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Breaking "Syllabus Syndrome":
How Great Leaders Motivate and Empower the Next Generation of Talent
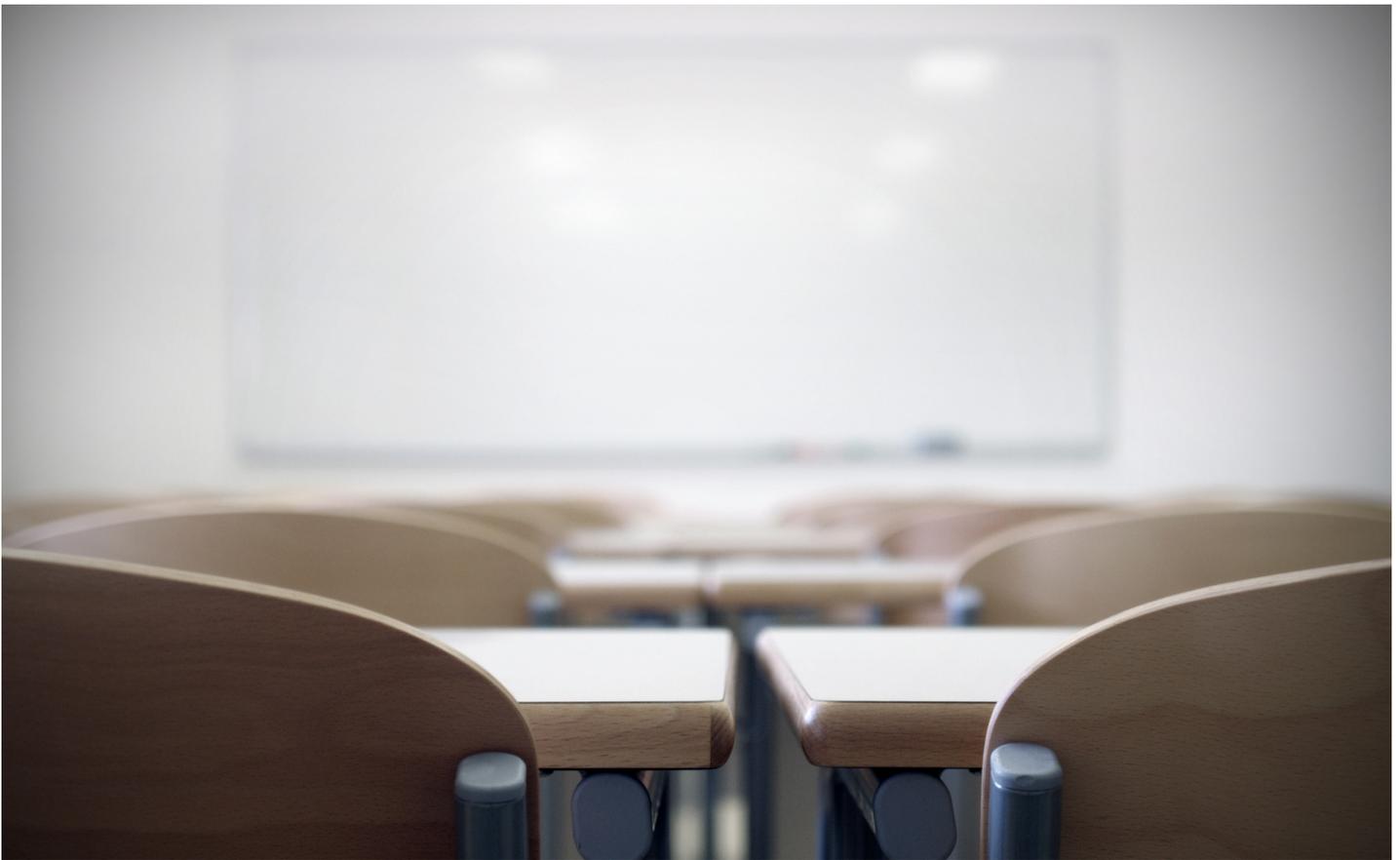
by Dan Kempson

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Leaders must move teams from needing step-by-step direction to owning decisions and acting with confidence.

Nearly every business leader has faced this scenario: you give clear guidance on next steps, yet a team member still hesitates to act without first confirming that it is the "correct" path forward.

This lack of comfort in making independent decisions has been growing in recent years. A 2024 *HSBC* [study](#) found that over 50% of Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z employees feel unprepared to make decisions, with nearly one in three Millennials reporting they feel paralyzed by choice. Unfortunately, a need for prescriptive guidance makes it difficult to thrive in a modern business environment battered

by new forces (e.g., AI, global instability), particularly for leadership roles where sound judgement is essential to decision-making.

In our work coaching executives, we've coined this phenomenon "Syllabus Syndrome" because it is as if the team member needs a school syllabus spelling out every assignment, every action, and exactly how to earn an A. We've helped many CxO leaders work through this dynamic with teams of Boomers and Gen X, but as Millennials (the eldest of whom is turning 45 this year) and Gen Z take on larger roles, it's becoming even more prevalent.

> Here's the reality: if you're a C–suite leader today, or will be in the next few years, your success depends on moving from managing a team to leading leaders. Breaking "Syllabus Syndrome" is central to making that shift.

Five Ways to "Flip the Syllabus"

The solution isn't to eliminate the syllabus, it's to redefine what it means to set expectations and motivate your team to act. Here are five proven ways to make the syllabus work for you and your team:

1. Focus the syllabus on outcomes, not actions.

Success in school and early career often comes from mastering prescribed actions and repeating them consistently. But as people advance to higher-level manager and leadership roles, that approach breaks down; strategic thinking and real decision-making can't be fully scripted. Shift from action-based scorecards to outcome-based expectations and clear deadlines. Support their learning through frequent, focused check-ins on progress until they start to build this muscle.

See it in action: Head of Finance for a $5B+ company

This leader set an ambitious goal: to transform his finance team from pure reporters of results into strategic business partners. The team had buttoned-up monthly and quarterly reporting, but assumed consistency alone equaled excellence. This leader expanded the syllabus by shifting from top-down cascaded targets to bottom-up planning, where finance partners in each business unit set their own goals and owned how their teams achieved them. He reset expectations from "deliver accurate outputs" to "co-own performance outcomes." The result? A finance function that now co-creates strategy with the business, instead of just reflecting it.

2. Have team members build out their own syllabus.

For each project or role component, ask team members to develop the syllabus details themselves (e.g., next steps, full project plans, major decision points, etc.). Your role is to review, provide feedback, and ask what support they need, which builds their strategic thinking capability and allows you to

delegate with more confidence.

It's important to note that delegation works both ways. Set clear expectations for proactive communication from your team and maintain alignment. As trust grows, ask them to email you their understanding of the direction and next steps. These quick sense checks are invaluable for catching misalignment early without you needing to drive every detail.

3. Make understanding the syllabus a team effort.

Early- to mid-career professionals learn tremendously by watching peers navigate complex problems and succeed. Six years into the hybrid work era, however, Millennials and Gen Z have far less access to this kind of informal peer learning. If you are among the 70% of managers who feel unprepared to lead a hybrid workforce (Gallup), consider these approaches to foster peer connection:

- Build tailored forums where teams can share their work and best practices in a structured way. To give participants the space to open up naturally, allow these to be team led at first (and perhaps don't attend the full session).

- Create peer mentorships which team members can opt into that a) focus on discrete themes focused on independent thought and decision making, and b) have a consistent, structured cadence.

- Discuss cultural norms and expectations alongside business goals, helping your team understand how to show up in new, changing, or challenging situations (for example, when to move fast versus when to wait for consensus).

4. Engage your team members beyond the syllabus.

Millennial workers crave authenticity, transparency, and clarity more than other generations. Feed that by providing frequent, consistent, and constructive feedback, particularly on the "how." How do they communicate? How do they make decisions? How do they collaborate? In addition, share your own decision-making process and reasoning openly. This transparency builds trust, accelerates learning, and helps them internalize the standard instead of waiting for instructions.

5. At times, let the syllabus get torn up by rewarding new ideas and bold action.

While Gen Z and Millennials may hesitate to act, they also thrive when permitted to be more creative at work. A 2023 study led by Richard Daker and published in *Nature* suggests that anxiety around creative tasks can be reduced by directly engaging in those creative tasks. As a leader, in addition to celebrating excellent execution, intentionally reward creativity and new ideas (even when they don't always pan out). By removing fear around trying something different, you unlock your team's willingness to take calculated risks.

ghSMART's CEO Genome™ research shows that decisive CEOs are 12 times more likely to be high performers, and that a potentially flawed decision outperforms no decision at all. Build confidence in your team's ability to challenge the status quo and make decisions that embrace pragmatic risk by 1) removing unnecessary risk through early, low-stakes decision-making opportunities; 2) rewarding bold or new ideas, rather than just incremental changes; and 3) sharing examples of your own past decisions, including what worked and what didn't.

See it in action: Business Unit President with a $1B+ P&L

This leader inherited a team conditioned by her predecessor to seek approval before acting. To shift the culture, she created two forums for peer-driven learning and innovation: a twice-monthly leadership session and an open "suggestions box" where anyone could propose ideas. By making creativity and new ideas central to how the team operated, she effectively changed team behavior and drove measurable improvements in financial performance.

Conclusion

Breaking "Syllabus Syndrome" is about fundamentally redefining how you measure leadership success for yourself and your team. By moving your team from dependency to ownership, from scripted actions to sound judgment, and from fear to confidence, you unlock their full potential. The leaders who master this transition will build high-performing teams equipped to thrive in uncertainty—and accelerate their own path to the C-suite.

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