

Lessons from Tricky Vicky: The Series

Leadership lessons don't always come from mentors.

Sometimes, they come from the managers who test your patience, your confidence, and your ability to stay grounded.

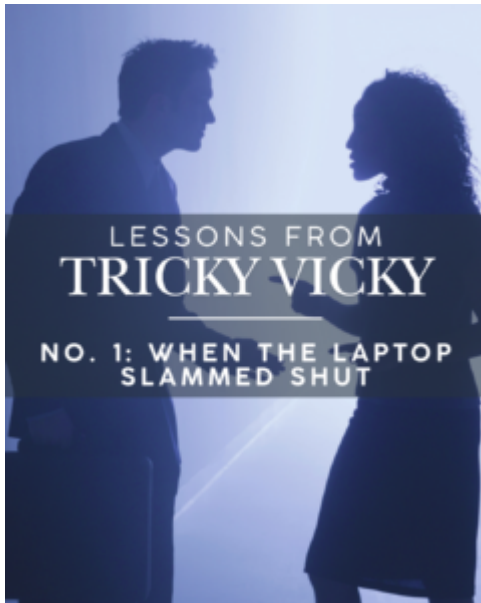
This is one of those stories.

Over the next ten weeks, I'm sharing a leadership series called "Lessons from Tricky Vicky".

Vicky (not her real name) was my manager for several years during my time at Coca-Cola. We started strong. We didn't end that way.

Working with her helped shape my *How > What* leadership philosophy—not because she modeled great leadership, but because I learned what not to do.

These stories are honest, personal, and maybe a little uncomfortable. But they're shared in the hope that they'll help you lead better, think differently, and avoid some of the mistakes I lived through.



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It was supposed to be a normal meeting. Just three professionals sitting around a conference table, reviewing some display concepts and sipping bad office coffee.

Then it happened.

Slam.

Tricky Vicky's laptop shut like a mousetrap. She stood up, eyes blazing, and asked something I'll never forget.

"Are you going to confront me in the hallway now?"

Well... I wasn't planning on it. But apparently, suggesting we revisit a previously rejected idea crossed some invisible line in her world. The idea? Using SurveyMonkey to gather team feedback. Earth-shattering stuff, I know.

Here's how it unfolded.

We were discussing the best way to collect input from the National Retail Sales teams. I offered, gently, "What if we used SurveyMonkey? Quick pulse, easy to analyze."

Vicky's face twitched like I'd just insulted her favorite spreadsheet.

"That idea's already been rejected."

Now, this is where I probably should've nodded and moved on. But instead, I did what I thought good teammates did. I tried to help.

"I don't mean to challenge you," I said, "but maybe we should reconsider. There's some real upside to—"

That's when the laptop lid snapped shut and Vicky rose like court was adjourned.

As she left the room, she tossed her hallway grenade. I stood there, stunned. Not because I disagreed with her reaction, but because I realized something deeper.

This had nothing to do with SurveyMonkey. It had everything to do with control.

And Vicky didn't like being challenged. At all.

We followed up the next day. She told me she had feedback and asked that I not respond. "Just listen," she said. "We can talk about it another time."

You can guess how that went.

She told me I was lucky it was her in the meeting, because if it had been a different leader, I would've been "torn apart." She said I had a blind spot. That I interrupted. That I didn't listen. That my brand was damaged. She name-dropped three leaders who had apparently voiced concerns.

Nothing like a little surprise reputation assassination over coffee.

Here's the twist. I actually liked Vicky. Still do in a strange, professional war-buddy kind of way. But our leadership styles were oil and water. I believed in empowerment. Coaching. Trusting capable people to do the work. She believed in... oversight. Heavy oversight. Everything filtered through her. Every approval, every detail, every pixel.

We weren't aligned. And more importantly, the team knew it. I was often the human buffer between her intensity and their exhaustion.

That moment, the laptop snap, it stuck with me. Because it taught me something I've carried ever since.

Micromanagement doesn't just slow a team down. It stifles

trust. It drains engagement. And it turns feedback into fear.

That’s when I started to crystalize what eventually became my core belief. That *how* you lead matters more than *what* you lead.

How you respond to a new idea.

How you handle someone pushing back.

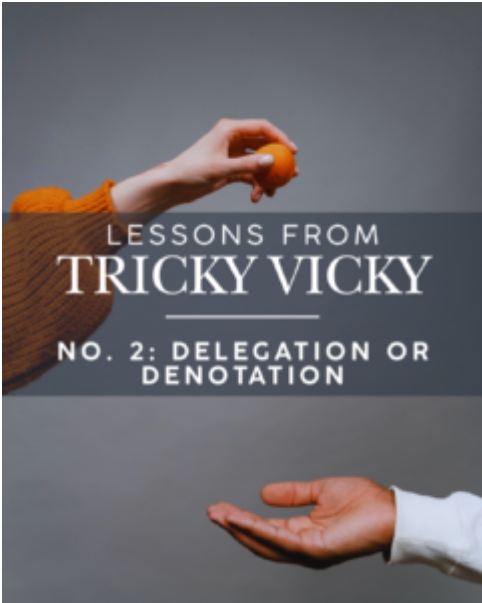
How you navigate disagreement without making it personal.

When a leader can’t be challenged, the culture becomes a tightrope. And people stop walking it.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself this: **“When someone on my team pushes back on an idea, do I lean in and listen, or do I look for the nearest exit?”**

A slammed laptop might feel powerful. But open minds build better teams.



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“Hey Preston, I want you to own this.”

That was Tricky Vicky’s favorite phrase.

To the untrained ear, it sounded empowering. Trusting, even. The kind of thing leadership books praise. But anyone who worked on our team knew what it really meant.

You could “own” the work.

You just couldn’t own the decisions.

Or the approach.

Or the timeline.

Or the messaging.

Or anything that might require judgment.

So really, what you owned was the pressure. Not the authority.

Here’s how it played out in real time.

We were preparing for a major retail pitch—one of those

presentations that had more eyeballs on it than a Super Bowl ad. I assigned the lead to someone on our team. Talented, sharp, totally capable. She built the deck. Reviewed the metrics. Crafted the narrative. All the right things.

We walked into the meeting feeling ready.

Then Vicky got a look at the deck.

“Why is the third slide formatted like that?”

“Well,” my team member said, “I wanted to emphasize the lift in shopper conversion, so I reversed the color scheme to draw focus—”

“No. Too confusing. Fix it.”

Slide by slide, it unraveled. A comment here. A tweak there. Pretty soon we weren’t collaborating—we were surviving a slow-motion teardown.

By the end, the presentation looked exactly like something Vicky would have built herself. Because in a way, she had. She just took the scenic route.

This happened often.

We’d be assigned a project with marching orders to “run with it,” only to find ourselves redoing the work after every check-in. Not because it was wrong. But because it wasn’t how *she* would have done it.

One time I joked with a teammate, “Vicky doesn’t micromanage. She just pre-edits your thoughts before you even say them.”

We laughed. Then got back to work. In silence.

At some point, I realized what was happening. Vicky thought she was delegating. But what she was really doing was outsourcing responsibility without releasing control.

That's not delegation. That's detonation. You set people up to take the fall for work they never truly owned.

It kills initiative. Cripples innovation. And sends a very clear message:

We don't trust you to lead. We just trust you to execute.

That's the opposite of what I believe leadership should be.

I want my team to feel real ownership. Not ceremonial ownership. I want to hand over decisions, not just tasks. I want them to have the freedom to succeed their way, not just survive mine.

That's what *How > What* leadership looks like in action.

It says: I care more about how we get there than whether every detail mirrors my preference.

It trusts people to think.

It expects them to lead.

Vicky didn't get that. She meant well, but her version of delegation was wrapped in so many disclaimers, you needed a legal team to interpret it.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

"When I delegate something, do I really let it go?"

If your team feels like they're walking a tightrope every time they take initiative, you're not delegating. You're detonating.

Let it go. Let them lead. And watch what happens.



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It was the end of the year, and I'd just wrapped one of the most demanding stretches of my Coca-Cola career. Big wins. Heavy lift. The kind of work that leaves a mark.

And then came the performance review.

"Meets and Exceeds."

Nice. I was genuinely grateful. Affirmation matters. I walked out of that conversation thinking, "Alright, the hard work was worth it."

Fast forward a few months.

Same leader. Same me. Different story.

This time, Tricky Vicky sat me down with a serious tone and said something I didn't expect.

"Your brand is tarnished."

My what?

She listed three names—senior leaders who had supposedly voiced concerns about me. No context. No specifics. Just a vague cloud of disapproval. It felt like the professional version of "People are saying..."

And just like that, I went from high performer to high risk.

Now, I'm no stranger to feedback. I welcome it. Crave it, actually. I've been sharpened by wise leaders over the years who knew how to speak the truth in a way that built trust, not suspicion.

But this wasn't that.

This was feedback served cold, anonymous, and weaponized. I left the meeting more confused than corrected.

I asked for specifics. Nothing.

I asked for examples. Still nothing.

Just... concern.

So let's recap.

In December: I'm a valued leader.

In March: My brand is a liability.

In Wonderland: That checks out.

What made it worse? The unspoken message: "Be grateful I told you. Anyone else would've torn you apart."

That wasn't feedback. That was a warning shot.

It didn't motivate me to grow. It made me question everything.

What had I done differently?

What had they seen—or not seen?

What could I even fix?

The truth is, I hadn't changed. But the narrative had. And no one was willing to own the authorship.

I learned a lot that day. Not just about Vicky, but about how *not* to handle performance conversations.

Real leadership doesn't traffic in ambiguity. It doesn't hide behind anonymous feedback or deliver gut punches without guidance.

It names what's working.

It calls out what's not.

And it gives people the chance to course-correct.

That's why *How* > *What* matters so much. Because how we give feedback shapes what people do with it.

When it's thoughtful, it builds clarity.

When it's careless, it builds resentment.

You can't grow what you can't name. And you can't lead what you're afraid to address directly.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

"Would the people I lead say they get clarity from me—or confusion?"

Your team doesn't need perfection.

They need feedback with a face, not a fog.



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You ever play the role of emotional translator?

You know, the one who filters your boss's tone so the team doesn't quit?

That was me. For two solid years. I wasn't just leading a team. I was buffering one. From Tricky Vicky.

Vicky didn't yell. She didn't curse. She didn't throw chairs. Her pressure was quieter, more controlled. But it was just as heavy.

There was the constant second-guessing.

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The pre-meeting meetings.

The post-meeting critiques.

The never-ending edits.

You'd think we were producing Super Bowl commercials, not planograms and retail pitch decks.

My team felt it. They wouldn't say it outright, but you could see it in their posture. Shoulders up. Voices cautious. Heads down.

They were talented. Creative. Driven.

And terrified of getting it wrong.

I found myself doing what I thought any good leader would do. I absorbed the stress, softened the blow, and kept morale high. I'd go one-on-one with Vicky, take the critique, reframe it, and pass it along in a more constructive tone.

Some days I felt like a human Brita filter.

I shielded. I translated. I coached. I covered.

Until one day I realized I was doing more buffering than leading.

One particular week, after Vicky dismantled yet another

proposal without acknowledging the weeks of work behind it, I sat in my car in the parking lot and just... sat. For an hour. No music. No calls. No movement.

Just stillness.

That's when it hit me.

I was protecting the team.
But no one was protecting me.

Don't get me wrong. I believe leaders should step in and stand up. I've always said that real leadership isn't about authority. It's about responsibility. Especially when things go sideways.

But when your full-time job becomes running interference, you start to lose the energy—and clarity—you need to actually lead.

You can't inspire when you're constantly recovering.

You can't develop others when you're emotionally managing your own boss.

You can't build culture if you're always patching leaks.

Eventually, I started to resent the very people I was trying to protect. Not because of anything they did, but because I was tired of carrying the weight Vicky refused to acknowledge.

That's when I knew something had to change.

How > What leadership taught me that protecting people doesn't mean insulating them from every difficulty.

Sometimes, protecting means telling the truth about what's broken.

Sometimes, protecting means confronting a pattern, not just absorbing it.

Sometimes, protecting means stepping out so you can lead from

a place of health, not exhaustion.

Vicky never saw the toll. Or maybe she did and didn't want to. But I saw it in the mirror. And so did my family.

The truth? Being a buffer made me better, for a season. It sharpened my emotional intelligence. It taught me empathy. But in the long run, it nearly burned me out.

You can only absorb so much before you start leaking, too.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

"Am I leading my team or shielding them from a system I'm too afraid to challenge?"

Protecting your people is noble.

But at some point, the best protection is to fix what's doing the damage.



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There was a moment—deep into my Coca-Cola run—when the numbers all looked great.

Merit increase.

Strong bonus.

A respectable pile of stock options.

Solid year-end rating.

Positive reviews on paper.

Everything said, “You’re winning.”

Except I wasn’t.

Because while I was checking all the boxes and cashing the recognition, something inside was quietly cracking.

See, Tricky Vicky knew how to work the system. She could polish performance narratives like a pro. She could link your contributions to KPIs, shape talking points for senior leadership, and pull the right levers during calibration sessions.

On paper, our team was thriving. But off paper?

Different story.

People were tired. Not just from the work, but from how the work was managed.

Everything required approval.

Ideas were inspected, dissected, and often dismissed.

Autonomy was lip service.

Trust? Conditional.

And yet, we kept getting high marks. Because the outputs were solid. Because the team delivered in spite of the system, not because of it.

I remember walking out of a performance discussion feeling strangely hollow. Vicky had just outlined a generous bonus package, told me I was one of the few she could count on, and said I'd "earned my spot."

It should've felt good. But it didn't.

Because I knew what it had cost me.

Late nights.

Emotional fatigue.

Physical exhaustion.

A slowly growing resentment I didn't want to admit.

I was starting to feel like the recognition was a strategy to keep me from leaving.

That's when I had to get honest with myself.

Recognition is nice. But it's not a substitute for culture.

You can be well paid and poorly led.

You can be praised but still feel stuck.

You can be rewarded while being misused.

Those aren't contradictions. That's corporate life if you're not careful.

This is why *How* > *What* matters more than ever. Because leadership isn't just about driving results. It's about how you get there, how you treat people along the way, and how sustainable the system really is.

Vicky wasn't evil. She genuinely believed in high standards. She just couldn't see how her methods were bleeding out the very people she relied on.

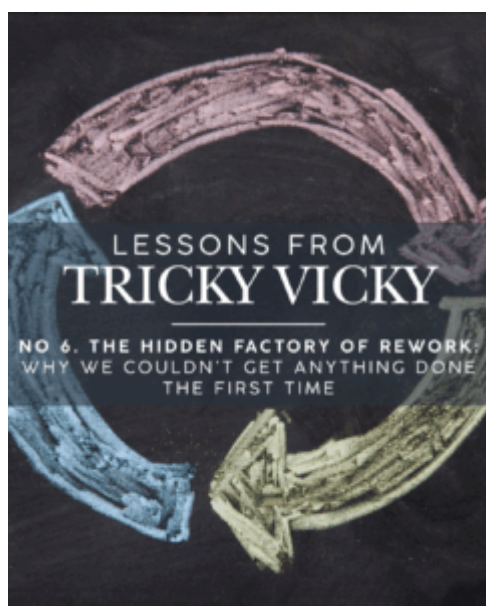
Her formula: reward the strong and squeeze the rest.
My formula: develop the strong and strengthen the rest.

Those two models look similar in a spreadsheet. But they produce wildly different teams.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

"Is my team engaged—or just compensated?" Recognition matters. But if it's not paired with trust, autonomy, and a healthy culture, it's just hush money in a fancy envelope.



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If you've never worked in a hidden factory, let me paint the picture for you.

It's not on any org chart.
You won't find it in the budget.
No one talks about it out loud.
But trust me, it's there.

It's the invisible workplace where everything gets done twice. Sometimes three times. Where decks are redone the night before. Where emails are rewritten in someone else's voice.

Where good ideas are quietly walked back because someone at the top “might not like it.”

At Coke, under Tricky Vicky, we ran a very successful hidden factory. She didn’t call it that, of course. She called it “refinement.”

But the truth? It was churn.

The hidden factory was born out of a simple pattern.

You’d work on a project. Pour in the hours. Think strategically. Build something you were proud of.

Then came the review.

“Why is this written like that?”

“Who told you to include this?”

“We don’t use that template anymore.”

You’d get vague feedback, not tied to performance, but preference. So you’d go back, revise, and resubmit.

New version. Same story.

Until eventually, you just stopped trying to innovate. You built what you thought she wanted. Not because it was better. But because it was safer.

One time, I submitted a pitch deck for a retail partner that included some creative, out-of-the-box display designs. We’d tested them. They worked. They told the brand story beautifully.

Vicky skimmed it, then dropped the line I came to expect.

“This isn’t quite where I need it to be.”

That was code. It meant: “Scrap it and start over.”

Which we did. Twice.

When we finally presented the deck, I barely recognized the original idea. It was watered down, box-checked, and perfectly bland.

The client loved it. Because they didn't know what it could have been.

And neither did Vicky.

That's the thing about micromanagement. It creates a system where creativity goes to die. Not with a bang, but with a whisper.

It's not that people stop working. They just stop trying.

And the cost? You never see it on a balance sheet. But it shows up in delays. In apathy. In missed opportunities.

That's why *How* > *What* matters. Because how you respond to draft work, half-baked ideas, and version 1.0 sets the tone for everything that follows.

You can either create a culture of thoughtful progress or a culture of perpetual rework.

Tricky Vicky thought she was ensuring excellence. But what she was really building was a machine that ran on fear, edits, and late nights.

We didn't need more oversight. We needed more oxygen.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

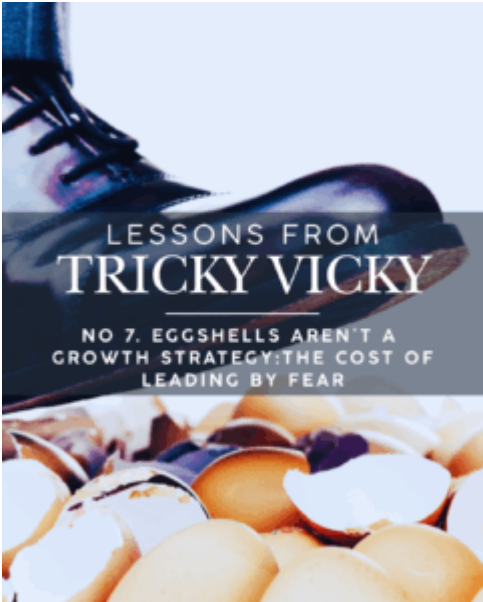
"Is your team revising out of clarity—or fear?"

Because if people are doing the work twice just to avoid your reaction, you're not refining. You're reinforcing dysfunction.

Trust them to finish well the first time.

Coach when needed.

Correct when necessary.
But don't make perfection the price of progress.



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You could feel it the moment you walked into the room.

The silence before meetings.

The carefully chosen words.

The sideways glances when someone spoke too boldly.

The tension you could cut with a butter knife.

We didn't need a corporate engagement survey to tell us something was off.

We were walking on eggshells.

Not because the work was hard. The work was fine—strategic, creative, fast-paced—exactly what you'd expect at a place like Coca-Cola.

The problem wasn't the work.

The problem was Tricky Vicky.

Vicky didn't lead with rage. There were no public meltdowns. She didn't bark orders or berate people in front of others.

Her style was more subtle. Polished. Quietly intense.

The pressure came through loaded questions.

Through long pauses after you spoke.

Through one-on-one "feedback sessions" that felt more like performance interrogations.

You never quite knew where you stood. So people stopped taking risks.

The team adapted.

Ideas were presented with disclaimers. "Just thinking out loud here..."

Decisions were deferred. "Let's run this by Vicky first..."

People double-checked their tone in emails. Triple-checked

their slide decks.

I once had a team member ask, “Do you think she’ll be okay with this wording?” about a sentence in an internal memo. Not the content. Just the tone.

That’s when I knew we had a bigger issue than formatting.

You can’t grow when you’re constantly looking over your shoulder.

You can’t innovate when your first thought is, “Will this get me in trouble?”

And you certainly can’t build a high-performing team when fear becomes the operating system.

I did my best to create pockets of safety. I encouraged honest feedback. I tried to give people room to breathe. But at some point, the culture started bending everyone toward self-preservation.

Even me.

What Vicky didn’t understand was that fear might get compliance, but it never earns commitment.

It creates perfectionists who are afraid to fail.

It creates performers who play not to lose.

And it creates professionals who eventually burn out or check out.

How > What leadership is the antidote. Because it prioritizes psychological safety, it creates space for real conversation. It invites challenge, even disagreement, as a sign of respect, not rebellion.

Fear might keep the wheels turning. But it kills momentum. Quietly. Systematically. One cautious comment at a time.

Leadership Challenge

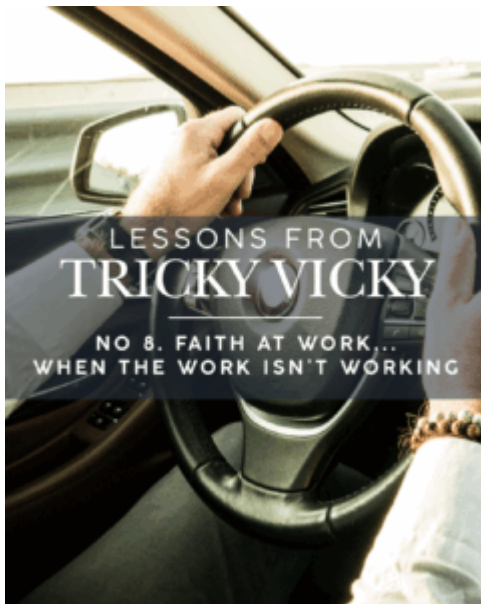
Ask yourself:

“What’s the emotional tone of your meetings?”

If people are guarded, hesitant, or overly polished, it might not be professionalism.

It might be fear in a suit.

And if that’s the case, it’s time to make the room safe again.



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I used to pray in the parking lot.

Not out of habit. Not because I was feeling especially holy.

But because I didn't know what kind of day I was about to walk into.

Some days I'd sit in the car for ten minutes, engine off, hands on the wheel, just trying to find enough peace to walk through the front door.

This wasn't early-career insecurity. It wasn't workload fatigue. It was the slow, soul-grinding dissonance of working in a system that didn't align with who I was—or who I wanted to be.

The disconnect was everywhere.

People were disengaged.

Communication was controlled.

Fear ran the meetings.

And leadership decisions felt more political than principled.

And at the center of it all... Tricky Vicky.

Now, let me be clear.

This wasn't a villain story. Vicky wasn't a monster. She was smart. Strategic. Capable. In her mind, she was protecting the company, the brand, the standard.

But her approach—high control, low trust—was breaking people down.

I felt it. The team felt it. The culture felt it.

So I did what I knew to do. I started praying more. Not for her. Not at first. For me.

Lord, help me keep my mouth shut.

Lord, give me the words if I shouldn't.

Lord, remind me why I'm here.

Lord, if it's time to go, make it clear.

I remember one particularly tough week where I seriously

questioned if I'd missed my calling. I was doing the work. Leading the team. Getting the results. But I was running on fumes.

And it hit me—this was a test.

Not just a professional test, but a spiritual one.

Could I stay faithful in a place that didn't feel fulfilling?
Could I still represent Christ when I felt overlooked,
overworked, and out of sync?

Could I choose to serve with integrity even when the system
felt broken?

It wasn't about titles or recognition anymore. It was about
obedience.

I didn't want to become bitter. I didn't want to play
politics. I didn't want to become Vicky.

That's when *How* > *What* became more than a leadership idea. It
became a spiritual anchor.

Because I couldn't always control what was happening around
me. But I could control how I responded.

I could choose humility over ego.

Patience over frustration.

Courage over silence.

Excellence over ease.

And I could trust that God was using the discomfort to form
something in me that comfort never could.

Eventually, things changed. New doors opened. And I walked
into the next chapter stronger, wiser, and far more grounded.

Not because everything got better. But because I did.

That's the hidden gift of hard seasons. They shape you. Strip
you. Refine you. And if you let them, they prepare you to lead

from a deeper well.

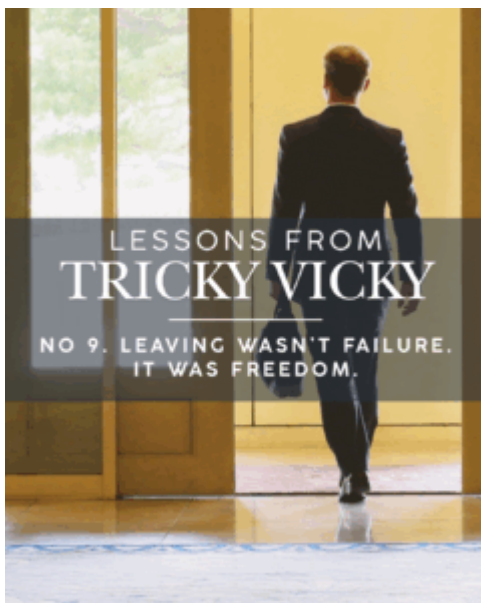
Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

“What if this difficult season isn’t just a test—but training?”

Maybe the work isn’t working. But that doesn’t mean your calling isn’t.

Keep showing up. And lead well—even when it’s not well.



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The day I left was quiet.

No farewell party. No big speech. Just a cleaned-out inbox, a couple of thank-you emails, and one last walk out of the building that had shaped three years of my life.

I didn't feel triumphant. I didn't feel bitter.

I felt free.

Not because I hated the job. The work was fine. The team was great. And I was good at it.

But the environment? That was another story.

For a few years, I worked under a leader I'll call *Tricky Vicky*.

It's not what we called her at the time. We never would have said it out loud. But in hindsight, it fits. Not because she was cruel or toxic or out of control. That wasn't her.

It was that we could never quite figure her out.

One week, you were a rock star. The next, your reputation was in question. Decisions shifted with no warning. Feedback came without clarity. Trust felt inconsistent. There was a constant undercurrent of pressure—and no clear pattern to navigate it.

Vicky was sharp. Strategic. Polished. But managing her expectations often felt like trying to read a book where the chapters kept rewriting themselves.

You just never knew which version of the story you were in.

Eventually, the grind of it all started to wear on me.

I wasn't energized anymore. I was drained. Not from the work itself, but from how it had to be done. Everything felt like a negotiation. A performance. A moving target.

So I made a decision. Quietly. Prayerfully.

I started exploring other roles inside the company. Not to climb. Just to breathe again.

When I finally told Vicky, I didn't say what I really felt. That I was leaving because the leadership environment had worn me down. That I didn't feel safe bringing new ideas to the table anymore. That I'd spent too long trying to navigate unpredictability.

Instead, I told her the truth I could safely share.

I said the work no longer matched my strengths, talents, or long-term goals. I wanted a role that aligned with who I was and where I could truly contribute.

And to her credit, she immediately offered to help.

Maybe it was her way of making peace. Maybe she was relieved, too. Maybe she realized the fit had run its course for both of us. Whatever the case, she made introductions, advocated on my behalf, and helped open the door to something better.

Walking away wasn't easy. It never is.

But it was right.

Because I wasn't just leaving a job. I was reclaiming something I'd let slip – my confidence, my voice, my belief that leadership could be different.

That *how* you lead matters more than *what* you lead.

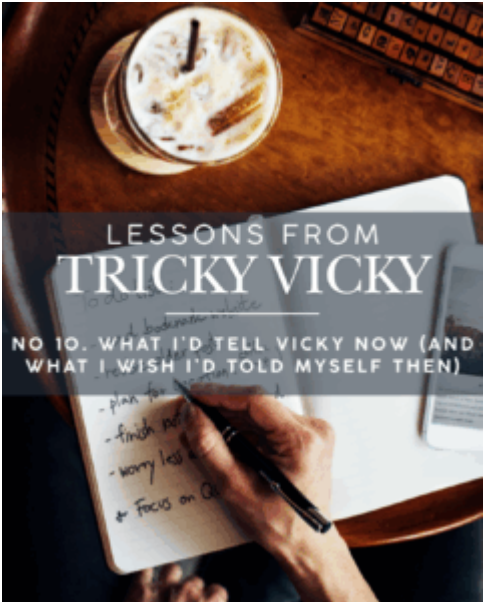
And that freedom doesn't always come from climbing higher. Sometimes, it comes from knowing when to let go.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

"Are you staying where you are out of alignment... or out of habit?"

Leaving isn't always failure.
Sometimes, it's the first honest step back toward who you're
meant to be.



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I've had a lot of time to think about those years.

The wins. The weariness. The politics. The pressure. The parking lot prayers.

And of course, Vicky.

Or as I've come to call her here, *Tricky Vicky*.

It's not a nickname rooted in bitterness. It's simply the best way to describe what it was like working under a leader I never quite figured out. One moment, an ally. The next, a critic. One day, praising your work. The next, quietly questioning your brand.

Navigating her expectations took energy. More energy than I realized. And by the time I moved on, I was drained. Not angry. Not even frustrated. Just done.

But now, with distance and clarity, I've started to ask myself a different set of questions.

Not just, "What went wrong?"

But also, "What did I learn?"

So if I could sit across from Vicky today, here's what I'd say.

First, thank you.

Not sarcastically. Not under my breath. Honestly.

Thank you for what I learned by working with you. You sharpened me in ways I didn't fully appreciate at the time. Your intensity pushed me to refine how I communicate. Your scrutiny taught me to be clearer, more strategic, more prepared.

But more than anything, you helped clarify the kind of leader I never want to be.

Not because you were bad.

But because the experience of being led by you showed me what trust, empowerment, and consistency actually feel like—by their absence.

You taught me that results without relationship will always fall flat. That systems without safety wear people down. And that influence without self-awareness is a ceiling no team can rise above.

So thank you.

For what your leadership formed in me.
And for what your leadership exposed in me.

Now, if I could speak to my younger self?

I'd say this:

You don't have to keep absorbing the pressure just because you can.

You don't have to downplay your exhaustion just to look strong.

And you don't have to keep performing for someone who's not interested in knowing the real you.

You're not crazy.

You're not too sensitive.

And you're not weak for wanting to feel safe at work.

But.

You're also not trapped.

So stop overfunctioning. Stop blaming yourself. Stop waiting for things to change.

Lead how you're wired to lead.

Speak truth when it needs to be spoken.

And when the time comes to go, don't delay out of guilt or

fear.

Some of your best leadership lessons won't come from the mentors who cheer you on.

They'll come from the managers who make you question everything.

If you let them, even the hardest leaders will refine you. Not to become like them—but to become someone entirely different.

Leadership Challenge

Ask yourself:

“What hard experience is still shaping how you lead today?”

Don't waste the difficult seasons.

Learn from them.

Lead differently because of them.

And be the leader someone else wishes they had.

The end.