



The Look & Sound of Leadership™

SINCE 1990

Executive Coaching Tips

6+
MILLION
PODCASTS
DOWNLOADED



THE DEMOCRATIC LEADER

TOM HENSCHERL
JUNE 2021

A new leader worries about having to become a dictator in order to meet her goals. She and her coach explore the challenges inherent in trying to be a truly democratic leader.

[LISTEN](#)

[DOWNLOAD MP3](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

Promotion prompts worry

Shalawn was chief medical officer at a regional clinic. Her clinic, along with seven others, had been bought by a national corporation and unified into a network. The corporate owners had taken notice of Shalawn and were promoting her to chief medical officer for the entire region. All eight medical officers at the clinics, seven of whom had been her peers, would soon be reporting to her.

Shortly after she'd heard the news, she reached out to me asking for help thinking about her new role. I asked what her concerns were.

"Two, I think," she said. "Maybe more, but two I've been thinking about most. One is just getting them to acknowledge I'm the boss."

I asked, "Why wouldn't they acknowledge you're the boss? Your promotion was announced, wasn't it?"

She gave a rueful laugh. "That doesn't always mean so much in the clinics. We've haven't been owned all that long. Not everyone is sure we like this corporate overlord system. And here I am crossing over to the dark side. I can imagine they could give me the cold shoulder."



I clarified, “The clinics do get measured, don’t they? At some point, won’t they *have* to work with you? Is this just a tantrum?”

“It might be,” she said, “which is why I called you. If you can help me stave off a tantrum, or at least tone it down, that’d make life easier, right? Why not talk to a coach?”

I said, “Well, I’m glad to help, Shalawn. So, fill me in on number two. What’s the second thing you’re worrying about?”



She said, “I worry about barreling in and ordering them around. I know these people. They have lots of ideas. But they have no clue what my bosses are asking of me. It’s a lot. And in a pretty short time frame. Everything I have to deliver has to happen at the clinic level. So I want them to feel it’s democratic. I want them engaged – even though they aren’t really going to have much choice. I worry that no matter how I play it, they’re going to see me as a bitch.”

“A bitch? Why would they see you as a bitch?” I asked.

She smiled easily. “I have a long history of bitchdom, going back to med school. Actually, even back to high school. I always knew what I wanted and lord help you if you got in my way. Call me bitch, fine, just don’t slow me down! But pretty early in my career I knew I wanted to move towards administration and I saw that administrators have to be good team players or everything’s just a mess. So I thought, stop being this warrior goddess competitor and get on the team. It took a lot of years, but I got myself out of bitch mode. I worry all this pressure is going to revert me right back.”

“So you’re hoping if they experience you as democratic you won’t be seen as a bitch?”

“Worth a try, right?”

“Even though, whether they like it or not, they’re going to have to do what works for the corporation or leave, right?”

“Which is what I’m worried about,” she said with a bit of exasperation.



Learning in a democracy

I asked, “When you say you want to be democratic, what do you mean?”

“I want everyone to feel good about what we have to do. I want them all to have a voice.”

I asked, “Are you thinking they’re all going to get their own way?”

Seeing the impossibility of that she suddenly deflated. “I’m going to end up forcing them no matter what, aren’t I?”

“I don’t know about that, but thinking about it through a democratic lens is interesting because, in my experience, democracy is not actually about equality. It’s about majority rules. Hopefully it’s also about people being well-informed, too. Can I tell you a story that makes the point?”

“Okay,” she said.

“My youngest daughter attended a progressive elementary school. The school says they teach children how to live in a democracy. What does that mean? It means that everyone gets their say. But not everyone gets their way.

“I had a front row seat for progressive education from kindergarten through sixth grade, and I’ve never seen anything as inspiring as the way these children were taught. Get this – there were no textbooks, no tests, no grades. It was a completely different way of engaging learning from anything I’d ever experienced. It was education for democracy because they were teaching children how to become informed about things that interested them so they could make choices. Just as one example, here’s how they started every year. Even in kindergarten.



“Every year, the teacher knows the learning goals for the year. She knows the language skills, the math skills, the social skills they’re going to pick up along the way. The kids don’t get to decide that part. What they *do* get to decide is the vehicle that will get them there. In this version of democracy, the kids get to decide what topic they’re going to study.

“At the beginning of every year, the children debate what to study. Some kids want to study space, some kids want



to study oceans, other kids want to study climate. And they talk it out. Then, whatever the group decides, is what the teacher will use as a foundation for all the subjects all year long. Everyone gets a voice, but not everyone gets their way.”

“That could be upsetting,” she said.

“Exactly, yes, it could be. But part of living in a democracy is learning to have grace on both sides of a decision, whether it goes your way or not. And sometimes someone is upset about the outcome. You know what happens? The community helps that kid. That’s what you do in a democracy. You help each other, because some day that upset person is going to be you. And then the community helps you.”

“Well, doesn’t that sound great?” she said.

“Doesn’t it?” I agreed. “The kids learn the importance of speaking up individually, and they also understand the importance of being part of the larger group. Nobody wants any one to give up. Everyone roots for each other. It’s part of why there are no grades. The kids aren’t there to compete with each other. They’re there to learn how to live in a democracy.”

“I wish I’d been taught in a school like that!”

I laughed. “Me, too. All of us parents used to say, ‘Why wasn’t I taught like this?’”

Getting voices heard

She cocked an eye at me. “I’m trying to see myself in this. What’s the lesson for me as the leader? What’s the analogy to letting the kids pick the topic?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I hadn’t thought of it as parallel, but what if it were? What if you were like the progressive teacher – you make the meta-decisions – and the directors are like the learners who get to make choices among themselves. Could there be a parallel?”

“Well, it means I’d do my initial presentation a little differently,” she said.



“How so?” I asked.

She said, “I’m planning to call a meeting with the eight of them. I was going to be completely transparent with them. I was going to say, ‘Look, here’s what corporate needs us to do. I know all the reasons why this is going to be hard. So let’s brainstorm ways we can deliver against the goals.’”

“And, in the analogy, brainstorming would be like the kids talking it out and deciding what to study, right?” I asked.

“Don’t you think?” she asked back.

“Are they used to brainstorming?” I asked.

She laughed. “Not really. This will be a first. Usually the clinics operate pretty independently. We haven’t needed to work together before.”



“So they’re like the kindergartners.”

She laughed. “Golly! Don’t tell them that!”

I laughed, too. “I just mean the first time a group tries to work together it goes slowly. Kindergartners are just learning. By sixth grade, the kids are sharp.”

“So maybe I need to allow more time,” she said.

“Maybe. Can I tell you my concern?” I asked. She nodded. I went on. “You’re going to sit them down and show them all the ways their work is going to change. You seem to think it could sound pretty extreme.”

“I think they’re going to be shocked,” she agreed.

“So first you shock them, then you say, ‘But, hey, let’s dive right in and think up a whole bunch of new ways to do our work.’ Then you ask them to do something they’re not very skilled at. I’m concerned that could feel like dose after dose of discomfort!”



“What’s the alternative? One-on-ones?”

“Would you have time to talk with all of them individually?” I asked.

“If it’s important, I’ll make the time,” she said.

“Then why not? Wouldn’t one-on-ones be the ultimate democratic move?”

She laughed. “A listening tour!”

I laughed, too. “That’s a great way to think of it. Can I give you a challenge?”

With a suspicious smile she said, “Okay?”

“The purpose here is to get people to speak up, right? Have a voice. So when you go in to listen, just listen. Don’t go in to make agreements or negotiate. When they tell you their idea, take it seriously. Don’t judge it. Don’t poke at it. Ask them to tell you more about it, yes, but don’t ‘improve it’ or tweak it or correct it, even if it’s clearly full of holes. Write it down. Say thank you. And maybe they’ll have another idea. Write that one, too. And say thank you again.”

“That’s going to be hard for me. I’ve never heard an idea I couldn’t make better!”

“So this challenge might really be a challenge!” I laughed.

But being a democratic leader was a meaningful motivator for Shalawn. She worked at it consciously. We talked about it often.

She came to view democratic leadership as having two components: authentic, genuine relationships, and rigorous, measurable results. To her, democratic leadership was an ever-shifting balancing between ‘tasks’ and ‘relationships’ that looked a whole lot like [*The Look & Sound of Leadership*](#).



Core Concepts:

- When pressured, many leaders revert to giving orders.
- People need time to feel safe speaking up to a new leader.
- A democratic leader doesn't have to give everyone their way, just give everyone their say.
- When listening to ideas, just listen. Don't fix or tweak or improve.

Related Archive Categories:

- [Leading Teams](#)
- [Leadership](#)
- [Perception – How You're Perceived](#)

Related Episodes:

- [How Teams Fight](#)
- [Inviting Dialogue](#)
- [Psychological Safety](#)
- [Taming Meetings](#)
- [The Conflict Conversation](#)

CONNECT



CONTRIBUTE

an idea for future Executive Coaching Tips



SUBSCRIBE

to the Podcast



LISTEN

to episodes of "The Look & Sound of Leadership" podcast



VIEW

searchable archive of Executive Coaching Tips



CONTACT

the Essential Communications team

818 788 5357

essentialcomm.com

info@essentialcomm.com



6+

**MILLION
PODCASTS
DOWNLOADED**

