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THE ART OF LEADING

In Tough Times, Are You a Victim or Do You See Opportunity in the Challenge?

With **Seth Besmertnik**, Former CEO at Conductor

Published November 17, 2026



Seth Besmertnik, former CEO of Conductor, shared hard-won lessons from two decades of building the company with Adam Bryant. Key themes include why culture is defined less by stated values than by what leaders celebrate, what they tolerate, and how they handle someone who is not working out; why accountability matters more than ever in a world of AI; and how hardship builds the resilience to treat every challenge as an opportunity.

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Bryant: I first interviewed you when you were 27 for my Corner Office series in the New York Times (link in the comments). You're now 44, and you spent two decades building Conductor before stepping away this year. What are the key insights you've learned about leadership?

Besmertnik: That's a big question, but one thing I learned over time is to trust my intuition more. As you build a company, you hire all these smart people and assume that they know the right thing to do. It's easy to think, "Well, they've done this before, and they've got experience."

But as you get more experience yourself, you start to realize that you know some things and learn to act on your instincts. You have to be open-minded and coachable and take input, but you have to stay close to what you actually believe.

> **"It's okay to feel like a victim for a little while, but as soon as you move into "I'm the cause, not the effect," you can start asking, "What do I need to do about this?"**

Bryant: What have you learned about building a culture and the cultural signals that really matter?

Besmertnik: We never put up a sign about our values or our principles. Culture is the culmination of a series of small decisions over time. Ultimately, it comes down to the actions and behaviors that you celebrate. What are your systems for rewarding people and encouraging the behaviors that you want?

And what are the lowest-quality actions or behaviors that you accept? That's also a big part of your culture: what do you tolerate? Is it okay to be just okay? And when something isn't going right, how do you handle that? Is it one and done? Do people get coached? I've always thought that a big part of culture is what happens when someone's not working out.

Bryant: What qualities do you value most in employees? And what do you have a low tolerance for?

Besmertnik: The two things that matter the most are a desire to get better, and then one's ability to take action against that equation. The best people are eager for feedback. They do a great job of taking the kernels of goodness in your feedback.

With those people, you don't have to be so careful about your words that if you say the wrong thing, then that's going to linger in their brain forever and then they're going to have this narrative about that one time you said that thing. So they can get rid of the garbage and focus on what matters and actually do something about it.

And doing something about it manifests in all kinds of different ways. It could be watching videos. It could be taking classes. It could be asking for help. It could be doing a survey with your team and asking for more feedback.

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What's intolerable is not doing what you say you're going to do. That drives me crazy. My tolerance over the last 20 years has reduced dramatically for unaccountable behavior because then the whole system doesn't work otherwise.

We now live in this world where we've got AI, and we've got humans, and humans have to carry their weight. And a human being who doesn't do what they say they're going to do is becoming a valueless commodity in this world.

Bryant: What's your approach to interviewing candidates now?

Besmertnik: I'm trying to learn how they've been extraordinary relative to whatever situation they've been in. I massively over-index toward people who do a lot more than what's expected. That can be in a structured environment, like getting the highest grades in school. But I'm more focused on the unstructured environment.

When you're not working and sleeping, what are you doing? How do you train yourself and get better? I'll also ask questions like, "What was the hardest moment in your whole life?" I love people who have had hardship. I find that there's almost a straight-line correlation between people with hardship and their resilience.

In life, you're going to have at least a minimum number of things that are going to go wrong. And in the workplace, you're going to have a lot of things that go wrong, in terms of mistakes and challenges. It's not about trying to reduce that number. It's about how quickly you cycle through each of those moments.

How do you recover quickly? How do you find moments of challenge and turn them into growth moments? I think of all these things as battles. As a company, you're in a battle, and I want to be in a room with people who have been through stuff and are not going to cower.

Bryant: One of the many challenges of being a long-term CEO is knowing when you to upgrade your leadership team. What have you learned about doing that?

Besmertnik: It's hard because I always wanted people to ride with me forever, but I know that's not possible. A lot of times it's like a zigzag: the best person on your team over time can become the new worst person because they aren't the right person for the new challenges in the next phase of growth. So you're in this constant state of leveling up.

I find that the best way to handle it is by communicating as often as possible, including letting people know what you need them to do and what they have to do to maintain their position in the company.

These can be hard conversations, but you don't really know what someone's capable of until you let them know what you need. I sometimes have had conversations with folks where I will tell them, "The thought entered my head for the first time about whether the company would be better off with or without you." And then I'll just leave it at that.

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You learn a lot about people in those moments. You're not telling them they're fired. You're not telling them you're looking for someone else. You're not telling them you want them to leave. You're just telling them you're starting to question things.

Sometimes that becomes the beginning of a new person. They're motivated, and they needed a bit of cold water on their head. They're coachable, and then you can maybe get another good year or two from them. And sometimes it accelerates what might have been a six-month process of them leaving to 30 days.

Bryant: You've got a lot of drive, resilience, and ambition. Where does that come from?

Besmertnik: My childhood was riddled with pretty much all the check-the-box challenges that you can ask for, including different forms of neglect and abuse. And I was always the bad kid. I used to have to sit and face the wall during lunchtime while the other kids were playing because I was always in trouble.

I grew up with very few adults thinking that there was anything special about me, and with most adults thinking that I should be facing the wall. On top of that, my mother left home when I was about 12. My father worked two jobs and was very busy and tried his best, but I was always by myself.

I developed a lot of independence, and when I turned 18, I decided that I wanted to make something of my life. While my friends were enjoying university life, I worked a full-time job and went to school at night. I worked at two companies during college that didn't have great cultures, and I realized that I didn't want to do this for the rest of my life.

So I decided I've got to do something on my own, and that's when I began thinking about starting a business. For the last 20 years, I focused on just trying to make it better every single day and trying to prove to myself and the whole world that I'm going to be a little different than everybody else,

Bryant: It's not kind of thing you'd wish on anybody, but those experiences do make you stronger.

Besmertnik: There is good spiritual thinking about how every challenge you face is the challenge that you need. So every challenge is an opportunity. That thinking is a game-changer for anyone. When something bad happens, are you a victim? Are you the cause, or are you the effect? It's okay to feel like a victim for a little while, but as soon as you move into "I'm the cause, not the effect," you can start asking, "What do I need to do about this?"

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In this conversation



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Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the "Corner Office" series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including "The Leap to Leader" and "The CEO Test," both published by Harvard Business Review Press.

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