



The Work of Making Room

How to help people do meaningful work together, one choice at a time

Make space for people to do their best.

SHAD EDDIE MONGRUE

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SHELF 27 OF 32 · LEADERSHIP · CORE BOOK

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Every statistic, study finding and documented example is numbered and listed in the Sources, with a link to the page it came from. Each was checked word for word against its source in October 2026. Stories marked "composite example" are illustrations drawn from common situations; their names and details are not real people. Stories marked "documented example" come from the cited sources.

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An Invitation

Leadership often arrives before you feel ready for it. Someone asks what the group should do next. A colleague is unsure who owns a task. A meeting grows quiet just when an honest question would help. You do not need a grand title or a perfect answer to matter in those moments. You can help make the next step clearer, invite another perspective, or keep a promise. Those small choices are part of the work of making room.

That work deserves your curiosity because working together is not automatically easy. People bring different priorities, hopes, habits, and limits. A shared purpose can help, but it does not erase disagreement or guarantee a smooth path. Leadership is not a trick for controlling how everyone feels. It is a practice of noticing what the group needs, choosing how you will respond, and being willing to adjust when your choice does not help.

The practice matters in workplaces where managers themselves may be stretched. Gallup reported that global manager engagement fell from 30% in 2023 to 27% in 2024, while individual contributor engagement remained flat at 18%¹. That finding does not explain every workplace or prescribe one solution. It does remind us that the people asked to guide others also need support, clarity, and room to keep learning.

And everyday leadership can shape whether people feel able to contribute. Yale School of Management advises leaders to encourage employees to voice concerns and ideas without fear of retribution, which can support learning and mental health². That is not a promise that every concern will be resolved or every idea adopted. It is a reason to take seriously the way you listen, respond, and explain what happens next.

This book treats leadership as something you can practice in ordinary moments, whether or not it is your job title. You will explore how to build trust through follow-through, give work a useful shape, invite input, make decisions, and help people grow their own judgment. Some choices will be small. Some will feel uncomfortable. You may not know the perfect move in advance, and you do not have to pretend otherwise.

The point is not to become the hero of the room. It is to help people find purpose and make progress together, while staying attentive to the people doing the work. Gallup reported that participants in management-best-practices

training had up to 22% higher engagement, and their teams saw engagement rise by up to 18%; these are reported outcomes, not guarantees for every team¹. This book offers no magic formula. It offers a way to notice, choose, practice, and learn.

Reasons to fall in love with this subject

- **Because small choices count** You do not have to wait for a promotion, a crisis, or a meeting with a grand name on the calendar to lead. You can make room by clarifying who will do what, asking whose view has not been heard, or following up when you said you would. None of these actions makes you flawless. They do make leadership feel available, practical, and connected to the real work in front of you.
- **Because trust is something you practice** Trust can sound like a big, abstract quality, but you can work on it in concrete ways: make a commitment clear, keep it when you can, and speak honestly when you cannot. That approach leaves room for mistakes without pretending they do not matter. It also gives you a way to repair a missed expectation with responsibility rather than a long explanation designed mainly to protect your pride.
- **Because clarity can make room for purpose** A meaningful goal is easier to act on when people understand what matters, who owns which part, and what a useful result might look like. Clear direction does not mean removing every uncertainty or deciding every detail for everyone. It means offering enough shape for people to make good choices, while staying open to new evidence and changing needs. That balance is more useful than pretending you can plan away every surprise.
- **Because listening can change what becomes possible** Listening is not just waiting politely until your turn arrives. It means paying attention to concerns, ideas, and information the group may be missing, then responding in a way that shows people their contribution was taken seriously. Psychological safety concerns people's perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks, and research has linked it with team and individual learning, including learning from failure³. You can help by receiving an honest concern without making the person regret raising it.
- **Because helping is not the same as taking over** It can feel efficient to solve every problem yourself. It can also leave other people with less room to learn and make judgments. This book invites you to offer feedback,

questions, and space to try, then notice whether your help is building someone's capacity or making you indispensable. Research on leader autonomy support links it with autonomous work motivation and describes pathways through need satisfaction and motivation to well-being, engagement, and positive work behavior⁴.

- **Because the practice can keep growing** You will not get every choice right, and the same approach will not fit every person or workplace. That is not a reason to give up; it is a reason to pay attention. Reflecting on what happened, naming a useful adjustment, and trying it in a real situation can make leadership a practice rather than a performance. The goal is not to look impressive. It is to help the team become more capable, including without you at the center.

BY THE END OF THIS BOOK, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO

- Notice ordinary moments when you can help a group move toward a shared purpose.
- Build trust with clear commitments, steady follow-through, and honest repair.
- Connect purpose to priorities, responsibilities, and a useful picture of the result.
- Listen for concerns, ideas, and missing information, then respond constructively.
- Choose when to decide, consult, or share ownership, and explain your trade-offs.
- Support learning with feedback, questions, and room for people to try.
- Recognize when you are taking over, playing favorites, avoiding responsibility, or mistaking busyness for progress.

How to use this book

You can read the chapters in order, since they move from everyday leadership toward a practice that can last. Or start with the chapter closest to a choice you are facing now. Each chapter offers a way to think about the work and a chance to connect that idea to your own setting. You do not need to adopt every suggestion. Pay attention to what fits your responsibilities, relationships, and workplace.

Treat the book as a practice companion, not a test of whether you are a good person. Before a conversation or decision, choose one small thing to try: clarify the outcome, ask for a concern, or explain what you know and what you do not. Afterward, take a moment to notice what happened. Did people understand the next step? Did you leave space for a different view? What might you adjust next time?

Some chapters may raise tensions rather than settle them. Listening does not require agreeing with every proposal; sharing ownership does not mean every decision belongs to everyone; and care does not remove accountability. When you encounter a trade-off, name it plainly and consider what information or conversation could help. A sustainable leadership practice should be small enough to keep and flexible enough to change as your role and team change.

HOW THIS BOOK HANDLES EVIDENCE

This book is educational, not personal professional advice. It draws on the numbered facts supplied here; citations appear beside the claims they support, and a finding should not be mistaken for a guarantee or a universal rule. Any illustrative composite is fictional and combines common workplace situations, not a documented account of a real person. Documented examples use only the details identified as facts. Where evidence has limits, or where people and workplaces may differ, the book aims to say so plainly.

The Difference One Person Can Make

A COMPOSITE EXAMPLE · NAMES AND DETAILS ARE ILLUSTRATIVE

The meeting is already ten minutes behind when someone notices that the newest person at the table has not said a word. The group is trying to plan a neighborhood event. Ideas are flying, but the same two people keep talking, and no one is quite sure who will handle the permits. The quiet teammate has worked with the community partners before. You could let the meeting run on and hope somebody remembers to ask. Instead, you pause, name the decision still to be made, and invite that teammate to share what they know. Then you ask who is willing to take the next step and write the answer down.

Nothing dramatic happens. Nobody gives a speech. The plan is still imperfect, and the meeting still ends a little late. But now the group has heard useful information, one task has an owner, and the people leaving the room know what comes next. That small change is leadership. It does not depend on a title or a spotlight. It begins when you notice what would help the group move forward, and choose to make room for it.

Leadership starts with attention

It is easy to picture leadership as a grand gesture: a bold announcement, a difficult speech, a plan that changes everything. Those moments can matter. But much of the work happens before anyone would think to call it leadership. You notice that a conversation has become lopsided. You realize the group is treating a guess as a fact. You catch that someone has accepted a task without understanding what success looks like.

Attention is not the same as hovering over everyone. It means looking at the work and the people doing it, then asking what the moment needs. Maybe the team needs a clear next step. Maybe it needs a pause so someone can explain

a concern. Maybe the best move is to stop adding ideas and let the group sort through the ones already on the table.

Try asking yourself three simple questions: What are we trying to do? What is getting in the way? What could I do now that would help without taking the work away from others? You will not always know the answer immediately. That is fine. Sometimes leadership begins with saying, “I’m not sure what we’re missing. What do you see?”

A manager’s influence can reach beyond their own tasks. Gallup reports that managers account for 70% of the variance in team engagement⁵. That finding does not mean one manager controls every team member’s experience, or that every team responds in the same way. It does underline why ordinary choices—how you set priorities, respond to a question, or handle a missed commitment—deserve attention.

Make purpose usable

A shared purpose is not just a sentence people can repeat. It helps people understand why their work matters and how their different tasks fit together. A team might be trying to serve customers well, make a reliable product, or organize an event that welcomes the people it is meant to reach. The purpose gives direction. The everyday work gives it shape.

To connect the two, make the next step concrete. Instead of stopping at “We need better communication,” ask what information people need, who needs it, and when it would be useful. Instead of saying “Let’s make this easier for customers,” describe what a helpful outcome would look like in the task at hand. Clear direction does not require pretending that every detail is settled. You can name what is known, what is still uncertain, and what the group will do next.

Clarity also means saying who owns which piece of work. That is not a way to police people; it is a way to spare them from guessing. When responsibilities are unclear, people can duplicate effort, wait for someone else, or discover too late that they had different expectations. A quick check—“Who has this, and what would count as done?”—can prevent a surprising amount of confusion.

Then leave room for judgment. People may know things you do not, and a plan may need to change when new information arrives. You can set a useful boundary without prescribing every move: explain the goal, the constraints that matter, and where a teammate can choose their own approach. Research on leader autonomy support found positive associations with autonomous work

motivation, and a path model linked autonomy support with well-being, engagement, and positive work behavior through need satisfaction and autonomous motivation⁴. Those findings support a thoughtful balance: give direction about the destination, while allowing appropriate choice about the route.

Make contribution possible

People cannot contribute what they are not invited to offer. An invitation does not need to be elaborate. It might be a pause after you ask a question, a direct request for someone's view, or a meeting structure that gives each person room to speak. If the same few voices fill every silence, waiting politely may not be enough.

Listening means more than being quiet while someone talks. It means trying to understand the concern or idea before you decide what to do with it. Ask a follow-up question. Check whether you heard correctly. If you cannot act on a suggestion, explain what limits the choice rather than pretending you did not hear it. People do not need every idea adopted. They do need to know their effort to contribute was taken seriously.

A team's sense of safety can affect whether people are willing to take interpersonal risks, such as asking a question or admitting uncertainty. Psychological safety is described as people's perceptions of the consequences of taking those risks³. Research has found that psychological safety predicts team and individual learning, including learning from failure³. This is not a promise that every conversation will feel comfortable. It is a reason to pay attention to how people are treated when they speak up.

Your response teaches the group what to expect next time. If someone raises a problem, you can thank them for making it visible before you work through the problem itself. If a mistake comes to light, focus first on understanding what happened and what would help prevent a repeat. That does not mean dropping standards or avoiding accountability. It means making the conversation useful instead of turning it into a contest over who can look least responsible.

You can also make room by noticing who has not yet had a chance to contribute. Be curious rather than assuming silence means agreement, lack of interest, or lack of expertise. Some people need time to think; others may be weighing whether speaking is worth the risk. Offer more than one way to take part, such as sharing a thought in the meeting or sending it afterward.

Let shared progress feel shared

Leadership can be meaningful because it helps people see their effort add up to something. A group moves from scattered tasks to a result it can recognize. That result may be modest: a handoff that finally works, a customer's problem resolved, or a plan that people understand well enough to carry out. Progress does not have to be spectacular to matter.

Notice and name the contribution without making yourself the center of it. Be specific: "Your question helped us catch that gap," or "The way you organized those details made the decision easier." A general "Great job" can be pleasant, but a clear observation helps people understand what was useful. It also shows that the work was seen.

Sharing progress includes sharing ownership. If you have made every decision, solved every snag, and explained every next move, the team may be moving—but it may not be learning to move together. Give people chances to lead a piece of the work, make a reasonable choice, and learn from the result. Offer help without snatching the task back at the first sign of uncertainty.

There is joy in this kind of leadership, but joy is not a requirement you can impose. A team may be tired, under pressure, or divided about priorities. You cannot guarantee that a group will feel inspired simply because you acted with care. You can help create better conditions: clearer work, fair chances to contribute, honest follow-through, and visible progress. Then allow people to experience the meaning of their own contribution in their own way.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Research spotlight

Two findings help explain why small leadership choices can matter. Gallup reports that managers account for 70% of the variance in team engagement⁵. This points to the importance of the manager's role in the team experience; it does not mean managers control every influence on engagement or can guarantee a particular result. A separate Gallup finding says employees who receive daily manager feedback are three times more likely to be engaged than employees who receive it once a year or less⁵. That comparison is not proof that increasing feedback alone will cause engagement to rise. It does suggest that feedback is worth treating as an everyday part of working together, rather than saving every useful observation for a formal review. Keep it timely, specific, and open to the employee's perspective.

A life example

A DOCUMENTED EXAMPLE

When a report is not heard

In 2006, six Toyota employees submitted a two-page report to senior management raising concerns about vehicle safety and working conditions at manufacturing facilities. The report was disregarded by leadership, and the account says this preceded a large-scale vehicle recall⁶. The facts given do not tell us every conversation that took place or what any one leader knew at the time. They do show a stark difference between offering input and making that input count.

For a team today, the lesson is not that one report can always prevent a larger problem. No one can promise that, and the example does not establish what would have happened if the report had been handled differently. The practical lesson is smaller and more useful: when someone brings forward a concern, do not treat the act of speaking as the end of your responsibility. Acknowledge it, make clear who will look into it, and return with what you learned or what you can do next. Sometimes the response will be that the concern cannot be resolved as requested. Even then, a clear, respectful explanation is better than silence. One person's contribution matters more when the group has a way to receive it.

TRY THIS

One choice that makes room

Choose one ordinary moment this week and use it to help the group move forward without taking over.

1. Before a meeting or shared task, write down the purpose in one plain sentence.
2. Notice one point of uncertainty: an unclear task, an unanswered concern, or a decision that needs an owner.
3. Ask an open question that could bring useful information into view, then leave enough quiet for someone to answer.
4. Summarize what you heard and check that you understood it correctly.
5. Agree on one next step, who will take it, and when the group will check progress.
6. Afterward, ask yourself what helped, what got in the way, and one thing you would adjust next time.

Myths and honest truths

- **Myth:** Leadership only counts when you have formal authority. **Truth:** A title can give you responsibilities and influence, but people can help a group move forward through ordinary choices even without a leadership title.
- **Myth:** Being a good leader means having the answer and taking charge. **Truth:** Sometimes people need a clear decision. At other times, the better move is to ask a useful question, clarify the work, and let others contribute their knowledge.
- **Myth:** If the team is doing meaningful work, everyone should feel motivated and happy. **Truth:** People experience work differently, and circumstances can limit how much any leader can change. You can support clearer, fairer, more collaborative work without promising a particular feeling or outcome.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Leadership often begins by noticing what the group needs in an ordinary moment.
- Purpose becomes useful when people can connect it to clear work and practical next steps.
- Inviting input matters, and so does responding in a way that makes speaking worthwhile.
- Share ownership so other people can contribute, learn, and lead parts of the work.
- Progress can be meaningful without being dramatic, and results will vary.

REFLECT

- 1. When does your team most need you to clarify the work, and when does it need you to make room?*
- 2. Whose useful perspective might be missing from a conversation you are part of?*
- 3. What is one small leadership choice you could repeat this week?*

Nine more chapters are waiting

You've read the Introduction and Chapter 1. The full 92-page book continues with:

- CH. 2 The Joy of Shared Progress
- CH. 3 Trust Is Built in Small Moments
- CH. 4 Give the Work a Clear Shape
- CH. 5 Make Listening Count
- CH. 6 Decide Without Closing the Door
- CH. 7 Help People Grow Their Own Strength
- CH. 8 Notice When Your Leadership Gets in the Way
- CH. 9 Build a Practice You Can Keep
- CH. 10 Leave the Team Stronger

Plus the research analysis "What the Evidence Says", a 30-day practice plan, a glossary, and every source with full research credits.

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Sources for these chapters

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