

Seven Techniques That Move People

Practical leadership tools you can use in your very next conversation, drawn from the field and the boardroom.

Most of us were taught that leadership is about authority. Position. The corner office and the final word. Then we step into a real team, with real human beings, and discover that authority moves people only so far. What truly moves them is something quieter, and far more learnable. Here are seven techniques I return to again and again, with senior leaders and young managers alike. None of them require a title. All of them require practice.

1. Lead with the story, not the spreadsheet

Data informs, but stories persuade. When you need to move people, do not open with the numbers. Open with a moment, a person, a stake. Let your audience feel the problem before you show them the figures. The structure that almost never fails is simple: what was the situation, what changed or went wrong, and therefore what must we do. Master that arc, and you will never lose a room to a slide again.

2. Make the other person feel heard before you make your point

The fastest way to lose someone is to argue before you have understood them. The fastest way to win their trust is to show, genuinely, that you have. Before you respond in a tense conversation, summarise what the other person has said so accurately that they nod. Only then offer your view. This single habit, used consistently, transforms how people experience you.

3. Ask the question instead of giving the answer

The instinct of the expert is to solve. The discipline of the leader is to ask. When a team member brings you a problem, resist the urge to hand them the solution. Ask instead: what have you considered so far, and what would you do if I were not here? You build capability, ownership, and confidence in a single exchange. You also free yourself from being the bottleneck.

4. Name the hard thing, kindly and early

Silence is not kindness. The feedback you withhold today becomes the crisis you manage tomorrow. The skill is to say the difficult thing while it is still small, and to say it with care. Be specific about the behaviour, clear about the impact, and generous about the person's intent. People can handle the truth. What they cannot handle is being surprised by it later.

5. Use presence as a tool, not an accident

Executive presence is not about being the loudest voice. It is about composure, clarity, and connection. Before a high-stakes moment, slow down. Pause before you answer. Look people in the eye. Let silence do some of the work. Presence is the message your body sends before your words arrive, and it can be

practised like any other skill.

6. Turn your failures into your most credible stories

Nothing builds trust faster than a leader who owns a mistake. When you get something wrong, say so plainly, extract the lesson out loud, and show what you changed. A leader who hides failure teaches the team to hide. A leader who learns in the open gives everyone permission to grow. Your scars, told honestly, are more persuasive than your medals.

7. Build trust as if it were your only currency, because it is

Every technique in this guide rests on one foundation: trust. It is built slowly, through small acts of consistency, honesty, and care, and it is spent in an instant through one act of betrayal. Guard it. When people trust you, they will follow you into uncertainty, tell you the truth you need to hear, and do their best work. No tool, no title, and no algorithm can substitute for it.

Fifteen Principles That Separate the Good from the Average

Listed in the order of their currency in today's world — the principles that matter most, first.

An average leader manages tasks. A good leader develops people. The distance between the two is not talent or seniority. It is a set of principles, deliberately practised. Below are fifteen, ranked by how much they matter in the world as it is right now — a world of artificial intelligence, constant change, and a workforce that expects to be led, not merely managed. Each carries a link for those who wish to go deeper.

1. Psychological Safety

The single strongest predictor of team performance in the modern workplace. People do their best, most innovative work only when they feel safe to speak up, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear. The average leader, often unknowingly, makes people cautious. The good leader makes it safe to be candid.

Further reading: Amy Edmondson — ‘What People Get Wrong About Psychological Safety’, *Harvard Business Review* — <https://hbr.org/2025/05/what-people-get-wrong-about-psychological-safety>

2. Adaptability and Learning Agility

In an age where the tools change every few months, the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn has overtaken fixed expertise as the leader's most valuable trait. The average leader defends what they already know. The good leader stays curious and adjusts faster than the world changes around them.

Further reading: Amy Edmondson — ‘Strategies for Learning from Failure’, *Harvard Business Review* — <https://hbr.org/2011/04/strategies-for-learning-from-failure>

3. Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman's research found emotional intelligence to be roughly twice as important as technical skill in distinguishing outstanding leaders. Self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skill are what allow a leader to read a room and move it. As machines master analysis, these human capacities become the true premium.

Further reading: Daniel Goleman — ‘What Makes a Leader?’, *Harvard Business Review* — <https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader>

4. Trust and Integrity

Trust is the currency every other leadership behaviour is bought with. It is built slowly through consistency between word and deed, and lost instantly through one act of betrayal. The average leader assumes trust comes with the title. The good leader earns it daily and guards it carefully.

Further reading: ‘Begin with Trust’, Frances Frei and Anne Morriss, *Harvard Business Review* — <https://hbr.org/2020/05/begin-with-trust>

5. Empathy

Satya Nadella rebuilt Microsoft around it. Empathy is the ability to genuinely understand what another person is experiencing, and it is the foundation of connection, inclusion, and influence. In a world of

increasingly machine-mediated interaction, the leader who can truly see people becomes rarer and more valuable.

Further reading: 'Connect, Then Lead', Amy Cuddy et al., Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2013/07/connect-then-lead>

6. Authenticity

People follow leaders they believe are real. Authenticity is the alignment of your values, words, and actions — leading as yourself rather than as an imitation of someone else. The average leader performs a role. The good leader brings a genuine, consistent self that others can trust and relate to.

Further reading: 'Discovering Your Authentic Leadership', Bill George et al., Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2007/02/discovering-your-authentic-leadership>

7. Vision and Purpose

An average leader gives instructions. A good leader gives a reason. The ability to articulate a compelling picture of where you are going and why it matters is what turns a group of employees into a committed team. Purpose is what sustains people through difficulty when incentives alone run out.

Further reading: 'Creating a Purpose-Driven Organization', Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2018/07/creating-a-purpose-driven-organization>

8. Influence Without Authority

Modern work happens across teams, functions, and partners you do not control. The defining skill is moving people who do not report to you — through credibility, reciprocity, and persuasion rather than positional power. The average leader relies on the org chart. The good leader builds influence everywhere.

Further reading: Robert Cialdini — 'Harnessing the Science of Persuasion', Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2001/10/harnessing-the-science-of-persuasion>

9. Storytelling and Communication

Facts inform, but stories move. The ability to frame a message as a narrative — with a stake, a tension, and a resolution — is what makes ideas memorable and people willing to act. In an age of information overload, the leader who can cut through with a clear, human story holds a decisive edge.

Further reading: 'How to Tell a Great Story', Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2014/07/how-to-tell-a-great-story>

10. Decisiveness Under Uncertainty

Leaders are paid for the decisions only they can make, usually with incomplete information. The skill is to weigh what is known, accept the irreducible risk, decide, and own the outcome. The average leader waits for certainty that never comes. The good leader moves with judgement and conviction.

Further reading: Peter Drucker — 'What Makes an Effective Executive', Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2004/06/what-makes-an-effective-executive>

11. Accountability and Ownership

The good leader takes responsibility for outcomes, especially the bad ones, and never hides behind circumstances or blames the team. Ownership shown at the top sets the standard for the whole organisation. People will take responsibility only as readily as they see their leader take it.

Further reading: Peter Bregman — 'The Right Way to Hold People Accountable', Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2016/01/the-right-way-to-hold-people-accountable>

12. Empowerment and Coaching

The average leader hoards decisions and creates dependence. The good leader develops people by asking questions, delegating real responsibility, and helping others find their own answers. This servant, coach-like posture multiplies capability across a team rather than concentrating it in one person.

Further reading: 'The Leader as Coach', Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular, Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-leader-as-coach>

13. Resilience

Setbacks are certain; how a leader metabolises them is not. Resilience is the capacity to absorb difficulty, stay composed, recover, and carry the team through without transmitting panic. The average leader is shaken by adversity. The good leader becomes the steady point others can navigate by.

Further reading: Diane Coutu — 'How Resilience Works', Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2002/05/how-resilience-works>

14. Inclusive Leadership

Diverse teams outperform — but only when every voice is genuinely heard. Inclusive leadership is the deliberate practice of drawing out, valuing, and acting on different perspectives. The average leader listens to the familiar few. The good leader builds an environment where the whole team contributes.

Further reading: 'Why Inclusive Leaders Are Good for Organizations', Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2019/03/why-inclusive-leaders-are-good-for-organizations-and-how-to-become-one>

15. A Growth Mindset and Lifelong Learning

Carol Dweck's research shows that believing ability can be developed — in yourself and others — transforms how people respond to challenge and failure. The good leader treats every setback as data and every person as capable of growth, modelling the learn-it-all posture the modern world rewards.

Further reading: 'What Having a Growth Mindset Actually Means', Carol Dweck, Harvard Business Review — <https://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means>

A closing thought

You do not need to master all fifteen at once. Choose the one that would make the biggest difference to your team this month, and practise it deliberately in real conversations. Then choose another. Leadership is not a trait you are born with or without. It is a craft you build, one honest conversation at a time.

Col. Rajiv Bhargava (Retd) is an executive coach, leadership storytelling practitioner, and Visiting Faculty for Executive Education at the Indian School of Business. He works with senior leaders, founders, and students on narrative, presence, and leadership. To explore coaching, workshops, or a session for your team or institution, visit leadersweavestories.com.