

# How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches

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By Amiel Handelsman

## ODES TO TWO LEADERS

These are not technically odes (elaborate three-part lyrical verses), nor do they correspond with individual leaders I have coached. But I so enjoy the word "ode" that I had to use it. And I feel so honored to know leaders like these that it was only natural to create such composite portraits.

### ODE TO THE SKEPTIC (WHO WASN'T)

They told you to stop pushing back against decisions, to quit being the Devil's Advocate at every meeting. They said they were tired of the doom and gloom, wanted you to lighten up, stop furrowing your brow and smile more. Most importantly, they said, it was time for you to start offering solutions rather than complaining about problems.

At first, you thought the feedback was a bunch of crap. First, if you didn't point out all the obstacles to success, then who would--and then where would the organization be? Second, you had a word for what others called doom and gloom: realism. Finally, even if it would help the company for you to act differently, why bother trying? After all, people don't ever really change.

Then, one day, a colleague-friend pulled you aside after a meeting and said, "You know what? I've been sitting here for the past hour watching you, and I've realized something. The conventional wisdom on you is backwards. You're not pessimistic. You're just a woman with good judgment who doesn't trust it. And you've got perspectives that are essential but you have not yet learned to express them in a way others can hear you."

A week later, that same person called you up to remind you of the previous conversation and added this: "Do you realize that all this scary stuff coming down the pipe, do you realize that you are totally and one hundred percent capable of handling it--and ending up on your feet? You're like the lioness who swallowed a pill and thinks she's a sheep."

Huh? This was weird. *I'm all for bucking conventional wisdom, you thought, but doing so puts me in a strange place. It means trusting my judgment more. What in the world is that?*

Perplexed and intrigued, you had a hard time pushing back when your friend reached out to you a third time, in this case with a specific suggestion. Your friend encouraged you to start tracking things that had gone well each day and what you had personally done to contribute to these outcomes. It felt awkward at first to do this practice, but over time you found that you actually liked it. After all, what a kick to prove (to yourself, at least) that you weren't as gloomy as everyone believed.

You also started framing your comments differently in meetings. Instead of saying, "The problem with that idea is\_\_" you talked about why the topic was important to you, acknowledged others perspectives (even if inside you still thought they were unrealistic), and spoke about "strategies for handling obstacles."

Over the next few months, two odd things happened. First, people started listening more closely to you in meetings, occasionally complimenting you on points you had made. One of your "strategies for handling obstacles" ended up having a major impact on one particularly large decision. Second, a couple colleagues told you that you seemed more positive and asked what had happened in your life. Hearing this worried you because the last thing you wanted was to be Pollyanish, but the whole idea of defying people's expectations so pleased you that you simply laughed it off.

With these acts, you became a better leader and a better woman. You became the person you already were but didn't know it.

### **ODE TO "THE PERFECTIONIST" (WHO WASN'T)**

They said you were too critical, talked about people behind their backs, didn't use the appropriate channels. They said you had a "holier than thou" attitude, seemed to think you were better or smarter than others. They said you seemed irritated, angry, and disruptive of the team's morale. And, to top it off, they said you undercut the decisions of senior leadership.

The comments hurt. Felt like a slap in the face. All you ever wanted was to be good, to do the right thing. Your standards were high, no doubt, and what was so wrong with that?

Then, one day, you realized this was a case of mistaken identity. *They've got the wrong guy, you thought. And so have I.*

There was more to you than others were seeing, more than you were showing the world. *I don't have to be good. I already am good. So I don't have to do the right thing. I can do the effective thing.*

With these insights you took on new practices. You began spending more time with people who genuinely admired you and soaked up the positive energy. This put you in a better mood for responding to the inevitable criticisms you would receive back at the office. When you felt critical thoughts about others, you either kept them to yourself or gave those people feedback directly. You began to make a list of things you felt grateful for--and what a list it became! You even started to be kinder to yourself, recognizing when your inner critic was on the attack.

With these acts, you became a better leader and a better man. You became the person you already were but didn't know it.

Cheers,

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