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What is this?

14 ways leaders can get comfortable with not having all the answers



L-R: Laret Casella, Robert McDonald, Shannon Laine, Michael Sluka, Natalie Ruiz, Russell Harrell, Joy Frestedt, Betsy Hauser, Rachel Namoff, Scott Baradell, Scott Scully, Tashina Bailey, Jonathan Keyser, Joseph Gordon



The Business Journals Leadership Trust By Business Journals Leadership Trust Expert Panel®

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As a leader, your employees look to you for guidance. While your expertise and insight can help in many situations, you won't always have a ready solution for them. Not having an answer can be an uncomfortable feeling, and being candid about it can be

even more difficult. However, it's OK not to know everything – after all, nobody can solve every problem, every time.

Below, 14 members of [Business Journals Leadership Trust](#) share their best advice to help leaders get comfortable with not always having the answers – as well as strategies to build and lead a team of problem-solvers.

1. Draw on your past experiences.

As leaders, we should draw on our past experiences (or those of fellow leaders) when dealing with problems or unexpected situations that arise. If we address employee concerns or issues with an empathetic, open dialogue and share how we may have dealt with a similar situation, we can make them feel comfortable that an issue is being addressed – even if it takes time to resolve. - [Laret Casella, Casella Interiors](#)

2. Focus on finding a solution.

A good leader who doesn't know an answer will admit it, recognize the significance and implications and then swiftly work with their staff to develop the response. The tenacity to unearth creative responses is likely what got the leader to where he or she is today, and demonstrating it will set that great example for employees to follow. - [Robert McDonald, OLC](#)

3. Curate a team with different skill sets.

Surround yourself with others who have different skillsets and think differently. Encourage them to share ideas and reward them for bringing solutions to the table. The best leaders empower their teams. They lead by example and encourage creativity. Employees will feel more valued when they know their ideas are valued. This creates a sense of ownership and helps to fuel passion. - [Shannon Laine, HealthWorks! Kids' Museum St. Louis](#)

4. Encourage a two-way dialogue with employees.

If you foster routine, two-way dialogues with employees (possibly through managers if the organization is large), they will acclimate to helping to provide the answers instead of just looking to be told the answers. - [Michael Sluka, B2B CFO Partners](#)

5. Create a learning culture.

Normalize not always having the answers. Create a learning culture where employees are encouraged and supported in continuously learning and sharing what they learn. As leaders, we can model this continuous learning as well as collaboratively seeking out answers when we do not know them with our team members. - [Natalie Ruiz, AnswerConnect](#)

6. Always follow up with an employee who asks for help.

It's OK to tell someone, "I don't know the answer." It's better to be honest as opposed to making something up. In those situations, try to find an answer and let the employee know that you're looking into it. Then follow up when you have an update – even if there's no clear answer. Selfless support of your employees will drive loyalty and dedication. - [Russell Harrell, SFB IDEAS - a Strategic Marketing firm](#)

7. Teach critical thinking skills.

“Matrixed mentoring” and teaching critical thinking skills are two important approaches. This is based on the old adage about teaching a person to fish rather than giving them a fish. The long-term effects are profound and raise the bar for all of us. I feel the need for this training grows every day as I get older and hopefully “wiser” – I believe people look for shortcuts to wisdom. - [Joy Frestedt, Frestedt Incorporated](#)

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8. Give your team permission to be honest when they don't have answers.

I believe that it is my job as a leader to be authentic. In leading by example and being honest about when I have challenges or don't have the answer, I give my team permission to do the same. I would so much rather they are honest with me when they don't have the answers than cobble something together that isn't good for the business because they are scared to tell the truth. - [Betsy Hauser, Tech Talent South](#)

9. Accept and admit your own limitations.

It is okay to admit you don't have all the answers. While it may seem embarrassing at first, it is empowering to admit you are human – you may have a vast knowledge of specific topics and no expertise on others. True leaders are aware of their limitations and can admit there is no way to know what they don't know. - [Rachel Namoff, Arapaho Asset Management](#)

10. Foster a productive discussion.

Turn the question into an opportunity for a productive discussion. When they ask you for guidance, respond with “What do you think?” That gives your employee permission to engage with you on a level playing field to brainstorm a solution to the problem. - [Scott Baradell, Idea Grove](#)

11. Always be learning.

When great leaders embrace this advice, it allows them to understand and accept the fact they don't need to have all of the answers all of the time. By relying on their director and management teams for answers, they are building their confidence up in their specific areas of expertise all while leveraging their strengths. - [Scott Scully, Abstrakt Marketing Group](#)

12. Get your staff to weigh in.

Ask people what they think. I'm a small-business owner, and I train my staff to act as though they are the owner when it comes to making decisions. When a question comes up, I ask them what they would do if I wasn't there. Generally, their intuition is correct and they just need a bit of a push to fine-tune their decision-making. - [Tashina Bailey, The Bar Method Portland](#)

13. Empower your people through honest transparency.

The more authentic and vulnerable a leader is, the more trust they create with their people and the more empowered those people are to work hard to find the right solutions. Transparency and vulnerability are two of the most important traits in the world that a leader can embody. - [Jonathan Keyser, Keyser](#)

14. Facilitate networking with outside experts.

Sometimes you can collaborate with employees and external contacts – professionals and other experts who likely know the answer or who are more than happy to invest their time to build their brand and help you find that answer. - [Joseph Gordon, Gordon Asset Management, LLC](#)