

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Quiet Leadership: Leading from the Invisible Middle

By Kimberly Taylor-Benns

When leadership is discussed within traditional hierarchies, influence is often assumed to flow from the top down. My own leadership journey began with an early lesson that challenged that assumption. At eighteen, I landed my first job out of high school. A reality check, my first paycheck, made it clear that my aspirations required a different type of investment. My only path forward was more education. I enrolled in college the following semester.

As a first-generation student, I also worked in the Organized Crime Research Department for law professors; after some time, I was offered a full-time job as secretary to the dean of students for the School of Law. That experience and the roles that followed over the next seventeen years placed me in a unique position to closely observe senior leadership decisions, yet I was deeply embedded in daily operations, allowing me to understand their human impact. Over time, I came to see leadership not as a position, but as a practice often exercised most powerfully from the middle.

The Invisible Middle

Quiet leadership often resides in what can be called the “invisible middle,” a space where leadership is exercised quietly but with profound impact. It is not a role defined by visibility or title alone, but by influence earned through trust, collaboration, and consistency. In this quiet leadership, power is exercised not through authority, but through alignment, advocacy, and the ability to move systems forward, often without fanfare, but *always* with purpose.

Leading from the middle requires translating broad strategic goals into operational realities while simultaneously elevating insights, barriers, and innovations from the front lines. It demands credibility in every direction, upward, downward, and laterally. In my culture, we call this “street cred.”

Nowhere is this more evident than in higher education, where shared governance, distributed authority, and consensus-driven cultures require leadership

without positional power. Middle leaders rely not on command, but on influence, relationships, and clarity of purpose.

Quiet Leadership in Action

Quiet leadership is neither passive or avoidant. It is active, deliberate, and rooted in humility and resolve. Joseph Badaracco (2002) characterizes quiet leaders as those who “work behind the scenes, rely on careful thought, and act decisively without seeking the spotlight.” Quiet leaders prioritize doing the right thing over being recognized for it. This kind of leadership thrives in the middle. While senior leaders set the direction and frontline staff execute the day-to-day, middle leaders hold space for both. They defuse conflict, promote collaboration, and create conditions in which others can lead. In this way, quiet leadership is an act of service. It values sustainability over speed, systems over spotlight, and long-term trust over short-term attention.

I recall that while serving as associate provost, I encountered a recurring cross-divisional conflict between enrollment and student life teams, primarily at the start of the fall term. Each unit operates under intense pressure: enrollment goals, regulatory compliance, and housing logistics. Communication deteriorated into finger-pointing, and the strain began to affect student service.

From the senior leadership’s perspective, the issue appeared procedural. It wasn’t. It was human. Rather than escalating the conflict, I initiated a series of one-on-one conversations, not to solve problems, but to listen. Each director felt unheard, undervalued, and protective of their team. The tension wasn’t about timelines; it was about legitimacy.

I created a neutral space for dialogue and began each conversation by grounding us in our shared purpose: serving students with excellence and integrity. Through facilitated planning sessions involving a group of campus partners, I intentionally positioned each leader as a co-owner of the outcome. Over time, mutual respect replaced defensiveness. No team got everything they wanted, but team members felt heard, valued, and accountable to one another.

No memos were sent. No credit was claimed. But student complaints dropped, processing time improved, and teams began to collaborate, not because they had to, but because they chose to. That is quiet leadership: alignment over authority, restoration over resolution.

In another instance, as associate provost, I inherited a portfolio of graduate programs that were under-enrolled, operating in silos, and not offered on the main campus. The dominant narrative was that these programs were failing, and by extension, that the team lacked innovation or market insight.

I scheduled meetings with department leadership not to critique, but to ask: *What’s working? What are you proud of? What do you need to be successful?* From these conversations, a pattern emerged. Faculty had ideas but lacked the “know-how” to move the needle. The challenge was a combination of innovation and infrastructure. I shared the goal of growing graduate enrollment with my director of undergraduate admissions (who was brilliant). I charged her with mentoring the graduate program director to: *collaborate on marketing and institutional research, develop custom dashboards, and pilot campaigns in recruiting graduate programs.* Within a year, one program experienced an increase in new applications.

Again, no public credit followed. But the narrative shifted from “underperforming” to “under-supported but rising.” Quiet leadership creates the conditions for latent excellence to surface.

Emotional Intelligence and the Human Side of Leadership

To lead quietly and effectively from the middle requires a high degree of emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman (1998) asserts that emotionally intelligent leaders demonstrate self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management—core traits for middle leaders navigating complex interpersonal terrain.

Whether mediating departmental priorities, mentoring emerging talent, or advocating upward without overstepping, middle leaders must be attuned to context. They ask, “*What does this moment need from me?*” rather than “*How can I prove myself?*” This level of self-regulation and situational awareness builds psychological

safety, strengthens teams, and encourages authenticity, a critical factor in retention and engagement in higher education settings (Brown 2018).

Emotional Intelligence and Quiet Leadership

Early in my leadership journey, I questioned whether my quieter style was a liability. Leadership is so often portrayed as bold, outspoken, and commanding. Over time, however, I realized that my quietness wasn't a weakness; it was a strength, especially when coupled with the principles of *emotional intelligence* (EI).

Goleman (1995) describes emotional intelligence as the capacity to recognize, understand, and manage both our own emotions and those of others. For me, this has been the foundation of leading without needing to be the loudest voice in the room. My approach resonates with what Boyatzis and McKee (2005) call *resonant leadership*, a style that fosters trust, hope, and compassion through emotional awareness.

Self-awareness is where I've seen the biggest impact. By paying attention to my inner voice when I feel anxious before speaking or when I sense myself withdrawing, I now pause and choose how to respond, or I have resolved that I have the right to remain silent—until I determine how I should respond. Where I used to force myself to mimic more extroverted leaders or feel pressure to provide an immediate response, I now lean into my natural tendency to listen carefully, think intentionally, and respond when ready. Recently, my approach was validated by my current vice president, who shared that he'd prefer the pause, the time needed to think through a situation or question and provide the best or correct answer. Cary Cherniss (2010) supports this: self-awareness enables leaders to regulate their behavior and adapt more effectively.

Empathy has been the consistent cornerstone of my leadership. Quiet leaders often notice what goes unsaid—for example, the colleague who withdraws in meetings, the student whose enthusiasm masks self-doubt. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013) emphasize empathy as central to effective leadership, and in practice, it has allowed me to connect with others in mean-

ingful ways. Sometimes, my most impactful leadership moments come not from delivering a powerful speech but from asking a thoughtful question that gives someone else space to shine.

Finally, throughout my career, *self-regulation* has helped me create stability for my team. Even when I feel uncertainty, I've learned to ground myself so I don't amplify stress. This aligns with Boyatzis and McKee's (2005) point that emotionally intelligent leaders sustain positive climates, which in turn inspire resilience in others.

No leadership style can be examined without emotional intelligence. Looking at the literature, I see my own story reflected: quiet leadership is not at odds with effectiveness; quite the opposite, when informed by emotional intelligence, it can be deeply transformative. What I once thought of as a limitation, my tendency toward reflection and calm, is, in fact, my strength.

The Space Between: Quiet Leadership and the Restoration of Trust

Higher education operates like many organizational systems; trust is as critical as structure. While serving on the cabinet alongside fellow vice presidents and assistant vice presidents, I led initiatives that intersected directly with their portfolios. A requested, submitted, and approved proposal to overhaul new student move-in (not under my portfolio) resulted in increased confidence in my work from senior leadership and campus partners. This unintentionally strained my relationship with a fellow vice president. Communication stalled, collaboration slowed, and assumptions filled the silence.

Rather than escalating, I practiced quiet leadership, listening carefully, observing patterns, and interrupting silence with intention. Eventually, I invited a direct conversation: "*There's been a shift in how we're working together. Can we talk about what's happening?*" My request was met with a resounding "NO."

What surfaced was not betrayal, but misalignment. Unspoken assumptions and small missteps had created distance. Once named, the issues became manageable. We clarified expectations, reset communication norms,

and restored functional trust. Quiet leadership in moments like this is not about winning or even fully resolving conflict. It is about restoration. Trust does not return through force—it returns through conversation.

The Lesson: Leadership is Not a Title

One of the most powerful lessons of leading from the middle is this: Leadership is not a title, it's a choice. Middle leaders often guide without recognition, shape culture without formal credit, and sustain progress without applause. Success is defined not by visibility but by consistency and impact. For those who choose to lead quietly, their influence often endures far beyond their time in the role.

The work of quiet leaders may not trend on social media or be highlighted in board reports, but their teams perform, their systems improve, and their insti-

tutions move forward. In his book *Quiet Leadership*, Carlo Ancelotti (2016) states, “There is power and authority in being calm and measured, in building trust and making decisions coolly, in using influence and persuasion, and in being professional in your approach” (x).

Conclusion: Legacy in the Quiet Work

Grosz states (2021), “The best quiet leaders stop from time to time to reflect and embrace the lessons they are learning” (17). In an era where visibility often equates to value, I am reminded that quiet leadership is a deeper truth: institutions are held together not by loud voices but by those who consistently show up with readiness, wisdom, and service. Leading from the middle is not a lesser form of leadership; it's a deeper one. And when paired with the intentionality of quiet leadership, it becomes a powerful force for lasting change.

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