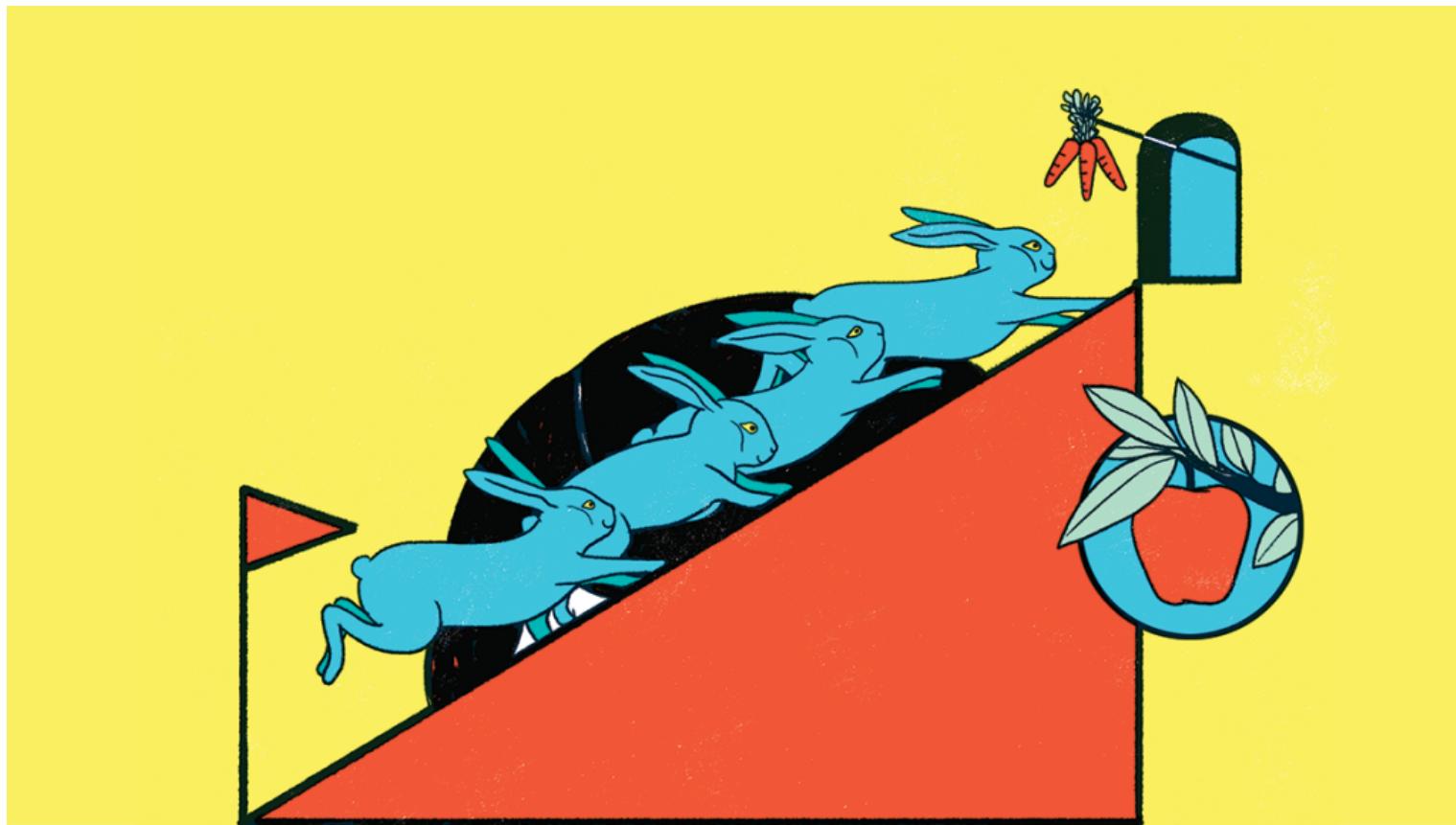


# The Best Leaders Are Great Teachers

by Sydney Finkelstein

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CRISTINA DAURA

Kundapur Vaman Kamath was a teacher. But he didn't work at a school or stand in front of a class. Instead, he delivered his lessons at the office—to the employees who served under him during his four decades as a senior executive at, and then CEO of, India's ICICI Bank. Whether he was offering tips on stakeholder communication or explaining the importance of ambitious goals, Kamath treated each day as an opportunity to provide his direct reports with a

customized master class in management. Over time, this approach transformed the company into a hothouse of leadership talent, accelerating its growth. ICICI became one of India's largest, most innovative banks, and Kamath has been credited with molding a whole generation of the country's banking executives.

I've spent more than 10 years studying world-class leaders like Kamath to determine what sets them apart from typical leaders. One big surprise was the extent to which these star managers emphasize ongoing, intensive one-on-one tutoring of their direct reports, either in person or virtually, in the course of daily work. Cognitive psychologists, teachers, and educational consultants have long recognized the value of such personalized instruction: It fosters not just competence or compliance but mastery of skills and independence of thought and action. However, it's unusual to see this type of teaching employed in a business context. Indeed, I've found that most leaders fall back on more-traditional employee management and development practices, such as giving formal reviews, making professional introductions, advising on career plans, acting as sounding boards, and helping to navigate internal politics. Although some managers do occasionally find themselves imparting a lesson or two, few give it much thought or make it a core part of their job.

By contrast, the exceptional leaders I studied were teachers through and through. They routinely spent time in the trenches with employees, passing on technical skills, general tactics, business principles, and life lessons. Their teaching was informal and organic, flowing out of the tasks at hand. And it had an unmistakable impact: Their teams and organizations were some of the highest-performing in their sectors.

Fortunately, it doesn't take special talent or training or even a lot of time to teach in the same way that star managers do. Simply follow the precedent they've set. Learn what to teach, when to teach, and how to make your lessons stick.

## **Unforgettable Lessons**

Great leaders teach on a range of topics, but their best lessons—so relevant and useful that direct reports are often still applying and sharing them years later—fall into three buckets:

### **Professionalism.**

A manager who worked for real estate CEO and investor Bill Sanders told me that Sanders often gave advice on conducting oneself professionally. He explained how to effectively prepare for meetings, how to communicate a vision when attempting to sell, and how to look at the industry not as it is but as it could become. Protégés of Kamath have said that he showed them how to mentor subordinates in an appropriate and constructive manner—guiding them while still respecting their independence. Other managers spoke of learning from their leaders the value of emphasizing integrity and high ethical standards. “He started with credibility,” former Burger King CEO Jeff Campbell said of the late Norman Brinker, a legend in fast casual dining and one of Campbell’s early bosses. “It’s clear that he really cared about how guests felt and what kind of people he had working for him.” An executive who reported to Tommy Frist Jr. when he was the CEO of Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) recounted that Frist sometimes lectured doctors about the need to put patients first. “Your duty,” he would tell them, “is to do just what you learned when you took the oath. If you ever have a business manager call you and encourage you to do something different from what you think is right, you call me, because the day we start doing that, we start shutting hospitals.”

### **Points of craft.**

You might think that the most senior leaders would leave instruction about the nuts and bolts of their business to others. But stars like former hedge fund CEO Julian Robertson and fashion icon Ralph Lauren trained their people in the same highly disciplined approach that they employed themselves—one rooted in extensive knowledge and experience. As a direct report said of Robertson, he “could, at any given time, know so much about so many different companies that an average person’s head would spin.” Mindy Grossman, CEO of Weight Watchers and a former executive at Polo Ralph Lauren, remembered standing in showrooms with Lauren and listening to him explain how to achieve authenticity and integrity in fashion whether they were “creating a \$24 T-shirt or a \$6,000 crocodile skirt.” Similarly, employees who worked at Oracle under Larry Ellison noted that when he was running the company, he constantly shared his technical knowledge of software architecture. And Jim Sinegal, cofounder and retired CEO of Costco Wholesale, recalled the way his former boss, Price Club founder Sol Price, routinely tried to build his employees’ expertise in the details of retailing: “We were tested every day, and if something wasn’t done properly, he’d be certain to show us how to do it.”

### **Life lessons.**

Of course, great leaders don't limit themselves to teaching about work—they also proffer deeper wisdom about life. That might seem like overstepping, but I discovered that managers found it extremely helpful. For example, an HCA physician interviewed by my research team remembered his former boss Frist showing him a note card on which he had written his near-term goals, intermediate-term goals, and long-term goals. In a lesson the doctor never forgot, Frist explained that he refined those goals each day and was surprised that more people didn't perform such an exercise.

Great leaders don't just teach about work—they also proffer deeper wisdom.

Another example comes from Mike Gamson, a senior vice president at LinkedIn, who told *Business Insider* that his first meeting with the company's new CEO, Jeff Weiner, involved a two-hour discussion of Buddhist principles. Gamson said he wanted to be a more empathetic leader, and Weiner asked why he wasn't instead aiming to be more compassionate. The pair explored the difference between those concepts, with recourse to a religious parable. Gamson came to see that both types of leaders understand other people's perspectives. However, managers who empathize run the risk of getting drawn into the emotions of situations, whereas compassionate leaders are more likely to remain calm and clearheaded and thus more capable of rendering assistance. That lesson from Weiner changed Gamson's entire leadership philosophy.

## Perfect Timing

When leaders teach is almost as important as what they teach. The successful leaders I studied didn't wait for formal reviews or even check-ins. They seized and created opportunities to impart wisdom.

### On the job.

When Sinegal was working with Price at Price Club, he knew that lessons could come at any time. According to Sinegal, Price "spent day and night teaching," whether giving advice on retail tactics or discussing how to be a better manager. Chase Coleman III, a protégé of Robertson's, said that Robertson was similarly "out to teach you a lesson" in every interaction, showing "how to do things and how to run a business."

Some leaders ensure on-the-job learning by working in open offices that allow them to observe employees, project accessibility, and encourage frequent conversations. Others opt for more-conventional offices but make a point of maintaining open-door policies and spending lots of time circulating among their staff, which means they can offer lessons on the spur of the moment—when people can best process and embrace them. A good example of this was relayed to me by Campbell, the Brinker disciple. One evening at the office, Brinker brought up a memo Campbell had recently sent to a team member directing him in some detail to take a specific action. “You know,” Campbell vividly recalled his boss saying, “this is a thought for you: The next time you’re going to tell someone like Bill to do something, try to give him the objective and leave it up to him to figure out how to do it. You’ll find out how smart he is or isn’t, and he’ll probably come up with some things that you wouldn’t have thought of yourself.”

### **In manufactured moments.**

Great leaders don’t wait for the “perfect” opening. They create teaching moments—often by taking protégés out of the office environment to more-relaxed settings or unusual places. Frist, an avid pilot, sometimes invited people up in his plane. Longtime *Philadelphia Inquirer* executive editor Gene Roberts would treat his direct reports to dinner and offer “little hints” on how to handle certain situations, one employee recalled. They were the “best seminar you could ever have,” another Roberts-trained manager told me. An ICICI executive who often caught rides home from the office with Kamath discovered that this was one of his boss’s favorite times to teach. Kamath would welcome all kinds of questions and offer reflections on everything from his business philosophy to his personal spirituality.

Great leaders often create teaching moments outside the office environment.

Famed chef and foodie entrepreneur René Redzepi, co-owner of the restaurant Noma in Copenhagen, takes off-site teaching to an extreme. In 2012 he relocated his entire staff to London to create a 10-day pop-up establishment. A few years later, the team members went to Tokyo for two months. The next year they moved to Sydney, Australia, for 10 weeks, and in 2017 they ran a pop-up in Tulum, Mexico, for seven weeks. The goal, Redzepi explained, was “to learn by exploring a

different place and meeting new people.” He took personal responsibility for ensuring that everyone was broadening his or her culinary horizons. Back home, he said, he and the staff worked “to apply all these new learnings to the everyday routine.”

## Expert Delivery

No matter when or where they chose to teach their lessons, the leaders I studied were smart enough not to pompously pontificate or pummel employees with too much information. They deployed these more-nuanced techniques:

### Customized instruction.

Best-in-class educators embrace personalization, tailoring lessons and support to match students’ individual learning profiles. And great business leaders do the same thing. They know that each subordinate should be taught in a way that suits his or her particular needs, personality, and developmental trajectory. Craigslist founder Craig Newmark remembered getting that type of targeted advice from his former boss at a local IBM branch office after an incident in which he behaved like a know-it-all. Pulling him aside, his boss quietly said, “Don’t correct people when it matters little.”

A senior manager who worked for Sanders described a similar encounter. The man had used the phrase “you guys” in an important—and successful—meeting with potential business partners. Afterward, in private, Sanders chastised him for the informal language. “He put his arm around me like a father,” the executive recalled, and made it clear that as good as the meeting was, “it could have been even better.” He has since made a point of expunging “you guys” from his business vocabulary.

Robertson was a master at delivering targeted advice and, more generally, at customizing his ongoing interactions with protégés. “He was very good at understanding what motivated people and how to extract maximum performance out of them,” Coleman explained. “For some people, it was by encouraging them, and for other people, it was by making them feel less comfortable. He would tailor his approach based on what he thought would be most effective.”

### Questions.

Star leaders also take a page from Socrates and teach by asking sharp, relevant questions, often in the course of furthering their own learning. According to a colleague at HCA, Frist “was always asking probing questions to find out what was happening.” He did it to “educate himself, not to make you feel like you were doing something appropriate or inappropriate. It was an educational venture.”

Restaurateur Brinker likewise “was always asking questions,” said a former senior executive who reported to him. “‘What do you think about this? What do you think about that? If this were your restaurant, what would you do differently?’ He pushed his people to do the same thing: ‘Have you talked to employees? What kind of guest feedback do you have?’”

## **Modeling.**

Another powerful and common teaching tactic deployed by executives I studied, used in conjunction with the other techniques I’ve mentioned, was the simplest: leading by example. Andrew Golden, president of the Princeton University Investment Company, reported that his former boss, Yale’s chief investment officer David Swensen, was known for assuring ambitious new hires that he would do everything he could to help them not only develop but also move on to new jobs when they were ready—which is exactly how Golden ended up in his current role. He and other Swensen disciples learned the strategy by watching Swensen employ it, and now they practice it themselves. “It’s a great recruiting tool,” Golden noted.

One of Frist’s direct reports told me that he learned how “to be a lot more adventurous” just by being around Frist, who was “incredibly creative in how the company was built and put together.” Another Frist manager commented: “You learned as much from watching Tommy” as you did from listening to him. Sometimes, just seeing the right example in front of you is all it takes to pick up new behaviors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ultimately, great leaders understand that even a little bit of high-quality, one-on-one teaching can yield great dividends. As the boss, you command your employees’ attention, and the lessons you impart will be more relevant, better-timed, and more personalized than content delivered in traditional leadership-training programs. And when you embrace the role of teacher, you build loyalty, turbocharge your team’s development, and drive superior business performance.

Teaching is not merely an “extra” for good managers; it’s an integral responsibility. If you’re not teaching, you’re not really leading.

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Cathy Fetter a month ago

Certainly enjoyed this article. I am in the education field and I found it amazing how many great pointers you covered that can help educators to improve their craft. In the end it seems that all leaders have a responsibility to help the next group of leaders be as prepared as possible to take the organization/school to a higher level. Part of being a leader is being a steward of all the resources we have been entrusted to work with.

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