

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.

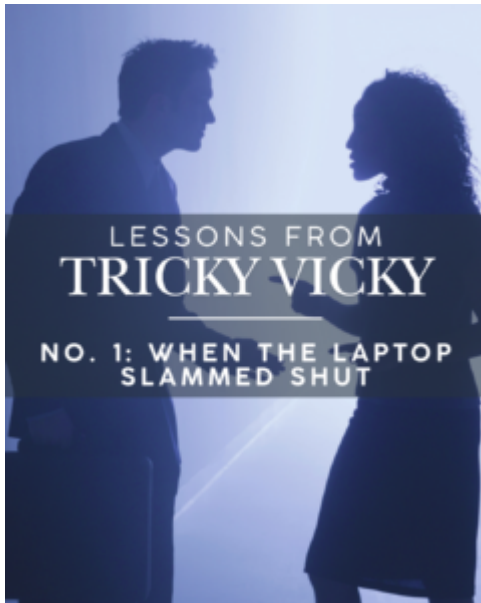
This is one of those stories.

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.

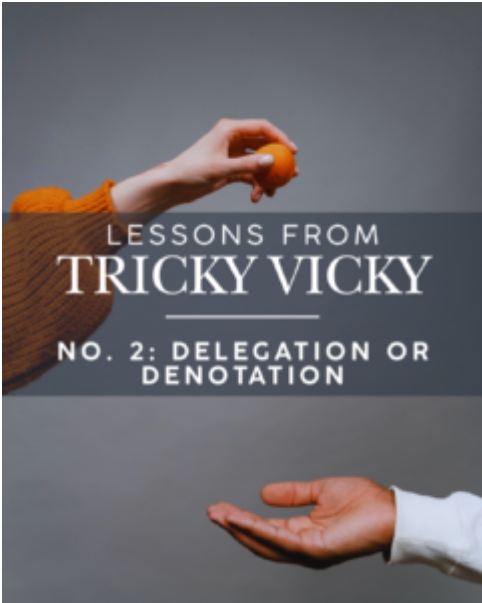
How you navigate disagreement without making it personal.

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.

No 6. The Hidden Factory of Rework: Why We Couldn't Get Anything Done the First Time (Coming soon)