

# Leadership at Westwing – good leader, bad leader

by Stefan Smalla, May 2014

*Westwing is a bold, young company. Our leaders are guiding their teams and peers on a rapid path, take on immense responsibility and develop junior people. Our leaders must be the ones that junior team members aspire to become. Westwing will fulfill our vision if our leaders truly develop into the best of the best. – Thus, the right leadership discipline is as crucial as anything at Westwing. What follows is our leadership ambition.*

## A good leader at Westwing ...

- ... is passionate about the trifecta of customers, style, business.
- ... is decisive and takes the risk of potential mistakes.
- ... prioritizes ruthlessly and is highly focused.
- ... makes shit happen, is pragmatically driving towards results.
- ... is wildly ambitious, instills excellence, is pleased but never satisfied.
- ... is detail-oriented.
- ... thrives under pressure, feels positively challenged by obstacles, aims very high.
- ... is a team player and connects people across functions and countries.
- ... is engaging and inspiring.
- ... is a great coach and develops the team, but also oneself.
- ... truly cares about the team, professionally and on a personal level.
- ... is open, honest, and direct.
- ... is a clear and to-the-point communicator across communication channels.
- ... is fast.
- ... is a genuinely nice person.

## A good leader at Westwing is **passionate about the trifecta of customers, style, business.**

- A good leader cares deeply about our customers, never forgetting the customer experience in all of her actions. She deeply understands the importance of style, has respect for style-based decisions, and knows that many decisions will not be analytically founded but driven by pure style considerations. She breathes our business: She exudes enthusiastic passion for where we are going, how we are meeting our targets, what our financials are, how our team is doing, what our culture is.
- A bad leader is not passionate, but simply does her 9-5 job without really caring. She does not feel with our customers and does not work around obstacles to find solutions for them. She looks with an analytical mind's arrogance on the style side of our business and fails to understand that this is our true differentiation. She simply works too one-dimensionally.

## A good leader at Westwing is **decisive and takes the risk of potential mistakes.**

- A good leader takes decisions as fast as possible, as only decisions move the business forward. She accepts that some of those decisions will be wrong, yet it is better to take some wrong decisions and keep moving vs always waiting and keeping the organization at bay. A good leader knows that decisions involve painful trade-offs, and she welcomes the clarity that decisions provide. She empowers her team to do the same: 'you decide' is a key part of her vocabulary, and she accepts that a delegated decision might look different than her own. Once a decision has been taken, she clearly communicates it and ensures speedy implementation. If a decision turns out to be wrong, she rapidly reverses course, explains the new decision, and does not look back.
- A bad leader shies away from decisions, waiting for ever more information and postponing, thereby crippling the organization's ability to move forward. A bad leader is afraid of painful trade-offs, hoping that by closing her eyes, those trade-offs will disappear.

## A good leader at Westwing **prioritizes ruthlessly and is highly focused.**

- A good leader prioritizes – amid all competing choices – the highest-impact ones and focuses herself and the team ruthlessly just on those few priorities; she is not about starting many things, but she is about finishing things to results. She always knows her top 3 priorities, and she spends the vast majority of her time on those. She proactively cuts down the number of things to pursue. She knows that many things are vital (drink, breathe, eat), but even those have priorities (breathe before drink before eat).
- A bad leader does not prioritize enough, overloading her team with too many topics that only get halfway done. She is afraid of dropping an important topic, forgetting she will otherwise just pretend to do it and not find the time to properly execute anyway.

### A good leader at Westwing **makes shit happen, is pragmatically driving towards results.**

- A good leader does not care for a perfect solution that cannot be implemented; she always prefers a fully implemented good solution to a half-ass implemented great solution. A good leader does not obsess over problems, but finds solutions rapidly and drives them to implementation. A good leader forces her team to get into action faster than they feel comfortable with, as she knows that only implementation shows whether something really works. A good leader cuts long discussions short once an 80/20 outcome has been reached. A good leader neither fakes optimism nor falls into pessimism, but locks sight with the target and implements, come hell or whatever. A good leader makes shit happen and refuses to be measured by anything else but results.
- A bad leader focuses on problems, has hard time moving to solutions. She over-discusses problems and wastes time in meetings without outcomes.

### A good leader at Westwing is **wildly ambitious, instills excellence, is pleased but never satisfied.**

- A good leader has ambition to change the world, and pushes her team beyond the boundaries of what they think is possible. She demands excellence all around. When her team thinks they have challenged themselves enough, she pushes them further and demands yet another step forward, even if her team is not sure how to get there. She is pleased by progress, but never satisfied – knowing that fulfilling our vision will take many years of further progress. She is not satisfied with mediocre implementations. She knows that even the best athletes in the world have coaches and improve on a daily basis; she demands that from her team too.
- A bad leader is satisfied too early and too cocky about progress. She fears overstretching her team too early. She does not have a good feeling for when she needs to get into the trenches with the team, but she delegates the details and thus cannot differentiate mediocrity from excellence.

### A good leader at Westwing is **detail-oriented.**

- A good leader knows minute details of the business better than her reports. She is interested in how everything works in her area and beyond. She challenges her team on every single detail, because she knows that in a startup it's the details that make the difference between success and mediocrity. She instills a culture of almost maniac attention to details. She probes down the causes of problems until fully understood. She has a huge aversion against discussion about generalities and high-level guidance. A good leader at Westwing knows that over time, her job makes her somewhat get out of the details, but she hates every part of that and only gives ground grudgingly – permanently maintaining a level of access to details that others might consider obsessive.
- A bad leader dabbles in generalities. She is proud to delegate details, and she aims to become less detailed as her team grows. She won't be interested in why problems appear but just demand them to be fixed – instead of jumping into the details with her team.

### A good leader at Westwing **thrives under pressure, feels positively challenged by obstacles, aims very high.**

- A good leader is passionate about Westwing and never ever loses faith in eventual success, even while nothing is perfect yet, problems are popping up everywhere, day-to-day feels like a warzone, competitors are gaining, team morale is being shaken up, and demands by her supervisors are ever increasing ... That's what it is at Westwing and any startup for that matter, and a good leader welcomes this environment, as it provides opportunity to build your own path and have meaningful impact. A good leader takes full responsibility for problems, if selfmade or thrown upon, and takes charge until fixed – until the next tough problem occurs, and also that will be solved. She also aims very high – often too high – and risks that she only achieves 80% of the target; she rather aims too high to slightly miss than losing ambition and always playing it safe.
- A bad leader takes a big-company attitude and feels negatively threatened by problems. She does not understand that if there were no problems, there would be no market opportunity. Instead of seeing progress, she is discouraged by the gap to perfection. A bad leader sandbags and only commits to targets that she can easily achieve, thereby underperforming vs the full potential.

### A good leader at Westwing is **a team player and connects people across functions and countries.**

- A good leader thrives as part of a team. She leverages the abilities of the worldwide Westwing group to the fullest, knowing about what's going on where and being able to identify from whom to learn. She 'copies with pride' from others. She proactively shares lessons learned, good and bad, so that others can learn. She pushes her team and is a crucial part of her team to get things done.
- A bad leader tries to go alone, proving that she doesn't need others. She keeps knowledge to herself, and she suffers from reinventing the wheel everytime as she is not enough connected with others to know better.

### A good leader at Westwing is **engaging and inspiring.**

- A good leader is someone her team loves to work for because they feel that together they can change the world, learn together, and have fun doing it. She inspires others to reach for the stars. She engages not only on an analytical/fact level, but emotionally by showing her personality. She has edge. She is ok being unpopular from time to time, and she always leads from the front (esp. steps up in times of crisis). She is a talent magnet. She has a team that follows her to the edge of the world and jumps if she asks that, because they trust her. She also engages and inspires towards peers and supervisors. She is someone others aspire to become, and she is an example of how to act and succeed. She is truly authentic, someone who does what she says and says what she does.
- A bad leader is an autocrat who does her job, but does not inspire others to follow. She avoids edge because she fears putting herself out there. She lacks personality for fear of making mistakes, so that there is nothing to be inspired about or engaged with.

A good leader at Westwing is **a great coach and develops the team, but also oneself.**

- A good leader focuses a high share of her time on coaching her team, as a group and individually. She coaches mostly not in general terms, but gets down with the team to work on problems and solutions, stepping back every once in a while to explain – she is a ‘shower’ not just a ‘teller’. She gives frequent and brutally honest feedback. She focuses on understanding her own weaknesses, asks for feedback, and never stops to improve herself – without losing her edge. She develops superstars in her team.
- A bad leader hardly finds the time to coach because she always believes she has too much work to do, failing to see that one of her top priorities as a leader is coaching. When she coaches, she does so without purpose and in a rush. She does not improve.

A good leader at Westwing **truly cares about the team, professionally and on a personal level.**

- A good leader genuinely cares about every individual member of her team. She will want to make each one professionally successful. In addition, she will care about her team members’ personal well-being, esp. ensuring right work-life-balance (which means different things for different team members), allowing individuals to work as important for them (e.g., sometimes leaving earlier, coming later, etc.) while still ensuring output and performance. A good leader knows her team members’ personal lives and cares about that. She shares a laugh with her team and also supports in difficult times, knowing that there is more to life than work.
- A bad leader treats her team purely as ‘human resources’. She will be needlessly uniform in treating her team members, not taking care of the individuals’ preferences. She will not know much about the dreams and ambitions of her team.

A good leader at Westwing is **open, honest, and direct.**

- A good leader openly communicates at all times with her supervisor, her peers, and her reports. She directly approaches complicated topics and does not shy away from raising disagreements, up and down the organization. Even on hard and cumbersome topics, she is courageous and engaged so as to challenge the status quo, and follow the obligation to dissent. She openly and publicly praises. She openly and privately criticizes, with concrete examples and path to improve. Everything she does passes the ‘sunshine test’. She demands honesty, openness, and directness tirelessly from her team. She will not make false promises, even under pressure maintaining truthfulness. Once a decision has been made, she might disagree but fully commit.
- A bad leader hides problems, falsely assuming either not to bother her peers/reports or not to get reprimanded by her supervisors. She shuts up even when criticism is appropriate. She is backstabbing, not openly disagreeing.

A good leader at Westwing is **a clear and to-the-point communicator across communication channels.**

- A good leader communicates with purpose and poise, understanding that communication must be consciously managed. She focuses on effective communication, i.e. clarity – makes unambiguous points, puts herself in the receiver’s shoes to ensure she gets understood, avoids empty phrases like the plague, is concrete and focused like a laser, makes sharp points. She also communicates efficiently – makes her arguments succinctly and gets straight to the point, communicates as briefly as possible while still being clear. She knows when to use which communication medium best, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each. She knows how to run effective and brutally efficient meetings. She leverages 1on1s efficiently. She uses email for asynchronous communication and is a best-practice user of emails. She is extremely responsive in all communication, being available for her team when required, helping colleagues. She prioritizes face-to-face and verbal communication when possible.
- A bad leader is hard to understand for her supervisor, peers, and reports. Her messages need interpretation. She leads long and unproductive meetings. Her emails are hard to understand.

A good leader at Westwing is **fast.**

- A good leader is fast in all aspects of business, in decisions, in execution, in communication ... in everything. Because a lot of what we have as a startup is speed, and being fast is one of our key competitive weapons, allowing us to learn and improve.
- A bad leader is slow.

A good leader at Westwing is **a genuinely nice person.**

- A good leader is someone who is a genuinely nice person. Not for the purpose of pleasing everyone, but she knows that only genuinely nice people should be working at Westwing. She has no tolerance for bad behaviors in herself and others. She does what our mothers have tried to teach us: honest, authentic, hard-working, humble, ambitious, etc. She won’t be nice every second, she makes tough decisions, she pushes – BUT she is a nice person overall and strives to be that everyday, knowing it’s a trade-off and one of the hardest ones at that.
- A bad leader is an asshole, and nobody wants to work with those. And we don’t want them at Westwing.

Last but not least, a good leader at Westwing doesn’t stop there.

- A good leader always recruits and develops people. She shows acute business sense. She has strong opinions and changes them on great new arguments. She shows trust. She overinvests in knowledge sharing. She always challenges the status quo and is a pain in the ass. She purposefully creates tension, stretch, and pressure. She is not afraid to go hard against superiors and risks being wrong. She works harder than others. She asks for forgiveness more than asking for permission. She shows personality, yet keeps professional distance. Etc etc