

Kevin Kruse

**Great Leaders Have No
Rules: Contrarian
Leadership Principles to
Transform Your Team and
Business**

Made by Blinkist



These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me?

**Revolutionize the way you lead,
to increase your team's
productivity and profitability.**

Regardless of your leadership style, holding on to outdated managerial philosophies may be holding you and your team back.

But what if there was an alternative leadership style that made your team so effective that productivity shot through the roof? What if you could create a workplace where everyone had autonomy, giving you freedom to focus on

business strategy? Sound like a perfect managerial mirage?

Well, this vision is actually within your reach, with a little shift in approach. These blinks explain why a more contrarian leadership perspective helps you get better results. Forget what you've been taught about management, and buckle into a new way of doing things. Here's to becoming the leader you've always wanted to be!

In these blinks, you'll learn

- one word you need to say to your employees each day;

- why to-do lists don't make you productive; and
- the reason you should have favorites.

Abandon your open-door policy and be more deliberate with your schedule.

In 2017, a memo written by talk-show host Steve Harvey went viral. His team was outraged! The memo was blunt. It demanded that *anyone* who wanted to speak to Harvey must now schedule an appointment. Without an invitation, his dressing-room door was firmly closed.

Author Kevin Kruse was shocked that everyone was so scandalized by Harvey's memo. Sure, his phrasing could have

been a little tamer, but Kruse saw Harvey's request as completely reasonable. Sixty-year-old Harvey was hosting several TV and radio shows in three different states. Naturally, he needed some peace before a show to connect with his energy and humor. The 'pop-in' culture interrupted his focus on what mattered most.

In other words, far from criticising Steve Harvey, we should be copying him.

**The key message here is:
Abandon your open-door policy
and be more deliberate with
your schedule.**

In a bid to promote trust, collaboration, and communication, most workplaces have adopted an *open-door* culture, giving team members access to their managers at any time. But rather than achieving that anticipated trust and ease of communication, it actually reduces your productivity as a leader and hampers your team from building crucial decision-making skills.

No matter how much you encourage them to use your open-door policy, statistics show that 50 percent of your team won't feel comfortable

speaking up when they have an issue. These are the folks that fear potential ramifications, like having their concerns dismissed or being judged as troublemakers. They're also sensitive about having a manager follow-up on their complaint and risking new tensions amongst the team.

For everyone else? They'll constantly interrupt your workday. That open door won't just prevent you from getting work done, it'll also stop your employees from making their own decisions. They'll get into the habit of running straight for your approval, creating a culture

of dependency instead of relying on themselves and possibly making a mistake.

To lead effectively, strike a balance between an open- and closed-door policy by nominating a recurring time when you're available for employees. It could be for a full day once a week, or an hour every morning; whatever works best for your schedule and the team's needs. That way, your team will still feel supported, and you'll have uninterrupted time to tackle problems that need your attention most.

Get rid of rules! They only inhibit employee performance.

Imagine you're an employee on an overnight business trip.

Complying with company policy, you've made your reservation at a Motel 6. But there's an issue when you arrive – no room is available. The other motel in town has availability, but its rooms are \$10 more than you're allowed for accommodations.

What do you do? Well, luckily your company accepts car-rental expenses; so your best option is to rent a vehicle for \$250 and drive four hours to

another Motel 6. Sorted. Wait, what?

This may sound senseless, but many workplaces are riddled with rules that defy common sense. The bigger the company, the more rules it's likely to have. When leaders don't have direct contact with employees, they rely on those rules to maintain professional standards and mitigate risk. But rules undermine trust. And an untrusted employee is one who underperforms.

The key message here is: Get rid of rules! They only inhibit employee performance.

Workplace rules cause three major problems.

First, they reduce an employee's accountability. The more highly regulated a job is, the less ownership a team member has over that job, which diminishes emotional investment. Why should they be invested when they don't feel ownership in the company? It usually leads to staff caring less about how they – or the business as a whole – perform.

Second, rules make the majority suffer to protect the minority. Here's an example: Concerned about employees accessing

personal emails at work, family business owner Nick installed blocking software on all office laptops. Whenever a useful website or software update was also blocked – which happened all the time – Nick would personally approve access and enter his administrator password to unblock an employee. Just imagine how much time this wasted for him while his team became *less* efficient than before. The cost clearly outweighed the benefit.

Finally, rules shift the team's focus from outcomes to activities. In the author's experience, many managers

forget that *outcomes* are what really matter. By getting caught up in micromanaging staff to increase productivity, they dampen any potential for good outcomes. If a manager insists her team works onsite, fearing they won't be diligent at home, an employee simply ends up taking more breaks to check Facebook on his phone while in the office.

Instead of making rules, set standards. Standards are something a team can collectively uphold. They encourage employees to be accountable to each other and to you as a leader. This is far

more empowering than
dictating rules, which only
erodes trust.

*“The higher the quality of
your workforce, the less
likely it is that you’ll need
rules.”*

Needing to be liked sabotages leadership, but wanting to lead right garners respect.

The need to be liked is an innate part of the human experience. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which maps the stages of human development, places our need to belong directly after our most basic requirements, like food, shelter, and safety.

A 2017 Gallup survey found that employees with close work friends were the most highly engaged, proving that a sense of belonging has positive outcomes in the workplace. This

explains why so many Silicon Valley enterprises encourage social connection at work by hosting regular company parties, installing foosball tables in staff rooms, and more.

But the same rules don't apply to leaders. To be an effective boss, you can't worry about being liked. Instead, you have to focus on doing what's right for your team.

**The key message here is:
Needing to be liked sabotages leadership, but wanting to lead right garners respect.**

It's nice to think of you and your team being equal, but the reality is that you're not. Equality isn't possible when you're the only one who can fire someone or give them a bonus. If you ignore that fact and focus on being liked, you're apt to create some serious problems for yourself.

For one thing, you may have to make important decisions that impact friendships, tempting you to make them poorly for the wrong reasons. This famously happened to Yahoo's cofounder, Jerry Yang. He wanted to keep every employee happy, so he never solved a pinnacle question – was Yahoo a

media company or a tech company? This lack of clarity meant executives couldn't align on strategy, which significantly limited Yahoo's success and value to date.

Leading with wanting to be liked also lends itself to a dysfunctional work culture. You risk prioritizing popularity over work and it may cause you to put off difficult conversations, like providing constructive feedback or mediating disputes between team members.

Without a timely resolution, this delay only creates more stress and tension as problems fester. And nothing causes talent to

resign faster than a toxic work environment.

Learn to let go of your need to be liked by swapping it with something more powerful – the desire to *lead right*. Think of great leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Some people passionately hated them. But they continued to lead because they were guided by their values.

Reflect on your leadership values and measure yourself against them, not your popularity. When you lead by values, you may not win

everyone's friendship, but you
will gain their respect.

An effective workplace is a loving one.

In 1513, Italian diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli penned *The Prince*, a political treatise used as an instructional guide for new royals. In it, he claimed that being feared by those you manage was more effective than being loved – a sentiment still revered by many business leaders today.

While fear-based leadership might bully employees into working hard, it doesn't create a productive work culture. In fact, fear reduces creativity, stifles

innovation, and prevents open communication. Fear causes stress, and stress drives employees to look for jobs elsewhere.

But centuries before Machiavelli, Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu had a more worker-friendly opinion. He believed the most successful leaders supported their teams in developing autonomy – leaders managed people, not tasks, and so should care about them.

The key message here is: An effective workplace is a loving one.

Ok, so leading with love might sound uncomfortable, or downright scary, but it isn't as complicated or mushy as you might think. It doesn't require you to reveal your most intimate thoughts. It just requires that you actually care about those on your team.

According to a Gallup survey of 25 million employees, staff turnover is lower and productivity higher when workers feel cared for.

The first step to showing you care is to greet your employees on a regular basis. Executive coach Paul Marciano found that one of the biggest complaints

employees have is that their bosses don't say "Good morning" when they walk past their desks. It gave employees the impression they weren't worth their boss's notice. A quick "hello" was all they needed.

Similarly, making eye contact can be a great tool. Eye contact can make people feel seen, which, in turn, can make them feel more connected to the team.

But that's just one way to strengthen connection. Another is to show your team that they matter to you. Learn the names

of your employees' partners and children – ask after them from time to time. Acknowledge important events, like birthdays. And at the end of the week, take the time to talk about weekend plans. At the beginning of the following week, try to ask how that party or baseball game went over the weekend. It shows you've paid attention.

Finally, schedule one-on-one career path meetings every six months. Employee engagement increases when people have the chance to develop their careers. And since people already have the option to resign if they want to, they're more likely to stick

around if you foster their
growth.

Become obsessed with time.

While researching for his book *15 Secrets Successful People Know About Time Management*, Kruse interviewed over 280 high performers, from Olympic athletes to entrepreneurs. What he learned shocked him. Hardly any of them used to-do lists to organize their time.

Despite what most of us have been taught, to-do lists aren't that helpful when it comes to getting things done. In fact, research has found that 41 percent of to-do list tasks are never completed. And knowing

that there's a long list of items awaiting completion increases our stress levels. So, to become a highly effective leader, stop writing lists and start focusing on how you're using every minute of the day.

**The key message here is:
Become obsessed with time.**

The secret to becoming a high achiever is *time blocking*. Rather than writing a list of tasks, schedule a time to get each task done. Open your calendar, pick a date, time, and duration, then book it.

When scheduling tasks, prioritize according to your values. If coaching employees is important to you, book that task first. If health is a priority, start by blocking out your daily exercise session. Don't forget to schedule family and leisure time too. By using time blocking in this way, you get more done, and feel less stressed, because you'll always prioritize doing what matters most.

To successfully manage your schedule, take your peak performance time into account. Typically, our minds are freshest and most focused one to two hours after waking up. But just

two hours later, our creativity and decision-making abilities wane. This means it's crucial to work on the highest priorities during those two optimal hours and leave less demanding or important tasks till later in the day.

Think about time wastage, too. We tend to schedule activities in blocks of 30 or 60 minutes. But do you really need a full half-hour for that quick coffee catchup? Start thinking about time in 15-minute blocks to fit more into your day.

Keep in mind that work meetings typically hemorrhage

time. A University of California study found that employees at Microsoft spent around 31 hours a month in unproductive meetings. That's almost a full workweek! So, do your part. Insist on clear meeting agendas and be thoughtful about your invite list. Every minute spent in an irrelevant or poorly-planned meeting is one that could be used in a better way.

Treating everyone the same is unfair.

In 2017, former NFL Super Bowl Champion Gary Brackett was a guest on Kruse's podcast, *The LEADx Leadership Show*. After retiring, Brackett started a restaurant franchise called Stacked Pickle. Asked what advice he'd give a new manager, Brackett said not to treat people equally, but to treat them fairly.

Brackett meant that you should always consider the broader context when it comes to an employee's performance. For instance, if a normally punctual

employee is late one week due to car problems, she should be treated differently to someone who's been rolling in to work late every morning since he started. The rule is universal – show up on time – but the ramifications of breaking that rule should change according to the individual.

**The key message here is:
Treating everyone the same is unfair.**

Managers set blanket rules because it's easier on them; they don't need to adjust how they handle different situations. But this doesn't mean those

situations are handled in the best way.

That's why being flexible is the best strategy. This means you can show a trusted, long-term employee leeway and take a harder line with a new employee who's yet to prove herself.

Though it may seem counter-intuitive, giving preferential treatment to the people who've earned it is not only fair, it also inspires other employees to gain your trust too.

Similarly, don't give your time equally to your employees. Entrepreneur Cy Wakefield recommends investing your

time in your most productive and engaged staff. These are the workers you want to retain, but who have the highest number of alternative career options available to them. Time spent fostering their career growth will help you keep them longer.

Unfortunately, employees at the opposite end of the spectrum will usually dominate your time. Wakefield calculated that low-performing employees generate an extra 80 hours of work each year for their managers. Most managers try endlessly to accommodate or inspire chronically disengaged employees by listening to their

complaints or trying to coach them.

But often, these people weren't a good fit to start with, so no amount of support will transform them into stellar teammates. The best thing you can do is fire them. It may sound harsh, but every hour you spend with them is one less hour you can invest in helping a star employee excel, or coaching someone who's shown potential.

“People are different, so treating everyone the same doesn’t mean we’re treating them fairly.”

Embrace transparency.

How would you react if an employee sent you an email accusing *you* of being disorganized and unprepared for a meeting? What if they told you that your underperformance was unacceptable and mustn't happen again?

This happened to Ray Dalio, founder and CEO of Bridgewater Associates. But Dalio wasn't offended by his employee's blunt email; he was delighted. Dalio had implemented *radical*

transparency at Bridgewater, meaning nothing is hidden or off-limits, including holding the boss accountable. This policy has transformed his company into the world's largest hedge fund with \$160 billion in assets.

**The key message here is:
Embrace transparency.**

In the past, information was power when it came to business. Sales reps wouldn't swap notes because they were vying for the same promotion. Agency colleagues wouldn't share freelancer information because they wanted exclusive use of the best talent. But in today's

volatile and complex terrain, a team's strength is what determines success, not hoarding knowledge.

Actually, radical transparency optimizes team performance. It gives employees access to the information they need to make quick decisions. Real-time data allows sales reps to answer customer questions on the spot. Financial transparency guides employee spending.

Sharing failures as well as successes is important because it shows that you believe your team can handle bad news and will choose to use this new

information as a learning experience. This also fosters risk-taking by making failure less taboo, fueling innovation in the process.

Open-book management – where employees have full access to an organization's financial records – deepens staff investment and engagement. This practice involves training every employee, from janitor to CEO, in interpreting financial records. Employees begin to understand how money is allocated to different costs, like rent, salaries, and marketing. Once staff grasp what those figures represent in relation to

profit, they begin to reflect on how to best use resources, leading to more thoughtful and effective decision-making.

It may make some leaders nervous to include individual salaries in open-book management, but if salaries have been calculated fairly, total transparency isn't a problem. In fact, it builds trust. If an employee challenges why she's on a lower pay grade than a colleague, you can use the opportunity to explain how those salaries have been determined. And, now that the conversation has been started, your employee then has the

chance to state her case for why her contributions warrant a pay increase.

Being vulnerable fosters connection.

The most popular segment of Kruse's podcast is when his guests share a time they've failed. Listeners love hearing high performers talk about something other than how successful they are. Knowing that even great leaders make mistakes helps the audience relate to them.

Vulnerability doesn't come naturally to most people. Evolution has made us fear being weak. We don't want to be

the gazelle that the lion singles out for dinner.

In fact, showing vulnerability at work historically could have ended a career, so people hid their illnesses or didn't tell their boss personal information, like getting a divorce. But times have changed. Relationships have replaced power and authority in the contemporary workplace, and that makes vulnerability an essential leadership quality.

The key message here is: Being vulnerable fosters connection.

So, how does vulnerability help a workplace thrive? First and

foremost, it fosters trust.

Neuroscientist Paul Zak found that people collaborate better and are more productive in a trust-based environment. In the same way it deepens the connection between friends, being vulnerable builds trust between work colleagues.

Vulnerability also increases the level of a worker's emotional engagement in the company and its goals. Engagement is an indicator of how much a person cares, and caring is what makes employees loyal to the company. In actuality, good employees always have numerous job opportunities

now that the internet has made job hunting easy and accessible. So, engagement is a leader's tool to steer them away from looking elsewhere.

Innovation is also connected to vulnerability. Research conducted by management consulting firm McKinsey & Company found that Fortune 500 companies now only operate for an average of 18 years. This has dropped from 90 years in 1935. The only way a company can survive in today's complex business landscape is to constantly innovate. And this means getting used to failure,

which is fundamental to innovation.

Failure in the workplace should be used as a learning opportunity and a way to inform new strategies. Great leaders support innovation by sharing their own failures and praising smart risk-taking, even if it doesn't lead to success.

Finally, vulnerability promotes good health. Living authentically might take courage but it uses less energy than striving for perfection. Rather than focusing on being perfect, reflect on where you can improve. By doing so, you'll role model

confidence and bravery to your employees.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Like many managers, your leadership style might be based on principles that date back to the Industrial Revolution, like using fear and rules to control people, or distancing yourself from your team in a bid to appear authoritative. Or, you may use practices from the opposite end of the spectrum, like being overly supportive and available at all times. Either way, you're stopping yourself from becoming the great leader you want to be. If you want to

optimize performance and productivity – both yours and your team’s – you need to embrace unconventional leadership qualities, like love, transparency, and vulnerability.

Actionable advice:

Introduce a ‘no smartphones’ policy.

According to cognitive researchers at Florida State, you’re three times more likely to make a mistake at work when you receive a phone notification or call, even if you don’t respond. Your performance will also suffer if you can see your

phone, even if it's off. To improve productivity across your team, stick a 'No Smartphones' sign in each meeting room and ask everyone to comply. Role model good phone use by muting your phone at work and leaving it in your drawer, checking it just three times a day.

Got feedback?

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