

Leadership *in a World of* Contradictions

A Q&A with Alexi Robichaux, CEO and co-founder of BetterUp, on finding clarity in your management style amid new workplace challenges and tensions.

The leadership playbook has been rewritten in the past few years, and managers need to adapt to survive. But the path to becoming a modern leader isn't clear—and, in fact, the messages can be contradictory, says Alexi Robichaux, the CEO and co-founder of BetterUp, a leading online personal and professional coaching firm. *People + Strategy* executive editor David Reimer and articles editor Adam Bryant sat down with Robichaux to explore the challenges, shifts and future possibilities of leadership.





People + Strategy: There seems to be an enduring tension and lack of alignment with the expectations of employers and employees. How do you think about that?

ALEXI ROBICHAUX: Stepping back, I think part of the tension lies in how we think about leadership. In the late 1970s and early '80s, thanks to people like Peter Drucker, management was the “super category,” and leadership was a subset of that. But along the way, that got flipped and we saw a leadership industry boom. And a lot of what people were talking about wasn't really tied to the core idea that the role of a manager is to increase performance.

It was as if leadership, as a set of metaphysical principles, became a set of activities for its own means, rather than making people better at their jobs to grow the business. The ideas have become disconnected. That's where some of the irreconcilable differences come in. If I'm reading leadership blogs all day, I can have a very lofty idea of what my leader should

do for me, and that may not have any actual practicality to running the firm. A lot of the genuine, authentic disconnects come from these types of situations.

P+S: That notion of leadership as a philosophical practice, discreet from running the business, is certainly pervasive.

ROBICHAUX: It's as though leadership is seen as a virtue instead of as something utilitarian. Both can exist, but the measure of virtue has to be that it works. We're seeing a disconnect. I hear it from young people. “I want my manager to do this,” they will say. And I'll ask why they think that. “Well, I read a blog.” Then I'll explain that the author of the blog may have good intentions, but that the suggestion may not actually work in practice. But they really think that they deserve certain treatment from their boss. And they don't mean that in an entitled way; that's just what they expect.

P+S: What is the management component that is in scarce supply today?

ROBICHAUX: We have a very large dataset of 360 reviews evaluating managers, specifically. And we can pull from that to see what managers are struggling with and also what people are saying they want from their managers. The three things that people want most from their managers—in part because managers have become progressively worse at these since the start of COVID—are focus, strategic planning and alignment.

They're kind of basic. Is that inspirational leadership? No. But what we find is that employees want clarity. They want the block-and-tackle basics of management. But in the world today, that is increasingly hard to do. It requires a higher level of business acumen on the part of the manager. You have to be able to think in multidimensional chess about tradeoffs and consequences. It's not about inspiring people, storytelling or integrity. It's just, "Tell me what I've got to do, how to spend my time and what winning looks like."

What we're finding in the data is that people want that more directive style and they want that clarity, because outside of their work context, clarity is at an all-time low in their lives. People want their jobs to be a place of clarity in their lives. That requires a directive leadership style, more so than people may have been comfortable with in recent years.

P+S: In the past few years, managers have increasingly found themselves in conversations for which there is no playbook. So, on the one hand, employees want their managers to get back to basics. But there are also all these new conversations—how do you balance compassion for an employee going through a tough patch while also driving accountability, for example—that managers may not have the training for.

ROBICHAUX: It does feel like management is harder than it's ever been. You are navigating complex social, political and emotional issues alongside your direct reports now. There's a whole new skill set to people management. You're not a therapist, but you are being trusted with the well-being of your team. And the traditional literature has not prepared us for guiding colleagues to perform and flourish through these complex issues. MBA classes don't traditionally address how to increase the well-being and the flourishing of your team even though it's a huge indicator of performance.

If you can't learn the skills fast enough, what do you focus on? You have to focus on this concept of psychological resources for your managers. What is their capacity for change and their capacity for learning?

We published a book called *Tomorrowmind: Thriving at Work with Resilience, Creativity, and Connection—Now and in an Uncertain Future* (Atria Books, 2023). We studied 100,000+ workers, their leaders and organizations to answer the question, "What are the key skills critical to flourishing at work today?" The answer is an acronym we call PRISM, which are the five skills that can set managers and teams up for success in the future:

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- The first is *prospection* or strategic planning, which is the ability to think through the “matrix of maybe” and prune decision pathways.
- The second is *resilience* on an individual and team level. You're constantly getting blowback and setbacks right now as a leader or manager. Do you have the fortitude and the ability to bounce back?
- The third is *innovation* or creative thought.
- The fourth is *social* connection or rapid rapport building. In a Zoom world, you have to be good at building rapport fast because you still need to trust your teams.
- The fifth is “*mattering*.” It's less existential than “meaning.” People want to know that their work matters, and they need to understand how it fits into the big picture.

P+S: One of the most persistent themes in this idea of irreconcilable differences is the tension over return-to-office policies.

ROBICHAUX: The data is messy right now. Ideally, companies would not approach it as a one-size-fits-all policy. You would do it based on the life cycle of projects. In the ideation phase, people are better in person. Rapport is built quicker and strategic planning happens faster. In the heads-down phase, being at home has huge advantages for flow states. So the scientific answer is you need both approaches, and ideally you would organize policies around the actual work being done.

The data shows that a lot of these CEOs who are advocating for return to office aren't wrong. People seem to be more productive now coming into the office at least some of the time. But it's hard. There's a little bit of indignation on both sides.

That said, I also hear anecdotally from some younger employees that they are more eager to go back into the office because a lot of their social bonds are at work.

P+S: Have you seen shifts in what people want coaching for?

ROBICHAUX: We've seen two shifts, besides the expectations of managers. Themes related to well-being spiked at the start of the pandemic and persisted throughout. A big

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factor in the effectiveness of teams was how much gas the manager had in their own tank. In general, people in senior leadership were much more depleted than we may have all thought.

There is a predictable pattern to how people develop leadership skills that was amplified at the start of COVID. In general, most members start working on a well-being or stress-related theme for a couple months before they start to tackle a traditional management or leadership skill. And it's not surprising, but most traditional leadership development resources don't establish well-being as a starting point.

It doesn't really design around the question, "Do you have the capacity to learn right now?" The answer for most managers is that they don't have the capacity to absorb robustly a lot of new information. They're just in survival mode, just trying to make it through. That's why resilience is the fountainhead of most modern leadership. It is maybe the primal leadership skill.

The second shift we tracked longitudinally is the relationship between burnout and resilience of everyone in our dataset. For the first time, we are starting to see burnout eclipse resilience as a collective capacity. If burnout starts to eclipse resilience—it's hard to believe—but a lot of workforces may not have the capacity to turn on a dime when facing the uncertainty of future business challenges.

P+S: There is so much polarization in society now. That creates an enormous leadership challenge, particularly since people are increasingly looking to companies to solve all of society's challenges.

ROBICHAUX: It's this intersection of authenticity and civility. One of the jobs of a leader today is to create a civil workplace, and that's really hard because we don't have a civil space outside of work anymore. The geopolitical landscape is not civil for the most part, and there's a lot of demonizing in the world.

So one job of a leader—because you can't be productive or collaborative without it—is to create a culture of civility where there is mutual respect and there are some boundaries. You can't just cop out of everything, because then you start to compromise authenticity. That's the tension of how you give authentic expression to your viewpoints. You do it in a way where you also create space.

Our data shows this happens best in high "belonging" cultures, which is the holy grail here. People not only feel safe to bring their thoughts to bear, but they also feel like they fit in and are welcome in their organization. Leaders can create that environment, and that's the key to civility. People have to feel they can disagree with colleagues without being ostracized.

A lot of belonging comes down to the manager/team dynamic and individual interventions around people. Is the front-line manager creating an environment in which people can express their views and people on the team don't pounce on each other? You have to police that. If it happens, you have to say that's not acceptable. You have to exit those people.



P+S: Given that leading and managing people has become harder, are you seeing people opt out of these roles to go back to individual contributor positions?

ROBICHAUX: Anecdotally, from talking to customers and working with other founders, I am seeing more comfort with people being coached out of (or opting out of) management and leadership roles and being OK with that. Before, people might have thought, “Oh, my career is over.” But a lot of this is because people are burned out as managers.

I often coach internally that the atomic unit of management today is just difficult conversations. If you’re conflict-avoidant, we can coach people on how to be less avoidant. But you’re going to have a harder road than if you’re someone who naturally sets boundaries. You have to be clear about expectations because the job is really hard. It’s pretty thankless. That’s why it’s called leadership. Some do want to opt out of these roles and still stay with the company, rather than feeling like they have to go somewhere else.

P+S: Let’s fast-forward 30, 40 or even 50 years. What does leadership look like?

ROBICHAUX: It looks more like being a leader of teams that are highly situational and based on the job that has to be done at the moment.

The jobs to be done are proliferating and changing at a rapid pace, but we still assume now that one manager constantly can manage that. Instead, why not ask, for every emerging job that has to be done, who should be in charge?

That starts to look like punctuated situational leadership—and maybe you don’t even have managers. A person may have certain skills that are right for the project and they get drafted in to lead it. It’s like mission-based work. And maybe there should be combat pay for that particular tour of duty.

If you’re going to lead this particular project, then your pay should be tied to that rather than your particular level in the organization. If you’re functioning like a VP for three months with a particular project, then you should be paid that way for three months and then go back to your base pay rate.

That dynamicism is going to be huge. I humorously say that maybe Hollywood is smarter than we all thought because they’ve been doing this forever with the gig economy. Maybe Hollywood is going to be the future model of work, with some AI and different pay models mixed in. ■■