LEADING WITH EDGE

Activate Your Competitive Advantage Through Personal Insight

JOSE R. COSTA
Dedication

To Papá, Mamá, Cindy (the love of my life), Loren, Vera Rose, Nico, Gaby, Andy, Claudia, Jackie and Burt: You’re the “edge” in my life. Thank you for fueling my dreams, always supporting me, and for continuously reminding me that God is in control.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”
—Jeremiah 29:11
Introduction:
The Best Advice I Ever Got

I spent a lot of time at my father’s office when I was a boy. Even when I was quite young, I knew that he was an example to follow: in our home, as a leader in our community, and as a great success in his business. I could tell by the way he carried himself and by the way others treated him. Even just walking in the front door of his office building gave me that sense. It was the kind of space that made an impression. The lobby was a big, open room with glossy white walls and high ceilings. On the right was an L-shaped couch where well-dressed people were often waiting to be called in for their meetings. Behind the couch there was an enormous poster that immediately called attention to itself, not just because of its size but because of its bright colors standing out against the monochromatic décor. It depicted a large school of orange fish going in one direction and one little blue fish trying to swim against them. Below the image was bold lettering that read, “Resist the Usual.”

For me, that poster summed up everything my father taught me about how to succeed in business and make my way in the world: It was about having the courage to go my own way and do what was necessary to get there. That meant gaining as much knowledge and experience as I could, setting big goals and challenging myself, working hard to achieve what I wanted, and trusting that with
enough perseverance I would get where I wanted to go—even if everyone else was headed in the opposite direction.

My father was himself a kind of blue fish, always modeling this message for me and my three siblings. He was an immigrant from Spain. He came to Venezuela with his father, and in 1972 started a business from scratch. His first “office” was really just a rented house on the outskirts of the business district. By the mid-1990s he had moved into the gleaming offices that I remember so well and had built his company into a multimillion-dollar advertising agency, the largest of its kind in Venezuela. He partnered with the global agency Young & Rubicam (“Resist the Usual” was their slogan in the 1990s, and the poster had come from them) to create campaigns all over Latin America for multinational brands like Colgate, Citibank, Ford, and Diageo.

There is something about being that single blue fish in a sea of orange that gives a person real clarity about what he or she needs to do to succeed. My father reinforced that and other lessons throughout my entire childhood, but it wasn’t until I left home and became an immigrant myself, moving to the United States to attend graduate school and then pursue my career, that I truly understood how valuable they were. What worked for my father also worked for me, giving me the edge I needed to propel myself forward in a competitive environment. The best advice my father ever gave me was to continue striving to gain that edge. He showed me how to have the daily courage and tenacity to pursue the things that would allow me to swim against the tide and stand out from the crowd.

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If you’re in business today and you’re paying attention, then you have already read about the dismal employee engagement numbers that the Gallup organization posts year after year after year. The
percentage of employees who are “not engaged” or “actively disengaged” has hovered around 70 percent for years, costing the U.S. economy trillions of dollars. How to get employees to perform better is a common topic among the leaders I’ve known. What often gets overlooked or ignored in the discussion, however, is the fact that Gallup cites “poor leadership” as one of the main causes of this continual and costly problem. W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, professors of strategy and management at INSEAD, wrote a *Harvard Business Review* article on this subject, “Blue Ocean Leadership,” (May 2014) in which they noted: “Of course, managers don’t intend to be poor leaders. The problem is that they lack a clear understanding of just what changes it would take to bring out the best in everyone and achieve high impact.”

I currently serve as CEO of For Eyes, which is part of Grand-Vision, a global leader in optical retail with more than 7,000 stores worldwide, 120 of which are in the U.S. Before taking this position, I worked in a wide variety of industries—automotive, consumer products, quick-service restaurants, marketing and advertising, banking and private equity—and my personal experience backs up Gallup’s conclusion. And I get it. As leaders, we have a lot on our minds—from keeping our customers happy and managing legal and compliance issues to keeping our eyes on the bottom line. How to truly engage and get the best out of people is not something we are typically taught in business school. Plus, if Gallup is right, then most of the leaders who came before us and have shown us the way really haven’t excelled in this area either. Research shows that this is a longstanding problem across all industries.

What I have come to realize is that what it means to be a leader and what it truly takes to succeed as one are two things that far too often are in conflict with one another. It’s time that we, as leaders, give the skill of leadership the same focus we would any other aspect of the job and teach others in our organization, the leaders coming up
behind us, how to do the same. That is what I aim to do with this book. Its main goal is to help people resist the usual messages that are creating far too many poor leaders and take responsibility for the way they lead.

About This Book

This book is organized into four sections, each of which highlights a different key element that, if applied well and with consistency, can help anyone resist common leadership pitfalls and instead build a leadership style that gives them an edge. Based on my own experience, research, and the lessons of top leaders I have known (whose insights will also be included), these four elements are the keys to success:

1. Knowledge, and your ability to gain and share it;
2. Expectations, and your ability to model and drive them within an organization;
3. Hard work, especially when paired with big dreams;
4. Trust, in yourself and in the people around you.

Equally important is how you utilize these elements as a leader. I’m not the first person to talk about what makes someone an effective leader, but I often find that books and speakers on the subject don’t talk much about the difficulty of applying these elements and making them relevant on a broad scale. Each of the elements I mentioned must be applied in a balanced way. That means they shouldn’t be one-sided or driven by the leader alone. For example, you cannot apply a different set of expectations (Leading Edge #2) to those
around you than you do to yourself—not if you want people to respect you and your position. On the flip side, you can trust people (Leading Edge #4)—in fact you must trust people if you want to get things done—but you have to do it with your eyes open and with a clear and honest view of their abilities and character.

I call this balanced application “the barbell approach.” When I was in marketing at Burger King, we used something we called the barbell strategy to build our menus. Every menu needed value items on one end—those affordable, price-conscious items—that would drive traffic to our restaurants. At the same time, the menu needed premium offerings on the other end, items that would catch the customer’s eye once they were in the restaurant and drive up the ticket. There was always something for the customers and something for us—a successful menu always needed an even balance of the two.

That is the same approach this book will take. For each of the four key elements, you will find two chapters: one that describes how to apply that element personally, in your own life and career, and another that shows how to promote it among the people around you. For example, Leading Edge #1 is about knowledge. The first chapter under that heading (Gaining Knowledge—Ask, Listen, and Be Curious) covers how you can gain more knowledge in order to give yourself an edge. The second chapter under that heading (Sharing Knowledge—Provide Feedback and Promote Know-how) addresses how to share knowledge and promote knowledge sharing in those around you, so that the whole team or organization has a deeper well to draw from in order to grow and succeed.

This barbell approach means there is something for you and something for your people in each of the elements being discussed. The balanced application of the right elements is what will allow you to continue to gain an edge time and time again. To help ensure you’re on the right track, each section of the book ends with an
assessment tool that will allow you to score yourself and monitor your progress.

When I talk about knowledge as one of the key elements for gaining an edge, I don’t just mean knowledge about your business; I’m also talking about self-knowledge. My father served as a model for me, as someone who was continually learning and growing throughout his life, no matter how much success he had achieved. This is crucial because you can’t gain an edge just once in your career. The world is ever changing and competition is never ending, so you always have to look for ways to expand your knowledge, skills, and experience. I was reminded of this recently when a mentor of mine gave me a piece of advice that I had heard over the course of my career but still hadn’t been able to master. She said, “As a leader, you don’t have to be liked; you have to be respected.”

That really resonated with me. I spent much of my early career trying to win over the people around me. While there’s nothing wrong with being liked, my mentor reminded me that it wasn’t the thing that would make me a great leader; therefore, it wasn’t where I should be focusing my energy. Her comments brought me back to that image of the fish from my father’s office. The people who are most liked tend to be the ones swimming along with the group. Resisting the usual can be lot harder and a lot less popular, but I believe—as my father did—that doing so will help you gain the edge you need to achieve real results.
LEADING EDGE #1: GAINING AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE

1: Gaining Knowledge—Ask, Listen, and Be Curious

There are few who would deny the crucial role that knowledge plays in helping a person succeed in today’s fast-paced, ever-changing business environment, but that doesn’t mean that everyone knows how to go about gaining knowledge effectively and efficiently. After all, we are living in the Information Age where there is always another book or article you could read, podcast you could listen to, course you could take, and on and on. If you’re not careful, you could spend all your time seeking knowledge, leaving little time for applying it.

In this chapter, I’m not going to talk about gaining knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but the kind of strategic knowledge-seeking that leads to 1) better problem solving, 2) greater innovation, 3) stronger, more open relationships, and 4) less pressure on the leader to have all the answers. What’s more, I’m going to talk about how you can gain knowledge without having to do all the work of seeking it out by
yourself. In any group of people, knowledge has a flow. People can either guard what they know and keep their ideas to themselves, or they can share willingly, even eagerly, so that knowledge and ideas travel freely. The difference typically comes back to the leader and what sort of tone he or she has set. How can leaders set themselves up so that the right kind of knowledge is more likely to flow their way? That is what this chapter is all about.

**Start with Humility**

You may be wondering what humility has to do with gaining an edge through knowledge. Well, if you want knowledge to flow your way, you have to be willing to search for it. If you want people to share what they know with you, you have to be open to hearing it. Having humility as a leader means starting from a place of admitting you don’t have all the answers and are not always going to make the right decisions.

That may sound simple, but it’s one of those things that are easier said than done. No leader, parent, or person in a position of authority has all the answers but that can still be a hard thing for many to admit. If you are one of those leaders, then you are shutting yourself off from people who could have the information and insights you need.

When I was younger and working in marketing at a large quick-service restaurant chain, I worked under a Senior Vice President who thought she had all the right answers. When someone contradicted or challenged her, she would get into a screaming match with that person, and she wouldn’t back down until he or she saw things her way—or pretended to. She wasn’t interested in different viewpoints or getting to the best possible outcome. It was her opinion that mattered and getting her way was the only thing that satisfied her.
The result was a chaotic and fearful atmosphere in which people were reluctant to bring in new ideas, offer opinions, or even talk to her if they didn’t have to. After all, most of us only have to be screamed at in front of our peers once before we think twice about putting ourselves in a situation like that again. I was no exception.

My team was working on a promotional campaign for our restaurants in Latin America, and this Senior Vice President had been clear about wanting us to focus our efforts on kids and families. At the same time, she never paid too much attention to our particular part of the business, so when our consumer insights took us in a different direction, we just followed where they were pointing. It was clear from our research that soccer was a big draw throughout the region, one that could provide us with some equally big marketing opportunities. At the same time, we discovered that our Spanish business unit had established a very successful partnership with the Spanish soccer league, La Liga. My team wanted to try something similar in the Latin American market. Our franchisees agreed that soccer was the right passion point to leverage, as did my direct boss who was president of the region.

When I discovered we could get the exclusive rights—for a very low dollar amount—to partner with the Spanish soccer league for our promotions, I made the deal. Furthermore, our beverage supplier agreed to put money toward the campaign. We got nearly 85 percent of Latin American countries where we did business to participate in the promotion. As part of the promotion, we offered crystal drinking glasses with soccer team logos on them to draw fans into our restaurants. We had purchased what we forecasted as about three months’ worth of inventory of those glasses. They sold out in two weeks. It was the most successful campaign ever executed in our Latin American market. Everyone within the organization was thrilled with the results.

I was focused on the success of the business, and I had been able
to get just about everyone else behind me. I had gotten the buy-in of all my team members, nearly all the franchisees who would be part of the promotion, and my direct boss, who was head of all regional business. We knew the Senior Vice President wasn’t open to hearing what we had learned, so there was no use sharing our knowledge with her. When I one day found myself in a similar position of authority, I remembered that lesson and made a point of making sure people saw me as the kind of leader with whom they could exchange views (even if they differed with mine) and someone to whom they could comfortably bring controversial and potentially innovative ideas.

Keep Your Ego Out of the Way

A lack of humility can really cut you off from valuable knowledge and experience that others have to offer. It can also make it difficult for you to correct your course when you are headed down the wrong path. A lack of humility in leaders often shows up as a need to always be right. And no one is right all the time. Humble leaders who prioritize learning and getting to the best answers are more likely to catch themselves (or allow others to catch them) when they make a mistake. Those who can’t admit when they’re wrong, who can’t put the right answer ahead of their need to be right, are more likely to dig their heels in and make a bad situation worse.

A friend of mine experienced this kind of situation when she was promoted to vice president of her division at a large food and beverage corporation. She had been promised that she could pick her own team, but when she got into her new role, the president, her direct boss, told her she had to find room for one particular person who had been with the company for years. Because of a restructuring, his position was being eliminated and they needed to find a place for him. My friend’s team was that place, whether she liked it or not.
At first, because she was new to the organization, she didn’t protest. She figured she could find a way to work with this person and that his institutional knowledge might come in handy. But it quickly became apparent that he was a serious problem. He was rude to his team members and often undermined my friend’s authority in front of others. He was also way behind on his targets, but never took responsibility for it—it was always someone else’s fault. To make matters worse, his overly familiar behavior had garnered some complaints from junior staff.

My friend kept bringing up these performance issues with her boss, but he wouldn’t waiver. Finally, after several years of this kind of back and forth, he erupted at her, telling her never to mention the subject again. “I am tired of rehashing this subject,” he said to her. “You just need to figure it out with him, and leave me out of it. Don’t talk to me about it again.” That was when she called me, looking for advice. “I can’t just pretend this guy isn’t a liability,” she told me. “What am I supposed to do?”

It was a tough situation. “If I were you, I would stick to my guns... but carefully,” I advised her. “If this employee continues to cause problems, I think it’s your duty to make your boss aware of it, and probably others in the organization as well, if he’s not listening. But don’t push him too hard because that’s not going to get you anywhere. And maybe it’s time to start looking for opportunities elsewhere.”

Not long ago I heard from my friend. After two years of this, her boss was finally getting ready to fire her terrible team member. The CEO had gotten wind of some of his failings and was forcing the president’s hand. When her boss told her the news, he didn’t say he was sorry for not listening to her sooner or admit that he had made a mistake. If he had, she might have respected him more and let it go. After all, we all have our blind spots (more on how to minimize those in chapter 3). As it stands, despite her stellar performance and that of
her team over the past three years, she is quietly looking outside the company for new opportunities. She just feels that her boss’s outsized ego makes it too difficult for her to do her best work. And she’s right.

**Practice Conspicuous Humility**

It may sound counterintuitive, but humility is a quality that often needs to be put on display. If you believe you have all the answers, think you are always right, or are somehow above others because of your position, or if the people around you perceive that, then they aren’t as likely to come to you with their knowledge, ideas, or opinions—not unless they have to.

So, how do you do this? There are acts of humility that you can make a point of practicing that will help people feel more comfortable around you, encourage them to be open and honest with you, and make it easier for them to contribute their thoughts and ideas. You can convey a sense of humility in big ways and small. Here are some simple ways that any leader can incorporate humility into his/her day-to-day work:

1) *De-emphasize hierarchy*: I never state my title when I introduce myself to someone, especially to someone junior to me. Saying I’m the CEO or in charge of such-and-such only reinforces a feeling of hierarchy or superiority. So does sitting in a big corner office while your team members crowd together in cubicles. That’s why, when I became the CEO of For Eyes by GrandVision, I moved my desk, as well as those of all the company’s managers, out to the floor so we could sit with our teams. In an article for *The Washington Post*, Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, was once quoted as saying: “The moment you discover in life that it’s not about yourself, that it is about investing in others, I think you’re entering a steadier state to be a
great leader. Because above all, I think the main quality of a leader is to be a human being. There’s no reason you are special because you happen to have this job.” (“The Tao of Paul Polman” by Lillian Cunningham, *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2015.)

When I was in marketing at a quick-service restaurant chain, there was a franchise owner who was very successful. He owned close to one hundred restaurants in a region where the chain was very popular, and his business did very well. Over the years, he became a very wealthy guy and it showed. He drove an extremely expensive car. He dressed in extremely expensive, tailored suits. He always wore a big gold wristwatch. Everything about him screamed money and ostentatiousness. And this was how he would present himself when he walked into the fast food restaurants he owned—where the people working for him were only making about $7.00 an hour. Many of these people were barely making ends meet, so it was no wonder that his employees often seemed to lack energy or enthusiasm for their jobs. Based on what I saw, they were always polite to him, but I got the feeling that they didn’t really like or respect him. He was successful, sure, but I always wondered how much more successful he could have been had he practiced humility in the way he presented himself to his team.

After meeting with this franchisee a few times, I became more conscious of how I dressed and presented myself around different people. I have nothing against you enjoying the fruits of your labor, but I do think that should be balanced against an awareness of and respect for other people’s positions and circumstances. It’s important for people to know who’s in charge, but that’s different from rubbing their faces in it.

2) *Put yourself in someone else’s position:* In 2015, when I was president of Maaco, I had the unusual experience of being invited to participate in the CBS television show *Undercover Boss.* If you haven’t
seen the show, the premise is to take senior executives from various companies and dress them up to go “undercover” in their own organizations. From there, they learn what it’s really like to work on the front line. For me, that meant working in several different Maaco body shops around the country as a sander, painter, and detailer. Boy, was I humbled when I got my performance reviews from the bosses at those body shops. “Not fast enough,” “too many mistakes,” and “I wouldn’t hire this guy on a permanent basis” were some of the things I heard at the end of my long workdays. It gave me a real appreciation for the hard work these guys do to please their customers and make their company a success.

Of course, most people won’t get a chance to be on Undercover Boss, but that’s okay. You can still get out of your office and spend a day in your warehouse, tour your stores, go on a sales call, or do whatever it is that applies to your particular business. Not only does this show employees that you are interested in their experience and expertise, it’s also a good way find out what you don’t know about how your business works. Chances are you will be surprised by how much you can learn.

3) Give credit where credit is due: I once had a boss who would take all the work that her team members had done and present it to her own boss under her name and her name alone. She never gave anyone credit, especially not in front of her superiors. It had such a negative impact on morale that it’s amazing she never noticed.

The humble thing for her to have done would have been to be generous with her praise and credit. I’m not suggesting that you hand out credit just to make people feel good, but when someone has truly contributed something, it’s an easy and effective motivational tactic to give that person credit for it. This is a simple way to ensure that people feel good about their good work and about you as a leader who notices and appreciates it. The best way to ensure that people
want to contribute to your success is by helping them feel like it’s shared success.

4) Take an interest in people: You never know what you can learn from someone, so it’s important to keep the focus on others, not yourself. To make sure I do, I like to build it right into my schedule on a regular basis. I take people I work with—usually peer level or below, as well as vendors and clients—out for coffee or lunch as often as I can. I do that three to five times a week, every week without fail. I like to get people out of the office because I believe the change in setting helps them let their guard down and relax so they can open up. That has allowed for an enormous amount of good feedback and insight to come my way.

Recently I had to attend a golf event that the company was holding for its franchisees and vendors. My role that day was less about playing golf, but more about greeting franchisees and making guests feel valued and welcomed, which was probably a good thing since my golf game lacks serious game. I made the rounds before everyone started playing, but once they did, I had about four hours to kill before everyone came back to the clubhouse. I was just sitting there with some junior-level employees who were helping to run the event, so I asked an entry-level guy if he wanted to ride around in a golf cart with me to check on our franchisees. I used those thirty minutes we were riding together to get to know him and ask him questions. During the course of our conversation, he mentioned that he would like to try working in operations rather than marketing. It just so happened that I had a position in operations that needed to be filled. Because I took the opportunity and listened with an open mind, I had already found a great candidate before I had even formally started looking to fill the position.
Ask Good Questions

When you sit down with somebody for lunch or a ride in a golf cart, how do you get the right kind of information out of that person? How do you steer the conversation toward subjects that will be useful while making the person want to open up and share their knowledge with you? In other words, what makes a good question?

If it’s someone I have never met before or don’t know very well, I usually start with the personal: “Where did you grow up?” “How many brothers and sisters do you have?” “Where did you go to school?” “What did your parents do?” Questions like these are meant to be easy to answer, so the person feels comfortable talking to you right away. They are also meant to show your interest in them so they are more willing to open up.

Next, I often shift to questions that will tell me something about how curious the person is. I ask things like: “What books have you read?” “What do you do with your free time?” Curious people are interested in expanding their knowledge, and those are the kinds of people I like to surround myself with.

Then, I move on to the person’s current function and get them talking about what they do, what they are working on, and what gets them excited. From there, I always ask this question: “In three to five years, where do you want to be?” I want to know if they want my job, if they want to be the head of finance, if they are simply happy where they are, or something else. Based on the answer, I then present a business challenge.

That is what I did with the young man with whom I shared the golf cart at our franchisee event. His name was Scott, and based on what he told me about himself, I asked him what he would do if he were suddenly given a position in operations like he wanted. Scott told me that he liked working with franchisees, and the first thing he would do would be to reach out to them to establish relationships. He
said, “I would fly out to meet as many of them as I could and just start a conversation with them about what their issues are, how much money they’re making, how they think they can make more money, and so on. Then I would follow up with calls to keep the conversation going. Obviously I can’t be visiting all our franchisees every month, but I would try to go back as often as I could.”

Scott was in his late twenties and didn’t have a lot of experience per se, but the way he answered the question showed me something about how he thinks, how he approaches problems, and how he would handle a new situation. It was enough to make me want him on my team.

**Learn How to Listen**

When it comes to gaining the knowledge you need to get ahead, it should be obvious that it’s important to know how to listen. But you might be surprised at the number of leaders I have met over the years, even ones who have climbed pretty high up the corporate ladder, who have not mastered this basic skill. And it shows.

Whenever I promote someone, my first piece of advice is to start off by getting to know the people who work there: ask them questions and then just listen with an open mind to what they have to say. I did this on a large scale during my first days as president of Maaco. I had come from the restaurant business, having worked for Burger King and KFC, so it wasn’t surprising that there were those in my new company who doubted whether I could do the job, particularly some franchisees who wondered pretty publicly, “What does this burger guy know about cars?” That was why I spent my first ninety days at Maaco on what I called my *listening tour*. Instead of launching new initiatives or trying to prove myself, I traveled the country, visited all our body shops, and asked questions. And I didn’t just ask questions;
I listened closely to the answers.

When I showed up for these visits and meetings, I made a point of taking a humble approach. I didn't show up with a team of twenty people. The first couple weeks it was me and the head of operations, and then it was just me. I would show up in a basic rental car, nothing fancy, dressed in a Maaco shirt and khakis. I always brought doughnuts for the crew and started off with a tour of the body shop. I met everyone and handed out the doughnuts. Then I would end up in the owner’s office, where I’d spend a couple of hours just asking questions: “What has your relationship with Maaco been like?” “What sort of relationship did you have with the company’s founder, Tony Martino?” “What are your thoughts on how the brand has evolved?” “What are your biggest challenges?” I would then take out my notebook and record the owner’s insights, observations, and anything else I wanted to follow up on. Doing so ensured that the owner knew I had heard him.

Sometimes I had to listen to some tough feedback. When I first showed up, many franchisees were very opinionated, saying that I didn’t have enough experience or the right qualifications. One guy even told me: “You’re too young and you’re not American. This is an American company, and that matters.” It was harsh stuff, but I didn’t

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**Elements of an Effective Conversation**

1. Start with the personal
2. Find out how curious the person is
3. Ask about the details of the person’s current job
4. Ask where the person sees himself/herself in the future
5. Present the person with a hypothetical challenge to talk through
let my ego get in the way. I just nodded and let him vent. I was the president; I couldn’t just walk away. Well, I guess I could have, but that wouldn’t have been very useful. It never helps to bury your head in the sand just because things get tough. After all, you can’t solve a problem you can’t see.

Because I hung in there, the experience paid off in many ways: I knew where people stood ideologically and what they were really thinking. I gained insight into how the business had evolved, how it was working at that time, and what the issues were. It was also helpful for the franchisees to get to know me and see that I cared about what they had to say. It gave me a chance to tell them, “I hear you. I understand your concerns. Give me a chance to show you how we’re going to change this together. And if we don’t, then I want you to tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

For a lot of these franchisees, I think the conversations were mostly about airing their frustrations. They had seen too many guys come in with big promises that they didn’t always deliver on. Because I listened and respected what they had to say instead of making big promises right off the bat, they respected me more. When I came back to them a few months later with a new vision for the business that I wanted to roll out, they were willing to hear me out because I had heard them out. I quickly got the endorsement of the franchisee council—the top fifteen franchisees in the system—for that new vision, which made it a whole lot easier to get support from the rest of the system. And when I left the company, we had had sixty months of consecutive same-center sales growth. So we were doing something right. Just before I moved on, I was still visiting franchisees on a regular basis, and by then they received me with open arms.
Listen So Others Feel Heard

It’s important to know how to listen in order to gain knowledge, certainly, but it’s also a crucial skill to build better relationships with the people we work with. When someone feels heard, it fosters a sense of trust and respect between you. And when people trust and respect you, they are more likely to share with you what they think and what they know. They are more likely to listen to you when you talk or present them with new ideas. They are more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt.

This means that you need to know how to listen and how to listen in a way that lets people know you hear them and respect what they have to say. Here are some key ways to make sure that happens:

1) Maintain strong eye contact: For me, this is the most important thing. We have all had the experience of talking with someone who is looking past us or whose eyes are darting about as we talk. The person may be listening, they may not, but the point is, how can we know for sure?

2) Actively listen: You can do this by periodically repeating back your understanding of what the other person has said for confirmation or by asking questions when you need clarification. People are much more likely to feel heard if you participate actively in the conversation rather than just sit passively and listen.

3) Minimize distractions: We are living in a time when we carry distractions around with us in our pockets, and far too often people try to multitask when they should be focusing. No one is going to feel heard or respected if you are on your phone or computer throughout a meeting. So don’t take out your phone. Recent research has shown that the mere presence of your phone—even if you aren’t using it—
reduces the quality of conversation between people. Leave your phone in your pocket or turn it facedown on the table with the volume off. Whomever you’re talking to will know you’re paying attention to them, not your phone.

4) *If appropriate, take notes:* This shows the person that you are invested in what they have to say. It’s also a very useful habit to get into so you aren’t missing or forgetting important information. Related to the point above, I try to do this with a pen and notebook as much as possible rather than on my laptop. In order to minimize distractions, I only bring my laptop to meetings if I need to see a presentation or be online for some reason.

These tips aren’t hard to apply, but you do need to make a point of practicing them on a regular basis. You might be surprised by how much of a difference it makes to really know how to make people feel heard. By the end of my listening tour at Maaco, I had a much deeper understanding of this new business I was in, and I had begun to build solid relationships with many of the franchisees who had originally been wary of me. That is one of the biggest benefits of seeking out knowledge in the right way from those around you. Even if the people you are listening to tell you things you have heard before or things you disagree with, hearing them out makes them feel valued, and it builds trust, which you are going to need if you want them on your side in order to accomplish big things, together, down the line.

**Be an Avid Learner**

When you start from a place of knowing that you don’t have all the answers and that you’re not right all the time, no matter how much experience you have or how high you have risen in the ranks, it
Leading With Edge allows you to approach things from a different perspective. To grow instead of stagnate, one of the best things anyone can do is adopt an attitude of curiosity. This means being an avid learner who actively seeks out knowledge, not just among your team members but throughout your organization, industry, and beyond. Here are some of the different ways you can become an active learner no matter what your role:

1) **Expand your network**: Scheduling the kind of regular lunches or meetings that I mentioned earlier in this chapter is a great place to start. Reach out beyond your immediate circle to connect with people at different levels, in different departments, with different skills.

2) **Read!** I read every morning for about an hour. By making this a regular habit, I get through one or two books every week. I also keep up with about twelve different news and industry websites including *Harvard Business Review, Advertising Age, Fast Company, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Forbes, Institutional Investor,* and *Bloomberg*. Early in my career, I was very focused on marketing and business, so most of my reading focused on those topics. Since then, I have realized that I can optimize my capacity for new ideas, insights, and self-reflection by casting a wider net. I read a daily scripture from the Bible, and in any given month, my nightstand may hold books on sociology, psychology, biography, and more.

3) **Continue your education**: I have three master’s degrees because I believe so strongly in education, and I would go back to school for a fourth one if I had the time. But even if you can’t invest in a formal degree program, that doesn’t mean you can’t keep learning in a less formalized way. I sign up for a week-long executive class about once a year to expand my skills in things like negotiations (at Harvard Business School’s Executive Education program), mergers and acqui-
sitions (at the University of Chicago), innovation (at Northwestern’s Kellogg’s School of Management) and leadership (at the Center for Creative Leadership). I also go to a monthly breakfast at my church, where we learn about different topics that aren’t strictly business-related, but I almost always find some lesson that I can apply. For example, at one of these breakfasts, a high school football referee was asked to give a speech about what he does and the different challenges he faces. He talked about how he handles it when a coach is so mad about a call that he runs on the field and gets in the referee’s face. It happens often enough, even in high school sports, that this guy had developed a specific way of dealing with it. As the coach runs toward him, he maneuvers himself slowly so that his back is to the audience. That way the entire stadium of people can see that coach as he screams and carries on. It puts his behavior on display and often makes him feel intimidated when he realizes he’s being watched. It causes most people to calm down and moderate their behavior without the referee having to say a thing. I love this strategy and believe it could be applied in all sorts of situations, anytime you find yourself involved in a public confrontation where emotions are running high.

4) Get involved with different organizations: I recently joined YPO (Young Presidents’ Organization), which is like a networking and learning group for executives and entrepreneurs. It’s a great way to learn about the kinds of challenges other people face in different situations and industries and how leaders go about tackling those challenges. There are all kinds of professional organizations out there that you can join if you take time to identify them. The key is to take advantage of the knowledge these organizations connect you too. For example, during our YPO meetings, I ask basic questions that help me understand the leader in context to the success of his business. “What has made you so successful?” “What’s the best new idea you’ve
encountered lately?” “How do you communicate what’s important to your team?”

My YPO group once visited a manufacturing company in Greensboro, North Carolina, to learn more about its operations. As we were walking through the plant, I saw this vending machine filled with bolts, screws, and nails. I couldn’t help myself: “What’s that?” I asked. The executive who was giving us the tour told us about a company that offered this product line of vending machines for industrial customers, which helped prevent theft and waste. The way it worked was that you gave employees their own card to use to get whatever supplies they needed. What they took was recorded in their account. If they need X amount of screws, for example, that is exactly how many screws the machine would give them. I thought it was a brilliant idea, one that I filed away for potential use in the future.

5) Constantly be on the lookout for new learning opportunities: More than any individual tactic, the important thing about being an avid learner is to adopt it as a mind-set. Opportunities are everywhere if you just look. Recently I joined the board of a science and technology museum for kids in my hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina. The board was looking for someone with my expertise, and I figured it would be a great way to give back to the local community while also learning about new subject areas—for me and for my three small children.

Learn About Yourself

If you want to grow, improve, excel, and become better at what you do each and every day, you need to take an active part in learning about yourself—your strengths, your opportunities for improvement,
how you come across to others, and so on. Don’t wait for an annual performance review from your boss. Ask your boss how you’re doing if he or she isn’t letting you know on a regular basis. And don’t stop there. Ask your peers and your direct reports what they think. Then go outside the organization and get different perspectives on your work and your leadership abilities whenever and wherever you can.

How can you do this? Start by simply asking. And then keep asking until you get the information you need. For example, early in my career I had a boss who never seemed invested in his employees. I wasn’t sure if he thought I was doing a good job, so in addition to our quarterly review sessions, I asked if we could have a monthly development meeting where he would coach me. I wanted to be in his position one day, so I figured who better to learn from than him?

We set up a regular appointment, but he missed the first one. He made it to the one after that, but it was always hit or miss whether he was going to show. I finally got frustrated enough that I took a different approach.

The person who had previously held my boss’s position had gone on to start his own company. I knew him a little bit because we still worked with his company on occasion as a vendor. One day I called him and asked if I could take him to lunch. We talked about the business for a bit, and once we had established a rapport, I asked if he could tell me what it had been like to be in my boss’s position when he worked for the company and what skills he thought I would need to fill it myself one day.

He was very open with me and gave me a lot of great advice. We kept in touch after that, and eventually I asked him if he would be a mentor to me on a more formal basis by meeting regularly to help me develop as a leader. He agreed and became an invaluable resource. Even though he didn’t work with me on a day-to-day basis, he got to know enough about me to really help me become the kind of leader who could grow into bigger and bigger roles.
Learning about yourself really comes back to humility. You have to be willing to ask the tough questions about yourself and let people give you the tough answers. You have to be willing to see yourself clearly because if you don’t, you will never be able to grow past your current limitations.

Never Go It Alone

We started this chapter talking about leaders who don’t like to admit when they’re wrong or don’t have all the answers. One final, crucial but rarely discussed reason why these are counterproductive attitudes is because they isolate the leader even more than is necessary. It can be lonely to be the leader, but if you adopt an attitude of curiosity about people and things, if you make a point of getting to know people at all levels, asking them questions and listening so they feel heard, being the leader can suddenly become a lot less lonely.

Leaders have to know how to shoulder responsibility—there is no way around that. But they also need to know how to manage the pressures that come with the job. It takes some of the pressure off if you are willing to collaborate with others, to share credit, to find out what others know that you don’t. It can be empowering to feel like you are in this together, but you will never get there without humility, trust, and respect for those around you, for all they know, and for all they have to contribute. You don’t have to be all on your own in making big decisions. Ultimately, accountability lies with you, but the concepts and tactics we have talked about in this chapter can help. They can help a lot.