



THE ONES I COULDN'T REACH

LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS
LIMITED EDITION LEADERSHIP LETTER

Sheena Cutno, Trifecta Strategies

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4 LESSONS FROM THE ONES I DIDN'T REACH



INTRODUCTION

I've been leading for 24 years. I've built teams from the ground up and inherited more than a few that were already cracked at the foundation. This didn't scare me. It energized me and gave me opportunity to make meaningful contributions.

By most measures, I've been successful and not because *I'm all that and a bag of chips*, but because my teams helped me to be more effective. I am not perfect, but I am brave. I invited and embraced my teams' feedback (good, bad and ugly) and I applied it to be better. Their feedback has always been my scoreboard...especially the ones I couldn't reach.

There were four to be exact.

These are the ones who never quite met me in the middle or the gap between us was too great to close. Ultimately, there was separation initiated by me or initiated by them.

Every now and then, they cross my mind, and I still catch myself wondering, "What was it?", "Was there something I missed?", "Could I have shown up differently? As leaders, we have to remember that leadership is not how we see ourselves, it's about how our teams experience us.

4 LESSONS FROM THE ONES I DIDN'T REACH



THE ONE WHO WOULDN'T MOVE

There was the one I still think about more than the others. This one was the hardest because of the intense internal conflict I experience. I've already mastered separating performance from the person, but I had to do this more than ever. I liked the person, but the performance was lacking.

I started with empathy. I gave grace, clarity, and expectations, not judgment. To be 100% honest, I was judging something, but it wasn't the person. I judged decades of organizational leadership for not leading this person according to the expectations. I spent months trying to build trust, coaching, and partnering. But every effort I made was met with stillness.

When accountability finally came, their response was simple: "I was never going to do what you asked, because it wasn't going to work." YIKES!

That moment taught me one of my hardest lessons: you can't lead someone who's already decided not to be led. Since then, I've learned to ask earlier, "Is it that you can't, or that you won't?" This is a powerful coaching question I still use today and it consistently exposes the root.

Empathy and accountability can coexist. But compassion without boundaries is just permission and condonation in disguise.

4 LESSONS FROM THE ONES I DIDN'T REACH



THE ONE WHO WOULDN'T BEND

There was the one with all the potential in the world. They were creative, capable, and passionate about their craft. I could tell from the start they had a spark the team needed.

What I didn't realize was that their way of working and the organization's pace were on two completely different frequencies. They needed structure, precision, and time. Admittedly, these can be a trifecta of excellence. Unfortunately, the environment needed speed, flexibility, and flow.

I tried to bridge the gap. I shared my own story of how I had to loosen my grip on "perfection" to meet the moment we were in. But they couldn't. Or maybe they wouldn't.

Sometimes, even as a leader, you have to accept that not everyone will choose to.

What I learned from them was this: adaptability isn't the enemy of excellence. You can be brilliant and still need to bend.

The opportunity here was to find shorter and quicker ways to give the organization what it wanted and what it was ready for. The organization wasn't looking for top tier. They were looking for "right now" results.

4 LESSONS FROM THE ONES I DIDN'T REACH



THE ONE I COULDN'T CARRY...ANYMORE

There was the one I tried to hold up longer than I should have.

Every time performance slipped, I built a new support plan. I flexed schedules, offered solutions, and adjusted whatever I could to make space for balance.

I was overly empathetic because the situation they were in, I have been in for many years of my life. I knew what it was like to try to work a full time job while also having some VERY challenging non-work responsibilities.

Every time I asked what they needed, they were blank and I ended up filling in the answer myself. The moment I stopped coming up with the solutions, everything stalled and performance got worse. That's when I learned a hard truth: support doesn't work when the effort is one-sided.

My job as a leader is to build the supportive bridge, but they still have to walk across it. I couldn't allow my past experiences to cause me to carry what wasn't mine to carry.

Leadership isn't about carrying people. It's about creating space where they can learn to carry themselves.

4 LESSONS FROM THE ONES I DIDN'T REACH



THE ONE WHO WOULDN'T YIELD

There was the one who was brilliant, driven, articulate, and confident in every room. Maybe too confident at times.

From the beginning, I could see their potential. They had all the tools to lead, and when they spoke, people listened. But as time went on, their confidence had a shadow side that showed up as resistance to feedback. There was a refusal to adjust because there was a belief that adjusting meant changing who they were.

My goal was to help them see opportunities to be heard, received and effective. Not change who they were. This ultimately meant adjusting, not changing.

If given the chance, I could have shown them how they could retain their personal power AND still be pliable. They couldn't see it. Maybe they weren't ready to. Maybe they couldn't. Maybe they wouldn't.

What I learned from them is this: you can't coach unwillingness, attitude or character. You can only pull the accountability lever of expectations.

Confidence without self-awareness will eventually bring humility. None of us have or will ever arrive because we are not perfect. There is ALWAYS something we can work on to be more effective in our professional and personal lives.

4 LESSONS FROM THE ONES I DIDN'T REACH



REFLECTION

Every leader has the ones they couldn't reach.

Reminders:

- Empathy without accountability turns into exhaustion, and accountability without empathy turns into fear.
- Leadership isn't measured only by the ones who followed, but also by the ones who didn't.
- Even when you do your very best, some stories still end unresolved.
- Sometimes the growth isn't theirs to have, it's ours.

You can't make a goal to reach everyone, as this is unrealistic. A leader's goal should be to lead with integrity no matter the outcome so that you can sleep peacefully at night.

Strengthen your leadership today, by reflecting on the ones you couldn't reach as you may find an opportunity for your leadership growth. Use that growth to build a best practice for your path forward.