

"I'm Not Good Enough" and Other Leadership Myths

with Roxy Manning, PhD

I sat in the back of the room thinking, 'I should say something.' I knew the work. I had more relevant examples. I understood my community better than this outside person who wasn't aware of all the undercurrents that eddied through the room. But I stayed silent, alternating feeling despair, disengagement and irritation, but unable to step up, unable to lead.

Have you found yourself in that position – sitting in a training or meeting, thinking you have the skills and knowledge to lead, but still stepping back? Many people find themselves balancing on the edge of leadership – yearning to step forward, but holding back. For many of us, it's not about getting more knowledge, more skills, taking one more class or reading one more book. The barrier we face is often internal, more to do with our beliefs and fears than any external missing piece.

Do you have those voices that hold you back? Let's look at some of them, and debunk the myths they tell us so convincingly.

Myth 1: This trainer or that leader has been doing it so long. They can do it so much better than me so I should step back and let them.

When I first started training, I co-led with the very people who inspired me so deeply to move into this field. At first, I didn't make comparisons; I just enjoyed everything they said. But each time I thought about sharing something into the room, I found myself freezing. Why would I bother to speak – they could say anything I thought of with so much more precision and clarity. Of course, that was true! After all, they had years of experience on me. But, by stepping back, I was not bringing my own unique perspective and voice to our training situations. Through stepping forward, I learned that some people really relished my take on things, my life experience, my journey.

Each person is unique, and each person has a contribution to make. Your task is to trust that your contribution, no matter how small, is meaningful. What is it about you that's unique? How can you bring that to situations in which you lead? What life experience do you have that others around you might not have? Does it point you to a certain audience that you're especially qualified to reach? After many years of training, I've learned the importance of fit between leaders and those they lead. It's not a 100% essential component – when it's not there, a leader needs to work harder. But sometimes a trainer can reach someone who others trainers have been completely unable to reach. That's because our differences in life experience, personality, and interpersonal styles are all important and all part of what we offer to the world. Mastering the material is only one aspect of being a successful trainer. Sometimes I intentionally draw on this principle when I co-lead with someone who is less experienced than me. If I explain something and people look confused, I'll ask my co-lead to explain it in their own words. They may say it with more words than I would have, or with a different example or an unexpected

emphasis, but all of a sudden, it clicks! Not because the message is essentially different, but because the person delivering the message, and the way they deliver it, can be as important as the message itself.

So try it sometimes. Think of what makes you unique, think of ways to bring your voice and life experience into the room, and see what impact it has.

Myth 2: I can't lead. I haven't mastered this yet.

This myth is connected to our first myth. We either compare ourselves to other people, or we think we need to meet some (often unattainable) standard of perfection before we should lead.

I'm a perfectionist. I'm in my comfort zone when I have prepared for every contingency, when I've learned everything there is to know about the topic I'm sharing. What I often found though was that, by the time I stepped up to lead, I had rehearsed so much that some of the excitement of leading a training was gone. And, when I found myself facing those moments of unpredictability, I would be thrown off-guard even further. I either found myself acting like a programmed robot, giving a canned lecture, or I would be frozen, beating myself up for not having anticipated or prepared adequately. I now know that, in order to lead with all my passion, I need to leave my comfort zone.

Now, while I still do my best to learn and integrate the skills I'm going to teach, I no longer tell myself that I need to be perfect. I've discovered exactly the opposite! In fact, I often hear expressions of gratitude from people who tell me that I make leading look possible. When they see me uncertain about what to do next, they find that how I handle not knowing what to do is more inspiring than if I had known exactly what to do. My reaction to my "failures" is more educational than my ongoing success, because it teaches people something about continuing to learn while leading. When something unexpected happens, I use it as a moment to really live some of the principles of Nonviolent Communication – prioritizing connection, receiving the other with compassion, and meeting each situation in the present moment rather than from preconceived ideas. If you trust that a true leader is one who can make mistakes, if you ask for help and gather wisdom from those around you, then you can relax, realizing you don't need to be the omnipotent master in order to lead.

Myth 3: I've got to be original or do it on my own.

So many times I stopped myself from speaking, thinking that what I'm about to say isn't unique. Someone's said it already or had a similar idea. Somehow, I created a story that, if I didn't do it on my own, if it wasn't totally innovative, then it wasn't worthwhile. As you can imagine, this was exhausting!

And, ultimately, it was counterproductive. Repeated instances of something landing at the right moment, no matter how many times it has been said before, helped me to understand that a timely message, not a new message, was what was most important. Earlier, I discussed the importance of embracing your uniqueness, trusting the voice that is singularly you. Freedom to shine comes when we can do this while acknowledging and honoring our interdependence.



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You don't have to do things that have never been done before to be an effective trainer or leader. Your unique style comes when you can take what has been done before, use the contributions of those who came before you, and add the spice that is distinctively you. It doesn't mean that everything has to be a never-before-heard-of gem of wisdom. I have been coleading the BayNVC Leadership Program for 8 years. The program was developed by Miki Kashtan, Inbal Kashtan, and Julie Greene, and we still use many materials developed by our original founders. The Leadership Program is a great example of leading, and having a huge impact on people's lives, without having to have new, innovative, unique material each time. Building on existing foundations and accepting support as you lead can make you a better leader by leveraging the resources available to you in support of the group, and it can add another dimension to your leadership as you teach others about independence through your modeling.