

# How to Bring Out the Best in Your Team

: 30/4/2025

---

**Frances Frei**, professor at Harvard Business School, says that trust, empathy—and even a bit of tough love—are all essential ingredients to strong leadership in today’s world. Successful managers focus on the effect they have on others, not themselves. They also define a strategy and create a culture that drives employee behavior in their absence. Frei is the coauthor, along with Anne Morriss, of the book [Unleashed: The Unapologetic Leader’s Guide to Empowering Everyone Around You](#) as well as the HBR article “[Begin with Trust.](#)”

**Key episode topics include:** leadership styles, constructive criticism, feedback, trust, empathy, managing people, employee performance management, underperforming employees,

- Listen to the original HBR IdeaCast episode: [Great Leaders Use Tough Love to Improve Performance](#)
- Find more episodes of [HBR IdeaCast](#)
- Discover 100 years of Harvard Business Review articles, case studies, podcasts, and more at [HBR.org](#)

HANNAH BATES: Welcome to *HBR On Leadership*, case studies and conversations with the world’s top business and management experts—hand-selected to help you unlock the best in those around you.

Harvard Business School professor Frances Frei says the best measure of a leader’s effectiveness isn’t their charisma, vision, communication skills, or resilience. Actually, it’s their ability to, as the tagline of this podcast suggests, bring out the best in those around them.

Helping your team grow, elevating their talents, and keeping them engaged all starts with trust. In this *IdeaCast* episode from 2020, Frei talks to host Alison Beard about how to build that trust and, ultimately, help your team thrive. Frei starts by breaking down the three main components of trust.

ALISON BEARD: So if trust is the starting point for good leadership today, how do you build it with employees?

FRANCES FREI: Great question. And our big breakthrough came when we realized that building trust is a monolithic thing. It’s super hard, in fact, close to impossible, for most of us. But when we found that trust had three component parts, that was helpful, and then also found that each one of those component parts are actionable. So we can actually build more trust tomorrow than we have today by diagnosing which component part is in the way and then coming up with a custom solution for that particular part.

ALISON BEARD: So what are those three pieces?

FRANCES FREI: The language we use is that its authenticity, logic and empathy. Which will feel a lot like those that have read Aristotle, feel a lot like logos, pathos and ethos. But what it really is that, do you

sense that it's the real me talking to you? Or do you feel like I'm only bringing part of me, or I'm delivering a message perhaps that I don't really believe in, but I think I'm supposed to say. So is it the real me with sound and rigorous logic, and that I'm in it for you? If you question any of those three, the first thing to go is trust.

ALISON BEARD: So you said that there are ways to improve on all of those fronts. Let's start first with authenticity. You know it can sometimes feel risky to show your full and total self at work. How do you get leaders to move into a more authentic mode?

FRANCES FREI: What you're thinking about with leaders, leaders have two jobs right. One is to be authentic themselves, but the other is to create the conditions for other people's authenticity to show up. Because as a leader, my job is to enhance the performance of other people.

What I have to do is make sure that people feel safe to be their authentic self. Regardless of the difference that I represent, I feel welcome. And then it starts getting really exciting. Because of any difference I represent, I'm celebrated and then I'm cherished because of it. Each one of us can bring our authentic self, we get to make much more robust decisions and we get to include many more people.

The challenge is for anyone of us, how do we do it? So, let's say that I'm, so I am a woman over 50 lesbian. Puts me in a couple of categories. If I was tempted not to bring my authentic self in any of those three categories, it's a leader's job who feels comfortable on age, sexuality, gender, to set the conditions for my authenticity to bloom. Note where your authenticity really shines. Like what triggers your most authentic version to show up? It's really hard to be authentic when you're reading a script for example.

ALISON BEARD: So let's move onto the logic piece of it. How do you establish your credibility on that front?

FRANCES FREI: So one part is, I'm not being very logical and I'm communicating that super clearly. Right. So that's, like, my logic is suspicious. The other part is, I actually have really good logic, but I'm struggling in the communication of it. So, is it substance – the real logic, or is it style – the communication? We find that it's far more often style than substance.

There's two ways that we can communicate in the world. And one is using a beautiful storytelling technique where I take you on a journey, there's dramatic twists and turns, and then you ultimately get to the point. That's a beautiful way to communicate and it's lethal for a logic wobbler. Instead I would say flip it. Start with the point, even if it feels a little scary, and then give the supporting evidence. If I take you on a journey and you give me all of that context and you tell me all of your credentials and everything along the way, awesome if I stay with you to the end, but you can lose me at so many of the plot points. Start with the point, even though it feels artificial and then give the supporting evidence.

ALISON BEARD: What do you do with the trickier problem of actually having flaws in your logic?

FRANCES FREI: Yeah so, here the solution is even more straightforward. Which is, don't talk about things that you don't know well.

ALISON BEARD: Makes sense.

FRANCES FREI: I'm just going to pause for a moment for laughter. But so, I like, I draw a box and I say, this is what you know. And then I draw a circle in the box and say, this is what you're allowed to talk about. The temptation of course is that we talk about a circle that's much larger than the box. If we only talk about that which we know well, we won't have substance problems.

ALISON BEARD: What about the third leg of trust, empathy? How do I build that as a leader?

FRANCES FREI: In this one I would say that in the time of crisis, I normally say all three are important because if you don't have one of them you're, you don't have, you lose trust. But in a time of crisis, this is the one that is really important.

And here's the thing about empathy. I have to be present to the needs of others in order to express empathy. If I am at all self-distracted with myself, it's about me and not about you. So when I'm in your presence, if I'm checking my email, or texting someone, I am not present to you. I'm multitasking between you and me. People will question my empathy immediately and trust is the thing that goes.

The reason this is so important right now is that we're in a global pandemic. Everyone is going to be self-distracted right now. As a leader, when you're building trust, you can either be self-distracted or present to others. You can't do both at the same time. Put the oxygen mask on yourself as much as you need and I'm sure it's more now than it was two months ago. But understand that when you're putting the oxygen mask on yourself, you're not leading and you're not building trust. So, perhaps be in front of people less often, but be fully present when you are.

ALISON BEARD: Yeah. OK, so let's focus on the next piece of effective leadership, something that you call love. Which seems pretty touchy feely for the corporate world. So how have you seen it work in practice?

FRANCES FREI: Yeah. So, trust is the foundation. And then the way that we think about this is that if I want to bring out the best in one other person, we figured out how to do that. And it requires two levers. So if I wanted to bring out the best in you Alison, what I would do is I would make sure that you felt really high standards from me, because it's hard for you to achieve your best in the absence of high standards.

That's necessary, but not sufficient. The only way that's going to work is if you also experience my deep devotion to your success. So if you experience my high standards and my deep devotion to your success, that's when I can bring out the best in you and that's what we call love.

But here's where the pesky human nature comes in. Most of us when we're setting really high standards for people, we shield them from our humanity. We don't display our intense devotion to their success. And so we get, we come across as chilly, or uncaring. And then the story goes that I get some feedback that I'm cold and I'm not, it's all about me. I get horrified, so then I rush to revealing that I'm deeply devoted and I accidentally insidiously lower the standards, as I show my devotion.

And then I get really frustrated with the lack of performance that comes from that. And then I scramble back up into high standards, low devotion and a lot of us spend our lives going back and forth between those two states. What we call severity and fidelity. So the trick is, how do I simultaneously show high standards and deep devotion?

ALISON BEARD: That sounds like something that could work in a family as well as an office.

FRANCES FREI: Well so here's the great breakthrough we had. So a woman named Carol Dweck who's a wonderful family psychologist, a Stanford professor. She wrote something that gave us a total breakthrough on this. She wrote, there are two ways to parent and one of them is the right way.

So then she goes onto say, and she wrote this, I'll use her dated language. She goes onto say, you can either prepare the path for the boy, or prepare the boy for the path. And it was a bolt of lightning. I had been preparing every path, real and imagined so that my boys could travel them. I had been a weed wacker of a parent. So deep in fidelity, so deep in devotion that I didn't even want them to have to do the work of mitigating any paths. And what she showed us is that, or you can prepare the boy for the path, so that he will be able to thrive in our absence.

ALISON BEARD: So how exactly does a manager do that in a corporate setting?

My belief in humanity is that we all really want to achieve and the greatest expression of love is for me to set the conditions for you to thrive. Someone's not thriving if they're just doing well enough. Like I think we all want to be better tomorrow than we are today. And it's a leader's job to set those conditions.

ALISON BEARD: So, who's a leader that you've seen do this in action?

FRANCES FREI: Oh, the best example of it is a man named Carlos Rodriguez-Pastor. To those who know him, and to everyone in Peru where he's from, he's a CRP. He believes in the possibility of people. Like he believes that the way to bring Peru from a third world country to a first world country, which he plans to do in his lifetime, is by setting the conditions for individuals to thrive.

So he cares more about the development of individuals than any CEO I have ever seen. Ranging from, I go down to Peru every year and teach, and we teach a new set of leaders every year, he sits in every one of the classes and takes notes on the people. I've never seen a CEO do that.

He sets super high standards for people starting with the recruiting process. If you want to get hired at, in one of the Intercorp companies, which people are, it's a very long line to get hired there. It's going to take a really long time. And if you try to use any informal mechanisms to do it like, oh I have a friend, can you talk to him? If he senses that you're trying to use your connections, trying to do anything to mitigate a meritocracy, he does what he calls, he puts you in the freezer. He gives you a time out.

Because he wants everyone to realize that at Intercorp, it's the meritocracy that rules. But he's also deeply devoted to people. And I think he gets to set even higher standards than anyone else in the world, because he is so devoted to his people.

One famous example is that he and his top team, he decided to give them a reward for having done a very good job. And the reward was to go climb a mountain right near Mt. Everest. And so, this will reveal, his other rewards are like you get to go to school.

And because he cares, he doesn't care about status. He cares about meritocracy. So the top people that were most responsible for this, there were some that were wealthy by then. And so they bought business class tickets to get from Peru all the way to the mountain, which is a very long journey. The others that were the young scrappy people that they had coach tickets. And then just at the last minute, right, like the day before they were going to take off, Carlos asked who has business class tickets? Everyone else and me, will meet you there. I'm going to take them on my plane. Which is like, he just

never misses a chance to show you that it's not how much money you have, it's not how much, like he's devoted and he really cares about meritocracy.

ALISON BEARD: Yeah. So this vision for leadership that you have from the very beginning, from the time that you're managing just one person all the way up, it seems to run a little bit counter to how people are noticed and rewarded in most organizations. You know, you're really sort of taking a backseat to your people and elevating them and their needs above your own. Is there a tension there?

FRANCES FREI: I think that there, so yes there is. Because we, we sometimes get put into positions of leadership because we were a really good individual contributor. And then we form a team and we think well they're there to help us achieve even more. And so it's about me, me, me with more and more people. And it's, we find that that actually puts a pretty severe ceiling on what you can actually do which is that I'm thinking, how can I bring out the best in other people? So the second that I'm leading someone, it, how can I set the conditions for them to thrive? And I want there to be equal access to everyone thriving and I want more and more varied people to thrive. If I can do that, I will thump the team, that is, how can I get people to help me perform?

ALISON BEARD: So that's a good transition from moving away from team managers to people leading larger groups and even organizations where they don't have day to day contact with all of their people. So how does someone like that make sure that everyone feels trust and love and a sense of belonging when they are absent?

FRANCES FREI: The way to think about it is that if I can guide your discretionary behavior in my absence that's the whole game. So, you're making ten's, hundreds of decisions without my direct observation, even my direct knowledge. So if I can get you to make those decisions as well as if I was standing right next to you with my high standards and deep devotion and with our trust and you felt included, if I could get you to make those decisions as well as if I was right next to you, that's the whole ballgame. Because I can't be right next to you.

There are two levers we have to guide discretionary behavior. And that's discretionary behavior in our absence. The first one is strategy. So usually we don't talk about strategy in a leadership book. I think it's essential for when people are in my absence, the strategy can help guide discretionary behavior. Go into a Walmart and watch 100 different employees confront the same situation and you will find 100 different employees do the same thing. Everyone at Walmart knows that their reason for being is on behalf of the customer so that they can make their lives more affordable.

It's a disaster if you have 100 people confronting the same situation and there's a 100 different solutions. So when strategy is clear that takes a whole bunch of discretionary decisions off the table. It's surprising how many organizations the strategy isn't clear enough in the minds of everyone in the organization.

Everywhere where strategy is silent, where strategy is not enough, that's where culture comes in. And culture is what describes to us how things are really done around here. I'm in a meeting and do I get to take up a lot of space or a little space? Strategy doesn't tell me that. Culture does. I'm junior at an organization. Is it my obligation to bring up any problems I have or should I do it more politely through the chain of command? Strategy doesn't tell us that, culture tells us that. So everything else for what's the way that things are done around here, that's the culture. Those are the only two levers that a senior person has for guiding, for leading in their absence.

ALISON BEARD: You've been involved in some massive cultural transformations starting with your own organization, HBS. Tell me what you learned through that experience.

FRANCES FREI: Yeah, so I think it starts with, culture change has to happen quickly. And so this is counterintuitive to most people. But meaningful change happens quickly or it doesn't happen at all. So if you're on a five year journey for a cultural change, I would just suggest you stop and use those efforts to do something else.

So, meaningful change happens quickly and it's because otherwise you'll be sending mixed messages. Like I can change a culture when we're saying, changing the culture is the most important thing. So you should decide when you want to do it and then do it in an all in, and don't think oh, I'll change this part of the culture now and that part later, doesn't work. We have to do all of it now. That's the first thing.

The second thing is make sure you have a really noble purpose and a really noble reason why you're changing the culture. What's the burning platform? If I didn't change the culture, what would be so bad about it? And in my experience, the easiest reason to change the culture is that we are, we are not living up to the dignity and humanity of a group of people. Whether its customers, suppliers, employees, there's some group of people who we have been systematically disadvantaging. And we're going to fix that. That's the easiest way to change a culture. There's like a burning platform, but about people so that we find it close to immoral that we've been doing it and now it's going to be the most important thing that we do.

ALISON BEARD: And so, at HBS the concern was that it wasn't a welcoming environment for women. How did you quickly move to fix that?

FRANCES FREI: Yeah so and that was, that was for students. And the burning platform that we had was that women had lower grades than men and women had lower self-reported satisfaction than men. Now, the truth is it gets talked a lot about in gender and I'll talk about it in gender. But it was also true for international students and domestic for LGBT. There were 12 categories because we collected a lot of data. We solved it for everyone in the same year. And here's the way to do it which is, one, make sure you have devastating data. It's best if the devastating data has to do with people. So, what is it that is like gnawing at you? So, for us it was achievement and sentiment. Women weren't achieving as well and they didn't have same self-reported satisfaction.

So then we asked ourselves all right, what's getting in the way of achievement and sentiment for women? At HBS we grade on a forced curve. Half of every grade is class participation. It wasn't the grading difference, it wasn't in exams. It was really in class participation. And then when we went and double clicked on that more, it was that women were getting a much slower start in class participation.

So there's some people that would come into the HBS classroom and they'd feel so comfortable speaking from day one. So what we did is we had to unlock what makes good class participation, but we also had to set the conditions so that people could find their mojo, their super power early. So one of the things we did is introduce the field method. So the case method, been at HBS for, since it's, practically since its beginning and it's everything you can learn by talking about what you would do.

But there's also quite a bit that you can do of learning by doing. And that's what we call the field method, which is we'll put you in small group, experiential settings. We did the field method before the case

method so that people that would feel really great in small groups, if they were good at that, that confidence would spill over into the classroom. So one is that we created, we wanted more varied people to thrive. So we gave more varied ways to find your superpower.

We got much closer to meritocracy. And the benefit of that was that men and women got the same grades, the self-reported satisfaction, the gaps closed and here's the really awesome thing. All of the gaps closed in satisfaction as an example and it got better for everyone.

ALISON BEARD: And then you applied some of those strategies at places like Uber and Riot Games. What did you do there and what types of outcomes did you see?

FRANCES FREI: Yeah so applied the same strategies and got the same outcomes. So, at Riot Games they were facing a pretty public crisis. It was in August of 2018. And it's like every senior team's worst nightmare. Everybody wakes up to an article that has all of these claims of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. And you just be like, oh my gosh, where have I been working that this has occurred? It's just a bombshell that goes off. Now, fast forward and much of what was written about in the paper by great journalists, much of what was written about, turned out not to be true. But some of what was written about was true.

And so they had to do a complete refresh of this very culturally-driven organization. But the culture was now driving them unintentionally in the wrong direction. So what we did is looked at achievement and sentiment because that's the way we know to do this. And we found there to be enormous demographic tendencies associated with who was thriving. And so we set out to, we collected the devastating data and we set out to address those. We also in the cases of both Uber and Riot, they had really strong, cultural values that were each delineated. Like in one case there was 14 and in the other case there were six. So very culturally driven. And these cultural values were awesome.

One of the famous ones at Uber was called toe stepping. And what it meant was that if you're a junior person and you have a good idea and you're being blocked by your manager, step on your manager's toes and go to their manager. Because we want great ideas to be surfaced, and that's what you want in a young company.

Or one of them at Riot was default to trust. Well it turns out that over time, both of these had become weaponized. Toe stepping, instead of the junior person stepping on the toes going up, it was senior people stepping on the toes of going down. Default to trust, the same thing. Instead of when I'm explaining something to you and I want you to default to trust, so if I'm questioning you, default to trust so that like, understand that my questions are good and they're well intended. Instead I'm a senior person. You bring up a question and I'm like, look default to trust dude. Just do it.

So you can see how, so the second a cultural value gets weaponized and cultural values, the more specific they are, the easier it is to get weaponized. As a cultural value gets weaponized, you got to take it out. There's no, and no matter how much you loved it, and founders have a really hard time with this. Oh, but it was good and it was well intentioned. There's no reversing it.

So what we did in both cases is we got the entire, we invited the entire company to come up and author the new cultural values. Which is literally, you sit down with the old cultural values, you have a pen in hand and we all edit them together and then we talk about which of the cultural values would be super

sad if we lost and why? And which are doing, which do we observe are doing real harm to other people and why?

And then through that process we edited it and came up with new cultural values and these new cultural values are, because these are two strong cultural environments, the new ones got adopted super quickly because they were authored by everyone.

ALISON BEARD: Frances, thanks so much for coming on the show.

FRANCES FREI: Oh, I really loved it. Thank you for including me.

HANNAH BATES: That was Harvard Business School's Frances Frei in conversation with Alison Beard on *HBR IdeaCast*. *Frei is the author of the book Unleashed: The Unapologetic Leader's Guide to Empowering Everyone Around You*.

We'll be back next Wednesday with another hand-picked conversation about leadership from Harvard Business Review. If you found this episode helpful, share it with your friends and colleagues, and follow our show on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. While you're there, be sure to leave us a review.

When you're ready for more podcasts, articles, case studies, books, and videos with the world's top business and management experts, find it all at [HBR.org](https://hbr.org).

This episode was produced Mary Dooe and me, Hannah Bates. Curt Nickisch is our editor. Music by Coma Media. Special thanks to Ian Fox, Maureen Hoch, Erica Truxler, Ramsey Khabbaz, Nicole Smith, Anne Bartholomew, and you – our listener. See you next week.