

What we talk about when we talk about leadership

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LeadDev Berlin, November 2024

What do you think makes a good leader?

What makes a good leader?

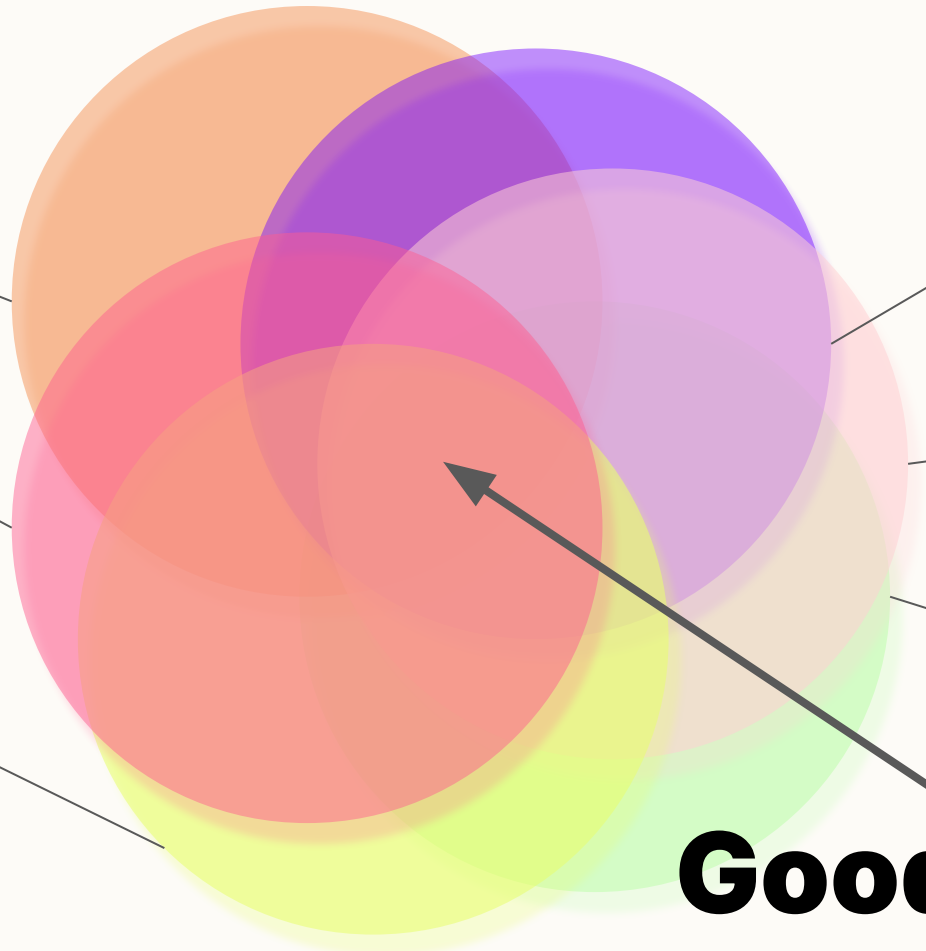
Goal-orientation, innovation, getting things done, driving impact, providing direction & vision/strategy, high degree of ownership, decision-making, great communication, grows talent, authenticity, introspection,...?

**What do you think makes
you a good leader?**

Your values

Business needs

Your boss's values & perception of your work



Employees' values, wishes

Results of your work

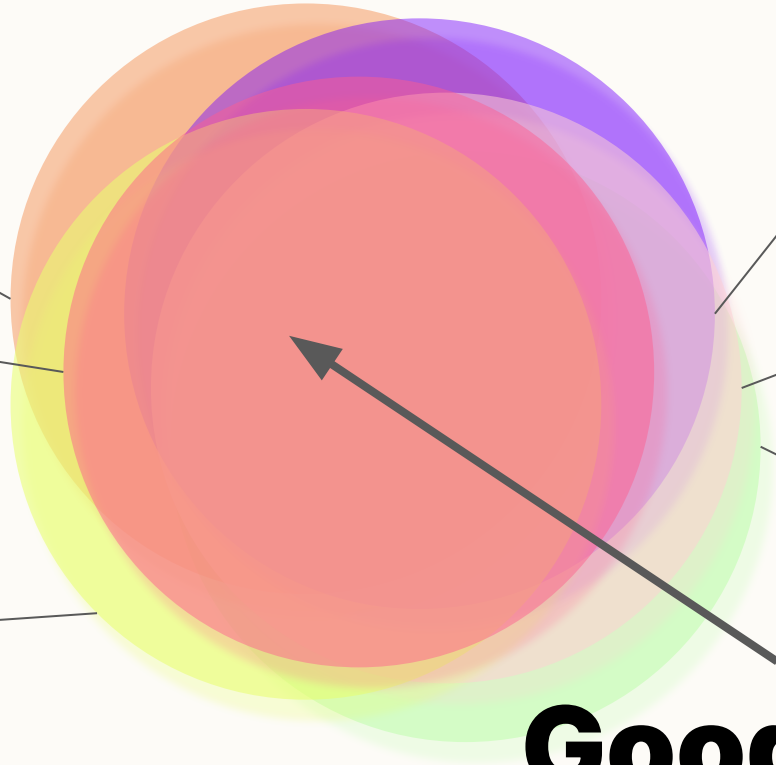
How you got these results

Good leader?

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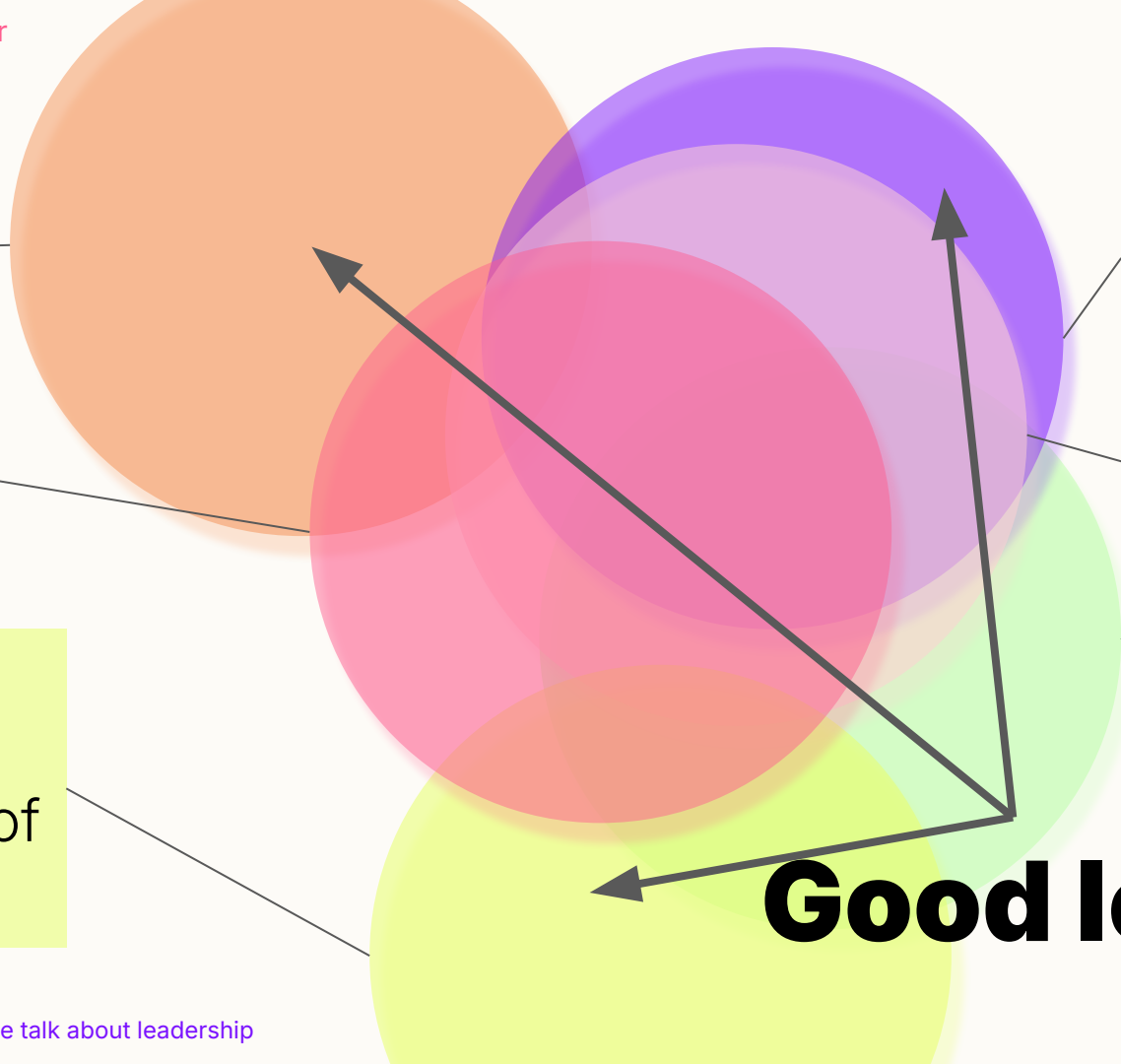
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How you got these results

Good leader?



What we talk about when we talk about leadership: 3 leadership ideas

Leadership Idea 1: Leaders innovate

"Leaders Innovate"

Product Roadmap: **"Something with AI"**

Product Roadmap: Something with...

AI
VR
NFTs
Machine Learning
Blockchain
Social Media
Mobile Phones
The Internet
Personal Computers
Fire
Rocks

Product Roadmap: "Something with

- Y**" It's the next big thing, says your boss
1. And TechCrunch
 2. You hear it's where all VC is going now
 3. Your customers will ask for it any day now
 4. And your investors
 5. And your board
 6. Hacker News: "It's too late for anyone who's not on it already"
 7. Your competition is *certainly* on it
 8. Your employees will ask about it any minute
 9. And Product
 10. You will surely need it to raise more money
 11. Every conference has sessions about it
 12. While you ~~wasted~~ spent time thinking about it, your competitor posted on LinkedIn that they're working on it
 13. Your boss asks when you'll ship it
 - 14.

"Leaders Innovate"
release their product [Claude] first and might steal all of their thunder.

And so they released ChatGPT to get out in front of Claude. And that was essentially the starting gun that launched the entire AI race.

I think it is fundamental to how Sam sees the world, that all of this stuff is inevitable. And if it's going to happen anyway, all other things being equal, you would rather be the person who did it, right? And get the credit and the glory and the users and the revenue. ...

AI developers might care about safety, but in the rush to be first in the field, the company who wins could actually be the company who cares about safety the least."

Casey Newton, technology journalist
Search Engine podcast, October 25, 2024

"Oops, consequences"

2014 Apple Health: No Menstruation tracking

2015 Google Photos labels Black people "Gorillas"

2016 Smart home devices incl. cameras stream home content publicly

2016 Microsoft's AI chatbot Tay takes on racist, sexist, homophobic personality, denies holocaust

2016 Google's speech recognition software struggles to understand women

2017 Facebook algorithms substantially contribute to ethnic cleansing in Myanmar

2017 Snapchat identified as pedophiles' go-to sexual exploitation tool

2017 FaceApp "hotness" filter pushes racist beauty standards.

CEO: *"Unfortunate side-effect caused by training set bias."*

2017 Trans YouTubers' videos used to train facial recognition software without their consent

2019 Self-driving cars fail to detect people with dark skin

2020 Lawsuit: Apple Watch's blood oxygen sensor racially biased against black people

2022 Meta's scientific research chatbot Galactica makes things up

2022 ChatGPT released with hallucinations, biases; copyright questions

2023 Microsoft's new chatbot in Bing would like to be human, wants to destroy, in love with user

2023 Google & Apple Photo Apps still can't find gorillas; label label shut down

2024 Google Gemini creates lethal food recipe

2024 Snap dismisses employee concerns over 10,000+ monthly reports of sextortion:

"Addressing child grooming would create privacy issues and be too expensive."

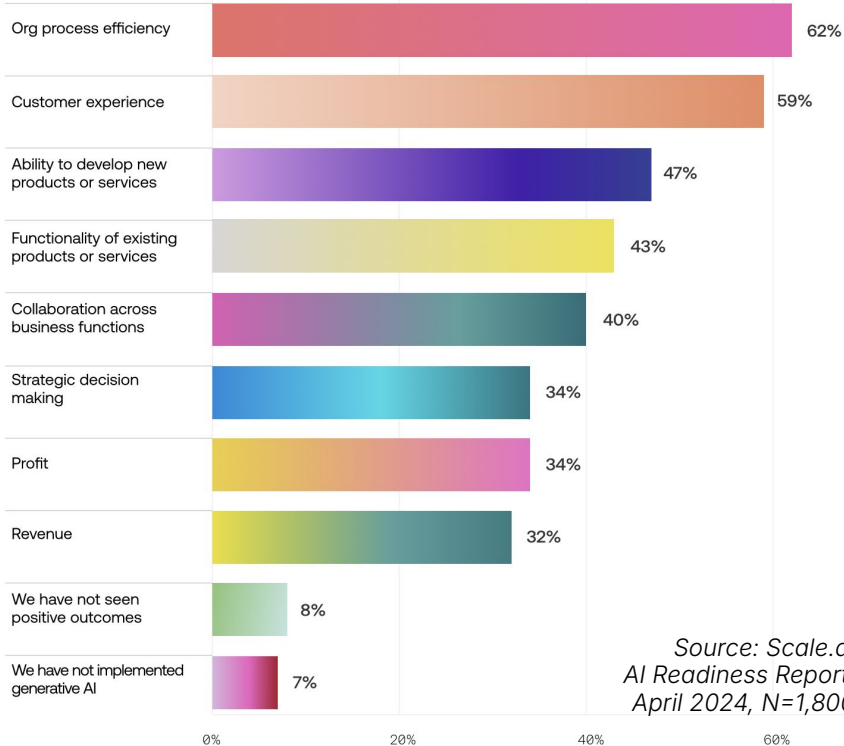
2024 50+ Roblox group chats with solicitation of child sexual exploitation content.

CEO: Roblox platform is *"a beacon for safety and civility."*

"Leaders Innovate"

The Hype Machine must never stop

What positive outcomes have you seen from generative AI adoption?

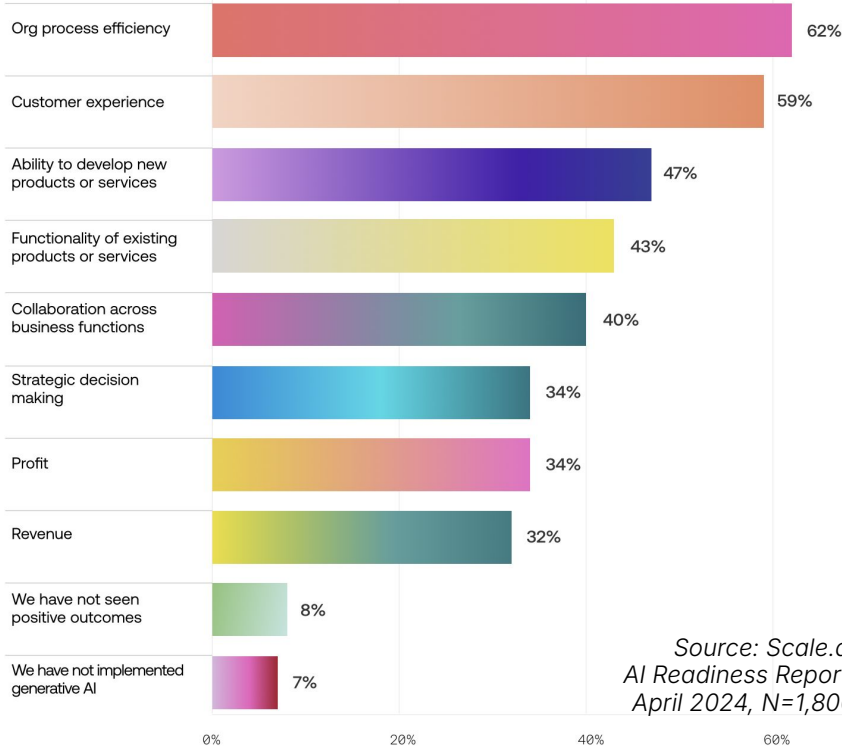


Source: Scale.ai
AI Readiness Report,
April 2024, N=1,800

"Leaders Innovate"

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 ADVENTURES IN AUGMENTATION

Google CEO says over 25% of new Google code is generated by AI

Source: arstechnica.com

**"There are those that have drunk the kool-aid.
There are those that have not.
And then there are those that are trying to mix up as
much kool-aid as possible.
I shall let you decide who sits in which basket."**

Nikhil Suresh, Executive Director, Hermit Tech, data science & engineer
*I Will F*cking Piledrive You If You Mention AI Again, June 2024*

"Oops, consequences"

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2024 Data centers alone are already consuming the equivalent of a top-10-energy-consuming country.

The greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of Bitcoin mining alone could be sufficient to push global warming beyond the Paris Agreement's goal of holding anthropogenic climate warming below 2°C.

AI is accelerating climate change: From 2024-2029. the datacenter industry is set to emit 2.5 billion tonnes of GHG emissions worldwide, 3x more than if Generative AI had not been developed.

**Our limitless pursuit
of shareholder value
is burning up the
planet, with
devastating impact
on humans.**



When it's leadership,
it's not called "carelessness", it's called

"Don't bring me problems, bring solutions"

"Bias to action"

"Sense of urgency"

"Disagree and commit"

"Move fast and break things"

"Better beg for forgiveness,
than ask for permission"



**When it's leadership,
it's not called "carelessness", it's called**

"Don't bring me problems, bring solutions"

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Recommendation 1:

Lead through, not with, the hype

- Don't take all headlines you see at face value
- Get to the core:
 - "What business/user problem are we trying to solve?"
 - "How short-term vs. long-term viable is this?"
 - "What are privacy, security, societal issues associated with it?"
 - "How will we mitigate the risks?"
 - "How much \$€ is this worth to explore?"
- Do good, boring engineering work; monitor, contain costs
- Invest in your operations and culture, build good teams
- Choose who you work for, hold companies accountable
- Build things & businesses not for fast returns and global scale
- Hold yourself accountable

Leadership Idea 1: Leaders innovate.

Hype Culture

Leadership Idea 2: Leaders get it done

"Leaders get it done"

"Fun" fact: Tech's herd mentality also applies to layoffs

"There is a herding effect in tech. If you look for reasons for why companies do layoffs, the reason is that everybody else is doing it.

I've had people say to me that they know layoffs are harmful to company well-being, let alone the well-being of employees, and don't accomplish much, but everybody is doing layoffs and their board is asking why they aren't doing layoffs also."

Jeff Shulman, professor, Foster School of Business, University of Washington

"Leaders get it done"

63% of engineering leaders are juggling increasingly broad roles and responsibilities:

"Filling in for more positions at once."

"I got assigned an entirely new role on top of my already demanding role."

"Started to code."

"The teams are now bigger than before."

"Complete chaos."

"Leaders get it done"

Many leaders are now responsible for

- People management, mentoring, development
- + Technical leadership, incl. strategy, decisions
- + Delivery management, incl. product & project management
- + Hands-on coding

"Leaders get it done"

Eierlegende Wollmilchsau, *noun*

Egg-laying wool milk sow

Ei·er·le·gen·de woll·milch·sau

[ˈaɪ̯əˌleːgə̯ndə ˈvɔlˌmɪlçˌzaʊ]

A person, thing, solution that supposedly only has advantages, satisfies all needs and requirements... and doesn't exist



"Leaders get it done"

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"Leaders get it done"

Many leaders are now responsible for

- People management, mentoring, development
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It's very, very difficult to impossible to do all of these well at all times without burning out.



Tackle ambiguity for you & your team with visibility

- Get good at managing up & alignment: Be hyper-clear about priorities, incl. what you're *not* doing bit.ly/manage-your-manager
- Document your work & impact, share with your boss
- Grow your community
- Get creative at finding/creating growth opportunities (those may be less exciting than before)

Share what you can to support your local community

Many of us are still in very fortunate circumstances.

If you can, share some of your skills, money, time, or energy:

- Become a mentor or sponsor; pass on your experience
- Neighborhood cleanup
- Join your local library
- Share tools with neighbours
- Make art
- Support local, independent journalism

"Leaders get it done"

Leadership Idea 2: Leaders get it done.

Hustle Culture

Leadership Idea 3: Leaders are authentic

"Leaders are authentic"

I'm over 35.

I've been in tech for 15+ years.

Statistically, it's

increasingly unlikely that I'm

here.

56% of women leaders leave tech industry 10-15 years shorter careers (2x more than men)

50% of women in tech leadership roles leave them by age 58.

From 1984-2023, the number of women tech leaders went from 35% to 28%.

2x more women than men in tech leadership roles feel burnt out.

From 2005-2024, the number of women in tech went from 22% to 22.6%.

An estimated 45% of those laid off in the 2021-2023 layoffs were women.

"Leaders are authentic"

"So, throughout your entire 15-year tech career, you've always been concerned that you might experience discrimination one day?"

"Leaders are authentic"

While we all talk about \$hype, many women, People of Color, queer & disabled leaders *also* talk about

Team members ignoring, speaking over them, and how to handle it without being labeled as "bossy"

After returning from parental leave, getting fewer opportunities than peers

When keeping everyone from talking over each other in meetings, being called "intimidating"

Being the expected coffee maker

Being told they're "not technical enough", despite their engineering degree

Being pushed into management as they're "good with people", despite wanting to remain technical leads

Whether to attend the next company offsite after repeated unwanted touching at previous events

How much to advocate for better culture without being told they're "difficult"

Being told they're "abrasive", "confrontational", "loud and dismissive", "not collaborative" when sharing a differing view

Being called "bitchy" after calling out they've been talked over

Being told to smile more by senior leaders

Being labeled as "aggressive" or "out of line" for showing ambition or asking for a raise

Being discriminated against at a company that has a strong public image of being "inclusive", and what to do when they're asked about what it's like to work there

How to deal with more likely being promoted during crisis or downturn when the risk of failure is highest ("glass cliff")

Being told they're not "passionate" enough because they don't have time for side projects

How much do I push for a company to do better, until I'm at risk of losing my job?

How can I still "lead" at my company, when the same company has turned against me?

VCs and founders who aren't safe to work with

How long they can hold out in this role, despite the toll it's taking on them, because they need the money and

- to protect their team from discriminatory senior leaders
- because many hiring managers immediately disqualify short tenure, and how do you talk about discrimination in your resume?!
- because they don't feel they can fail, as the only woman/Person of Colour/... in this role
- "at least here I know what I'm dealing with, it's not much better elsewhere anyway."

"Leaders are authentic"

Looking at leadership publications & hearing from leaders not personally impacted by these issues, there seems to be an assumption that sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of discrimination only occur to employees.

The numbers of women, People of Colour, queer, disabled leaders remaining so low is probably just an unrelated statistical mystery.

"Leaders are authentic"

Your values

Business needs

Your values & perception of you will

Who you are

Employees' values, wishes

Results of your work

How you got these results

Authenticity is for cis white men

"Leaders are authentic"

**Leadership can be lonely;
Leadership can be complicated;
Leadership can be stressful;
for some of us, it's more lonely,
complicated, and *also* stressful
because we aren't just accepted
as who we are.**

"Leaders are authentic"

Recommendation 4:

If you're experiencing discrimination, don't go it alone

- Know that you're not alone
- Know the history of tech
- Document your experiences: Dates, names, witnesses. Even if you never use it, have it.
- Consult a lawyer (*I'm not one*)
- Grow your community
- If at all possible: Don't sacrifice your mental or physical health for a job. Organizations are built to do well without you. You're not.

If you can, support your peers

- Volunteer to take notes
- Learn about what it's like to work in tech leadership for someone who doesn't look like you (*"being x in tech", allyship actions*)
- Don't let the women & People of Colour on your team be the only ones talking about safety, ethics, culture, equity, policy
- Check in with your peers, ask what they need
- Talk pay
- Start/support a workers' council/union (*Betriebsrat*)
- Believe people over your own experience

**3 Leadership Ideas:
Leaders innovate,
Leaders get it done
Leaders are authentic.**

Hype Culture. Hustle Culture. Hush Culture.

These issues are systemic: VC money, hockey stick growth curves, herd mentality, and, unfortunately, as we already know, capitalism.

**The more companies aim for fast growth and profits, the more investors want quick returns,
the harder it becomes to create environments that are survivable by humans.**

**While none of us can fix this on our own,
we're still in positions of power.**

**"The tech industry"
isn't just happening to us:**

Everyone of us is "the tech industry."

**What do you think makes
a good leader?**

**What do you think makes *you*
a good leader?**

**What impact do *you* want to
have, on your teams, and on the
small and big world around you?**

