

Empathy Is The Most Powerful Leadership Tool

By [Ginny Whitelaw](#)



Anything we're trying to make happen as a leader involves other people, and the fact is, most people don't have to follow us. They don't have to believe in our great ideas, buy our great products, or do what we want them to do. Even when we have authority--as parents of teenagers will tell you--our power doesn't go very far without others believing that what we want them to do is in their best interests. The pull of connecting to others and their interests is far more powerful than the push of control, especially when we find the intersection between their interests and our goals. How do we know what's truly in someone else's interests?

"Become the other person and go from there." It's the best piece of coaching advice I ever received, coming from Tanouye Roshi, and it applies equally to influence, negotiation, conflict, sales, teaching, and communication of all kinds. To become the other person is to listen so deeply that our own mind chatter stops; to listen with every pore on our body until we can sense how the other's mind works. To become the other person is to feel into her emotional state, see through her eyes, think like she thinks, and see how she views us, our proposition, and the situation at hand. To write it out or read it in serial fashion makes it sound like a lengthy, time-consuming process, but in fact, deep empathy conveys its insights in a flash, and our ability to empathize deepens with practice, as we learn to quiet our own inner state.

Once we become the other, we can sense what's in her interests, and influence becomes a matter of showing how our idea connects with those interests. That doesn't mean she will always agree with us or do what we want, but it does mean that our thoughts and actions are now coming from a larger place: one that accords both our interests and hers. Extending this empathetic approach, person by person, group by group, through

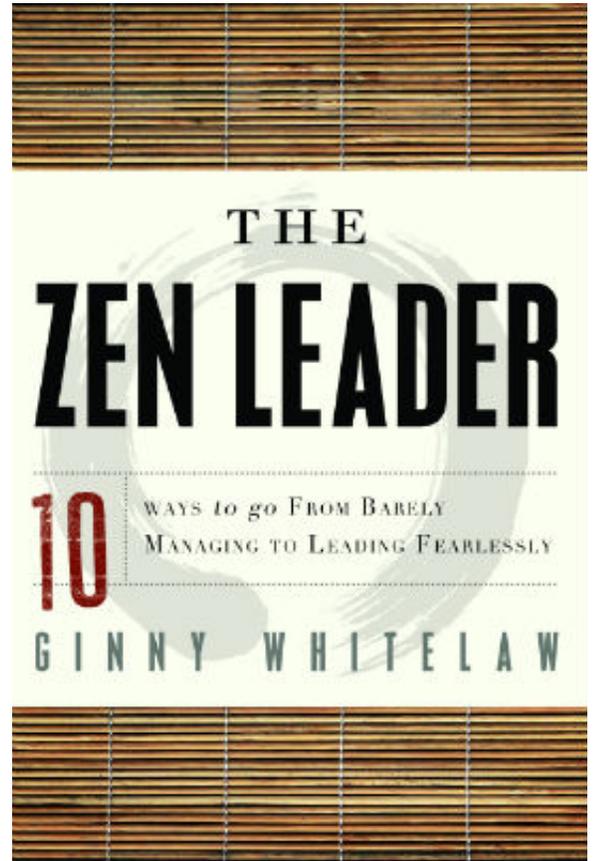
your world, you can see where your actions start to be informed by an ever larger context. Consequently, your ideas, actions, and direction will start to resonate within that larger context. You can start making big things happen, not by controlling, but by connecting; not by making war on them, but by becoming the people whose interests are served by those big things.

Become the other, and it opens up a world of understanding, in which communication becomes naturally influential, and influence becomes just another authentic dialogue. Influence is a two-way street, a give and take, a mutual learning. If I think influence is about getting another person to accept or act upon my idea, and that I will come away unchanged, I've mistaken it for control. The less you put "I" in influence, the more likely influence will occur. Influence has nothing to do with the strength of my argument, my data, eloquence, how loud or long I talk, how right I am, or how many big and powerful people I have behind me. Influence is not about me-in-my-skin at all. It is about the person I want to influence perceiving that my idea is in his or her interests. That's it. And as we've said, the surest way to do that is to become the other person and go from there:

- **Deeply understand** your own needs and interests: Go beneath the surface to unearth what you *really* want and why.
- **Become the other.** See through their eyes, think with their mind; sense its patterns. Consider what is truly in their interests.
- **Go from there.** Show how your idea is in their interests, either directly or through an exchange you offer.

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