

TAMRA RYAN

FOLLOWSHIP

16 LESSONS TO BECOME
A LEADER WORTH FOLLOWING

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TAMRA RYAN
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For more information: Tamra@tammaryan.com
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About Women's Bean Project

From 2003 to 2025 I was the CEO of an employment social enterprise called Women's Bean Project (WBP), located in Denver, Colorado. The Bean Project, as it is also called, is a food manufacturer that employs women experiencing chronic unemployment. The products consist of a variety of dry food mixes—the first product was a bean soup mix, the genesis of the company's name—as well as baking mixes, spice blends, and a variety of delicious snacks and candies, which are distributed across the US and online through some of the country's largest retailers.

But the business isn't the Bean Project's primary purpose. WBP believes all women have the power to transform their lives through employment, so they hire women who have typically not ever held a job longer than a year, though their average age is thirty-seven. These women usually have long histories of addiction, incarceration, homelessness, or domestic violence. Their past experiences have created barriers to getting and keeping employment, which is why they apply to WBP. Women are hired

for a transitional job that lasts six to nine months. During their time as employees, they work in food production, making all the products, as well as in the shipping and fulfillment department, ensuring those products get to customers across the country. The physical part of the job is called the “bean job” and women spend 70 percent of their paid time doing it.

The Bean Project provides women work experience to learn basic job readiness skills, as well as helping them focus on their psychosocial barriers to employment. Women spend 30 percent of their time working on themselves, which is called the “you job.” During this portion of their time, they get connected to resources for housing and childcare. They are supported while they develop plans for their sobriety, learn skills for healthy relationships, and improve their communication and conflict resolution skills. They also work on improving math and reading, learn planning and organizing, and practice basic computer skills.

WBP is an anomaly in the business world. They are a business, with product sales creating more than 50 percent of the organization’s revenue. They are also a human services organization, and they raise grants and donations to support the program activities that make each woman’s experience unique to her while she is focused on transforming her life. WBP makes products to create jobs and employ women, but the products aren’t the point. The business also creates the opportunity for the women to make new lives for themselves.

The Bean Project is not a place women go to stay the same. It is a place for each woman to create a new life for herself and her

family, one where she maintains employment and experiences the dignity of supporting herself and her children. After completing her time at WBP, each woman goes on to a career-focused, entry-level job in the community. These jobs have opportunities for advancement and benefits, and her employer cares that she comes to work because they are invested in her. This will likely be the first time she has had a job such as this. A year after completing the program at WBP, over 95 percent of women are still employed.

My role as the CEO of this organization was the job of a lifetime and gave me an opportunity to learn and grow. I figured out who I was and who I wanted to be as a leader. As I look back on my experiences, there are many times I wish I'd had someone to advise me, challenge me, and support me. This book is a reflection of what I wish I'd known sooner.

Introduction

We are in a leadership crisis. Across sectors and around the world, our belief in leaders has been in steady decline for more than a decade, and we have reached a critical state. People don't trust their leaders, a fact that is corroborated by research. The Global Agenda Councils conducted a survey in which it identified the issues expected to have the greatest impact on the world in the coming twelve to eighteen months. Eighty-six percent of respondents identified a leadership crisis as their top issue because leaders are mired in factions and not doing enough to solve the big problems of the world.¹

In the midst of the COVID pandemic, the economic crisis, and the global outcry about systemic racism that followed, another important indicator of people's trust, the Edelman Trust Barometer, revealed an accelerated and widespread distrust in societal institutions and leaders around the world. Followers are requiring leaders to work to rebuild trust across sectors including business, government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs, which are commonly referred to as nonprofit

organizations in the US), as well as the media. The declining belief in leadership around the world means not even one sector is truly trusted to do what is right.²

Though all trust scores have dropped, in 2022 the Edelman Trust Barometer shared that people's trust in business now outscores trust in government and other sectors.³ Those surveyed reported feeling that businesses are the only institutions believed to be able to address societal problems such as climate change, economic inequities, and workforce reskilling to ensure economic mobility, while also providing trustworthy information. Societal leadership is now considered a core function of business, and trust has become more localized, i.e., I trust *my* coworkers and *my* CEO. Followers want their CEO to speak out on issues, to be personally visible when public policy is being addressed, and to be outspoken about what the company has done to benefit society and shape societal conversations. By contrast, both government and the media are viewed as divisive because they are seen as fueling the cycle of distrust.

Pew Research Center has further documented societal distrust. In research published in 2019, Pew indicated two-thirds of people in the US think their fellow Americans have little to no confidence in the government. Because of its partisan factions, the general belief is that the government has let down its citizens. The Pew report confirms that this lack of trust and the crisis in leadership extends to religious organizations and media. Over the past decade, the media has lost credibility because of the prevalence of news that seems partisan or untrustworthy. Even

trust in NGOs, which were historically more trusted than other organizations, has dipped to second place after business. Nearly half of Americans believe nothing can be relied on as it used to be.⁴

Why is this lack of trust a problem? Distrust leads to a lack of confidence, and confidence is essential for economies to function. Without public trust, societies are unable to effectively respond to public health crises, as witnessed during the recent pandemic. A high level of trust is connected with less violence in communities and more economic security. The UN secretary-general warns that distrust threatens to undermine progress toward the world's Sustainable Development Goals, targets that have been set by the UN to decrease poverty and suffering and increase empowerment across the globe.⁵ The cycle of distrust threatens societal stability and the lack of strong, inspirational leadership is making it worse.

All institutions that help our society function are built on a foundation of trust. Supporters of NGOs must trust that the organizations they give to are deploying the funds to do the work they say they will and in the way donors expect of them. Often, the supporters are unable to witness the work firsthand and must have faith their gifts are used as intended and the outcomes are being reported accurately and with integrity. For NGOs, the amount of money donated, the numbers of donors, and the retention rate of those donors can serve as proxies for how much trust and confidence supporters have in the organization.

Missteps by religious leaders have created a wariness in followers. Too often, leaders who try to maintain the moral high ground end up on the slippery slope toward loss of credibility when their actions don't match the values they are holding their followers accountable to. We have seen this happen with numerous religious leaders, from Catholic priests to ministers of megachurches.

Whether we look at the media or politicians, our respect for leaders has plummeted. We feel duped by those who say anything to gain our support but do nothing to follow through. Most recently, we witnessed examples during the COVID pandemic. For the first time in at least a half century, we were all being affected by something grave and were looking to our leaders to guide us. Yet too many of these leaders were mired in posturing, providing misinformation, and politicking in ways that felt counterproductive to a solution. Today, many people are wondering where the leaders who might inspire us to follow them have gone. They puzzle over what is missing from those in charge that has left them feeling flat and uninspired.

This widespread dearth of trust makes the case for doing leadership differently. It's time to turn the focus away from what leaders want to give and toward what followers are seeking from their leaders—what entices people and enlists them to join the leader in accomplishing great things. I call this new way of leading “followship.”

What followers expect from their leaders has shifted. Effective leadership is no longer the command-and-control

style of previous generations when the leader was a singular, great individual whom followers did not question. Gone are the days when everyone looked to the individual at the top of the organizational chart to give directives to the people positioned beneath them. Followers have been burned by leaders who required unquestioned authority. They no longer want their leader to save them from having to think or worry about the issues facing the company. No one is seeking hierarchical leadership anymore.

To start on the path toward followship, we must begin by understanding what followers are looking for from their leaders. Today we look to CEOs to take the lead on policy, such as climate change, reskilling, and diversity, as well as expecting them to be a model for long-term thinking. As an NGO leader, I have learned how essential it is for me to meet these expectations of engagement; however, I wonder how many CEOs in other sectors realize what is being asked of them. Not only are leaders expected to lead companies, but followers also want them to take a stand in areas where government has disappointed them. Leaders in business and NGOs are expected to behave as a unifying force in society.

Not surprisingly, many leaders are caught in the gap between where they currently sit because of their training, background, and role models, and where their followers expect them to be. For too long, leaders have been encouraged to think about their own success in an individual way rather than as a big-picture, collective concept. Boards and the public tend to focus on the leader's

accomplishments. They give accolades to the individual at the top to celebrate success, encouraging them to continue their inward focus with no concern for soft skills such as values alignment, self-awareness, and integrity. The leaders haven't been taught or encouraged to think about how their actions might change for the benefit of systems and society because markets and shareholders reward them for a short-term mindset even when long-term thinking would be better for all.

Leaders are learning the hard way that the relationship between them and their follower has been democratized. Followers now understand their power to choose whether or not to stay with the leader. We need only look at the Great Resignation that occurred in 2021 to see evidence of this disconnect. Followers have realized they are looking for leaders who align with their values and who can serve as a compass to guide their actions. They want their leaders to have the courage to look in the mirror, the integrity to accept what others see, and the gumption to take action to rectify their gaps. And they are willing to show their displeasure by leaving the leader to find new employment.

Followers want their leaders to see them as more than a means to an end. They want to know the leader is concerned for them and their thoughts and feelings. They want someone who is values-driven—who will communicate those values and stay true to them, even when it is hard. Followers want to be heard and be part of the decisions driving their organization.

Even when leaders cannot name these pressures, they feel them. Recently, I was with a group of female CEOs. As we sat

around a set of tables configured in a circle, catching up on our recent personnel experiences, the conversation veered toward lamenting the challenges of leading employees. As we talked about recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees, many of the CEOs were frustrated by their feelings that nothing ever seemed to be enough. “People just don’t want to work hard anymore,” one CEO said. “No matter what I do, it isn’t enough,” said another. A third shared that she had nothing more to give. Each of these leaders sat in the gap between what they thought they knew about leading and the shift in their employees’ expectations. Their pain was real and existential, and I suspect their employees were feeling the same.

We are living in a time of paradox for leaders. Jim Rohn, an American entrepreneur and motivational speaker, said it well: “The challenge of leadership is to be strong, but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not a bully; be thoughtful, but not lazy; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humor, but without folly.”⁶ Phew.

We put our leaders on a pedestal and then proceed to pick them apart for their inadequacies. We are certainly surrounded by many egocentric leaders; look no further than our most prominent tech entrepreneurs. And no wonder—we created them by perpetuating the myth of the single, brilliant leader who changes the world. The problem is that when they betray our trust, we resent being stuck looking up at them.

And therein lies one of the paradoxical challenges of leadership: leading a company is simultaneously about the leader

and not about the leader. People often chose to support Women's Bean Project based on meeting me. This fact was essential to my role as the leader of this NGO: to bring resources into the organization. Yet, I recognized it was never truly about me, and I understood the danger if I began to believe it was. I realized I could never allow my ego to be tied to my position.

But how do leaders balance the notion that leading depends on them yet is not all about them? I believe it requires the leader to get comfortable sitting between an inward focus on themselves and an outward focus on followers and the environment. The inward focus requires the leader to keep their own ego, emotions, and needs in check while focusing on others' egos, emotions, and needs. It requires both self-awareness—being grounded in the present reality and how they are being perceived—while also looking out to the horizon to create a vision that will inspire others to join them on the journey to a better future. Followship happens when leaders engage and listen to the people they wish to inspire and build trust with.

I served as the CEO of WBP for twenty-two years. This means I had plenty of opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them. In this time, I embraced the responsibilities and nuances of my position and came to understand that leading is not something you do. A leader is someone you are. To me, there is little more magical than watching a team of people, led by a leader who has captured their imagination with a vision, engaged their trust with integrity, motivated them with courage, and created enduring bonds as a result of their emotional intelligence, work to accomplish things they might never have thought possible.

My aim in sharing with you the keys to what I've learned about followship is to save you time and help you avoid making the same mistakes I made.

Throughout the book you will find examples of my own experiences and observations about what has allowed me to lead effectively and where my actions have fallen flat. I have also highlighted examples from well-known leaders, chosen because they exemplify a particular lesson well, even if they struggle with other areas of leadership. Other stories highlight opportunities missed by leaders whose followers would have benefited if only the leaders had made different choices.

I learned that the essence of my job as the CEO was in my ability to enlist people to join me in caring about and working to solve the societal problem WBP exists to address. In my role as the CEO, my job was to inspire people to give their time, talent, and treasure to support the Bean Project. After years of observing, researching other leaders, trying strategies, and adapting to the results, I have come to believe that being a leader worth following isn't about any one thing but instead a combination of skills and behaviors. This book is not about doing leadership. It is a guide for being a leader. I hope you can use the examples on your own leadership journey, and I encourage you to take what you need and disregard the rest (or store the lessons away until you need them). As we evolve, what we need to support our leadership skills does too.

As I was researching this book, I conducted interviews with friends, colleagues, and others I had met professionally. I started each interview by asking what I hoped would get to the essence

of the idea behind followship: Who in your career has so inspired you that you would crawl through broken glass to follow them? At first, I was not sure this was the right question, but I quickly noted one of two things occurred immediately upon asking the question. Either the person being asked would say, “I have never worked with a leader like that.” Or the interviewee would get a dreamy look in their eye and say they knew exactly who the person was and what they had done to be remembered so fondly. Through their recollections, I began to see a pattern and was able to condense these memorable behaviors into four characteristics that make a leader worth following: vision creation, integrity, courage, and emotional intelligence.

A leader worth following leads the creation of the vision for their organization. The vision is created because the leader is constantly listening to and integrating information from the environment with an idea of what the future could look like. The leader not only understands their own company and industry but also has a sense of the external world in which the company operates, along with the rapid social changes affecting their followers’ behaviors and psyches. As the vision is being created, the leader must have the ability to connect the dots between all the collected information. They must then be able to relay the vision clearly while enlisting followers to come along on the journey to a future in which the vision is realized. When this is done well, followers want to join the leader; they begin repeating back the elements of the vision that are sticky and resonate with them. The vision becomes shared and no longer belongs only to the leader.

Integrity is an essential building block of trust. As Brené Brown, an American professor, social worker, author, and podcast host expressed, trust is a bank, and a leader is always making deposits. In her book *The Anatomy of Trust*, Brown wrote about the essential elements needed to achieve and keep trust, including being consistently reliable by doing what one says they are going to over and over again, being accountable and owning one's mistakes, and being clear on one's values and practicing them. A leader with integrity says what they mean and means what they say. Followers appreciate their consistency and know they can take this leader at their word.

A leader worth following is courageous. Courage in a leadership context means choosing to do the hard things over what is easy. A leader with courage overcomes their fear and learns to be okay with discomfort. Courage is shown by being vulnerable—admitting one's weaknesses and errors in a way that builds trust and loyalty. It requires the knowledge that covering up mistakes is not courageous and leads to a loss of trust. A brave leader also understands that it takes a huge amount of courage to apologize genuinely because of the humility one must have.

And finally, leaders worth following are emotionally intelligent. They are relatable because they focus their leadership on soft skills versus hard. They lead with empathy, kindness, and compassion. They are more human and approachable and have made the shift from the autocratic, selfish model of leading to one that is collective, in touch, and inspirational in a way that followers want today. The leader with emotional

intelligence makes all team members feel valued and as though they belong to the team and are doing work that is larger than themselves. These qualities inspire followers and enlist them to join the leader on the journey to accomplishing great things together.

Even if they are not acutely aware, followship makes or breaks leaders, and leaders make or break organizations. Leaders worth following are powerful because they make followers excited to work together in pursuit of something greater than they could accomplish individually. They feel inspired to be their best selves and are willing to tackle things they never saw themselves capable of before. These followers exist in an environment in which they feel empowered, even when the leader is not present, because they feel they have the skills needed and know what to do.

In this book, with the help of sixteen lessons, you will learn about followship: the art of inspiring others to follow you. You will learn about the differences between managing and leading, and about the ways of showing up that get others excited, inspired, and motivated to join you, the leader, on the quest to accomplishing great things. You will learn what many followers already know: that leaders are leading all the time, well or poorly, with intention or not. Together we will examine which leader behaviors inspire and motivate followers and which fall flat. You will learn that in order to truly excel at leadership, you must be excellent at followship.

Since I was young, others labeled me as a leader. I ran for office numerous times throughout my school years, culminating

in being elected student body president in my senior year of high school. I attended leadership camps and was chosen for a prestigious leadership program for my undergraduate years at the University of Colorado in Boulder. I never questioned the label or wondered what it meant to be a leader. This leader label followed me into the world of work as I rose relatively quickly to a director level within the first organization at which I was employed.

Despite this experience, I didn't understand what it meant to lead until after I became the CEO of WBP. And even then, it took some time to embrace the idea of what it meant, and more importantly, why anyone might want to follow me.

I recall the time when I felt ready to lead a company. I had worked for several leaders who had not inspired me. I followed them because of their titles—president, owner, CEO—and because it was a requirement of my position. I learned quickly and repeatedly that if I disagreed with the leader, I would lose, because what they mandated was required. I felt there was a difference between following someone because I had to rather than because I was inspired to. And so I took the leap and applied to become the CEO of a company. I now realize that I didn't know what it meant to be a leader worth following. At that time I viewed leadership as equal parts cheerleader, enforcer, and role model. I believed if I was enthusiastic enough, I could get people to come along with me. If the energy in the room was flat, it was my job to improve it.

Maybe these strategies were valuable. But they didn't consider the follower's viewpoint. That is the crux of the issue.

So often, when we become leaders, we forget what it was like to be a follower, particularly if we have never experienced a leader worth following.

During my tenure as the CEO of the Bean Project, the organization grew tenfold from the size it was when I started, which caused my job to change—but revenue wasn't the only reason for the change. The job changed because I changed. I progressed from being a manager who called herself a leader to truly embodying the position. I matured personally and professionally and developed perspective I wasn't able to see when I first took on the role. My understanding of the job, how to occupy the position, and how to show up have all evolved as I have learned what leadership means and what it means to be a leader who inspires others to join me in a quest to address the challenges faced by women in communities across the country.

While working at WBP, I became well-known in the field of social enterprise. I had opportunities to speak to audiences around the world and frequently to women's groups, especially in male-dominated industries where women struggle to find their voice and power; places where these women are working to embrace their unique ability to inspire followers.

The skills I have learned have helped me create a platform of thought leadership that now extends to policy discussions where I have had the opportunity to converse with policymakers and scholars influencing national issues.

Most importantly, I have embraced the responsibilities and nuances of leading. I understand leading is not something I do,

it's who I am. This mindset is rewarded constantly. I've been able to watch my team work together to accomplish our goals and realize the vision we created. I think we all aspire to be this kind of leader.

This book is for anyone who has wondered why they have felt uninspired or disappointed by the leaders they have encountered. It's for leaders who want to be better by learning from leaders who inspire others. I believe this book will resonate with leaders who know the old way of leadership no longer works and are ready to commit to being a better version of themselves for their followers.

This is not a one-size-fits-all approach or another book about leadership from the leader's perspective. It isn't a how-to in the sense of "just follow these instructions and you will be a great leader." It's not written from an all-knowing place nor is it a list of rules that must be followed as the only path to success, because followship is about nuance and art.

This book walks through ways leaders can inspire their followers, build trust, and accomplish great things together. Working toward becoming a leader worth following doesn't require you to master each lesson. As humans, we each have strengths and weaknesses. You may have already learned some of these lessons; others may elude you.

This book makes the case for bringing humanity back to leadership, raising the bar for ourselves, and demanding more of our leaders. But before we dig in to the lessons learned around the four essential characteristics of vision, integrity, courage, and

emotional intelligence, let's address an issue I have seen many new leaders struggle with: making the transition from managing to leading.

Chapter 1

From Doing to Being

How do you start each day? Do you look at the appointments on your calendar and the list of things you need to get done? Do you imagine how you want to show up for your day over a cup of coffee or as you are exercising? Do you think about who you wish to be?

I belong to a group of women presidents and CEOs from a variety of companies. We gather over lunch each month to discuss our challenges, both business and personal. At the beginning of each meeting, we share updates and choose a topic we can workshop to help one of us address a nagging issue. Though we are workshopping a problem one person brings, it is usually a concern several women in the group share. Not long ago, at one of our meetings, one CEO lamented how little her team seemed to be at their desks working. She felt they didn't put in the hours she had when she was working her way to success. She asked our group what we thought she should do about it, wondering aloud what would be required to motivate people to work as hard as

she does. Around the large conference table, each of my fellow CEOs shared their perspectives. My turn came second to last, and I asked whether she was looking to be a manager or a leader. When she looked at me quizzically, I said a manager would be focused on how much time everyone's butts were in their seats producing work. But a leader would be focused on how well the team was coming together to accomplish the mission of the organization. If the mission is being accomplished, the amount of time the butts were in seats would matter less. Mic drop. The person after me merely said, "I can't add anything to Tamra's comments."

When someone asks me how to make the transition from manager to leader, it's usually not asked with a direct question. In fact, I wonder if those who are struggling to make the shift understand what they are struggling with. I recall a time at a women's conference, after I'd finished my talk about the power of compassionate leadership, a sharply dressed woman approached me and earnestly asked, "How do I find the balance between being responsible for the people in my department and making sure the work gets done?" She shared she had recently been promoted to lead her division in a technology company. She was now reporting to the CEO and responsible for the success of the department as measured by their customer ratings, efficiency and speed in solving technology issues, and keeping her departmental costs under control. "All the people who now work for me are men, and several of them are disrespectful and ignore my direction," she lamented. She wondered aloud how she could establish her authority and show them she knew as much about their software as they did.

I was struck by this last part. As the leader of her division, it didn't seem to me she needed to be the best programmer or know the most about their company's technology solution. In fact, by focusing too much on the work of the people she was now responsible for, she was missing the fact that she had just been promoted to lead them. Since she was accustomed to working side by side with the people who she was now charged with leading, she was finding her new role elusive. While she understood her role had changed, she struggled to understand what it meant to lead her team, making her feel overwhelmed and lost. She was questioning whether or not she had the skills to do the job, saying, "I feel like I'm not qualified to run this division."

I asked her a few questions because I was curious to hear what her company's goals were and how she was enlisting her team to do their part in accomplishing them. I asked how she typically spent her time and how she checked in with her new direct reports—the ones who were not following her. As she shared what she did during a typical week, I learned she spent a majority of her time being worried about the team's output. She spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to be perceived as nice so they would like her and do what she asked of them. And, she was living in the moment, running from meeting to meeting, constantly in reaction mode and rarely stopping to think or plan.

As she described her days, I couldn't help but feel her frenetic stress. The job was managing her rather than the other way around. I made a couple of suggestions I hoped would set her on a path to making her job feel more doable. I advised her to get clarity on

the company's overarching goals and, more specifically, how her team would contribute to the company's success. Her time should be spent enlisting her team in helping the company succeed, I said, not in making sure she was supervising each person. I also suggested she consider how she could become more mindful, starting each day with intention rather than letting her calendar bounce her from meeting to meeting without time to reflect and lead. Finally, I encouraged her to stop worrying so much about being liked. Her job was not to be popular with her team but to lead them to accomplish the company's objectives.

I have witnessed even seasoned leaders struggle to wrangle their calendars and to-do lists. They look to other leaders for the secret formula that will decrease the feelings of overwhelm that are due to what feels like unrelenting demands on their time. Leaders have the sense they have to do all their old work plus the new work of leading. Since leading a company is a lonely role, rarely is someone present to help the leader navigate the challenges they face. Leaders believe they are just expected to know how to lead. This makes them reticent to speak up, and instead, they try to overcome their feelings of inadequacy by working more and more hours. Not only does this rarely work, it creates an emotional toll that can prove unsustainable.

In a typical career progression, one starts as an individual contributor, having responsibility for knowledge and providing work output to others, such as analysis and reports. The next step for a worker rising up the ranks is to be given responsibility for managing individual contributors. In this scenario, the employee

often continues to make their own individual contribution, but company leaders look to the manager to be responsible for the work output of the collective. Subsequently, there may be increasing levels of responsibility for these managers, but fundamentally, they are still managing.

Eventually, a few managers become leaders. In this new role, they are no longer responsible for managing the individual or aggregate performance of individuals. Now they are responsible for the organization—and people and organizations cannot be “managed” in the same way. Organizations function when individual contributors are working collectively. Leaders who were previously very confident and qualified managers can get overwhelmed by self-doubt. Having never thought about how leading is different than managing, they believe everyone else has leadership figured out and that they are impostors who will be exposed for their lack of understanding of their new leadership role.

When I became the leader of Women’s Bean Project, it was the first time in my career that I could be busy all day yet have nothing to show for it. I was accustomed to creating work output, such as presentations, reports, or other tangible evidence of my effort. Initially, I didn’t understand this was a reflection of how my role had changed. I was still in the doing mindset.

Though my role had changed to leading, the staff I had inherited was small at that time, so I took over marketing responsibilities too. Marketing was my professional background before arriving at the Bean Project, so I thought it made sense.

But as I moved further into embracing my CEO role, my marketing skills became less sharp, and I was no longer up to date on the latest online trends. However, I was still good at marketing strategy, like brand building, which I came to realize was more aligned with my CEO role. As the CEO, my purview was larger, and I needed to be focused on high-level strategic thinking that was consistent with our organization's overall vision. Eventually, I was happy to hand off the day-to-day marketing efforts to a manager whose skills were sharper and whose attention was undivided.

Over time, I learned my CEO job consisted of only three things. First, I was responsible for creating a vision and enlisting people to join me in pursuit of that grand plan for the future. Second, I was responsible for bringing resources into the organization. This happened in a variety of ways including fundraising, sales, and human capital, as well as other ways of building awareness by serving as the face of the organization. And third, my job was to help others do their jobs and become the best they could be.

With this clarity of purpose, I prioritized my actions and saw that everything important fell into these three buckets. If I struggled to determine which bucket something might fall into, it was usually because it was not an activity that was truly essential. This regular analysis of my priorities also led me to begin focusing on intentionality.

I learned I operated best when I started each day with a review of my calendar. Besides helping me select my outfit for

the day, it also gave me time to ask myself what activities would require special attention or focus. I thought about how I wanted to show up for the people with whom I was meeting that day. Who did I want to be? I found this habit made me think about my purpose as a leader and the people I was leading. It gave me space to ask “Am I committed to their success?” If the answer was yes, then I could think about what that would look like and how I needed to show up. If the answer was no, that required an entirely different mindset to determine why and what I’d like to do about it.

I believe the transition from managing to leading is mastered through intention. In psychology, intentionality is the ability to think and behave in accordance with one’s goals. Rather than allowing the day to happen to you, you have the opportunity to decide what kind of leader you wish to be each day. You decide what you hope to accomplish and why. Then you can choose the actions to match these intentions and goals.

Intention comes from being clear about your purpose each day and thoughtful about which actions taken that day tie to the goals and vision you have set for yourself and your organization. An intentional leader does not allow their calendar to drive them because they are deliberate in their thoughts, actions, and interactions. By working with and for team members, without micromanaging their work, you can focus on purposeful action, making conscious decisions rather than thoughtless or careless decisions that are reactive to the situation.

The transition from leader to manager is about being connected to the thing that is bigger than any task, meeting, or report. It's about being connected to the people one is leading and being mindful of their strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, and goals. The people you lead do not need you to do their jobs; they want you to connect their work to the higher purpose. They watch the leader's actions because actions show what the leader believes and values.

One of the skills I've seen leaders struggle with the most is having difficult conversations. In a perfect world, all conversations are intentional, but going into difficult conversations with intentionality means being thoughtful about how I wish to show up, and who I want to be in that conversation in order to support the person while simultaneously being mindful of the higher purpose, larger outcomes, and strategic vision I am responsible for. I find that being clear on my purpose and showing up to my interactions with others accordingly forces me to stay out of the weeds of management.

Intention can also help leaders overcome impostor syndrome. Being focused on what you, as the leader, are responsible for, gives you less time to look in the rearview mirror and wonder how you got to this new role when the management role was so much more familiar and comfortable. Being clear that leadership requires both a focus on the future and the ability to connect the daily work to the organization's strategic goals allows the leader to intentionally create interactions with their team in a way that is removed from management and focused on leadership. With

daily practice and positive results from intentional interactions, the doubts recede, and the team moves toward the vision. Remember, managing is about doing. Leading is about being. I do not “do” leading; I am a leader. As long as I am thinking about how to do, I will not be focused on who I wish to be.

Another adjustment I was required to make was resisting the temptation to have the answers. Managers may be expected to have answers about processes and systems. A leader understands they are serving their followers by resisting this temptation. Instead, they ask questions to help the followers, in partnership with the leader, arrive at the answer that best serves the stated goals. We will discuss this more in a future chapter.

Becoming a leader worth following requires a fundamental mindset shift to being more intentional about how we show up. When done well, we move to a mindset of being. This transition doesn’t happen overnight, and it won’t happen without intention. What might your days look like if you took some time each morning to pause and think about your leadership intentions for the day?

Now that we have talked about the transition from doing to being, let’s look at the four characteristics of being a leader worth following—vision, integrity, courage, and emotional intelligence—and the lessons to learn for each.

