

COACHING *for* LEADERS

Leading Without Authority: How the New Power of Co-Elevation Can Break Down Silos, Transform Teams, and Reinvent Collaboration

by Keith Ferrazzi

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Dave's Reading Highlights

By leading without authority, I was determined to make an impact at Deloitte as we built a global brand name in the consulting business. I wasn't willing to wait ten years (typical at the time) to be anointed for some kind of leadership position. Instead, I built critical relationships with influencers inside and outside the company, and went on to become Deloitte's chief marketing officer (CMO) and later its youngest-ever partner.

Through my decades of team coaching, I've come to see how many people are repeating the same mistakes I made at Starwood so many years ago. Too many managers rely on their title, position, and budgetary control to get their work done. They waste too much of their energy on painful bureaucratic infighting, energy that would be better spent leading others to collaborate and seek audacious new solutions. And I find that people without formal authority are often sitting on the sidelines, waiting their turn, when they could be diving in as I did at Deloitte, building relationships and leading without authority to get extraordinary things done.

Simply defined, co-elevation is a mission-driven approach to collaborative problem-solving through fluid partnerships and self-organizing teams. When we co-elevate with one or more of our associates, we turn them into teammates. We enter into close co-creative relationships based on candid feedback and mutual accountability. With its guiding ethos of “going higher together,” co-elevation nurtures a generosity of spirit and a sense of commitment to our new teammates and our shared mission. The resulting outcomes almost always exceed what could have been accomplished through regular channels within the org chart.

Never Eat Alone stressed the vital importance of creating opportunities through authentic, generous, and mutually supportive relationships within your personal network. That’s as true today as it was back when the book was published in 2005. But the new work world has added another layer of effort to the equation. Our networks have evolved into the primary medium for getting work done. And because everyone in most organizations is connected through these radically interdependent networks, our effectiveness is ultimately determined by our ability to lead, inspire, and serve our network. Think of it as a network of networks.

I ask every team that I work with the same question: “Who are the most critical people to help you achieve your goals right now, whether or not they are currently aligned to your org chart?” These are the people on your team. No matter who they report to formally in the chain of command, they are all members of the team you need to lead without authority in order to get things done.

OLD WORK RULE: Your team is limited to those who report to you or report to your manager. **NEW WORK RULE:** Your team is made up of everyone—inside and outside the company—important to achieving your project or mission. **OLD WORK RULE:** Professional relationships happen organically over time and develop without purposeful effort. **NEW WORK RULE:** Professional relationships must be proactively and authentically developed with the people on our teams. This is the new competency of collaboration and productivity. It is critical to getting things done, more quickly.

Zina shook her head as if I'd suggested something crazy. "I've been asking around," she said. "Everyone tells me that five years or longer is typical. Getting into management faster just doesn't happen in healthcare." I hear objections like this all the time: "Your ideas won't work in our industry," or "You don't know how we do things here." It's absolute nonsense. Always. The fact is that the organizations with the most hidebound, hierarchical cultures are in desperate need of transformational leadership within their ranks. And hospitals are a prime example—when they fail to adapt, they are extremely vulnerable to change, disruption, and competition. Rigid company hierarchies are loaded with inefficiencies, which makes them ripe for impact by anyone willing to lead without authority. When we think and act like co-elevating leaders, our potential as leaders will get recognized—sooner rather than later. That's the fundamental message I want to get across in this chapter. No matter what your status is within an organization, the way to be a leader is to start leading. Right now. Do the job before you have the job. That choice is always entirely in your own hands. And the way to begin is by accepting that it's all on you.

I've heard it so many times before: "They won't listen to me anyway. It will never work." It's a common excuse for not stepping up to lead, especially when being a leader is not in your job description. But real leadership is not about telling others what to do. It's about inviting others, encouraging others, getting others excited about new possibilities. True leadership doesn't presume to have the answers. In fact, the opposite is true. The best leaders start with an open mind and invite others to seek solutions with them. Truly great leadership is about genuinely caring about the other person's success as you mutually learn and grow. That's true of all successful leadership. But it's absolutely crucial to leading others when you have no positional authority.

Imagine a group of executives joking over beers about how they cheated on their expense accounts. That would be an unconscionable violation of integrity. Yet when coaching executive teams, I consistently hear things that, in my opinion, are equally

objectionable. For example, you're sitting in a room and you have a point of view that you think would make a difference, but you withhold it out of fear that the comment may unsettle someone. Is it professional to just keep your mouth shut? If you doubt the efficacy of a peer's direction, but you choose to be silent about the risk, is that acceptable or unacceptable behavior? Is the act of speaking to others behind a colleague's back about their poor performance (without addressing it with them directly) high or low professional behavior? If your goal is to act with integrity, to be a leader among your peers and in your organization, then the answer is no—failing to speak up is an abdication of your responsibility. Failing to take up the mantle of leadership and co-elevate with your teammates is a violation of professional integrity. My hope is that someday, failing to lead when leadership is needed will be no more acceptable than cheating on an expense account.

We've heard of the Seven Deadly Sins. Well, here are the Six Deadly Excuses we all must overcome in order to co-elevate and lead—with or without a title or official authority. Excuse #1: Ignorance Now that you are aware of the new work rules and that leading without authority is entirely your choice, ignorance is no longer an excuse. Until Zina understood that she could be a leader in her job now, she thought it was perfectly okay to sit back and do nothing when supplies periodically ran out in the ER, putting patient care at risk. My message to Zina was that it was her responsibility to take on what was wrong at the hospital. She no longer had an excuse to avoid taking action. And now neither do you!

Excuse #2: Laziness Sometimes we fail to follow through and faithfully co-elevate with others because it feels like it's just too much work. The trouble is that in today's work world, despite the understandable difficulty we all have checking the boxes in our long to-do lists, you cannot afford to abdicate your responsibility to lead. If you hang back with a not-my-job attitude, you might wind up with not-a-job. If the mission is important, then you will do what you need to do to get the job done. Yes, co-elevation is hard work—but if you abdicate your role as a leader, you may find yourself forced to abdicate your business. Most of us are satisfied with relationships

based on simple coexistence. We're busy. Co-elevating relationships require extra time. It requires us to be proactive. And to be sure, many of us keep crazy schedules and are yanked in multiple directions. Even when we're feeling jammed, it's simple enough to fire off a quick email to set up a fifteen-minute phone call. Co-elevation takes time, so you'll need to make room for it. That may mean delegating other responsibilities or reprioritizing your schedule. If you're managing a team or have people reporting to you, consider looking to them to do more. Some will leap at the opportunity to grow and advance their skills and responsibilities. If you feel as if you can't catch a glimmer of light, try this: Ask those around you what you should stop doing or what you should do less of—in other words, ways you could save time. Their feedback may surprise you. And if you don't have someone on your team who can take on extra responsibility, consider making this a co-elevation project. Co-elevate with someone who may, over time, be able to take on more responsibilities on the team. As you prepare and coach them, you'll also be freeing up time to nurture your co-elevating relationships with others.

Excuse #3: Deference All too often I hear people resist taking the first step toward co-elevation in deference to the org chart. When a task crosses a boundary and requires the help of colleagues in other departments or involves advocating for a new initiative, I'll hear, "That's above my pay grade," or "It's not my call." Someone once told me, "It's not my job to be my boss's coach." But if your boss happens to be the one person you need to engage with to make a difference—then, yes, when the occasion warrants, you might have to coach your boss. If you ever catch yourself being so deferential to the chain of command that you fail to speak your mind and hide the truth, you are not just letting yourself down, you're letting the whole company down. You're cheating your employer. It's no different than if you falsify your expense report. It's low-integrity, unprofessional behavior. The truth is that often, people are waiting for you to dive in and become more involved.

Excuse #4: Playing the Victim One of the best things about accepting the mindset of leading without authority is that it can cure the disease

of seeing yourself as a victim. When people or events disappoint you, don't run away, resign yourself to the situation, or succumb to self-pity. Take the rational response and just treat accepting your disappointments the way you accept the forces of the market—as a reality to be dealt with. In my work with large companies, I constantly hear complaints that co-workers are uncooperative or that the organization makes change too difficult or that the world is unfair. I hear more negative nicknames for rival internal departments than I do for competitors, which is where your organization's focus would be more suitably aimed.

Excuse #5: Cowardice Again, if a situation scares you, there's probably something in it calling you to grow. Often we fail to choose co-elevation because we are too timid, too afraid of conflict, or too fearful we'll be rebuffed or rejected. That inhibition may be all in our head, but the fear of relationships is strong and ingrained. Most of us don't like to confront others—and I'm right there with you! Studies show that the pain of rejection is indistinguishable from physical pain.⁴ But by experiencing what can be gained by leaning into that discomfort, it starts to get a little easier.

Excuse #6: Indulgence Indulgence can take many forms. Caught in painful memories, we are often reluctant to relinquish our anger, our resentment, or our frustration. When a relationship is strained, we can simply be too prideful to give up being right, or too unwilling to view the conflict from another's perspective. But there is no place for clinging to resentment if it is holding you back from professional or personal success. Resentment can be detrimental to our mental health and productivity. When we indulge resentments in the workplace, they just fester and get worse, undermining our careers in ways we might not even be aware of. Resentments between two parties can drag on for years in a downward spiral, costing both people incalculable numbers of lost opportunities for personal growth and professional success.

Co-elevation does not require consensus or two individuals having to agree. It only requires your taking responsibility to decide to be a co-elevator. Whether your relationship with your partners is going to

succeed is up to you, and based on your actions. In other words, you don't have to wait for others—you just have to get started.

Resentment leaves us blind and powerless; it's been compared to drinking poison and hoping the other person will die.

OLD WORK RULE: Leadership is something bestowed upon you by the company or organization. It comes with the authority associated with your job title. NEW WORK RULE: Leadership is everyone's responsibility. You must help lead your team, regardless of your job title or level of authority. OLD WORK RULE: To advance in your career, you must do what's expected of you according to your job description. NEW WORK RULE: To advance in your career, you should do whatever it takes to create value for your team and your organization, even if it's not expected and even if it goes beyond your job description.

The formula for porosity and preparing others to co-elevate starts with what I call serve and share. These two complementary concepts are so important that they are dominant themes running through almost everything I write. Think of serve and share as two strands in a DNA double helix, with each strand supporting and reinforcing the other. To serve is to lead with generosity. To share is to open yourself up and build the bonds of true connection and commitment with others.

Adam Grant, author of the bestseller *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, has spent years studying the benefits of being generous with our time and expertise. I first met him when he was a professor at the Wharton School. He reached out to me after reading *Never Eat Alone* and wanted to know more about the special role of generosity in networking, what I referred to as “giving without keeping score.” We've since become friends and have shared and learned a great deal from each other. He quotes me in his book: “I'll sum up the key to success in one word: Generosity. If your interactions are ruled by generosity, your rewards will follow suit.”

Some people put taglines on their business cards like “the connector” or “giving forward.” I’ve always advised against this, because I fear it strikes some as too self-promoting. I’ve seen it make eyes roll. For the record, I do personally care for and admire some of the folks who use these taglines, and I believe their sincerity. I just find it’s better to show up and be a connector and a giver without announcing that that’s who you are.