

TRANSFORMING LEADERS & CULTURE

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Conscious Leadership:

The Great Opportunity Emerging from the *Great Resignation*

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Could there be a silver lining in this time of persistent uncertainty and change we've been living in? If we're being hopeful—and we are—that silver lining is that leaders are more focused than ever on their people (employee retention and wellbeing). The question is, *how*.

Losing people is hard. It very likely will shake your confidence in your abilities as a leader. Added to that, you're now in the position of having to hold your team together as they're short-staffed and taking on more work and feeling the morale hit themselves. You (and they) may be wondering who will be the next to go.

The temptation in these moments is to look outward for solutions, such as external rewards, to keep your people motivated. **Yet this is the moment to look inward.** To think about, examine, and improve **how you lead**, because that's what creates an environment where either people want to stay (even when things get tough!) or they begin looking for the next opportunity to move on.

Looking inward at your leadership style is the Great Opportunity that has emerged from what has become known as the Great Resignation.

Two Styles of Leadership:

Domination vs. Conscious

There are two fundamental ways to lead: through fear or through trust. One makes people grow smaller. The other invites people to grow larger. The mindset and the skills of each are radically different.

How do you lead? How do you want to lead?

Let's explore each leadership style.

Domination Leadership

"I matter—and you don't."

For hundreds of [generations](#) (including our own), we have been conditioned to a "domination" mindset of leadership that puts the needs of one human being above the needs of others. Whomever the person in power—the boss, parent, government official—their choices and their will are imposed on those they lead.

The mindset of domination leadership is based on fear: "Do what I say, or else I will use my power to harm you" (punishment). More benevolent leaders can offer a reward if you do what they say, but that's still a domination mindset. Either way, the person in power is using **rewards and punishments** to manipulate and coerce the people they lead to do what they say.

At the core of this domination leadership is a mindset of: "I matter—and you don't."

Over the course of human history, this domination mindset was built into our language, thinking, culture, families, institutions, and our laws. It's become pervasive, invisible, and subconscious. We tell ourselves it's normal because we think, "that's just the way the world is... that's the way it's always been."

Conscious Leadership

"I matter AND you matter AND we matter."

Conscious leadership sees another way. A way based on trust and care, rather than on fear. It flows from a mindset of: "I matter AND you matter." It means that I value you and your human needs as much as I value myself and my own human needs.

A conscious leader leads by igniting people's [intrinsic motivation](#) to contribute and belong to something bigger than themselves.

To embrace conscious leadership is to move toward it, starting from wherever you are. It's the yearning to lead from this new mindset that propels the conscious leader forward in their own development. **It's the openness to embrace the new—language, thinking, and way of being—that this mindset invites.**

What matters is not to **be** a conscious leader, but to **become a more conscious** leader. It's a process and a journey much like a spiritual practice. It means an ongoing commitment of authentic self-discovery to see where domination still lives within you, and to consciously practice new thinking and new language in alignment with: **"I matter AND you matter AND we matter."**

The Great Opportunity: **Embracing a New Leadership Mindset**

If the domination leadership mindset sounds common in your culture or in your own leadership style, do you also have a sense of the environment it creates?

“I matter—you don’t” is the mindset that has motivated people to seek out other places to work (or to leave the workforce altogether) in the Great Resignation. The sentiment is: “Life’s too short to be this unhappy.”

But leadership doesn’t have to be this way. In fact, this way doesn’t work with the world today, and it’s actually at odds with the trend of companies placing renewed strategic emphasis on employee wellbeing and retention.

Conscious leadership challenges the underlying mindset of domination leadership, and it’s the *antidote* to the Great Resignation. Conscious leaders create [psychological safety](#), which has been shown to boost employee resilience and wellbeing; the way they lead sets the foundation of a [people-centric workplace](#).

Conscious Leadership in Practice

If the conscious leadership mindset sounds attractive in theory, you’re likely wondering how it works in practice. Let’s take a look at one specific practice: **empathetic listening**.

I (Gregg) once facilitated a conversation among a group of nurses and certified nursing assistants (CNAs), along with the nursing supervisor and nursing director. We met twice a month for six months.

The intention of the meetings was to invite them to take ownership of **co-creating the culture they want**, to take responsibility for how they are showing up, especially in those moments of reactivity in themselves or in the people with whom they work.

At one point, a nurse said, “I wasn’t going to speak, but I just need to say this ... when I come to my supervisor and tell her that I’m overwhelmed and need more support on the floor, I don’t want to hear a response of ‘you don’t have anything to complain about ... our nursing coverage is much higher than most facilities even when we’re shorthanded.’

I don’t feel heard when you say that, and I get even more frustrated. I want to hear that you understand how overwhelmed I am, how frustrated and disappointed I feel in not providing the quality of care I want to.”

This nurse is describing a moment in her workday when she has a human need for empathy. This is a core need *for all of us*.

When our emotions are surging—whether in joy or frustration—we have a yearning for another human **being to be present with us**, to understand what is going on inside us. Not to try to fix us, or make us better, or to try to distract us from it, but simply to be present with us.

Empathy has several close cousins: the simplest of which is the **need to be heard**. How rare in our workday (or anywhere else for that matter) do we encounter another person who is willing to give us their attention and listen with understanding?

Amazingly, when we are heard, understood, and/or nurtured with the empathy that we need, then we have a sense of being valued, of mattering.

One of the challenges around the need for empathy is that it is often unseen. We don't recognize it either in ourselves or in the people around us. We don't name it. **We aren't aware of the common ways that people "ask" for empathy.**

Very often in the workplace, when staff is reaching out for empathy, the supervisor or manager instead hears it as "complaining," or "whining," or making excuses. The person speaking up can then be labeled as a troublemaker.

Another nurse spoke up in those meetings mentioned above, and she said, "I appreciate that I can call the nurse supervisor and ask her if I can just vent for a few minutes so I don't explode, and she gives me the space to do it, and afterward says 'I can really hear your frustration of how hard it is to work with this patient.' ... That helps a lot. Otherwise, I think I would probably take it out on my co-workers and on the patient."

The need for empathy is pervasive. It arises in multiple moments, during every day, in every one of us. We're more likely to get that need nurtured when we recognize it and ask for it.

In fact, recognizing one's own need for empathy and asking for it are milestones of development in becoming a conscious leader.



Communication that Honors Human Needs

Empathic listening is part of the foundational training for becoming a more conscious leader. The leadership training we do at SweetRush Transforming Leaders and Culture (TLC) stimulates new insights and gives us new tools to bridge the space between unconscious reaction and conscious response. **By enhancing our self-awareness and self-responsibility**, it invites us to **stop playing the blame game**. At the same time, it enhances our ability to communicate and collaborate with others in challenging conversations, when emotions are rising, and even when we seem to be heading into conflict.

When the people in an organization (starting with its leaders) all learn the same language, empathy and culture thrive.

If we are to nurture the human need for empathy in our workplace environments, then we not only need the skills of empathic listening, but we also need structures that support people in their need for empathy.

For the group of nurses and CNAs I mentioned above, one of their key structures is the bi-monthly meetings that we have together. They are also coached to support each other. When they notice a colleague in a reactive state, they invite the other person to pause and take some deep breaths. They meet their colleague with some empathic listening.

If keeping people on your team and supporting their wellbeing matters to you, this is the type of environment you want to create—one in which people feel safe enough to share their needs (what's been referred to as psychological safety). When your employees feel valued and seen, they will show up knowing that they matter and that you matter, too, which makes everyone motivated to care about and support each other—**we matter**.

How to Become a More Conscious Leader

Ask yourself this: ***Do all of your team members feel seen and heard?***

If you see room for improvement, take heart—that means you are on the path to becoming a conscious leader, to seeing your team through the lens of “I matter and you matter.”

And, this is a path you don't need to walk alone. You don't have to be an expert in organizational change management, or a visionary spiritual guru, or a high-level executive responsible for teams upon teams of people. All you need is to recognize the Great Opportunity before you, and take the first step to look inward, learn, practice, and grow as a leader.

When you are aware and value others as much as yourself, you become the leader that your employees need.



The SweetRush TLC team would love to help you do this inner work, to walk this path with you, and to see you realize the profound change that emerges for you, both personally and professionally.

The most effective leadership training encourages introspection and awareness.

Intrigued?

We invite you to learn more about our **Intro to Conscious Leadership workshop**. During this brief development experience, you'll discover and work with your personal values in a way that benefits your leadership practices, and you'll learn the mindsets, practices, and behaviors of conscious leadership.



Contact us to learn more:

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We'd love to help you on your journey to becoming the leader your team is waiting for—and you know you can be.

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