

INTRODUCTION

There are countless ways of defining leadership. Because this is a book for and about leaders, we offer our own definition. As you consider it, notice what part of this definition resonates most with you.

Leadership is the ability to call forth your own best efforts, and the best efforts of others, to achieve a shared future that people care about.

What does it take for you to “call forth your own best efforts” day in and day out? How do you simultaneously maximize your own potential and the potential of those you lead? Where can you find the time and energy you need to envision a new future—one that you truly care about and that is shared by others as well?

As leadership coaches with more than forty years of combined experience, we’re uniquely positioned to guide you along this journey. In addition to executive coaching and team coaching, Heather has consulted for more than eighteen years in the fields of organization development and conflict resolution, helping clients reignite their shared purpose, overcome differences, and work toward common goals. A Certified Somatic Coach with more than twenty-five years of coaching and leadership development experience, Bridgette specializes in coaching senior and emerging leaders in organizations facing rapid growth and change. We’ve partnered on this book to bring you the benefit of our experience working with leaders just like you who are ready to maximize their potential, revitalize their commitments, and lead their teams and organizations to new levels of success. Like you, our clients are committed not just to being great leaders but also to building great teams. *Missing Conversations* isn’t just a book—it’s a road map to your future.

We’ve worked with hundreds of leaders over the past twenty-five years, and we’ve learned that conversations are a leader’s most influential tool for creat-

ing a shared future that people care about. Our first glimpse into the power that conversations have to shape how we see ourselves, and how we see others, happened many years ago, in an unlikely place—a first-grade classroom.

A six-year-old girl sits at a table facing her teacher. While her mother holds her hand under the table for moral support, the young girl quietly tells her teacher that she is often scared in the classroom. The reason for her fear? The teacher's habit of yelling at the first graders and sometimes even slamming her fist on their desks in frustration.

“When you do that, it makes me really scared,” the young student says, “and it makes it hard for me to learn.” Though her voice is soft, her words are strong. Her teacher, caught off-guard and humbled by her student's honesty and courage, vows to stop yelling and promises to do better at managing her frustration in the classroom—and she keeps her word.

But even more significant than the teacher's actions is the impact the conversation has on the little girl, who leaves the conversation standing a bit taller, walking more lightly, and feeling more secure.

Conversations like this one, which we helped one of our daughters have many years ago, don't get any easier the older we get. As we've discovered in our work with leaders, there are numerous “Missing Conversations” in organizations—conversations that people delay having or neglect altogether because they are uncomfortable, don't know how to engage in them, or don't even realize these conversations are missing.

Our understanding of conversations and the vital role they play in a leader's success continued to evolve when we attended a program for executive coaches taught by one of our mentors, Bob Dunham.¹ When Bob brought up the concept of “Missing Conversations”—the conversations leaders should be having with their direct reports, teams, and peers—it was a lightbulb moment for us. We began to listen intentionally for the conversations that our clients weren't having and helped them spot these conversations rather than overlook them. We coached our clients to face and enter into these conversations in more skillful and effective ways. Doing so had a profound impact on their leadership and on the results they were able to achieve.

We also began listening for another type of conversation that was often missing in our clients' lives—the conversations they needed to have, first and foremost, with themselves. It turns out that these were every bit as important to our clients' success as the more “outward-facing” conversations and were often their impetus for seeking coaching in the first place. As we helped our clients to turn the spotlight of their attention inward and engage in these conversations, our clients became clearer and more grounded in who they were, what they really cared about, and how they could best manage themselves in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty surrounding them. As a result of this inner journey, they began to show up in their leadership roles with greater clarity, conviction, and resolve.

We've discovered that nine simple but powerful questions compel leaders to engage in these critical internal conversations. While other leadership books focus on improving the quality of interpersonal conversations, this is the first book that explicitly names the nine conversations leaders must have with themselves. Over the course of our work with clients in hundreds of organizations both large and small, these conversations emerged as the most essential to a leader's positive impact and effectiveness. Each chapter of this book poses a key question and focuses you on one of these nine conversations, while providing you with a framework for engagement. We'll support you in deepening your self-awareness, boosting your satisfaction in the workplace, and accelerating your professional and personal success—and we'll show you how to motivate those you lead to do the same.

Dee Hock, founder and CEO Emeritus of Visa, made the case for ongoing reflection and development when he said, “If you seek to lead, invest at least fifty percent of your time in leading yourself—your own purpose, ethics, principles, motivation, and conduct.” After all, if you can't lead and inspire yourself, how can you expect to lead and inspire others?

OVERVIEW

This book is organized into three parts. Part I introduces you to three conversations that will deepen your self-awareness, an essential ingredi-

ent of effective leadership. These conversations will provide you with a framework for exploring your identity as a leader, your impact on others, and your responses to the people and situations that trigger you. The net result? Greater authenticity and credibility as a leader, along with more equanimity in your day.

Part II presents three conversations that are inextricably linked to your own professional satisfaction and fulfillment. You'll explore how to better manage your capacity, discover proven practices for strengthening your well-being, and examine how best to navigate the inevitable career crossroads you will face. Having engaged in these conversations, you'll be better equipped to sustain your leadership efforts over time and to take care of yourself in the process. You'll also have the tools you need to chart a clear future path—whether that's with your current organization or in a radical new direction.

Part III covers three conversations focused on accelerating your success. You'll have an opportunity to get reacquainted with what inspires you and to envision a new future that you and others care about. We'll guide you to bring your best thinking and focused attention to the priorities and projects that matter most. And you'll assess the quality of your connections with the people you supervise, report to, and work alongside of. Most importantly, you'll learn what you can do to repair and rebuild trust where needed.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

At the heart of this book are stories of actual leaders with whom we've worked. Each story is followed with a "Your Turn" section that invites you to pause and engage more deeply with the material you are reading. We encourage you to take the time to do this exercise. Have a notebook and pen ready beside you so you can capture your responses to our questions and document your results to our exercises. Reading this book is more than a search for more knowledge: it's an actual experience that deepens your wisdom, enhances your skillful action, and enriches your presence.

Our Missing Conversations Self-Assessment (see page xix) is a tool we've created to support you as you move through this book. This Self-Assessment highlights your current strengths and where you can continue to grow and will direct you to the conversations that will benefit you the most. The book can be read sequentially, but each chapter stands on its own, allowing you to prioritize the areas you need to focus on most.

If you want to develop your potential, insight alone is not enough; you must also take new action and cultivate new habits. Toward this end, we have included a list of recommended action steps and supporting practices at the end of each chapter. We've also included supplemental tools in the appendix. These resources will help you take your leadership journey around a particular conversation to an even deeper level.

This book was written first and foremost for leaders to help them access more of their innate potential. It was also written for the coaches who work with them. If you are a coach, the conversations in this book provide a rigorous and thorough curriculum for a nine-month coaching engagement, with a chapter or conversation to focus on each month. You can also have your clients take the Missing Conversations Self-Assessment and, on the basis of their results, customize how much or how many of the conversations you include as part of your work with them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We've worked with hundreds of leaders in major organizations over the course of our careers, and we know leadership is not for the faint of heart—in fact, we think the only thing more difficult than being a great leader is being a great parent!

We also know how challenging it is to lead well in the digital era, when our lives are beset by twenty-four-hour connectivity, constant uncertainty, and challenges our ancestors couldn't have even imagined. Now more than ever, leaders must be skilled in maximizing their own potential and helping those they lead to do the same.

We dedicate this book to all the leaders with whom we have had the

privilege of working; many of their stories are told in these pages. We also dedicate this book to you, the reader. Our deepest wish is that you will find the hope, inspiration, and insights you need to keep your leadership flame alive and burning brightly. More than ever, the world needs leaders like you—those who are willing to do the deeper work of transforming themselves and, in doing so, transform their world.