

A CEO's Non-traditional Perspective on Leadership: Leading from the Back of the Boat

By Katharine Baker

“Leadership is really about asking questions and letting people answer them. I think it’s the only way you get your team to think. If you’re constantly talking at them, they don’t have time to think,” says Anne Berkowitch, co-founder and chief executive of a company called SelectMinds, in an [interview](#) about her beliefs about leadership for the *New York Times*.

Every Sunday morning I turn to page 2 of the Business Section of the *New York Times* and look for Adam Bryant’s interviews of business leaders. His column is called Openers, Corner Office, and he seeks out a remarkable group of business people, asking each of them about the keys to effective leadership, how they got their start, how they learned about leadership, and how they hire the very best people for their business. Bryant also often (but not always) asks these leaders about the families they grew up in and the lessons they learned from their parents.

Although Anne Berkowitch probably has no familiarity with Systems-Based Leadership™, her thinking as it emerged in the interview with Adam Bryant is remarkably congruent with the approach we describe in *Leading a Business in Anxious Times*. She says she learned through experience that “being smart isn’t the same thing as being a leader.” She had to learn to be transparent about all aspects of the company and not to micromanage the people who worked for her, but to ask a lot of questions and listen to people’s answers, as they gave her their best thinking. Her core metaphor for her leadership comes from boating where you steer from the back of the boat, rather than being “like a military general out in front of the troops and the first one rushing into battle.”

Berkowitch’s leadership is self-taught, according to the interview, but she appears to be a calm, thoughtful person who has tried hard to figure out what makes an effective work team, and how she can stay out of people’s way, so that they can function most productively individually and as teams. She is undoubtedly fairly high on the scale of differentiation, although she doesn’t talk about experiences from her family of origin. Nor is she familiar with the idea of emotional triangles among her employees, the concept of the workplace as an emotional system, or how she as a business leader will manage herself and think clearly when stress escalates, as it inevitably will from time to time.

I am intrigued with Adam Bryant’s weekly interviews and I plan to comment on them regularly for our newsletter. I hope you too will read them and let us know which ones are particularly interesting and useful for you as a business leader.