

WHY LEADERSHIP SUCKS
VOLUME TWO

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Why Leadership Sucks: Volume Two: Senior Servant Leadership Fundamentals and the Pain, Pitfalls and Challenges

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EPUB ISBN 978-0-9884053-8-7, Kindle ISBN 978-0-9884053-9-4; CreateSpace print ISBN: 978-0-9884053-7-0

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Acknowledgments

While there are many who have influenced my thinking on leadership, a number of whom I reference in this book, there are several people who challenged me to write and publish it.

The writings of Seth Godin encouraged me to ‘poke the box’ and to ‘ship’ this and other books. Seth, you may never know the depth of inspiration and motivation that got me started on this author journey.

Thank you to Google Drive and ListNote (khy-maera.com), whose cloud storage and voice-to-text apps helped me compile notes, manuscripts, and images.

Thank you to Scott Gilbert, a lawyer, David Yeghiaian at Holy Family Memorial, Terry Kohler at Vollrath, and Jerry Baumann at Windway Capital for inspiring me to be a better servant leader.

Thank you to Michelle Smith at Violets are Blue Photography for the incredible photos you took for this book.

Thank you to the team at Books Go Social (books-gosocial.com) for the cover art. If you need any graphic or website design, please contact them via their website.

Thank you to my lovely wife Carolyn, who challenges me, holds me accountable, and loves me for who I am, not what I do. To my three children, Josiah, Reagan, and Dominic, thank you allowing me to be a child at heart.

Thank you to my editor, Joy Tibbs! You were an extraordinary help in so many ways. I could not have polished this book without your invaluable effort. If you

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are looking for an editor, reach out to her via her website (joyofediting.co.uk).

Thank you to everyone else with whom I have had the privilege to cross paths. You have all impacted my life in some way that has contributed to this work.

And last but not least, thank you to Christ, without whom I am nothing, even on my best day.

Introduction

In this day and age, we talk about leadership and more and more books are available on the subject than ever before. Yes, I know I'm adding to that pile.

The single keyword 'leadership' offers up more than 640 million search results on Google alone, and via the internet we can access leadership courses (like mine on Udemy.com) and online information more quickly and easily than ever before. We have more management consultants than ever before in the history of the world. Yet we have a severe lack of leadership in most areas of government, business, and even non-profit organizations.

So why is that? I believe it is a lack of follow-through... plain and simple. We all gorge ourselves on leadership conferences, webinars, books, and so on, but how much do we actually put into practice?

This book is about putting what we learn into practice, and it is a hallmark of the servant leadership and Level 5 leadership style that I try to emulate every day. I work hard to do what I say I am going to do and follow through on it. This puts some of us ahead of the pack, and I would invite you to join those ranks.

It really boils down to leadership fundamentals. Whenever we feel frustrated or life seems to be spinning out of control, we need to get back to the fundamentals; to the basics of why we're living. What is your purpose and mission? Is it based on the fundamentals of living a selfless life as a service-minded person?

“Life and people aren’t out to get you, but your approach to life and approach to people are.”

At times when our lives feel out of control, we need to get back to the basics of life and leadership. We can get so distracted by things in life that we forget about what is seminally true. It is always about the fundamentals: fundamentals in work, life, sports, faith, and relationships. We can easily allow ourselves to become distracted by all kinds of things that really don’t matter, and most of the time a return to the fundamentals brings us back into balance and promotes peace in our lives.

That’s what this book is about. If you feel that things are out of control, either in your own leadership or in that of others around you, this book is for you. If you just want to learn more about servant leadership fundamentals, this book is also for you. It is my hope and belief that this book will help you get back to the fundamentals of life and leadership. These are the things that really matter in life, and life should not be focused on the things that distract us from the purpose of living a selfless life.

So what is servant leadership? Simply put, it combines a personal humility with a fierce resolve, and it is based on the teachings of Christ. Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term in 1970, but the concept began more than 2,000 years ago with the teachings of Christ.

In *The Power of Servant-leadership*, Greenleaf wrote: “The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types.

Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.”

Can we achieve servant leadership without the teachings of Christ? Not really. I am amazed at how many people don't realize that the term 'servant leadership' comes from His teachings. I have often heard people complain that my first book, *Why Leadership Sucks Volume 1*, uses too many Bible verses relating to Jesus, even though He started the whole servant leadership movement.

Some erroneously think that the whole concept is a recent phenomenon. It seems ironic to me that some people who are strong proponents of servant leadership don't understand that connection. You really can't have one without the other. You can't just be a do-gooder as a servant leader without acknowledging the teachings of Jesus Christ.

I've had people ask me, "Why do you talk about Jesus and the Bible in your leadership book, or in any business book for that matter?" My leadership book is called *Why Leadership Sucks* because Christ is at the center of servant leadership, and He experienced many rejections, which culminated in his crucifixion. Leading others in following His example invites similar frustrations and rejections to those that He experienced, except for the death part. Choosing to lead as Christ did is hard, since we don't get to pass the buck. Jesus' teachings are recorded in the Bible. He was a real, historical person. You may deny that He was the Son of God, but He really lived, and that's no debatable matter.

It seems kind of ironic that people would follow servant leadership without realizing they are following many of Christ's teachings. Some people have a problem with quoting Christ's sayings, but make no mistake; they

are part and parcel of the servant leadership philosophy. His teachings are true, and there are tangible benefits if you follow His life instructions.

Even if you are not a devout Christian but you lead a life according to His servant leadership principles, you will see the benefits. However, the best benefits come from believing and following Him, recognizing that the only way for us to be our best is through Him, not by ourselves. Make no mistake; if you follow the truths in the Bible without believing its truth you will experience blessing during your lifetime, but not for eternity.

You may feel you have an idea of what servant leadership is by now, but perhaps you are wondering what Level 5 leadership is.

This concept was first introduced by Jim Collins, author of world-renowned business book *Good to Great*. Conveniently, Level 5 leadership dovetails with servant leadership.

Jim identified five levels that leaders can potentially attain. Some are able to get to level 5, while others get stuck at one of the lower levels.

Level 1 is a highly capable individual. This person gains success through his or her own hard work, skills, and determination.

Level 2 is a contributing team member. At this stage, he or she has found out how to be an effective team member by leveraging others' work in addition to their own.

Level 3 is a competent manager: a leader who organizes a team of people and financial resources to reach a particular goal or milestone.

Level 4 is an effective leader: a person who is able to cast a clear and compelling vision, and to marshal a team

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to achieve a high performance level in aiming for that vision.

Level 5 is the highest level. Leaders at this stage are able to build enduring greatness (over many years or even decades) through a paradoxical combination of personal humility and professional resolve.



So why does leadership suck? It sucks because you get calls at the weekend and on your vacation days. It's harder to take a sick day because work piles up on the leader's desk that cannot be delegated or delayed. You have to take time out of your day and your own tasks to deal with team members who are not getting along or to listen to them complain about something they don't like. Then you either have to stay late to get your own work done or take it home with you.

You have to deal with more of the organizational politics the higher up the chain of command you are, which adds more work and complexity to the decisions you make. Your decisions will always leave some or most people unhappy. You have to constantly keep your boss

or board of directors happy with your performance, in addition to those reporting to you. So not only are you managing those who are hierarchically below you; you also have to manage the expectations and perceptions of those above you.

This book is volume two of the *Why Leadership Sucks* series. If you haven't read volume one you don't *have* to do so before you read volume two. However, I do recommend reading volume one as it provides junior leadership lessons, words of wisdom, and powerful experiences that aren't included in volume two. Added to this, volume two contains lessons that build on those in volume one.

The leadership lessons in volume two are divided into four sections. In part one I deal broadly with the topic of service, exploring the choices we make in terms of whether to serve or not to serve. Part two focuses on setting aside your ego to do what's best for the team. Part three focuses on humility by avoiding persona non grata (being an unwelcome person). Finally, part four applies these concepts to the organizational world: demonstrating how to get results in specific situations, despite fierce marketplace competition.

WARNING!

Many of these concepts are true in the vast majority of cases, but there will always be minor exceptions. As is the case with any writing on the subject of leadership, there are so many variables (for-profit versus non-profit, politics, culture, small versus large organizations, etc.), not the least of which is human psychology, which can slightly or greatly alter the leadership prescription needed to solve your particular situation. So if you find

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yourself in a situation that might be an exception to the rule, please keep this in mind.

Part 1: To Serve or Not to Serve, That Is the Question

“The goal of leadership is not to be likable or loved, but to be proven trustworthy and respected.”

There’s a difference between liking someone who is in authority and respecting them. You don’t have to love or even like someone to respect them, but you do have to gain their respect if you want to continue working for them long term. That is, if you want to enjoy your job. As leaders, our goal should be to earn the respect of those who report to us, not simply because of our positional authority but because of our own earned trust and authority.

Many who are just starting out in leadership wrongly think: “Now that I’m in charge, these ‘peons’ have to respect me!” And then we are rudely awakened to the fact that while we have positional authority that can coerce or force people to do a task, the better way is to earn the team’s respect. Doing the latter will cause most people to want to follow you, leading to much greater productivity and loyalty throughout the process.

Comfort, control, and significance. I must attribute these three motivations to a discussion I had with Andy Kilgas, a good friend of mine. Thanks Andy! We all pay homage to one or more of these ‘gods’. Which one is

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most important to you? Stop and think about it for a few minutes. Do you make decisions based on what is comforting to you? Or based on how you can control people, money, and situations to your personal advantage? How do you influence rather than coercing others to gain genuine significance in their eyes through trust and integrity?

It is important to recognize which one(s) we fall hard for and reduce their negative influences in our lives. It might be one or all three. Which do you struggle with the most? Take a minute to ponder on this and find ways to guard against it ruling your life.

1

Rejection and Hazards Call for Levity

“Crap should run uphill, not downhill.”

Nevertheless, this is the opposite of what so often happens in real life. It would be nice if the boss sometimes had to deal with the problems that normally flow downhill. If so, perhaps he or she wouldn't be so quick to dismiss a timely warning, or would take more time to understand the nuance of the situation, or would plan more effectively rather than blindly forging headlong into a project.

These thoughts swarm around in our heads when it comes to our bosses, but how often do we take the time to self-assess whether we are doing the exact same thing to our own teams? This is the essence of servant leadership. It is a choice to serve the best interests of the team, sacrificing our own interests in the process.

“Leadership is often hazardous to your health.”

When you experience rejection as a leader, it usually occurs for one of three reasons:

Hey, you suck at this leadership thing. If this is true, it requires humility to see it and focus on practicing servant leadership skills that lead to wisdom.

You are not sending out the right messages. Perhaps you're not communicating the way that a particular person wants to hear it or in a way that they can understand. This stems from a desire for others to be more like ourselves instead of recognizing that we, as leaders, need to talk in a way that suits them more than us. It is very difficult to do this well.

There is something wrong that is outside of your control, and you're just really not the right fit for that particular role.

If you do experience rejection in leadership, recognize that it might be number three. Maybe your leadership isn't the right fit or the timing is off. But don't skip to number three without honestly considering the first two reasons. We all have blind spots where there is room for improvement.

Our weaknesses as workers are amplified when we become leaders. If you seek revenue growth when your company is struggling, you might want to focus on your leadership tactics before going after growth, because it could crush you. I've seen many companies celebrate when fast growth happens and others that pursue it at all costs. Some companies aren't prepared to handle the operational aspects of their business as their customer orders explode. Think about the additional shipping, customer service, manufacturing, etc.

Others get drunk with success and start pursuing ancillary investments that don't have much to do with their core brand and end up alienating their customer base or running marginally profitable segments of their business that end up diverting time and investment away from other more profitable areas. Others simply underestimate the cash needed during growth, including major investments in inventory, staffing, and equipment

that far exceeds the cash flow returns from those growth activities.

Often we run from the things we don't want to face. Perhaps our 'shiny object' focus is the result of avoiding leadership shortcomings in ourselves or within the team. This doesn't mean that we can't go after something new if it makes strategic sense for the organization, but we should be cautious, honest, and self-aware enough to ask ourselves what our motivation for change is.

Some people have a seemingly insatiable desire to be in charge. These people are very different from those who don't feel a burning need to be in charge but instead choose to be in leadership at the right times. The latter can easily step in and out of leadership roles without always having to lead. This doesn't mean they don't have the desire and natural gifting to lead others, but they don't seek it at all costs. The former is afraid of losing his or her position of power and will do anything to retain it, even at the expense of others.

So ask yourself if you have an unnatural desire to lead in every circumstance or if you can step back and let others lead at times. First you lead, then another leads, producing a graceful leadership dance.

“When in hazardous situations, don't brake and turn the wheel.”

Just like when you're driving a car in snow, ice, or heavy rain, you want to avoid braking and turning at the same time. Do one or the other as an isolated action or complete them sequentially. If you try to do both, you may spin your car, or organization, out of control, especially during a crisis. Sometimes, the harder you work to try to

make something happen, the more it slips through your fingers like sand. You need to make sure that your work isn't perceived to be an act of desperation.

“Balance humor with a focus on getting things done.”

We all have a tough job as leaders; it isn't easy. And because of the pressures and stress, we often focus on the task at hand, urging our teams onward and upward while forgetting to enjoy the experience along the way.

Find a way to laugh with your team. This will do wonders to lift each other's spirits, especially during challenging times. Try dissipating a tense situation with an appropriate joke. Be mindful, however, when it comes to joking about sensitive topics such as an increase or decrease in staff salaries, or the dreaded lay-offs. Remember that what might seem funny to us at the time may not be so funny to others. If someone has just died, for example, a joke would not be appropriate, but there are many ways to poke fun at ourselves as leaders when things aren't going well.

One of my jokes around the office is that: “*I'm* the director, and it's all *my* fault.” This is tongue-in-cheek, but it's true that, as leaders, the buck stops at our desks. The way I joke with my team is the result of trust that has been built over time and it won't necessarily work the same way for you. So find a way to inject humor that fits your situation; it's critical to your team's sanity. When you are able to help ease your team's stress levels they will be reinvigorated and ready to help you achieve much greater things than they would if they were still feeling frustrated.

2

Out of Touch?

“If you get overtaken by a semi-trailer truck on a two-lane highway, you’re going too slow.”

I have literally witnessed the above, which was shocking at the time, since there was a significant risk that the semi wouldn’t be able to pass the other car before an approaching vehicle appeared in the oncoming lane.

This is a simple yet powerful illustration of what can happen in leadership. Either we have team members (the car) who are going too slowly, while the leader (the semi) is forced to pass them (leave them behind) because they aren’t keeping pace any more, or the opposite can happen, where the leader passes the entire team and is so far ahead that others cannot keep up, no matter how hard they try. To help with leadership pacing, collect your thoughts and give them time to ‘marinate’ before you blurt them out to your team.

Likewise, you can go too slowly and miss opportunities to move a project forward more efficiently. Sometimes a project needs to be set aside so resources can be allocated elsewhere. When discussing potential new projects, you may have heard someone say, “Why can’t we just try it and see if it works?” Now, there is a danger in taking resources from one area and putting them into another because we all have a limit to our resources, even if you work for a company that turns over \$100

million a year or more, but on occasion this is the most sensible option.

Sometimes it is more of a danger to try something because of what you must choose to stop doing in place of the new idea. If the existing project is important, there is an opportunity cost that needs to be taken into account. Don't forget to count the opportunity cost before giving anything up in favor of a new project.

Being out of touch or being perceived to be out of touch is very dangerous in a senior leadership role. When this happens, trust is broken and confidence in your ability to lead is lost. This happened to me once, earlier in my career, and it ended badly with me only staying with the organization for a few months.

My boss had begun to suspect that I didn't know what was going on with my team, which was partially true. I had signed on to work with a struggling company; so much so that I had to hire fifteen people in ninety days for a company of forty or so people. I even lost the HR manager, who was helping me hire and onboard all these new people. Needless to say, I was in a tough spot. I had to spend so much time hiring that I spent less time focusing on the day-to-day operations than I should have.

Given the massive turnover margin, it would have taken more than a few months to turn the ship around, but I didn't survive long enough to accomplish that. When the new senior leader came in, he or she didn't have to deal with the high level of turnover from day one.

This is a cautionary tale, which demonstrates that, even in tough situations, we can't afford to become out of touch or to give others the impression that we are out of touch. My boss believed it was the former and I the latter, but either way I had based my trust on my front

line manager's ability to manage the day-to-day operations while I focused intently on replacing many team members, and this created the wrong impression.

"You will *always* underestimate subordinates' efforts."

Be careful when you judge somebody with regards to the job they're doing. We have the responsibility and right to judge people who work for us, and we have to keep them accountable by overseeing their work in order to determine whether they are measuring up to the expectations of the job.

However, we often fail to understand all the duties and responsibilities they have because we don't see them on a daily basis. So we should guard against underestimating the value each individual brings to our team. If we base our opinions of their work simply on what they tell you during your weekly update meetings with them, we will be glossing over a ton. There is likely to be much more going on beneath the surface, and it's usually more than you want to know, so trust them more.

With each degree of separation (level of hierarchy) you are from senior management, it becomes easier to criticize their decisions because you don't know what they know. You're out of touch with what's going on, and as you move up the career ladder and get closer to that information, your understanding grows. Then you know what's really going on and what your leaders are dealing with, and your view of management changes. You see how hard it is and that the decisions made are usually based on what's best for the entire team or company; not on what will make one person happy.

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It's like living in a major city, Boston for instance. For every layer of management on top of your position you add distance between yourself and another major city in the United States: first Washington DC, then Charlotte, Atlanta, Nashville, Chicago, Minneapolis, Dallas, Denver, and so on. This can go on indefinitely, depending on how many layers your organization's management structure has.

The more we travel literally (to other states and countries) and figuratively (up the leadership ladder), the more our eyes are opened to new worlds we didn't know existed. Each time we are in a better position to understand what our past bosses knew. However, the danger is that we often start to forget what it was like on the front lines. We should recognize that, as leaders, we're always going to underestimate the amount of effort, time, and money that will be required of others to complete a project or task we have requested of them.

The reason for this is that the further away you are from project or task – meaning that you don't have to do it with your own hands, time, or resources – the more your memory of what it was actually like fades without you even realizing it. And the further away we are from that work and the more time that has lapsed since we did it, the harder and harder it becomes to accurately gauge how long a task should take or how easily it can be accomplished.

This is a huge problem in leadership, in that the further away we get from front line action, the more likely we are to have unrealistic expectations. This is something we must all be mindful and cautious of in order to guard against this potential blind spot when we find ourselves in charge.

“But I’m a vision guy/gal.”

There is a distinct difference between fantasy and vision, but many leaders use vision as an excuse for a lack of proper planning and preparation. This leads to poor execution and burnout among your team because everything is last minute (instead of just a few things, which is always unavoidable). Don’t fall for the lie that if we, as leaders, simply cast our vision and plunge headlong into it, things will take care of themselves.

Likewise, don’t believe that other people can keep pace with your vision for the future. There is likely to be a tension here, since leaders need to keep pushing things forward, just not at breakneck speed. Also avoid the habit of trotting things out before they are a sure thing and are ready to be followed through. If you discuss ideas that you’re not ready to implement quite yet, hold your enthusiasm or you will routinely disappoint with the perception that you don’t deliver on your promises.

Patience is a virtue of leadership. If you don’t get this right you will become the boy (leader) who cried wolf. You will lose the trust of people beneath you, and then when you legitimately cry wolf they will ignore your clarion call.

3

Effective Leader or Abuser of Accountability?

“There is a fine line between overbearing accountability and allowance for mistakes.”

As leaders, we know that we need to hold people accountable for getting things done on time and in the right way, but the line is often blurred. How do we set reasonable, yet stretching expectations for others while avoiding micromanagement? We should hold people accountable for what is within their control but not what is outside it.

The line between accountability and ‘not my fault’ or ‘out of my control’ is a very fine one, and I’ve worked for bosses who play both sides of the fence. I also struggle with this concept, but if we regularly battle with it at least we are acutely aware of the issue. We don’t want to enable ‘excuse makers’ here, but if people feel threatened by our micromanagement they won’t do their best work. They will do just enough to get by.

Positive reward always outperforms a negative consequence in the long run. Tell someone that if they accomplish ‘X’ goal, you will give them a \$500 bonus and you will have an engaged, motivated team member. Yell at the same person, “I’m taking this mistake out of your paycheck” and you will have broken trust with and demotivated that person. You may say that you don’t

care and that it is the employee's job to get their work done, no matter how he or she is treated. This would be an idealistic way of looking at things. It simply doesn't work that way, especially with younger generations entering the workforce, who are allergic to the "Do what I say because I'm in charge" mentality. They want to be inspired to follow a leader rather than being dictated to.

It's possible to be in touch in some ways and out of touch in others, not even realizing you are micromanaging your team. That's what is so dangerous because it's hardest to spot your own micromanagement. You may think you're focusing on the right things when you are in fact micromanaging the situation. You may be in touch with what's going on each day, but you may be out of touch with the more strategic, bigger-picture issues that are more important than the details. If we aren't careful, we may genuinely think we're in touch when we're really out of touch with the core strategy.

"So what do we do to avoid this blindness, Miles?" I hear you ask, and I'm glad you did. The key is to surround yourself with trustworthy people and give them explicit permission to point this out. Let them know that you won't be upset and that you expect them to give you unvarnished feedback. Then don't be upset when it happens and thank them for increasing your effectiveness by drawing attention to any blind spots.

We also need to be careful not to be 'pigeonholers'. If you give people the opportunity to grow, you'll be amazed at what they can learn and adapt, while the opposite is true if you pigeonhole to the point where you are constraining their personal or professional growth. This happens when we allow certain mental pictures to remain so firm in our minds that we hold people to a certain spot, personality type, job, or skillset. Had

we opened our minds to the possibility that they could change, we might have afforded them a grand opportunity.

When we place people in boxes, we overestimate our ability to read and know what's best for them. Now, I'm not saying that we can't learn to read people, but I am suggesting that we need to be cautious not to think of ourselves so highly that our thoughts become self-fulfilling prophecies, dooming others to only being good at 'X' and not 'Y' or 'Z'. I know I don't want to be the type of leader who holds other people back from fulfilling their potential and destiny.

"There's a difference between a leader who settles for a poor performer and one who chooses to lay down his selfish ambition and pride to coach and mentor someone."

Our tendency as leaders is to fall into one or more of the following groups:

1. Detail manager
2. Coach
3. Delegator

Most of us recognize these terms and know what the normal state of each should be, so let's talk about the extremes. Firstly, following up on things that matter is important, but detail managers, at their most extreme, want to control every little detail, no matter how puny.

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Detail managers can spend too long listening to every personal issue their staff members have, leaving little time to get work done. Having said this, we all want bosses who will take us under their wing and mentor us a bit. That's healthy, and that's what a good coach-style manager will do.



Finally, hyper-delegators do zero work themselves, yet expect it all to be done by the following day. Leaders do need to delegate to others to expand the capacity of what can be done, but delegating everything is unfair and counterproductive.

The intersection of these three constructs is where an effective leader stands. Aim for as much of a balance between them as possible.

**“If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got”
(Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company).**

The reason most organizations never grow, or stop growing at a certain point, comes down to the limitations of the leader or leadership team. They want to control and micromanage the organization, but in order to promote growth it cannot be micromanaged or controlled. There is often a fear of loss of control as the company gets larger. I’m not suggesting there shouldn’t be any checks or balances or accountability, but a hands-off approach is required in some areas if the organization is to grow.

As leaders, we have to keep growing in order for our organizations to do the same. Many leaders and managers tend to look at salaried employees’ (those exempt from overtime) wages in the same way we do with the wages of hourly, non-exempt workers. We want to scrutinize the number of hours our salaried employees work when we should really be focusing on whether they are getting the job done and achieving results.

They may be completing their work with excellence, and, if so, it doesn’t really matter how many hours they work because they’re performing well. Maybe you want to give them more work, which is certainly your right as a leader. However, if salary-exempt employees are underperforming and failing to put in the hours, a discussion needs to be had about improving their performance and getting the job done. There should be a clear distinction between these two types of employee.

Many of us also have hourly (non-exempt) workers. When it comes to these, don’t forget to be aware of the

switch that needs to happen when things go from being terribly busy to when the workload becomes lighter. The worst thing you can do as a manager is to ignore this, since most people will slack off and the work will be divided inefficiently among staff, with those who have more tasks resenting the others who have fewer.

Part of a manager's job is to continually spread out the work among the team. There is nothing worse than a person who is being paid on an hourly basis just waltzing through their day. Plus, when the work picks up again, those with a previously lighter load will resent the normal, faster pace.

“Micromanagement is the destroyer of momentum.”

There are basically two extremes when it comes to the types of people you will manage: those who are unmotivated, and those who are self-motivated, some of whom are easily discouraged. There are shadings between these extremes, to be sure. You will have to motivate the former each and every day as they have little, if any, self-motivation. You won't need to motivate the latter, but you will need to encourage them. Because they have strong self-motivation they will work so hard that sometimes they can feel discouraged. They have sky-high expectations of themselves and often can't see the forest for the trees in what they have already achieved. They are working extremely hard and always striving to make something happen, but encourage them to regularly take a step back from the day-to-day grind and reflect on all that has been accomplished.

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On the other hand, be careful about giving too much encouragement to those who are not self-motivated because they will become full of themselves and think they're doing a great job when they actually need a bit more motivation to get their work done. This usually involves setting clear deadlines for each task, not just the main projects, which can become time-consuming and draining. This doesn't mean that you can't give them *some* encouragement, just focus more on encouraging those who regularly become discouraged, despite their great efforts.

To read Chapter 4, “The Ubiquity of Greed and Dearth of Radical Generosity” and the rest of *Why Leadership Sucks: Volume Two* please visit MilesAnthony-Smith.com for online retailers of the book.