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Leadership Advice Was Clearly Written by Someone Who Has Never Run a Restaurant

What management theory misses about leading in the real world

BY DAVID AMBROSE · OCTOBER 2026

Leadership advice tends to come from unusually quiet places.

It is written in offices with doors, delivered from conference stages, and condensed into LinkedIn posts by people who apparently begin every morning with an intact schedule and a fully staffed team.

The manager who inhabits this literature has time to reflect before responding. She protects her calendar, delegates with intention, and never solves a problem her employees could solve themselves. When conflict arises, she becomes curious. When pressure builds, she pauses. At some point before lunch, she asks a powerful question.

No one has called out.

The walk-in is not making a noise that sounds expensive. A customer is not presenting a coupon from 2019 as though entering evidence at trial. There is no delivery blocking the rear entrance, no employee crying in the office, and no restroom incident rapidly expanding beyond the traditional definition of restroom incident.

I have spent more than seventeen years managing restaurants. I believe in thoughtful coaching, strategic delegation, emotional intelligence, and all the other things good leaders are advised to practice.

I would simply like to meet the manager who has been given enough time to practice them.

Frontline managers are routinely told to work on the business rather than in it, as though the preposition were theirs to choose. But when the business is short-staffed, backed up, and beginning to smoke, working in it is sometimes the only reason there will still be a business tomorrow.

The problem with most leadership advice is not that it is wrong.

It is that it begins after all the difficult parts have been removed.

Delegate to whom?

“Delegate more” may be the most common advice given to overwhelmed managers.

It is also frequently delivered by someone who has already delegated the responsibility of figuring out how.

Delegation is essential. Managers who hold on to every task eventually become a bottleneck, then a martyr, then a cautionary tale discussed carefully after they leave.

But useful delegation requires someone who has the time, training, and authority to receive the work. When every employee is already fully occupied, passing along another task is not development. It is forwarding an emergency.

Organizations often interpret a manager's direct involvement as evidence that the manager cannot let go.

Sometimes that is true. Some leaders are addicted to being needed.

Sometimes the manager is washing dishes because there are dishes and no one else available to wash them.

Leadership theory has surprisingly little to say about this possibility.

The distinction matters because the solutions are entirely different. A manager who refuses to delegate needs coaching. A manager who cannot delegate because the operation lacks sufficient capacity needs something coaching alone cannot provide. Treating both situations as failures of leadership allows an organization to avoid examining the conditions it has created.

And so the manager receives another development plan.

The dishes remain.

The developmental value of letting things burn

Managers are also encouraged not to solve every problem for their employees. This is excellent advice.

If managers answer every question, employees receive their decisions but never develop their judgment. Good leaders create space for people to think, try, occasionally fail, and learn.

Customers, regrettably, have not always agreed to participate in this curriculum.

A guest waiting for dinner is unlikely to view the delay as an exciting developmental opportunity for the new shift supervisor. The health inspector may also be resistant to experiential learning.

Consider a new supervisor confronting a service breakdown during the busiest part of the evening. The supervisor needs experience making decisions under pressure. The manager needs to develop that judgment. Meanwhile, orders are falling behind, guests are growing impatient, and an already stretched team is waiting for direction.

Should the manager stand back and allow the supervisor to work through the problem? Step in immediately? Intervene just enough to prevent the situation from deteriorating?

There is no universally correct answer. The judgment lies in understanding the consequences of each choice.

Frontline managers make these calculations constantly. Can the employee recover without harming the guest experience? Is this a mistake that will teach something useful, or one that will create an avoidable safety or service problem? How much disruption can the operation reasonably absorb?

Standing back is easy when mistakes are inexpensive. It becomes more complicated when the lesson comes with refunds, food-safety implications, or a one-star review written entirely in capital letters.

Always stepping in creates dependency. But telling managers simply to “let their people fail” ignores where frontline failure lands: on customers, coworkers, and the evening's results.

Development requires room for mistakes.

Many organizations have optimized that room out of existence.

Empowerment, with terms and conditions

Organizations love the word “empowerment.” It appears in mission statements, leadership competencies, and presentations featuring photographs of people pointing enthusiastically at whiteboards.

Actual empowerment is less photogenic. It requires giving people authority, information, and protection when a reasonable decision produces an imperfect result.

Too often, employees are empowered to fix the problem but cannot adjust the staffing, schedule, price, policy, technology, or customer promise that created it. The manager may be told to “own the outcome” while nearly every condition shaping that outcome was decided elsewhere.

This is not empowerment.

It is accountability with better branding.

Real empowerment also means tolerating decisions that differ from the ones a senior leader would have made.

If employees are free to decide only when they correctly anticipate the boss's preference, they have not been empowered. They have been entered into a corporate mind-reading competition.

And when a reasonable decision produces an unpopular result, the organization's response reveals whether its commitment to empowerment was genuine.

Does leadership examine the information available at the time, the authority granted, and the reasoning behind the decision?

Or does it simply explain what the employee should have done, now that everyone knows how the situation ended?

Managers learn which decisions are genuinely theirs and which ones are theirs until someone dislikes the result.

Their teams learn too.

Protect your calendar from reality

Another popular instruction is to protect time for strategic work.

There is wisdom in this. A manager who spends every hour responding to the immediate will eventually be surprised by the predictable.

But frontline operations do not recognize calendar blocks.

The lunch rush does not see “strategic planning” and return at 2:30. An employee crisis cannot always be rescheduled. Equipment chooses its own journey. Customers rarely make appointments to become furious.

For years, I began shifts with plans. I set aside time to coach an employee, review the numbers, or complete work that required more than thirty consecutive seconds of concentration.

Then the operation began voting on my agenda.

The details changed, but the result was familiar. By the end of the day, the urgent work was finished, and the important work had been politely rescheduled for tomorrow, where it would face many of the same obstacles.

Eventually, I understood that every unclaimed minute had quietly become emergency capacity.

This is where much of the conversation about time management becomes inadequate. Organizations cannot remove every available hour from an operation and then instruct managers to find time for strategic thinking. They cannot continually expand responsibilities, reduce coverage, and treat the resulting inability to plan as an individual failure of discipline.

Leadership requires margin.

A manager needs enough coverage to leave the floor, enough stability to think beyond the next hour, and enough capacity to prevent problems instead of merely surviving them.

Yet margin makes companies nervous. On a spreadsheet, it can look suspiciously like inefficiency. So schedules become leaner. Roles expand. Administrative requirements accumulate. Every hour is assigned before the day begins.

Then senior leaders wonder why managers are always reacting.

The organization has confused maximum utilization with maximum effectiveness. Those are not the same thing.

An operation running at full capacity may appear efficient right up until something goes wrong. And something always goes wrong.

The capacity to respond is not necessarily wasted capacity. Sometimes it is what prevents a manageable problem from becoming an operational crisis.

Self-care will not finish the closing checklist

When the strain becomes visible, the conversation frequently turns to resilience. Managers are reminded to set boundaries, take breaks, practice mindfulness, and make use of wellness resources.

These can help. People need rest. Boundaries matter. A breathing exercise can regulate a nervous system.

It cannot complete the closing checklist.

At some point, advice about personal resilience becomes a polite way of avoiding a structural conversation. The manager is asked to become better at enduring conditions the organization has no intention of changing.

A bubble bath is a lovely thing.

It is not a staffing strategy.

Wellness language should not recast an operational problem as a personal failure of coping. An exhausted manager may not need another seminar on energy management. The manager may need one additional competent person on Friday

night.

This does not mean managers bear no responsibility for their own well-being. It means personal responsibility and organizational responsibility cannot be treated as interchangeable.

An employee can learn to manage stress more effectively. An organization must still examine what is producing that stress.

Otherwise, resilience becomes the expectation that people will continually absorb pressures the business refuses to address. And when they can no longer absorb them, their departure is described as a retention problem.

Advice that survives contact with reality

Frontline managers do not need leadership standards lowered. They need those standards connected to the conditions required to meet them.

Organizations that want managers to coach must provide time that is not simultaneously required for coverage. If they want delegation, they must develop employees capable of accepting ownership. If they want sound judgment, they must allow reasonable decisions to survive imperfect outcomes. If they want strategic thinking, they must preserve some capacity beyond immediate execution.

They must also become more honest when evaluating managers. A leader constantly working inside the operation may be unable to delegate. The same leader may be holding together a staffing model that fails whenever a human being gets sick.

Those are different problems. One calls for leadership development. The other calls for an operational decision. Confusing the two does not make either one disappear.

Managers have responsibilities too. They should resist the seduction of rescuing every situation, develop people before emergencies occur, tell the truth about operational capacity, and stop disguising chronic strain as personal excellence. They must also recognize that being indispensable is not necessarily the same as being effective.

But organizations cannot demand that managers rise above the operation while designing an operation that survives only when managers remain trapped inside it.

There is a practical test for almost every piece of leadership advice: What would have to be true about staffing, training, authority, and workload for someone to follow it consistently?

If the answer requires resources the organization has chosen not to provide, the advice is incomplete. And if leaders are unwilling to examine those conditions, they should be careful about blaming the people who cannot fulfill the ideal.

Good leadership advice still matters. Coach thoughtfully. Delegate intentionally. Remain curious. Protect time to think. Build people who can make decisions without you.

Just remember that none of this happens in a vacuum.

It happens beside a broken walk-in, beneath a blinking labor report, and approximately six minutes before someone asks to speak to the manager.

Leadership advice does not need to be less ambitious.

It just needs to survive its first closing shift.