

# How Good Leaders Become Great by Never Leading Alone

Forbes | Keith Ferrazzi | November 21, 2024



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David Brancaccio, host of Marketplace Morning Report, the long-running public radio show, is a master of the art of sharp questions—and he aimed one in my direction he interviewed me this week about the difference between good leaders and great teams. “I think many people listening will be scarred by some of their previous experience with dysfunctional teams,” David said. “I mean, everybody wants agile teams, but how do you keep a team accountable? Right? If it’s a group effort, there’s sometimes a tendency for no one to take actual responsibility.”

It’s the right question to ask, and it’s one I often hear.

## **From Looking Up to Looking Across**

The problem is we spend too much time looking upward at our leaders. We need to spend more time looking at each other and how we work together. That’s the principal idea in my new book, *Never Lead Alone*, between moving from a perspective of leadership to a perspective of teamship. A good leader gives feedback, but a great team gives each other feedback. A good

leader holds the team accountable, but a great team holds each other accountable. We've got to give the team a real roadmap on how to collaborate effectively and really build transformational outcomes in the world that we're in today.

### **The New Social Contract**

The best teams—the world's top 15%—have a different social contract. A mediocre team salutes to authority. The high performing team knows that it's committed to each other's success. There are different social contracts. One social contract is, I won't speak up in a room against a peer. It's throwing them under the bus. Another social contract is, of course, I'm going to speak up in a room because I will not let my peer fail. I'm committed to what I call co-elevation, pushing them higher, and all of us will go higher together and achieve our mission greater and more than we would have otherwise.

### **From Startup to Billion-Dollar Disruptor**

One company that exemplifies this new social contract is e.l.f. Beauty. Under CEO Tarang Amin's leadership, the company has transformed from a small internet startup selling \$1 cosmetics to an \$11 billion disruptor that's shaking up an industry dominated by L'Oréal and Estée Lauder. In fiscal year 2023, e.l.f. saw net sales rise 48% to \$578.8 million—marking an extraordinary 84-fold increase in shareholder value over the past decade.

As I told David, "When e.l.f. recruits a person, the commitment is you will grow further and faster than any other place you could work professionally. But in return, you have to shed your defensiveness. You have to care enough about each other to give the kind of feedback that you know you have each other's back. That's a social contract, and it needs to be solidified."

### **Making Teamship Real**

But achieving this level of performance requires specific practices. Our research across 3,000 teams shows that conflict avoidance is one of the most erosive elements holding teams back. On a scale of zero to five, the average team scores just 2.4 on their ability to speak truth. High-performing teams overcome this through practices like "candor breaks"—where meetings pause to ask, "What's not being said that should be said?" This simple practice transforms participation: instead of just four voices dominating a room of twelve, ten people feel heard.

### **A Broader Vision**

The impact extends far beyond individual companies. Modern collaboration tools enable broader inclusion and more diverse perspectives. When teams use shared documents and virtual breakout rooms effectively, they create psychological safety for introverts and ensure every voice contributes to innovation.

I've seen for myself how the government of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has even adopted these teamship principles at the ministerial level. As I told David Brancaccio, "I watch our political system with a lot of regret and sadness. The practices that we're talking about here would be my dream to bring to the cabinet."

In an era of unprecedented volatility and technological change like AI, clinging to industrial-era leadership models isn't just limiting—it's dangerous. The choice is clear: continue with traditional top-down leadership or embrace teams that never lead alone. And e.l.f. Beauty is just one of the examples I encountered when researching *Never Lead Alone*. At IBM, teams transformed the forty-year sales divide between software and consulting to create a more effective go-to-market model. Cable giant Comcast created candor culture to drive operational results. Companies like Automattic, Dropbox, Guild Education, and Salesforce combine new team behaviors with modern collaborative tools to deliver breakthrough performance. When teams adopt the right social contract and practices, extraordinary results follow.