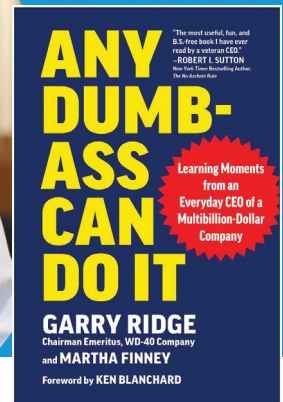


Learning Moments from an Everyday CEO of a Multi-Billion-Dollar Company



Q: *How did you learn your leadership skills? Did they come naturally to you?*

Leadership isn't something you're born with--it's something you earn through experience, learning, and a whole lot of humility. I often say my 25 years as CEO of WD-40 Company were an apprenticeship in leadership. I learned by doing, by learning moments, by surrounding myself with people smarter than me, and by staying curious. Early on, I realized leadership is about serving, not controlling. It's about creating an environment where people feel safe, valued, and inspired to contribute to something bigger than themselves. Learning moments—both my own and others'—were my greatest teachers.

Q: *How can we handle a leader who consistently yells at employees and the CEO allows it but doesn't condone it?*

The first step is to call it what it is—toxic behavior. Yelling doesn't motivate; it destroys trust and psychological safety. If a leader is behaving this way, and the CEO is allowing it (even if they claim they don't condone it), it's a cultural issue at the top. My approach would be direct: Have a candid conversation with the CEO and make it clear that allowing this behavior is a leadership failure. If the CEO truly cares about the culture, they must take action—coaching, feedback, or if necessary, removal. Great leaders protect their people; they don't permit harmful behaviors to persist.

Q: *What are some ways to authentically welcome remote workers back into the office, especially when they aren't thrilled to return?*

Forcing people back without understanding their concerns is a surefire way to damage trust. The key is to make the office a magnet, not a mandate. Ask: Why would people want to come back?

- **Make it meaningful** – Tie in belonging, connection, and shared purpose. If people see in-person work as bureaucracy rather than value, they'll resist.
- **Listen first** – Gather input. What do they love about remote work? What do they miss about the office? Address those insights.
- **Ease the transition** – Consider flexible schedules, team-based in-office days, and redesigned workspaces that encourage collaboration, not just attendance.
- **Celebrate the return** – Treat it as a re-onboarding. Acknowledge the change, share the why, and make it engaging.

At WD-40 Company, we always focused on culture first—creating an environment where people wanted to be. That's how you build a workplace people want to return to, not escape from.

Q: In the context of commitment + investment, how did you invest and prioritize creating the conditions for your people to thrive? How did you know that joy and belonging were embedded in your workplace and people? How did this manifest?

My leadership philosophy was simple: If I took care of my people, they'd take care of the business. I invested in them by:

- **Building psychological safety** – People knew they wouldn't be punished for mistakes. Instead, mistakes were learning moments.
- **Creating a tribe, not a workforce** – We fostered belonging. People weren't just employees; they were valued members of a community.
- **Making recognition a habit** – We celebrated contributions, big and small. Encouragement wasn't occasional—it was ingrained in our culture.

How did I know it worked? Employee engagement was consistently over 90%. Voluntary turnover was low. But more than metrics, you could feel it—people were happy. They were proud to be part of something bigger than themselves. That's when you know you've built something special.

Q: Can you please speak to any leadership “failures” from your past and how you recovered and what you learned about how to become a better leader and communicator?

Failure is a requirement for leadership growth. One of my biggest leadership learning moments was early in my tenure as CEO. I made decisions for people rather than with them. I thought I had the answers. I was wrong.

The turning point came when I started listening more than talking. I learned that leadership isn't about having all the answers—it's about creating an environment where the best answers emerge. The lesson? Humility and curiosity make you a better leader than authority ever will.

Q: How did you approach getting people in clear agreement on expectations?

Clarity eliminates confusion. At WD-40 Company, we used a philosophy called “Don't mark my paper, help me get an A.” It meant expectations were always clear, and feedback was continuous—not just at annual reviews.

- **Set expectations collaboratively** – People own expectations when they help create them.
- **Write them down** – Verbal agreements fade. Documenting goals ensures alignment.
- **Check in often** – Expectations shouldn't be a surprise. Regular check-ins create accountability without fear.

When people know what's expected and feel supported in achieving it, engagement soars.

Q: How do you envision AI changing the role of leaders?

AI is already reshaping leadership. But here's what AI can't do: replace human connection. The best leaders of the future will: Use AI to augment, not replace, human leadership – AI can analyze, predict, and automate, but it can't inspire.

- **Focus on uniquely human skills** – Empathy, emotional intelligence, creativity, and ethical judgment will be more important than ever.
- **Ensure AI aligns with values** – Just because AI can do something doesn't mean it should. Leaders must guide AI's ethical use in the workplace.

AI will change tasks, but it won't change the fundamental truth that leadership is about people. The leaders who embrace both technology and humanity will thrive in the future.