

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews SASHA DICHTER



Sasha Dichter is the Co-Founder of 60 Decibels, a company that helps anyone, anywhere, listen to their customers to create more social impact. Formerly the Chief Innovation Officer at Acumen, a global organization changing the way the world tackles poverty by investing in companies, leaders and ideas, Dichter worked on Acumen's Lean Data Work, the Acumen Fellows Programs, and +Acumen, the world's school for social change.

Q&A

Jason Womack: *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?*

Sasha Dichter: I am interested in asking, “Where does our commitment to change as leaders come from?” My own starting point of personal development is grounded in a genuine intention to improve. What I’ve seen, in working with leaders, is that you have to have deep humility (to see where you need to grow) and also have belief in what you can become. If you’re defined by fear of failure you won’t be able to see your own potential. It’s both challenging and empowering to see clearly who you are today and, with that clarity, seek self-improvement.

Our intention to improve is grounded in purpose — (Stanford Professor Carol Dweck’s work, including her books “Mindset” and “Grit,” are fundamental reading for anyone interested in change). Only with this sense of purpose can we move to the question, “How do we do it?” Depth of intention for continual growth is the prerequisite.

JW: *What was your Defining Moment as a leader?*

SD: That’s a tough one! An important turning point for me was recognizing that how I wanted to be led and managed wasn’t going to be the best way for me to lead and manage everyone else. When I first started managing people I thought I needed to provide a goal and lots of space: “Here’s the mountain, here’s how you might want to scale it, now, GO!” I assumed that because I responded to that type of management, everyone else would too. Subsequently, I have worked on my skills in situational leadership, which starts with diagnosing the kind of stretches and managerial support that are right for each individual in each situation. My job is to enable others to succeed, and support them in the right (evolving) ways to get there.

JW: *What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

SD: The rate of change in the world around us is accelerating, so standing still is no longer an option. We need to see continued growth and evolution as part of our everyday. We cannot be static. I feel like this message is sometimes missed.

Continued

Q&A with Sasha Dichter

Sasha Dichter is a leader who is committed to gradual, deliberate change.

He understands the importance of adjusting his leadership style to fit the development level of the people he is trying to support, creating opportunities for learning and growth along the way.

In both my personal and professional life, I have seen how much people can change. At the same time, most organizational cultures inhibit people's growth. While it's easy to say, "It's OK to fail," look at what typically happens when people do. The author and Wharton professor Adam Grant reminds us that there are two kinds of failure, and if failure is going to lead to a successful learning experience, it has to be free of shame.

JW: *What do you think are the most important questions effective leaders need to ask of themselves?*

SD: It all starts with where we focus our energy and intention. In the context of personal development, that means asking, "What is the most important new skill or set of skills for me to work on now?" Once this question surfaces, I can get the input I need, whether that's through reading or seeking feedback from colleagues or consultation with a coach or mentor, on how to work on these skills.

Where people sometimes get stuck is in letting themselves get overwhelmed by changes that seem too big. To overcome this, ask "How do I break that skill down into learnable small pieces?" For example, if my intention is to become a more effective storyteller, that's not something I can do all at once. There are fears I might have to face, techniques I need to develop, and lots of practicing to do. Making sense of all those pieces and allowing ourselves time to work on each of them is essential.

This is where the assistance and guidance of coaches and mentors is particularly relevant.

JW: *What are some of your own habits or routines?*

SD: I try to work on consistently to making small — even minuscule — changes that can ultimately make a big difference. I give myself plenty of time to make these small adjustments in behavior either through self-study or seeking assistance. It can feel like a long road, and progress is hard to see, but it's the only way I've found that really works.

In terms of working with others, I try to help them do the same thing. To partner with them, my first job is to really understand them. This is why I think the most important trait a leader can have is to be a

voracious listener. I need to understand what they can and cannot do well, and really understand why. Often I find it helps to ask, "What's the story they tell about themselves?"

JW: *How do you listen — and what do you listen for — so you hear more than what is just being said?*

SD: I'm sure I'll be working on this for the rest of my life—I know I'm not all the way there yet. The most helpful advice I received on listening is to start with deep curiosity. This is how, in the words of Stephen Covey, we listen with the intent to understand, not the intent to reply. I try to couple that with seeing things they can't quite see — or believe in — about their potential.

Then it's all about how to help them get there, and the balance of supporting and challenging them along the way. If someone is really committed to growth, and up to the task, they'll often need and respond to a degree of toughness. That can be a way of saying "this is what I know you're capable of" even if they don't believe it yet.

At the same time, it's not my job to define everything for them — that's a mistake. It's easy to defer the big decisions to an authority figure. When we do this, we're off the hook, because someone else then owns that decision and its consequences. To me, leadership is fundamentally about mobilizing people to create change. If I, as the "leader," am always playing the role of deciding what comes next, then I'm limiting the potential of those around me. Ultimately, leadership needs to come from all of us, and that can be scary both for the person in charge and the person working for them.

JW: *How would you define your leadership philosophy in just one sentence?*

SD: We all need teachers, and it is our job to find them. They are everywhere. ●