

## Preface

“I’M GOING TO school to become a . . .” Maybe, maybe not. In fact, very few people I know ended up working in precisely the job they imagined when they began preparing for their career. My plan didn’t include working in the substance abuse treatment and prevention field, but I spent about 20 years there. No matter what job I would have started with, I always aspired to leadership. My experiences as I moved up through the ranks in behavioral healthcare provided a rich training ground for the second half of my four-decade career coaching and teaching leaders.

It is interesting and sometimes surprising to me as I teach leaders how often the relevance of my work in behavioral healthcare connects to the development of all kinds of leaders. In my experience, these areas of my work intersect in three significant and meaningful ways:

1. **Leaders who share their struggles with peers learn from each other and benefit from that support.** I teach workshops covering a wide range of leadership topics to healthcare leaders, particularly those who have recently been promoted. I often announce to the participants that our classroom is our support group, and I encourage people to take advantage of it. These are the people who “get” you and remind you that you are not alone in your struggles—that we must lean on each other. This feeling of belonging is a big reason support groups work. We need

each other. Thinking we can do leadership on our own is a recipe for burnout.

2. **We are most successful when we keep things simple.** This is not to say that leadership—or life, for that matter—is easy. And I am not suggesting we ignore the complexities and messiness of life. But there is beauty and wisdom in drilling down to the fundamentals, which can help us get through challenges. Simple messages keep the focus on what you can control. They come in handy when we start trying to do too much at once, worrying too much about the future, or finding fault with others rather than accepting personal accountability. Instantly, we can shift the way we see ourselves. Many days, we must simply show up and begin. The little things we remind ourselves to do or say can make all the difference in how effectively we do that.
3. **Trust makes all the difference, and it starts with trusting yourself.** Trust yourself to do the best you can, to never stop learning, and to stay humble. Trust yourself to stay open and willing to learn even when you think you have it all figured out. Trust that every challenge is an opportunity rather than a setback or failure.

Mentoring has always mattered to me. Initially, I wanted to be a counselor. That desire took a variety of forms throughout my career: therapist, employee assistance counselor, prevention specialist, executive director, organizational development consultant, coach, teacher, and manager. No matter the job title, nothing has been more satisfying in my work than seeing someone I have coached become their best self.

One of my first jobs, working with teens in peer leadership programs, brought this to light for me. These teens gathered in a facilitated environment to support positive decision-making, particularly about alcohol and other drugs, but also about healthy choices in general. These programs aimed to encourage young people to develop leadership skills and to bring others along with them

to make healthy choices—a positive peer pressure of sorts—all with the support of caring adults. I was one of those caring adults, and I still am. My audience has shifted from teens to adults, but the key principle remains the same: Know that you make a difference, and do your best to make the difference that you alone can make.

Another pivotal experience occurred about three months into my first professional job as a youth counselor, when I was asked whether I would like to supervise the people I worked with. It was flattering to be promoted so quickly. I distinctly remember thinking, “How hard can this be?” Very hard, as it turns out. Being good at leading and managing is a whole different skill set than succeeding in the job we’re promoted from.

Like many leaders, I learned a lot of things through trial and error. You may relate to some of my learning experiences. I have had to:

- Fire a good friend
- Get myself out of the middle of others’ conflicts (which I erroneously thought they needed me to solve)
- Address bad behavior that I had ignored, hoping it would magically go away (spoiler alert: it didn’t)
- Lose out on opportunities because I waited too long to make a decision
- Correct the fallout from a decision when I acted too quickly
- Admit that I should have asked for help sooner to avoid a calamity

I have gotten some things right, too. For instance, I have been known to:

- Navigate the move from peer or friend to manager successfully
- Facilitate positive turnarounds in work culture

- Address and correct underperformance
- Share just the right wisdom or coaching question at the moment it was needed
- Attract and appreciate a diverse team
- Admit when I was wrong and fix it

This book originated from a desire to take those lessons—the good and the bad—and create a practical, skill-based, self-reflective, and actionable resource for leaders. Having worked with busy healthcare professionals for my whole career, I wanted to give new and experienced leaders a resource that they could grab onto and work with quickly, so I began writing a monthly one-page leadership newsletter in 2010. Every month, the topics were informed by listening to what was on the minds of other leaders and drawing on my own experiences.

Many of those newsletters are now collected and organized into sections of this book. I did not start out with a grand plan for a book about what leaders need to know; I credit the leaders who shared their struggles with me for creating the topics for this collection. Each topic was written to be read in about five minutes. While it is based on theory and years of experience, this writing is not theory. My hope is that on any given day, you can find just what you need and carry it with you as your approach your work today and in the future.