## GETTING TO KNOW YOUR TEAM

In the wise words attributed to Abraham Lincoln, "I don't like that man. I must get to know him better." The only way to check your paradigms is to compare them to reality. One of the ways to assess and strengthen the collective capabilities of the team is to get to know them better.

Pick a few questions and go through this activity once a year as a team or whenever a new member joins the team. It's not a strategy to confirm your biases; it's an exercise

to challenge your paradigms. Declare your intent beforehand, and encourage your team to share as much or as little as they're comfortable with.

**Exercise Option A: Pair, share, and rotate.** Everyone, including the manager, pair up and ask your partner one question from this list. After each person has answered at least one question, rotate to another partner and repeat. Continue rotating until each person talks to everyone else at least once. (If your team has an odd number, you may have a trio.)

**Exercise Option B: Group share.** As a group (or, if the team is too large, split into halves or thirds), go around in a circle and answer as many questions as appropriate. Determine beforehand whether the team wants to answer all or some of the questions, or limit the exercise by time.

1. What's something about your background that others at work may not know about you? For example: something about where you grew up, your family, culture, or beliefs.
2. What's important to you outside of work? For example: being physically active, community service, trying new restaurants, relaxing, or other hobbies.
3. Tell us about a prior job that had a big influence on who you are today. What did you like or not like about it?
4. Tell us about one of your goals. For example: a short-term goal related to your current role, a long-term career goal, or a personal goal.

5. What makes your job most rewarding? Tell us about what motivates you at work.
6. What's one thing you want people to know about how you like to communicate? For example: email vs. in person, or short bursts vs. long discussions.
7. What's one thing you want people to know about how you process feedback? For example: scheduled vs. in the moment, or active dialogue vs. sitting back and listening.
8. How do you like to be recognized? For example: in writing vs. in person, in public vs. in private? What do your preferences say about you?
9. Do you consider yourself introverted or extroverted? What situations draw out your introverted/extroverted side?
10. What types of personalities frustrate or fatigue you? How have you learned to collaborate more effectively with them?

Feel free to add your own questions that relate to your team's culture, challenges, or expertise. Did you learn anything surprising about your team members... or about yourself? Were any of your existing paradigms challenged? How will adjusting them affect your leadership?

Researcher and leadership expert Liz Wiseman asks, "Are you the genius in the room or the genius maker?" To me, this is one of the most insightful questions in leadership. You can't be both at the same time—you have to choose.



Leaders with enduring careers are genius makers, we'd argue. You have to figure out what kind of leader your people need, which could be different from the leader you might have been trying to be. Do you know what your team needs? Do you care? Are you asking? Are you attuned to it? This comes with flexibility, empathy, and listening. The future leader is nimble, not with their values and ethics, but in their style and skills. They identify the leadership competencies their people need, then grow their skills and maturity to match that.

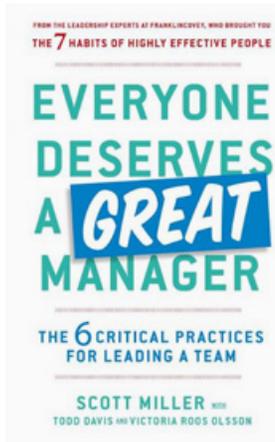
This is not something you're going to achieve by tomorrow. Release yourself from the anxiety that by next Friday you're going to master it.

Becoming a great leader takes time, repetition, successes, and failures—they're all equal parts of the formula. So relax, and give yourself some space. **It's a journey, and we can tell you: it's worth it.** 📖





# Info



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Scott Miller** serves as FranklinCovey’s Executive Vice President of Thought Leadership and is the host of On Leadership With Scott Miller—a weekly leadership webcast, podcast, and newsletter. He also hosts the weekly iHeart radio program and podcast Great Life, Great Career With Scott Miller, and is a leadership columnist for Inc. magazine. **Todd Davis**, FranklinCovey’s Chief People Officer, has been entertaining and inspiring people throughout the world for more than twenty-five years, with his deep understanding of leadership, employee engagement, and talent management. **Victoria Roos Olsson** is a senior leadership consultant with FranklinCovey. She is an expert in leadership development and has trained, developed, and coached leaders across the world for the past twenty years. She has also lead learning and development organizations for large corporations across Europe and the Middle East.

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