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Leading an Examined Life

Dr. Vicki Whiting
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In this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series, Dr. Vicki Whiting, Professor of Leadership and Management at Westminster College, joins John Zenger to discuss how leaders can leverage strengths, find passions, and improve careers through effective listening.

Dr. Whiting is an author, thought-leader, consultant, and coach. She focuses her teaching and research on personal and organizational leadership development through mentor relationships, leveraging strengths, and developing effective interactions. In her award-winning healthcare advocacy book, *In Pain We Trust*, Dr. Whiting shares her thoughts on patient advocacy, listening, and healthcare communication.

This eBook is a brief part of that conversation. Listen to the full podcast at zengerfolkman.com.

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Tell us about your book, *In Pain We Trust*, and a little about yourself.

I have the great fortune to be a professor at Westminster College, a liberal arts college, teaching in a way that lets me really connect with the students. I also coach executives across the United States helping them learn (and learning myself) how to maximize human potential as leaders, how to draw out the best in others, and how to find and grow our abilities to influence others to achieve more. This is my driving passion that gets me up every day.

In Pain We Trust came out of the hardest time that a parent can have. It was the event that so deeply allowed me to understand that leadership is not a position that one is granted as they move up in an organization. Leadership is our opportunity to interact in such a way that we are creating change and influencing others using our connections, knowledge, and expertise.

I understood this from a theoretical perspective from having been a technical director at a software company and studying under some phenomenal leadership scholars, but I did not fully understand this until I had the intense experience during my son's illness where I did not act as a leader. I did not understand that my role as mom did not limit me from acting as a leader to affect the outcome of my son's healthcare. I basically turned all of my leadership power to the doctor. My thinking was, "You're the doctor. You're the leader. You fix my son."



It became critical when he was down to 62 pounds and in excruciating pain. The doctors said he was bulimic and needed to be treated with psychiatric drugs. It was then that it tapped so deeply into my soul, as a mom, that it wasn't right. And suddenly I thought, "I need to step in and act as a leader."

That's when I found my leadership voice and started to act with those leadership principles that I had understood theoretically but then truly lived in the deepest possible way.

In your writings, there has been a lot of emphasis on listening. As you reflect back on your experience with your son, what did you learn about listening?

Looking back, there were perceptual biases the doctors had because of his age, the work my husband and I have, and the activities that my son engaged in. These led the doctors to quickly diagnose him as bulimic or suffering from anxiety. He was 13 and shifting schools.

Once these biases took hold, not only in the admitting doctor's mind, but also in my son's medical records, getting people to move past these assumptions, biases, and labels was very difficult.

It came to the point that he had a full intestinal obstruction, a very painful and life-threatening medical condition. These biases were so deeply ingrained that there wasn't any desire to look outside to see if the assumptions were correct. It took so much to break through these biases.

What would you share with leaders to help them improve their listening skills, based on these experiences?

To realize the benefits of listening. Studies indicate that humans, in general, listen for 18 seconds before coming to conclusions. Within 18 seconds of interacting with a patient, a diagnosis is formed in the physician's mind and the patient is cut off.



A key lesson that I've learned and try to apply to my life, instead of interrupting people at that point, is to allow them to talk on for just 45 seconds. This is a very short additional time, but so many more cues are given that allow for a much better understanding of the situation and the possibilities for a path forward.

This is a powerful lesson. I have my students time themselves to see what 45 seconds feels like when listening to someone and to notice the difference of what you learn from listening for 18 seconds versus 45 seconds.

One of the biggest pushbacks we got when we started talking to hospital administrators was that the doctors are busy and the system doesn't allow for additional time to listen. When you break it down, that half-minute could have, in my son's case, saved years of care. Looking at it from a time, effectiveness, and efficiency perspective, give it that extra half-minute.

Let's talk about your work in the leadership-development arena. How did you come to the conviction that leaders can identify and develop their strengths?

I hold the belief as a truism that we can all continue to learn and grow as leaders. The best way to do this is to identify and understand our strengths. I don't think I had one particular "Aha!" moment, but I had the good fortune to be in a household where my parents raised us based on an old, tattered, marked-up, first edition copy of Dale Carnegie's book that my grandparents had. From my earliest moments, my parents really set that pattern of continued growth, using our skills, listening to others, and being kind.

In my work, I like to help turn on the light for people who weren't raised in that kind of a household.



You talk about finding your own strength as well as drawing on the strengths of others. How do these two ideas come together?

In my mind, this is a natural feedback loop as I learn more about what I do well, maybe understanding a problem and being able to construct it in such a way that others can understand, then identifying other people who have strengths in laying out a plan to address that problem. Only by identifying my signature strengths and then tapping into others' signature strengths can we get that synergy that comes from effective collaboration.

I see this as an upward spiral. As I understand my strengths and see the gaps that somebody else's strengths could fill, we can move solutions forward quickly.

Your website talks about the importance of “leading an examined life.” What can our listeners learn from you in this regard?

The role of reflection has been powerful for me. Where can I make the greatest contribution to others in my life and to the world? Meaningfulness, to me, is the key. Meaningfulness has changed over time as I hit different stages in my life. Leading an examined life is looking at, acknowledging, and appreciating my life—both the highs and the lows—and then reflecting on how those times informed how I could best contribute to others moving forward.

How do I take what happened to me in my life and not use it as an anchor? What is the benefit of the hard times? Maybe the best moment that clarified this for me was when my son knew he was going to live and asked me, “Why did this happen to me?”

With tears in my eyes, I told him that maybe this didn't happen for a specific purpose, but his choice is what to do with it moving forward. This is at the heart of why he wanted to write our book: he wanted to make something good come out of a very difficult event in his life. For me, this was his story of wanting to examine his life and see what he could do with it in a positive way and to not get stuck in the past.

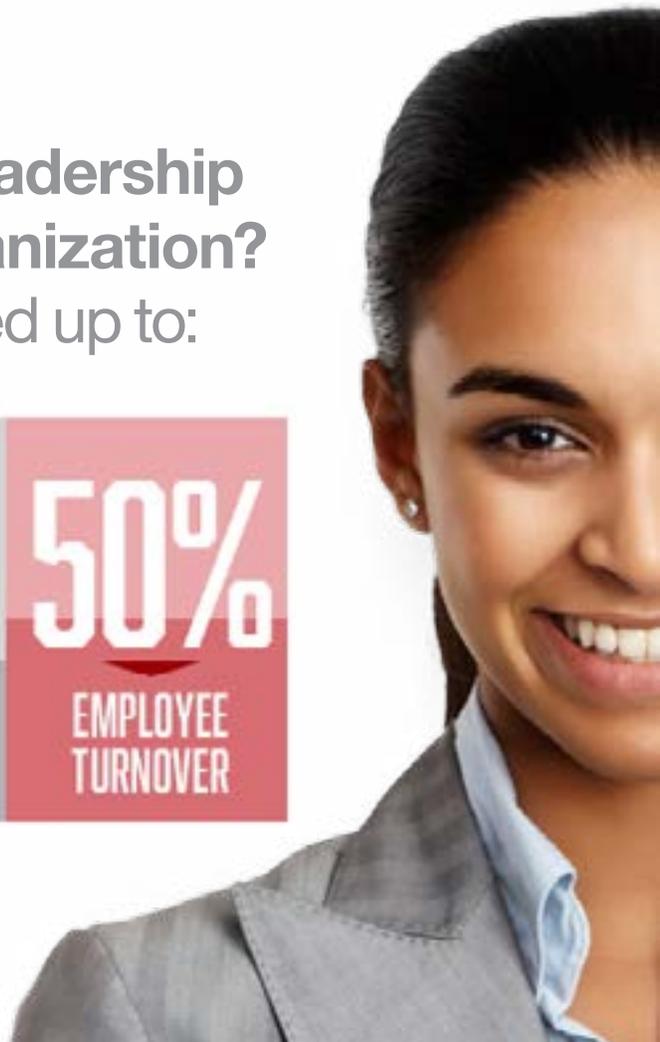


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