



## **PUBLISHED ARTICLES**

Dr. Kristal Walker has over 15 years of experience helping clients engage people, apply processes, and implement technology to improve human and organizational performance. Her expertise includes developing strategy and executable tactics in the areas of leadership development, diversity & inclusion, performance management, succession planning, employee engagement, and global learning in an enterprise context.

A teacher by trade and a thought leader by temperament, Dr. Walker brings great value to the partnerships and relationships she's built over the course of her career. In 2006, she launched 3C's Training Group alongside her work as a University Professor to design and develop soft skills and compliance training for small and medium-size companies. During this time, her passion for personal and professional

transformation in others grew to new heights, as well as her interest in creating content, courses, and learning programs.

Dr. Walker earned an undergraduate degree in human services, a graduate degree in management and organizational leadership, and a doctorate of management degree in organizational leadership. She is a Certified Professional in Training Management™ and prides herself on developing the next generation of leaders. When it's all said and done, she enjoys being the wife to her loving and supportive husband, the mother to her four amazing children and the step-mother to her six equally amazing bonus children.

# The Black Girl Who Rocks with Guitar Center

“Only the strong survive!”

“Sink or swim!”

“Leaders aren’t born, they’re made!”

“Tough it out!”

“Be the change you want to see!”

“Leaders are misfits!”

Blah, blah, blah...

If you’re a leader (or on the path to becoming one), you’ve heard quotes like these or something similar. I’ve dreamed them. I’ve lived them. I’ve challenged them. I go to sleep and wake up to them, but the one thing that experience has taught me is that **TRUE LEADERS ARE TROUBLEMAKERS!**

As I reflect upon my career—where I’ve been, where I am, and where I’m going—I’m privileged to have witnessed and weathered various forms of organizational storms that stemmed from planned or unplanned change, biased-thinking leaders, or a lack of innovation. This innate ability began long before my first boardroom experience or the first time I stood before an audience to share best practices or facilitate a workshop. My experiences as a teenage mother and high-school dropout forced me to choose, and I chose to survive. Living in survival mode for the first 10 years of my adult life taught me that there would be times that my voice had to ring loud and clear to my audience. It taught me that if I was going to reverse the stereotypical notions around a black woman’s position in her home, her community, and her career, I needed the intellectual, emotional, and adaptable quotient to do so. I had to align myself with leaders who weren’t afraid to challenge the status quo, who were confident in their abilities, and who weren’t threatened by grooming other leaders.



I was 21 when I returned to school to obtain my high-school diploma, but my quest for personal and professional transformation didn’t cease there. My pursuit of higher education and a sustainable career path challenged me to become a forward-thinker who added value to every relationship I developed and every business opportunity presented to me. My gender and the color of my skin made this especially challenging in some instances—particularly those instances where legacy-culture thinkers plagued the organization’s opportunity to compete in a changing market. There were many times when the great idea I conveyed to my boss in private was blatantly disregarded, but somehow presented to senior leaders and accepted as his wonderful contribution to the organization’s strategy. Despite experiences like these, I chose to stay in the fight but I learned to choose which battles to fight and which to avoid because they didn’t add value to my development as a leader. I eventually moved up the corporate ladder, earned a doctoral degree, and expanded my network. Through it all, I wasn’t personally fulfilled until I joined Guitar Center in October 2016.

The unique value proposition that Guitar Center has over other retailers is the experience it provides to its customers. We believe that the best way to provide an exceptional customer experience is to prepare leaders who can model the appropriate behaviors for their teams, connect with the teams in meaningful ways, and involve their teams in important conversations, projects, and processes—yes, we took a page from Sam Parker's bestseller—LEAD Simply. That approach alone requires us to be **open to change and sensitive to cultural and gender differences** if we want to develop our leader's full potential and pave the way for the great impact they can have on the company. Guitar Center quickly recognized my unique talents and gave me the opportunity to create a leadership/talent development program that will:

- Upskill individual contributors growing in scope and in hierarchy
- Enhance a new manager's onboarding experience
- Provide systematic, ongoing training & assessment that supports a manager's personal and professional development; and,
- Monitor performance and behavior outcomes expected of management associates

Since the launch of the program, we've had participation from over 4,600 existing and emerging leaders, nearly 600 graduates of the full curriculum, and 27 internal promotions to first-time leadership roles.

While previous employers 'somewhat' afforded me this opportunity, Guitar Center did not limit my contributions because I was a #BlackgirlwhoROCKED!



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# HiPo Hiccups: Implementing Multi-Level Leadership Development Initiatives

In the world of music, songwriters and musicians alike use their craft to create songs that cross ethnic, generational and geographic boundaries. The business of music aims to accomplish the same goal, except instead of the song itself, the organization works to develop the leaders who drive the business. It is every CEO's dream to have an organization with business processes and people who work together like a well-oiled machine. From the front-line associate who interacts with customers every day to the seasoned C-suite executive making key decisions that drive business results, the element that tends to make all things prolific or chaotic is the organization's culture.

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As so eloquently illustrated in the [results pyramid](#), a culture-changing model created by thought leaders Roger Connors and Tom Smith, the culture witnessed in most organizations begins with the experiences set forth by the leaders. Take, for example, the newly hired associate. If the new hires have a pleasant onboarding experience, they most likely believe that the company is a great place to work and that their department leader is genuinely concerned about their success. That belief, in turn, might encourage them to become proactive in accomplishing individual goals and organizational goals; hence, desired results are on the horizon.

Because leaders set the tone and direction for the internal operation of a business, it is imperative that high-performing leaders, who possess skills that align with strategic company objectives, are proportionately positioned throughout the organization to take on the mission, embrace the moment and pass on the mantle affiliated with leading people and guiding organizational change.

## The Mission

An organization's mission is the most critical element of the business, because it defines why the organization exists and why one might choose to support it. Equally important to the mission of any business is the personal mission of the business leader. In a perfect world, these two efforts supplement each other; however, because we live in an age where diversity in the workplace is undeniable, it takes well thought-out, intentional learning and development to align an organizational mission with individual motives.

An L&D strategy that clearly addresses the core competencies expected from leadership, along with any evident performance gaps, should be the sole mission of organizational development stakeholders. This step is the first – and, at times, the most challenging – step in creating a results-driven culture. While the L&D strategy should include standard programming logistics (i.e., the use of ADDIE, an effective LMS, etc.), it should not assume a one-size-fits-all approach. The business need(s) might require the L&D strategy to:

- Restructure positions within a department
- Redefine leadership and individual contributor roles
- Reallocate business resources to support development opportunities
- Realign career paths to generate a talent pipeline of emerging leaders

The mission to deploy such a strategy must be accompanied by strong backing from senior leaders who lead the functional areas of the business. Without that level of support, stakeholders might question the validity of the program despite the relevance and timeliness of the content.

## The Moment

Often, L&D professionals believe that once a training program is in the post-rollout phase, their work is complete. This is far from the truth. In fact, after rollout is probably when the “real” work begins. Overcoming the initial challenges of obtaining senior leader buy-in to the idea of supporting a learning strategy might seem like a piece of cake compared to the resistance that comes with getting associates to attend mandatory training.

It is vital that stakeholders prepare for these instances by clearly communicating training goals and expectations before, during and after program launch. Those who support the initiative might see training as the ship that has come in to launch their career to the next level. Others may go through the motions for the sake of compliance. Still others might use the classroom setting as an outlet or a cry for help to share unfavorable situations that have defined their cultural experiences and perceptions of leadership.

A moment is a very brief point of time. It passes so quickly that if leaders are not careful, they might overlook the gift of opportunity. An opportunity might disguise itself as the leader or individual contributor who is passionate about the skills he or she is able to demonstrate. It might also appear in the form of a disgruntled associate who finally gained the courage to express his or her concerns or ideas about inappropriate behavior witnessed in the workplace. In any case, L&D stakeholders must seize the moment by proposing, developing and implementing development opportunities.

## The Mantle

The mantle refers to the plan for succession. Any smart organization will have a plan in place to address leadership vacancies quickly. While many companies are finally jumping on board the high-potential program development train, it is imperative that these companies focus their attention on the right elements.

**Any smart organization will have a plan in place to address leadership vacancies quickly.**

High-potential leadership development programming should include a focus on four key areas: personal leadership, people leadership, results leadership and thought leadership.

- **Personal leadership** is having the capacity to own personal developmental opportunities, exhibit emotional intelligence and demonstrate the most effective leadership style in any given situation.
- **People leadership** is the ability to lead others and advocate for a team’s position in and significance to the organization’s mission.
- **Results leadership** is the ability to drive results through problem-solving and strategizing how the business might remain competitive.
- **Thought leadership** is having the expertise and persuasive ability to take an organization to its next level of success.

Whether you chose to go micro or macro in your leadership development initiatives, the key is to have the right strategy in place. Your strategy might include implementing one training program at a time or several. Experience and research have shown favorable responses to those organizational leaders who think strategically about their program’s implementation and its proposed outcomes.



# Why Leaders Should Embrace F.L.U. Season



In January, the New York Times published an [article](#) suggesting that “this year’s flu season is now more intense than any since the 2009 swine flu,” a time when I recall waking up every day to worsening news regarding the epidemic for nearly three weeks. The article also described the alarming number of deaths associated with the flu over the last decade. While natural death is never a pleasurable experience, metaphorical death happens every day in organizations at the hands of leaders who fail to cultivate a work culture rich in providing feedback, creating opportunities for learning and development, and having a genuine understanding of the unique talents of the people they lead.

## F = Feedback

In a [previous article](#), I described a formula that can be used in any situation or setting to script a feedback conversation. However, a script alone does not mean the message is received as intended. Often, even the most prepared leader will fail at delivering a message if he or she lacks the confidence or authenticity necessary to delivery both desirable and undesirable news.

Feedback is the development tool that benefits both the leader and the employee. For the employee, feedback enables behaviors to be either redirected or reinforced in real time. The key here is consistency, timeliness and accurate information. It is also important for the leader to model the behaviors expected of their team. The development opportunity for the leader exists when they focus on the end result and the appropriate behavior for arriving there rather than on their personality or character. Too often, leaders procrastinate on providing feedback for fear of resentment or disengagement, or because they do not have the emotional intelligence to say what needs to be said. In this case, the leader has to be willing to admit where they fall short and work toward mastering that skills gap.

**Feedback is the development tool that benefits both the leader and the employee.**



## **L = Learning and Development**

An organization that thrives to provide exceptional service in the way it delivers products and services will always find challenges with maintaining the culture appropriate to accomplish this goal. Because markets change so frequently, the best way to ensure that an organizational culture is equipped to remain competitive is to provide ongoing learning and development opportunities.

While nearly every L&D practitioner understands level one and level two assessment when creating and launching training events, not everyone is able to truly measure training impact or prove a solid return on the training investment. For these reasons, leaders are encouraged to engage in L&D opportunities much sooner than later. Engagement, in this case, involves working with stakeholders to identify performance gaps that connect with a performance metric. It might also require the leader to single-handedly champion the L&D initiative until stakeholders see its value to the organization. Too often, employees disengage from what a leader might initially refer to as an important L&D opportunity because they witness or become aware of his or her dwindling interest.

Leaders are encouraged to engage in L&D opportunities much sooner than later.

## **U = Understanding the Unique Talents of Constituents**

We live in a society where opportunities are endless and entrepreneurship is the new career advancement opportunity. The advancement of technology, coupled with the innovative talent often trapped within the walls of many organizations, compels employees with unique talents to advance their personal mission and vision by any means necessary. What makes this issue even more challenging is the lack of skills, attention and support that some organizational leaders exhibit when confronted with the opportunity to prepare their talent pipeline for new opportunities. These disparities make it easy for recruiters to bait talented individuals who once relied on their leaders to mentor or sponsor their next career opportunities.

Leaders who do take the time to assess the skills of their current and prospective team members outperform their counterparts. These individuals are intentionally focused on building teams that contribute to and understand the organization's strategy while using their supreme talent(s) to execute. This approach requires the leader to be present, accessible and secure in his or her own talents.

Leaders who take the time to assess the skills of their current and prospective team members outperform their counterparts.

Gone are the days when words were enough to validate one's ability to lead effectively. Now, more than ever, actions speak much louder than words.

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# I Want to Dance With Somebody: Effective Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives

It is 2018, and organizations have yet to master the art of creating diverse and inclusive work environments. While many have made strides in their efforts – as evident with the creation of employee resource groups, having dedicated thought managers leading the charge, and joining professional associations whose mission is to support the initiative – diversity and inclusion (D&I) still presents many challenges for the organizational leader.

Thought leader Verna Myers encourages us to think about diversity as an invitation to a party and inclusion as an invitation to dance at that party. However, many organizations are too focused on having parties where employees are wallflowers because they do not feel comfortable dancing – even at an event that they may have been highly sought after to attend.

The missing ingredient here is two-fold: First, the company must focus on playing a song that connects both the host and the guest, and second, the guests must be courageous enough to grab someone by the hand and dance without a prompt, regardless of how foolish they may appear in the eyes of bystanders. Herein lies the greatest opportunity for organizations and the people who make up their structure.

## Playing the Appropriate Song

Most people view D&I as a compliance issue that surfaces when prompted by the media or by some form of corporate injustice within the walls of an organization. While issues like these should shift focus toward the subject of diversity, organizations might experience greater success if they were to take their employees on a never-ending D&I journey rather than creating a one-time training event for the sake of checking a box.

That journey might incorporate various learning strategies, including keynotes from external D&I champions, training appropriate to one's career level, and a top-down approach of consistent interest and execution. The key to developing engaging content, however, is first to understand what's important to those who are expected to dance. Most organizations fail because they create content that glorifies the company's brand rather than focusing on real issues that affect the people within their walls.

**Most organizations fail because they create content that glorifies the company's brand rather than focusing on real issues.**

As we learned with the recent H&M advertisement controversy, the case for diversity in decision-making processes is imperative to the success and sustainability of any organization. Having equitable representation of stakeholders in the early stages of D&I initiatives ensures that all voices are heard and considered to maximize buy-in. We learned from H&M that the practice of bias, including unconscious bias, must not go unchecked by those who are in a position of influence.





## Encouraging Guests to Dance

When it comes to creating an organic inclusive environment, organizational leaders must create opportunities for employees to voice their perspectives about their real-life experiences. Regardless of the design of a diversity course or the incentive to complete it, the organization's culture determines how willing an employee might be in opening up and sharing personal experiences that impact his or her work performance.

If organizations want authentic feedback and inclusivity to be the norm, it is imperative for them to hear what constituents want or need. Anonymous surveys and small focus group discussions with a trusted facilitator are great ways to solicit feedback that might not be otherwise shared in an open forum with large groups. Employees might view candid feedback as a risk and fail to share anything at all, while others may use the opportunity to rant about issues that are well beyond the organization's control. For this reason, it's also important that stakeholders of these initiatives set the stage for emotional intelligence to govern these discussions.

**If organizations want authentic feedback and inclusivity to be the norm, it is imperative to listen to what constituents want.**

The late, great Whitney Houston was nominated for a Soul Train Music Award for best video of the year when she released a popular song called, "I Wanna to Dance with Somebody." The lyrics "I wanna dance with somebody, with somebody who loves me" metaphorically speak to employees' preference to work for organizations that genuinely care about the whole person. A global D&I initiative presents a great opportunity for any organization to dance its way to success.



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# New Year, New Leader: Making Coaching and Feedback Part of Daily Leadership



With each new year comes the opportunity to reflect, re-evaluate, and reset our personal and professional development goals. For organizational leaders, it presents a chance to measure business metrics and establish a new direction for their team's performance. More importantly, it is the perfect time for leaders to develop themselves in the areas most needed to protect their most valuable personal asset: their influence.

Having the capacity to affect someone's character, development or behavior differentiates some of the most successful leaders. Although characteristics like integrity, commitment and humility play a role in the ability to lead effectively, the most influential leaders tend to make ongoing coaching and feedback part of their daily strategy to manage people's performance and accomplish organizational goals.

**The most influential leaders make ongoing coaching and feedback part of their daily strategy.**

Coaching and feedback are no strangers to the world of management and leadership. In fact, some professionals cringe at the words, because they are often associated with criticism, corrective action, performance improvement plans or the final step before termination. When done properly, however,

coaching and feedback should function as an ongoing conversation that allows leaders to not only redirect behavior but also reinforce best practices.

While watching football, it's interesting to observe the coach's engagement throughout the game. The role of an athletic coach is similar to that of an influential leader. Their jobs are to provide ongoing coaching and feedback throughout their individual team members' careers that will help them accomplish personal and professional victories. Unfortunately, this is not the general practice of many leaders because of their inability to prioritize their time or script appropriate coaching conversations with their teams.

The Center for Creative Leadership's SBI model uses a script to help the coach address the situation, behavior and impact he or she observes when managing performance. What tends to make this model effective for the influential leader is the ability to address specific behaviors succinctly rather than focusing on the employee's personality or character. Since adopting this model at Guitar Center, we have found that it works no matter what coaching direction a leader might encounter, including coaching down (to direct reports), coaching across (to peers) and coaching up (to senior leadership).

Here are two examples for structuring coaching and feedback conversations.

### **Reinforcement Scenario (Coaching a Manager Who Is Performing Well)**

Michelle Jones is a manager who has been with the company for three years. Her workload has recently grown in scope, but the number of team members to accomplish the work has not. Michelle's department resources are limited, but she still manages to remain within budget. Her team continues to exceed performance expectations under her leadership, and she seems to be handling everything well despite the increased workload and limited resources.

Here's a sample coaching and feedback script for this situation:

"Michelle, thanks for taking on the XYZ account. I know it's been a challenge to manage the additional workload, and I've noticed you've been working late to close deals with all of your other accounts (Situation)."

"It's been difficult with the recent decline in sales and budget cuts. We've had to take away quite a few of your resources, but you've still managed to own your workload, creating experiences that are going to help us achieve the desired results, all while maintaining an optimistic attitude (Behavior)."

"Because you've been modeling a positive attitude and connecting with both your internal and external customers, the team has been able to stay afloat and managed to exceed performance expectations. I just wanted to let you know that your efforts are noticed by other senior-level managers and me. Good job (Impact)."

The influential leader understands that Michelle can use some encouragement before she feels overwhelmed, unsupported or even disgruntled about her job. The leader might also consider how she can get Michelle some help or provide alternative incentives to keep her performing in this capacity.

### **Redirecting Scenario (Coaching a Leader Who Is Not Performing as Usual)**

Jeff is a director who has been with the company for seven years. He recently participated in a meeting with his boss to discuss his annual performance. Jeff's overall rating on his annual review was "average," and he is upset. He has been working extended hours to help achieve sales goals, which have actually increased by 10 percent over the past three months. He has been seen lashing out at his direct reports, because he doesn't feel appreciated.

Here's a sample coaching and feedback script:

"Jeff, thank you for agreeing to meet with me, and congratulations on achieving a 10-percent increase in sales over the last few months. Your efforts are helping the organization achieve desired business results, and I've noticed your team is following in your footsteps to adopt your best practices to increase their personal sales goals as well (Situation)."

"I know you were not pleased with the rating that you received on your annual review. We've been discussing your collective leadership goals and checking in regularly, so the rating is actually a reflection of our year-long coaching conversations. Your attitude is noticeably different, especially toward your team. Some of your colleagues are also noticing this change (Behavior)."

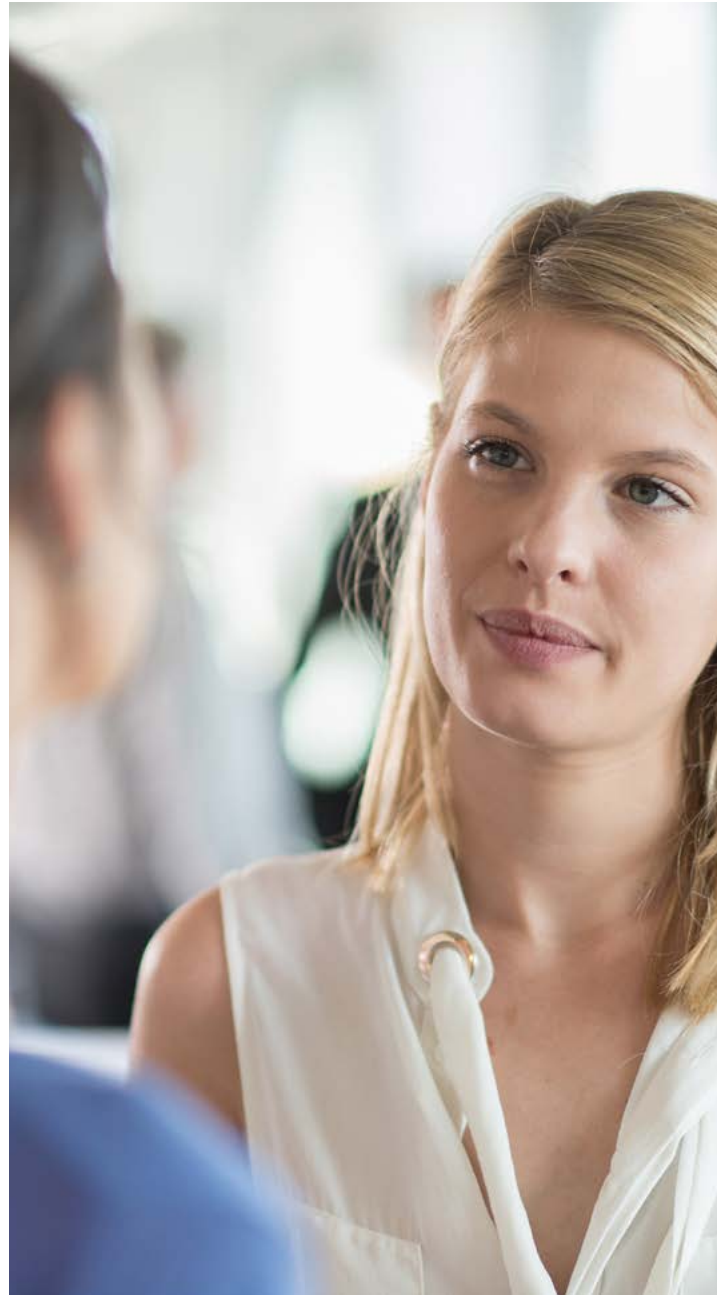
"You are one of our top performers, and many of our junior associates look up to you as model for great leadership and integrity. I'm afraid your lack of engagement and your attitude toward your team might impact your personal leadership brand and possibly damage the awesome reputation you've worked so hard to build over the last seven years. Is there anything I can do to shift your perspective (Impact)?"

Notice that both examples used the model to structure the coaching conversation, not to dissect the issues further or make assumptions. There is a time and a place for thinking on a deeper or broader level, but for the purposes of these situations, the influential leader might find the most success structuring a coaching and feedback conversation that is clear and to the point.

As we approach performance review season for most companies, it is important to understand the function of coaching and feedback apart from potential merit increases. When we make coaching and feedback a part of our organizational cultures, it makes it easier to manage performance on a daily, monthly, quarterly and annual basis.

When we make coaching and feedback a part of our organizational cultures, it makes it easier to manage performance.

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