

Are You 'Tough' Enough at Work?

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Seven habits for demanding excellence without being a jerk.

As executive coaches, we've worked with leaders of iconic companies like Apple, Nike, eBay, Hewlett Packard, and General Motors, as well as start-up unicorns like DoorDash, MasterClass, Fivetrn, and Remitly. In short, we've coached some of the most ambitious and impactful founders and CEOs in business today.

What we've learned is that great companies are built by tough leaders.

But what exactly is toughness?

Toughness, as we've come to define it, is the ability to commit to a mission, stay strong in the face of challenges, and push others toward excellence. Staying strong isn't about invulnerability; it's about staying true to your standards when market conditions flip, pushing past setbacks when plans fail, and refusing to retreat into comfortable excuses.

Toughness is a blend of inner capacities and trainable mindsets—including mental fortitude, willingness to disagree, boldness, conviction, urgency, obsession, resilience, presence, and pain tolerance—as well as relational skills. Among these are being able to productively engage in conflict, purposely share difficult emotions, deliver constructive feedback, enforce high standards, persevere through awkward accountability conversations, and drive others to perform at their best. Ultimately, toughness means doing hard things in pursuit of a bold mission.

And here's what toughness is not: macho posturing, bullying, performative "hardness," emotional suppression, humiliation, threatening, cruelty, or personal attacks. If it raises fear while lowering standards or if it serves the leader's ego over the mission, it's fake toughness, not the real thing.

Doing hard things in pursuit of a bold mission often means absorbing the short-term reputational tax of enforcing nonnegotiable standards. When Gwen Whiting cofounded The Laundress, she protected the high-end brand with fierce precision—canceling sales orders to nonluxury retailers minutes before they shipped and rejecting misaligned product labels that were off by an eighth of an inch.

Her team frequently viewed her exacting standards as "too much" or "difficult." But after Unilever acquired the company for \$100 million and Gwen finished her two-year contract, those strict standards slid under new management—culminating in a catastrophic product recall. Former colleagues later called Whiting to confess: "Now that you've left and the brand has slid, I get what you were doing." True toughness means holding the line on quality today, even when it makes you unpopular, because you refuse to let the mission degrade tomorrow.

At its core, our work explores the proven habits of successful (and tough) leaders and helps you select those that can be effectively integrated into your own natural, preferred leadership style. It's not about forsaking kindness and empathy. It's about knowing when to prioritize understanding and compassion, when it's time to be direct, and most important, how to do both simultaneously. Essentially, we want people to know exactly what toughness looks like for themselves and how to enforce it without crossing the line.

Through decades of coaching, conducting in-depth interviews, and studying how the most successful business leaders of our time achieve extraordinary results, we've identified seven habits that define true toughness in leadership. To be Tough Enough, you must work on the following 7 habits:

- Live Your Manifesto. Create a compelling story that inspires people to believe, belong, and go all in.
- Make Your Pursuit Relentless. Sustain extraordinary focus, effort, and intensity on what matters most.
- Assemble a Cult of Incredibles. Build a team of exceptional people who believe deeply in the mission and your way of working.
- Harness Emotional Thunder. Use emotion constructively to unlock greater performance and move people into action.
- Fiercely Pursue the Truth. Champion honesty, debate, and reality so your team can move faster and make better decisions.
- Build Your Accountability Stack. Design a unique system of accountability that makes progress inevitable.
- Adopt Warfare Tactics. Mobilize people and resources quickly when the stakes are high and the moment matters.

The habits are like Russian nesting dolls: The later habits build on earlier ones. You'll become tougher and more effective by understanding how each habit works and deliberately turning up the dial in each area. There is a way to engage each habit that is humane, respectful, and entirely your own.

In conclusion, comfort is the enemy of toughness. Tough means saying "I was wrong" in front of the team; giving specific, respectful feedback on the work the moment it slips; ending the "nice" charade and being willing to disagree; and firing instead of repurposing someone to another team.

Comfortable, on the other hand, means being overly friendly, offering vague "nice work" praise, sugarcoating and softening your message, and saying, "Let's give it one more quarter." As we think you'll find out, comfort is the path to mediocrity.

Keep in mind that toughness isn't just a skill you acquire; it's a system. The habits are designed to help you master that system, starting with how you lead yourself, and then extending outward to how you lead others. It's a progression: First you hone yourself, then your team, and finally, your response to the high-stakes challenges that distinguish solid leaders from standouts.

Excerpted from TOUGH ENOUGH: How to Lead a Team to Greatness Without Being a Jerk. Copyright © 2026 by John Baird and Matt Hunter. Available from Basic Venture, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.