

Learning From Business Leaders

A Coaching Memoir

Dr. Monica McGrath

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business
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DISCLAIMER

I have recreated the events and conversations detailed in this book to the best of my ability, based on my memories. In order to maintain anonymity, I have changed the names of individuals, places, and companies. I have also changed some identifying characteristics and details, such as physical properties, job titles, and places of residence.

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I AM GRATEFUL FOR the opportunity to be a part of the working life of my clients, colleagues, and students. Their openness as they faced challenges served as my classroom and this book is a thank-you letter to all of you.

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INTRODUCTION

COURAGEOUS MEN AND WOMEN

IN A SHORT conversation with a colleague, a top executive managing a billion-dollar budget, we spent our time trying to figure out how to change the behavior of one of her most important staff members—her staff manager. This executive was frustrated, annoyed, and confused with her manager. This employee was creative and smart, so how, my client wondered, could she be so blind to the impact of her short-tempered responses to legitimate concerns, and why would she discount and dismiss others' ideas? This behavior was arrogant. It seemed obvious to some and had a serious impact on others. My client thought her staff manager was building resentment and anger among her team members, almost assuring collaboration on important initiatives was impossible.

Shortly after this conversation, I took a call from a former student. He called to see if I had any ideas

about how to deal with the corporate “suits” he was now working with. They were so slow to make decisions that he felt they were deliberately stifling progress on strategic goals. He was ready to quit.

In both situations, these people felt trapped. Despite being experienced, well-educated and successful people in their respective fields, they felt exhausted by problems that might, and often did, derail their well-intentioned efforts to advance their enterprises. They had become immobilized and were not able to cope with the day-to-day stressors embedded in a leader’s role. Yes, they could walk away from these jobs and find others. Certainly, there is evidence that in these post-pandemic times, some of the most ambitious and competent leaders publicly walk away from the stress of caring for their people. Of course, this isn’t a new trend. Walking away from stressful roles and “quiet quitting” happened before the global scourge of the pandemic. The day-to-day challenges, frustrations, and skepticism inherent in a leader’s role can slowly erode the confidence and enthusiasm of anyone.

Does this sound familiar? Is it you? Or is it one of your team members, perhaps? Will you act, or will you wonder what happened to the person you hired who had such enthusiasm and optimism? Will you turn to your coach, if you have one, or to your own insights and reflections to address these day-to-day issues? Will you use the resources of management professionals, coupled with your own experiences and

self-knowledge, to deepen your understanding of the realities of leading? Will you support those who are open and willing to raise their hand when they are asked to lead?

If you are willing to learn, then this book is for you. It is for the courageous men and women who make the decision to take on a leadership role and for those who serve them as coaches, mentors, and friends. I will tell a series of stories that you may find familiar—the political intrigue, the team that works, the board that doesn't. But what's different about this leadership book is the perspective given by the outsider, an experienced executive coach. The business coach has a trusted seat next to the leader. Coaches work with all types of business men and women, but the stories in this book highlight the leader who is curious and open to learning. The stories and the learning that happened because of a coach's reflections go beyond inspirational quotes and tap into the insights, tools, and tips from the experience of experts committed to developing strong and focused leaders. So, with that in mind, allow me to introduce myself.

A front-row seat to leadership challenges

My name is Doctor Monica McGrath. I have over thirty years of experience working with leaders. I've worked in all manner of roles, including as a salesperson, a trainer, a consultant, an adjunct professor, a

vice dean, and an executive coach. I've worked in my own consulting company, collaborating with leaders at every level in their quest to learn and grow, and I've worked inside organizations and educational institutions, leading teams and being accountable for results.

From the first time I realized that the business world was rich with intrigue—and full of human stories of courage, failure, achievement, and adventure—I was smitten. From my first leadership role, as the president of my Junior Achievement class in 1963, through to today, when I am still coaching and counseling leaders at every level, I have sought the experience and education to be able to weave psychology, business, and teaching into my career tapestry.

My educational background includes a degree in psychology and a PhD in adult learning and organizational dynamics. In every job, every coaching assignment, and every consulting gig, I've had a front-row seat to the challenges business leaders face. My higher education, which was delayed twenty years after high school, taught me how to ask the right kinds of questions of those who shared their business dilemmas with me. My knowledge of organizational psychology, my background in educational theory, and my curiosity about how leaders develop themselves allowed me to create a safe and supportive forum for business leaders to explore their actions and understand their motivations, emotions, and values, with a goal to enhance their approach to leadership.

Why I wrote this book— and what you'll learn

Initially, I wrote this book for my children, grandchildren, and dear nieces and nephews. When they talk about their jobs, I have often wished that I could share a story or lesson from my career that might help them (though I realize it's not always easy to receive unsolicited advice). However, as I wrote about the experiences of my career, I realized that I actually wrote this book for me.

I don't anticipate that this book will become a bestseller, and I don't think of myself as a coaching guru. Rather, I thought I might be able to use the book during my workshops and seminars, and I intend to do so. I also found myself uninterested in writing anything overly academic or instructional, mainly because I felt depleted after writing my dissertation. Now, as my career is in a phase of creative reinvention, I find myself with vivid memories of those clients, students, and colleagues who invited me into their world and became my learning partners. I wrote this book to capture the lessons of my life and to reinforce my hope that I am not yet finished on the path of learning.

This book is for anyone who chooses to take on a leadership role or who may wish to support someone in this position. It captures the important and essential lessons from the day-to-day challenges and rewards of those in leadership.

What are the key takeaways? Through a series of real-life stories, I will:

- Provide insight into the real work of those in leadership roles.
- Explore the research around leadership, and share tips and tools to enhance your leadership.
- Share how I, as an experienced executive coach, use personal insight, reflection, and observation skills to enhance my practice.

If you are tired of leadership being simplified into clichéd phrases, memes, and lovely but overused quotes, I encourage you to read on. This book will introduce you to real leadership challenges as well as the deep questions they pose and the resources that can help drive a leader's success.

THE ROCK STAR IN JAPAN

AS I WALKED down the hallway toward the boardroom of this global auto company, I felt a sense of accomplishment and a flutter of excitement. This meeting and my pitch to a well-known Japanese automaker might result in a long-term relationship with the company and with an iconic CEO. The goal today was to gain the approval of the CEO on the delivery of an executive leadership program. I hoped to be the faculty director of this program; teaching the leaders of the largest automobile group in the world would advance my skills and my reputation.

I was here in Japan along with three professors: one from our business school (one of the top schools in the world) and two from a prestigious university in Japan. In my role leading executive programs for the school, I had been working to arrange this meeting for months. And I was nervous about the meeting. The full tour was impressive. It reminded us that this

was a Japanese company with pride in its past and a determination to own the future. The headquarters was a sprawling, glass-encased, modern building. Sparkling model cars of all kinds were showcased on the entry floor, highlighting the impressive history of the company, as well as futuristic models of cars our grandchildren might be driving someday. I grew increasingly nervous, knowing I would soon be meeting with a business school icon—the CEO.

My MBA students always found our discussions and case studies on this CEO inspiring. He had made substantive changes in the company when he came to Japan, and he had built a culture of accountability and results. They found his leadership inspiring and courageous, and their respect for him was palpable. He was, in their estimation and mine, a rock star. The class discussions about this company and this leader were always lively and provocative. How he, an outsider, managed to rebuild the company in 1999 made him a legend. I hoped that my face-to-face meeting with him and his possible engagement in this leadership class we were hoping to deliver would add even more color to my MBA classroom discussions.

But I was stopped in my tracks as I walked toward the boardroom. The human resource manager turned to me and said, “*Don’t ask him about his wife.*” I was stunned. I looked over at my male colleagues as they calmly chatted with one another, and I realized this comment was directed solely at me, the only woman in the entourage. Wow. Could this manager think I cared more about the CEO’s spousal situation than

my role as the head of the business school's executive learning division? And, despite my knowledge that Japan is decades behind other nations in terms of women's rights, could this manager think so little of my competence that he thought I would forget what I was there to do? I was suddenly angry and distracted just minutes before the meeting. I reacted to him with icy silence.

We proceeded into the boardroom, and I decided to assert my presence immediately as I positioned myself facing the CEO. The only other women in the room were serving tea and taking notes. While I tried to remain inclusive and kind, I was upset and disoriented. I was also determined to prove my competence and get things back on track. When we began our pitch for the leadership program, one that this CEO hoped would solidify his legacy, I realized that we had already won this job, thanks to the reputation of our school and the credibility of the Japanese faculty members who knew the company. As the meeting ended with a cordial goodbye, the CEO expressed that he would like to be a part of the program as a faculty member, and we agreed with enthusiasm.

My nervousness abated as I walked away, and within a few hours, I stopped thinking about the comment that had triggered my anger. But later, I realized something had changed in me during that meeting. Even after decades of experience, a prestigious role, and a well-earned doctorate, I was still facing the antiquated view that women were not really business-oriented. On my flight back to Philadelphia, I

wondered if all my efforts to help change that view were for nothing. I wondered if my frustration and anger were about the slow pace of change regarding the perception of female leaders or if I simply overreacted due to my anxiety about the meeting.

KEY QUESTIONS

Even though this global leader would be arrested for fraud and be the subject of scandal within the next few years, I was still feeling anger years later when I took the time to examine the learning moments from that momentous trip. Looking for insight and lessons within a challenge is one of the best ways to enhance your leadership learning. When I reflected on the meeting in Japan later—after the dramatic ending to the CEO's career—I asked myself the following questions:

- What was my role in that exchange?
- Did I check my expectations and my emotions before I walked into the boardroom?
- How had the comment before the meeting influenced my behavior in the meeting?
- Should I have said something about the inappropriate comment?
- Was the icy silence a cop-out or an appropriate response, given the situation?

Questions like these, as you will note throughout this book, lead me to research, to further my education as a business-oriented psychologist, and to continually broaden and inform my life experiences.

Leadership Lessons

The ability to capture leadership lessons embedded in both positive and negative work challenges is the essence of leader development. Here are six leadership lessons I took away from the experience in Japan.

Assess your emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is not just the latest business fad. It is a set of skills that every business leader must master. While the term “emotional intelligence” has been in the business lexicon for many decades, I often find executives misunderstand the term and, frankly, get confused about what it all means and why it matters. A simple definition, adapted from ability-based scholars, is this: emotional intelligence helps you to know your own emotions, to read and decipher the emotions of others, and to manage your emotions in service to your values and goals.

So, how might you assess and enhance your emotional intelligence or EI? The popularity of the concept has spawned numerous tests for EI, but I believe the

best resources for learning more about EI can be found at the EI Consortium (eiconsortium.org).

Learn to use the language of emotions

Some managers and executives think feelings have little to do with business. They are wrong—very wrong. Think about it. Do you have a story about how you were the recipient of an angry exchange for which a boss later apologized? Did you ever see a nervous and excited presenter lose a sale because she was so concerned about her own anxiety that she forgot to listen? It helps to know the language of emotions and moods. Are you tired? Does your boss seem irritated? Is your teammate depressed? If you enhance your ability to identify emotions, you will be better at deciphering what you see in others and factoring in how those emotions will help or hinder your goals. Again, the popularity of the concept of EI has spawned numerous online resources and assessments to determine your level of skill, but many of these tests are overwhelming in their definition of EI. Think of EI as a competency, an ability, and one you can learn. A quick scan of the EI Consortium website (eiconsortium.org) will give you a plan for learning how to talk about emotions, and how to manage and use them as well.

Prepare for the room

Prepare for the emotions in the room well before your meeting. In Japan, I had prepared the pricing, the course work, the timing, and the powerful role of the CEO and his team, but I did not factor in how I

was feeling. I certainly could have considered what the human resource team might have been feeling. How about the faculty team? While your predictions of others' emotions may not always be accurate, you will be better prepared for unanticipated distractions if you consider the emotional energy and moods that might be present in the meeting room. The impact of your own emotions will need your attention, too. Taking time to consider and acknowledge your emotional state will help you to better manage your responses. Without awareness of how a room and the people in it feel, you risk reactions that might drive your idea to dust.

Analyze the group

When you are presenting to others, and particularly when you are hoping to influence others, do you consider their stake in your goal? While it is tricky to make assumptions about how they might react, behave, or respond to your ideas, it is often useful to use your analytical skills to anticipate how others may react. This is easy when you have previously worked with a group, but less so if you do not really know them. But it can be done.

Take the time to write down what you know about each person in the group. If you get stuck, try to put yourself in their position. Ask yourself what they could gain by adopting your ideas. What might they lose? What might you say or do if you were sitting in their seat at the table? Once you do this, prepare a response that you can practice, and you will be so

much better prepared. While it does take time to do this type of preparation, ask yourself if this analysis of others' reactions is less important than the time spent preparing for the financial impact of your idea.

Manage your own reactions

Before my meeting with the company in Japan, I planned how I would talk about the school, the reputation of the faculty members who would teach in the program, the pricing, and the participant demographics. I did not plan for how the team from the company might react to this meeting with the CEO. I never considered how the faculty would participate or what they wanted from this interaction with the CEO. If I had been less starstruck, I might have noticed my stress level and nervous energy and managed myself from the first hour we toured the building. If I had been more attentive to my peers, the managers, and the women who were taking notes, I would have added positive energy to the meeting and walked away from it feeling less anger and more confidence.

Here is how my analysis might have gone:

The HR manager: I hosted the HR manager in Philadelphia when he toured our facilities. We had spent informal time together, and I knew he was curious about me and my role as a vice dean. He knew I was an ardent advocate for women's educational opportunities. In our time together, we discussed a recently released study, which had ranked Japan 104th among 136 countries with women in executive roles. He also knew I had hoped to bring Japanese women from his

company to our university MBA program. Given this, is it possible that he was reacting to his own fears and was concerned that I would advocate a feminist agenda in front of the CEO? Was he worried that I would embarrass him and bring up the dismal results of the report we had discussed? I eventually came to think that his remark was not intended as a personal affront but was perhaps a projection of his anxiety.

The professors: I was traveling with a professor who was known for his arrogance, but he was an intellectual with a vast knowledge of the history of Japan and Asia more broadly. He was also known for his abysmal track record in the classroom and his alienation of female faculty members. I knew all this and intuitively knew that he would not want to highlight the content of the coursework. Instead, it was probable that he would try to distract others with stories of his travels in Asia, and he would be driven to impress the CEO and the Japanese faculty members. Once we were assembled, if I had prepared appropriately, I would have managed the agenda and called on the professors when needed. My physical position in the middle of the table was strategic and a good idea. However, I could have taken time to role-play the agenda with the faculty members. Perhaps this would have allowed me to confidently share my expertise in course design and leader development.

Debrief and learn

You may be thinking that you don't have the time to do a rigorous review of every important meeting. Yet

there is evidence that you learn the most from your most challenging leadership moments. Having the discipline to conduct an after-action review on your own unique experience will ensure you capture every lesson you need to advance and enhance your leadership. To quote Nike, “Just Do It.” In this case, the course did proceed; the school delivered the program five times, and I attended the first offering—although we never saw the CEO, even before his messy career demise. Still, I thank him and the company for the opportunity to learn more than I had ever imagined that afternoon in Yokohama.

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