

# Chapter 1

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DR. VICKY GORDON



## THE INTERVIEW

### **David Wright (Wright)**

Today we're talking with Dr. Vicky Gordon. Vicky is founder and CEO of The Gordon Group, a leadership and organizational development consulting firm focused on leading the art and science of change. Vicky has over twenty years of experience as a senior executive coach and change specialist. She is also an inspiring keynote speaker.

Vicky, your breadth of experience working with leaders across industries from high-tech, health care, insurance, manufacturing, and service industries is impressive. With clients like Dell, Johnson Controls, and PepsiCo just to name a few, I am sure you have a unique line of sight to the challenges leaders face.

What do you see as the biggest differences between leading today compared with the past?

### **Dr. Vicky Gordon (Gordon)**

David, there are three key differences leaders face today: our 24/7 world, interdependence, and changes in people's expectations for

influence and participation. First, we are in an instant access world. We see news unfolding as it happens. We get instant messages. We work in “real time.” The immediacy—the speed at which we work and live—has fundamentally changed the communication process for leaders. Senior executives can no longer “stage” the communication of information by controlling content and timing. Action and reaction are not separated by time. Taking time to digest and assess a situation and plan a communication strategy is now a luxury. When something happens people expect to hear from leaders, if they do not, the silence is a loud message. This means that leaders must be excellent at communicating in all forms and through many channels, in all directions in real-time. Today, improvisational skills are critical to communication effectiveness. In our 24/7 world, communication is now at the core of everything a leader does.

The second difference is organizational interdependence—both externally and internally. Whether it is how your suppliers link globally with your business, or how sales and product development link internally can spell success or failure based on how interfaces—the links—work. The effectiveness of interdependent processes can make or break any business. Making the links—the interdependent processes—work requires leaders to see and influence the entire picture not just their individual parts of the picture.

The third difference is the change in expectations of employees and customers—actually all of us—to have greater influence. People are no longer willing to be passive receivers of information. A limited one-way flow of information is no longer tolerated—tell and sell just does not work. People now expect to participate directly. They vote online, they e-mail news reports to the media, and they blog their opinions. We demand not only to be heard but also to influence the outcome. So we have left the “information age” and entered the “influence age.”

These three elements combine to present new challenges for leaders. A leader must communicate clear and consistent messages to very different audiences while adapting quickly to changes. Leaders must achieve results without having direct control over each link, so your success is my success and my failure is your failure. Leaders must be strong, decisive and at the same time they must listen and allow what they hear to influence the outcome. A former client of mine put the new leadership paradigm in three key actions, “Listen . . . Learn . . . Lead.”

**Wright**

Could you explain what you consider the most important elements of the new leadership paradigm?

**Gordon**

To understand leadership today requires seeing leading as patterns of interaction among networks of people. The “Lone Ranger with a silver bullet” leadership model is history. Leadership is the collective actions taken to achieve a goal—a change—rather than the leadership position itself. Leading truly is both the art and science of creating change.

Of course leaders today must still know the fundamentals required of a leader. For example, if you are going to lead a global marketing effort you must have content expertise in marketing. However, a leader’s ability to spark the imagination and passion of others and enable everyone to make a difference in the change effort is even more critical today to success than content expertise alone. Command and control skills have been replaced with influence skills for leaders.

Leading is like the art of dancing. It requires mastering the individual steps to a particular dance. It also requires that you know how to influence and be influenced so you can get across the room together without stepping on each other’s toes.

Leading and following are inseparable. Understanding the interaction patterns you create with others is key to being able to make a difference as a leader.

Today’s leaders personally own their team’s and their organization’s behavior. If one person acts unethically and you don’t do something about it, then you and your entire team are seen as acting without integrity. Inaction by you as a leader is seen as condoning the behavior. So even though you personally did nothing unethical, you and your team lose credibility because you failed to send a strong message that unethical behavior will not be tolerated.

As followers we also receive the quality of leadership we are willing to accept. If we face negative leadership behaviors consistently but don’t have the courage to provide constructive feedback to stop it, we are reinforcing the behaviors and making the problem more entrenched.

I once worked with a CEO and his direct report team in a high-tech company. The CEO was young, brilliant, and friendly. He was highly respected and liked by his direct reports. He became frustrated

with his direct reports because no one brought up new ideas to him individually or in his weekly staff meetings. He said to me “I just don’t get it. Why aren’t people knocking down my door with ideas and issues? No one ever comes in and says, ‘I have a new idea and I think we ought to do this differently.’”

What the CEO couldn’t see was how his own behavior was blocking the exact behavior he wanted from his direct reports. Every time someone brought up an idea in a staff meeting, he would start immediately analyzing and dissecting the idea. Then he would tell the group what he thought ought to be done before anyone else had a chance to comment. One of his direct reports described what happened in staff meetings once the CEO started talking. “It was like all the oxygen was being sucked out of the room,” he said.

It didn’t take long before his direct reports just waited for him to give them the answer and then tell them exactly what to do. They literally stopped bringing up ideas and issues. The CEO had trained them not to take initiative. So I advised him, “You have to give others a safe space to take initiative. If you want others’ ideas and opinions, then you have to listen first and not immediately criticize. Ask thoughtful questions that enable the individual and the team to do the analysis together rather than doing it for them and thereby once again demonstrating that you are the smartest person in the room. Your job is to get other people to demonstrate how smart *they* are.”

With this small change in his behavior, the group started opening up. Ideas and information began flowing freely. Over time the direct reports even began challenging the CEO’s ideas. By changing how he was leading, he changed how others were following. The dance steps had changed.

### **Wright**

What about the other leaders in the organization—your peers? What role do they play in your leadership effectiveness?

### **Gordon**

Leaders are not only defined by their followers but they are also defined by their peers who are in other leadership positions in the organization. Gone are the days when achieving your individual objectives means success.

I worked as an executive coach for a large computer company providing 360 Leadership Feedback and coaching for executives. One of the ways individuals earned promotions at the company was to

come up with an idea that would improve the company's bottom line. They then had to recruit and lead a cross-functional team of their peers to implement the idea. Success was directly tied to their peers' performance. Individuals joining the company were coached to build strong peer relationships because their success at some point would depend on their peers' willingness to go to bat for them.

The concept that you own the success or failure of your peers on your team is at the heart of what it means to work as a leadership team. For aggressive, achievement-driven leaders it is difficult to accept that you own the performance of others over whom you do not have control.

I vividly remember being challenged by an extremely bright, dynamic young leader who was a member of a senior leadership team that was struggling. My consulting company had conducted an employee survey for his company and I was presenting the results to the entire senior leadership team. The average senior leadership scores on almost every question were low.

I said to the team, "This leadership team is not leading effectively. The team needs to change how it is leading."

The young leader interrupted me and said vehemently, "I don't have a problem; my leadership scores for my area are high. I am leading effectively."

"You are leading your individual area effectively," I responded, "but that is not happening in all areas, and this senior leadership team, which includes you, is viewed by the employees across the company as ineffective—despite your high scores. You have two roles as a senior executive: your functional responsibility and the equally important responsibility for the entire company's success. You own the leadership scores of everyone in this room."

He continued to protest vigorously.

I asked him, "If you hit your revenue numbers but everyone else on the team missed their numbers and the company overall missed its revenue targets, would you consider the business and this team that has responsibility for the business successful?"

"No," he answered.

"It is no different for leading," I said. "The question is: what are you doing to help the others on your team lead as effectively as you are?"

He looked at me straight in the eye and said, "I get it."

Owning your peers' success changes the paradigm from competing to collaborating among senior leaders.

Recently, a senior team that I was coaching had a new member join the team in a mission critical position. Instead of the typical “sink or swim” approach— the “let’s see if she has what it takes” attitude—to bringing the new leader on board, the team members took responsibility for designing and implementing the new member’s orientation and integration into the business. The team designed an on-boarding process to help the new executive quickly learn the company’s processes, products, and people.

The executive was amazed at the support and help she received. She told me, “I have never before experienced such a collaborative and supportive group of senior executives in my twenty-year career. The team members have taken six months off my learning curve, enabling me to make a difference in the business’s success after only six weeks on the job.”

Some of the most useful coaching comes from your peers. So peer-to-peer coaching is an important new element for companies to include in their leadership development efforts. No matter what your leadership role is, I believe that to lead and truly make a difference you must help others succeed.

### **Wright**

What do you consider the most important behaviors for leaders to be effective?

### **Gordon**

I think of people as having leadership “muscles”—some better developed than others. When coaching, I first focus on what I consider to be a leader’s core, like in weight training or Pilates. Having a strong core enables you to do heavy lifting and it’s the basis for building muscles that are connected to the core. A weak core means you have difficulty with anything else you try to do.

There are three areas that make up a leader’s core: character, change, and communication.

### **Character**

Visualize the leader’s core as having concentric circles. The center circle of our leadership core, and the basis on which all other circles emanate for a leader, is character. The center of our leadership core is much like our body’s spinal column.

The center circle consists of our fundamental values. We lead from the inside out. Our values are our internal compass—they let us

know we are leading in the right or wrong direction. Leaders must have a strong set of values. They must have a clear vision of who they are and be ready to decide instantly right from wrong. What do you believe in? What are you willing to fight for? In what areas will you not compromise no matter what kind of pressure is applied? Ambiguity or lack of essential values creates a weak spine and can cause paralysis when a leader is tested. In today's challenging environment make no mistake, your metal as a leader will be tested. In the white-hot heat of your character being tested, it's your values that enable you to survive the test and be a stronger leader as a result.

Leaders must have strong, clear values to be able to make tough decisions and not be seduced by money, power, or the easy way out. Leaders live in a world of conflicting demands and goals. For example, companies must build long-term shareholder value yet meet Wall Street's short-term quarterly expectations. Shareholder, employee, customer, and community needs are often at odds. I am not talking about doing what is legal—the minimum baseline for character—I am talking about being ethical: doing what is right and living your values in your daily life. For example, honesty is an essential value. Your integrity and credibility are built on your honesty value. How consistently people see you living this value is the most precious part of your character. You must mean what you say and say what you mean. Directness, honesty, and authenticity enable your unique leadership voice to be heard.

When I do in-depth interviews to provide leaders with a picture of their leadership effectiveness I always ask, "Do you trust this person? Is he or she widely trusted?" If the person is seen as widely trusted and honest, with high integrity, then people are willing to give the individual the opportunity to change other behaviors that aren't effective. If, however, the person is not trusted—if integrity and credibility are called into question—working on anything else will not matter.

Being honest and having others perceive you as honest and someone to be trusted can surprisingly be disconnected. For example, a COO I once coached would in good faith make commitments to people. He honestly intended to follow through, however, he didn't prioritize and failed to delegate, so things were always falling off his plate. "Unreliable" was the adjective most used to describe him. He would never intentionally be untruthful, however, the message he was sending to his direct reports and peers was, "You can't trust that

I will do what I say.” The lesson is clear: Just because you are honest and well intended does not ensure that others will see you as acting consistently with your values. When you don’t “walk your talk,” you hurt your credibility. Character is the center of your leadership core.

### **Change**

The next concentric circle is change. “Change” as part of your core consists of your ability to change yourself, other individuals, teams, and entire organizations. Leading is about creating change. As a leader you must guide, motivate, inspire, and influence others to reach beyond their current performance and achieve more.

Passion plays an important role in change. It fuels the change process. As a leader, ask yourself if you have the “fire” in your heart and can you ignite the fire in others’ hearts for change? Martha Graham, the famous dance choreographer, concluded, “Great dancers are not great because of their technique. They are great because of their passion.” The President of a fast-growing, entrepreneurial company once said to me, “I will do whatever it takes—wash windows, work the night-shift, whatever, to make this company successful.” He was passionate and devoted to his company’s success. His challenge was whether he could inspire the company’s thousands of employees scattered around the globe. Could he create the same “ownership of success” in others that he felt?

Being a passionate change agent is part of your core, but also being a hard-nosed realist about what *can’t* change is important as well. Early in my career, an unlikely client group taught me this valuable lesson.

I had given a keynote speech on teamwork to a large facilities management association when I first started my organizational development consulting business. An audience member came up after the speech and asked if I would work with a group of his employees who were having trouble cooperating. Delighted to have found a new client, I asked him to call me the next morning to discuss the specifics.

The client called the next morning and explained that he had tried everything to get the janitors in a large school under his responsibility to work together, but nothing had worked and the school was in jeopardy of being closed by the Department of Health. He was desperate, so I agreed to help. One of the questions I asked the janitors was, “What is the toughest part of your job?” One person responded, “Mud when it rains.” As I listened I thought, what can be

done about mud when it rains? The answer is: absolutely nothing. When it rains there is always going to be mud. No matter what your job is—CEO or first line supervisor—there are aspects of situations, companies, careers, and people that can not be changed. Understanding and dealing with the “mud when it rains” is an equally important part of a leader’s change responsibility.

### **Communication**

The third element of a leader’s core is communication. In the past, being “okay” at communicating meant you could still be considered an effective leader. Not anymore. Leaders have to understand that they are *always* communicating, even when they might think they are not. Leaders are now always on stage, and their behavior is under a microscope and a magnifying glass at the same time. What you say and do and what you don’t say and don’t do sends messages. Being able to be authentic in the moment and be strategic with your communication at the same time is difficult. Also, leaders must understand they are communicating at two levels: first the content level—the message or the “what”—and then the relationship level. How you deliver the message sends a relationship message. For example, you can say you want people’s input but the minute someone brings up an idea you don’t like you shut off discussion and announce your decision. This sends the message, “I’m the boss and I really didn’t want your input. I asked because that is what I am supposed to do to make you feel you are involved in the decision.” There is nothing worse than pseudo participation. If you have already made the decision, don’t ask for input. Leaders must be skilled in both content and relationship communication skills.

One of the communications challenges many leaders struggle with is listening. A few years ago my consulting company conducted an employee survey for a billion-dollar unit of a telecommunications company. The senior executive team’s results on communicating the company’s vision and other communication questions were extremely low. I urged them to ask employees what information they needed by conducting informal employee round tables led by pairs of senior team members. Their goal would be to listen to employees and engage in real-time, two-way dialogue about the company’s future and the employees’ roles in making the company successful. I said, “Throw away your PowerPoint slides and talk *with* your employees.”

The recommendation was rejected. Instead, they decided to launch an even bigger, more formal, high-gloss communications campaign

which was all one-way communication. Instead of changing, they used the same communication methods and messages; they just delivered them louder. It's analogous to when you tell a person you don't understand what they just said and the person responds by saying the same exact words but at a much higher volume.

We conducted a follow-up survey and the senior executives' communication scores went down even lower. After seeing the follow-up survey results they determined that my recommendations had some merit after all. They learned the hard way that listening to and engaging employees creates understanding, *not* talking at them.

### **Wright**

Vicky, you have coached hundreds of executives to be more effective leaders, what exactly do you do as a coach to help them?

### **Gordon**

As a coach, my first role is to serve as a catalyst for change. Together the leader and I must identify the one or two key behaviors that, if changed, will make a significant and fundamental difference in his or her effectiveness as well as the organization's success. What you do as a leader and how you do it are always connected.

Most leaders are effective a majority of the time. Otherwise they would not have achieved their leadership role. However, there are almost always one or two behaviors or "Achilles' heels" that can block a leader's effectiveness and can create dysfunction within their teams and throughout their entire organization. Creating an accurate picture of the leader's patterns of behavior and determining what works and what doesn't work isn't easy for people to do for themselves. Getting the unvarnished truth about oneself is nearly impossible even from close friends. Speaking truth to power takes courage and a willingness to take risks. So, having a coach who is an external, neutral source paint the picture while maintaining individuals' confidentiality has become a powerful tool for leaders to learn the truth about their effectiveness. It's like holding up a mirror so the individual can see an accurate picture of his or her leadership patterns. I call this your "invisible resume." We spend our entire careers focused on constructing our visible resume; we devote precious little time to understanding what is on our invisible resume.

Selecting the right behavior patterns to change is critical. If you drop a rock in the water, it creates lots of ripples—the larger the rock, the bigger the ripples. The key is to work on the right rocks, not on

the ripples they create. Determining the right behaviors to change is step one. Putting in place a change process that enables the leader to change while doing his or her job is step two. Peers, direct reports, and direct managers (or in the case of CEOs, the Board of Directors), have to be willing to give the person the chance to change and they must actively engage in supporting the leader's new behaviors. So everyone has to hear the music changing and learn the new dance steps together.

My role as a coach is to hold up the mirror so you, as a leader, can see an accurate picture of yourself and help you select the behavior pattern that will catapult your leadership effectiveness to a higher level. And most importantly, I help guide and support you throughout your change effort, reinforcing and challenging you to step up and achieve your potential.

### **Wright**

Vicky, having a talent pipeline of people to lead an organization is critical to its long-term success. Why is developing people such a challenge for most organizations?

### **Gordon**

The harsh reality is that few companies do a great job of developing people. There are three systemic reasons why.

1. First, most companies only reward results such as increases in profits or sales. The growth of human capital to achieve results is neither measured nor rewarded. Executives do not receive incentives to invest time and other resources on developing talent.
2. Secondly, the responsibility for developing talent typically resides in the human resources function. Human resources personnel have critical roles as expert consultants and internal coaches. However, the company's leaders must own developing their human capital starting with the senior team, including the Board of Directors. If the CEO is spending quality time developing the company's top leaders then you know the company is serious about talent development.
3. The third reason organizations struggle with developing their talent is that leaders are not trained in the skills needed to coach and develop others. Simply because you

know what a person needs to learn does not mean you know how to help them learn it. If a company is serious about developing its human capital, talent development efforts must be measured and rewarded. Leaders must take ownership and be trained to coach and develop others.

**Wright**

What advice do you give to leaders to help them develop others?

**Gordon**

Start by developing yourself. Although this advice sounds counter-intuitive, developing yourself sends a powerful message. As a leader, you are the example others emulate. When you ask for feedback and use the feedback to develop yourself into a more effective leader, others witness the importance of continuing to learn and grow. Einstein said, "Setting the example is not the main means of influencing others, it is the only means." If the leader is seeking to improve, the message is clear that everyone on the team needs to be doing the same for themselves and for the folks who report to them.

Make coaching and developing others one of your leadership strengths. Learn the skills needed to coach others successfully. Invest the time in the coaching process to do it right. Only giving a person a mid-year and year-end performance review does little to develop that individual.

There are two methods often used to help others develop skills. Think about how you teach a young child to ride a bicycle. In one method you explain how to pedal and steer; then you demonstrate by riding the bike as the child watches. The child then gets on the bike and you give a push to get him started riding. You watch as he begins to struggle and then fall. You help him back on the bike with his knees usually bloodied and bruised. You tell him what he did wrong and push him off again and again until either he gives up or gets it right.

In the second method, you follow the same first steps of explaining, demonstrating, and then giving a push to get started. Instead of watching, however, you run along beside him. As he starts struggling, you tell him to pedal faster, turn a little to the right, and look out for the tree. If he starts to fall, you steady the bike so that he can regain control.

The second approach takes more time and energy, but the learning experience is less bruising. Both methods, however, require that you let go. No one learns to ride a bike or lead a project unless you let go. It's what you do afterwards that makes you a great coach and developer of talent.

Spend as much time developing your top performers as you do with those who are struggling. Your highest potential people demand to be developed. If they are in a job and they are not learning, they will leave and find someone who will develop them.

Use praise early and often to help people move up the learning curve. Everyone on the team needs to feel valued for his or her contribution to the team's efforts. And when someone is outside his or her comfort zone trying new behaviors, we need to reinforce the person's efforts.

A story my Aunt Wilma shared with me at a recent family reunion gets to the heart of the power of praise at any age. My Aunt runs a pre-school in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. At the end of every school year, her twenty-five preschoolers present a program for parents where the children all sing as a group. As the little ones began singing their first song this year, my Aunt noticed that Josh, in the front row, was not singing. He just stood straight as an arrow. They sang another song and Josh did not open his mouth. He looked like he was frozen in place. The final song came and once again Josh just stood next to his friends, still not singing. As the applause rang out from the parents, my Aunt Wilma worried what she would say to Josh the next morning about his performance.

The next day Josh ran into the classroom, straight to my Aunt's desk. He blurted out, "Aren't you proud of me Miss Wilma? It was all I could do to stand there with everyone and not run back to my mom."

My Aunt smiled and said, "Yes, Josh, I am very proud of you because you didn't run back to your mom and you stood with the other children for all three songs!" She gave him a big hug and he ran back to his desk beaming with pride for his accomplishment.

What Josh needed was reinforcement—praise for the courage it took to stand up front. With the right encouragement and reinforcement, maybe next time Josh will be leading the singing.

Coaching and helping others develop requires skill and time. It also requires caring and a commitment to help others stretch to achieve their goals. I recently read an interview with Lorin Maazel who, at seventy-three, was still conductor of the New York Philharmonic. He was asked how he helped others stretch to play

difficult musical passages. He responded, “You encourage, you push, you pull, and you say yes you can . . . to bring people past the limitations of their own potential is leadership.”

**Wright**

What coaching do you want executives to remember as they advance into the ranks of senior management?

**Gordon**

Constantly sharpen your listening skills. Ask for and give candid feedback directly. Learn to tell great stories that help shape your company’s culture. Do not hire in your likeness. Recruit people who are smarter, more talented, think differently, and who have had different life experiences than you. Strength comes from diversity. Be inspiring and make the journey the company is on exciting and fun for all. Finally, have the courage of your convictions. Remember, your behavior and how it is perceived by others creates your credibility. Make certain your reputation is made of twenty-four karat gold. Do not allow it to become tarnished. Your reputation is your most valuable asset as a leader.

## About the Author

DR. VICKY GORDON is founder and CEO of The Gordon Group, a leadership development and organizational change company focused on leading the art and science of change. Her more than twenty years of experience span a broad range of service and manufacturing businesses in multiple industries.

Dr. Gordon has a PhD in Organizational Communication from the University of Texas, and an MA and BA in Communication Studies from tThe University of North Carolina. Prior to launching her own company, she was a consultant with Sibson and Company and an assistant professor at Loyola University of Chicago.

**Dr. Vicky Gordon**

The Gordon Group

5319 N. Wayne St.

, Chicago, IL 60640

Telephone 773.334.6789

Fax: 773. 334. 6383.

E-mail: [vg@DrVickyGordon.com](mailto:vg@DrVickyGordon.com).

[www.DrVickyGordon.com](http://www.DrVickyGordon.com)