



Jeremy Sirota's Five Rules for High Performance Leadership

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Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, businesses face unprecedented challenges that would have seemed unimaginable just decades ago. A family-owned manufacturing business must now navigate artificial intelligence integration, a local restaurant chain grapples with digital ordering platforms, and a regional consulting firm competes globally through virtual services. The twenty-first century has brought transformations that have reshaped how leaders must think, decide, and act, particularly for those leading organizations with limited resources but unlimited potential.

Traditional models of leadership, often focused on hierarchical authority and rigid structures, are increasingly insufficient in addressing the volatility and growing uncertainty that define today's environment. For leaders who often should wear multiple hats and make decisions with immediate, tangible consequences, new approaches to leadership are emerging that privilege curiosity, adaptability, and resilience over mere control or experience.

Jeremy Sirota¹, CEO of Merlin, the global digital rights agency for the independent music sector, has articulated five simple yet profound "rules for success." These rules, which provide a framework for sustainable leadership in rapidly evolving industries, are rooted in his personal experience and career trajectory spanning law, technology, and the music industry. What makes these principles particularly relevant for leaders is their emphasis on resourcefulness, adaptability, and authentic leadership, critical qualities for organizations that must be agile to survive and thrive.

This article examines Sirota's philosophy as an example of a pragmatic, curiosity-driven approach to leadership, discussing its specific relevance for emerging executives and business leaders. It analyzes Sirota's five rules for success within the wider context of leadership theories and practices, comparing them with the ideas of prominent thinkers such as Peter Drucker, Simon Sinek, Brené Brown, Jim Collins, and Carol Dweck.

Jeremy Sirota's Career Trajectory: Law, Technology, and Music

Jeremy Sirota began his career in law after earning a Juris Doctor from the University of California, practicing at Morrison & Foerster LLP with a focus on intellectual property and

¹ Jeremy Sirota was replaced by Fiona Eastwood, who was appointed the Chief Executive Officer of Merlin Entertainments in February 2025



digital media. He then moved to Warner Music Group and later Facebook (Meta), working in music licensing during the rise of social media's role in content creation. In 2020, Sirota became CEO of Merlin, leading global partnerships with major platforms and advocating for independent creators' fair access to the digital market. His leadership highlights innovation, fairness, and values such as curiosity and humility—qualities that resonate strongly with the entrepreneurial spirit found in many successful leaders.

Having established Sirota's diverse background, we now turn to examine his five-rule framework and its practical applications for today's business leaders.

The Five Rules for Success

Sirota's rules for success are: *get curious, be proactive, be intentional, cultivate intuition and self-reflection, and be humble*. These rules are deceptively simple, yet they embody profound lessons for leadership, particularly for those managing smaller organizations where every decision carries significant weight.

1. Get Curious

Curiosity, according to Sirota, is the cornerstone of growth. He recommends cultivating curiosity not as a one-off act but as a daily practice. Each week, he reflects on questions such as: What happened? What did I accomplish? How did I feel? What does success look like in the coming week? This practice transforms curiosity into a structured habit of reflection and inquiry.

In his career, curiosity enabled Sirota to move seamlessly across industries. His legal background could have confined him to traditional legal practice, but his curiosity about the intersection of law and creativity pushed him toward the music industry. Similarly, his interest in the evolving role of technology led him to Facebook, where he confronted entirely new challenges.

For emerging leaders, curiosity translates into the ability to ask meaningful questions in environments where answers are not always clear and resources are often limited. Consider, for example, a small manufacturing business owner who, rather than simply competing on price, becomes curious about why certain customers choose more expensive alternatives. This curiosity might reveal unmet needs for customization or faster delivery, opening new revenue streams.

From a broader perspective, curiosity is widely recognized by experts as an essential leadership trait. Harvard Business Review (HBR) has consistently highlighted curiosity as a crucial trait for effective leaders, linking it to several key organizational benefits. According to HBR, a leader's curiosity is not just about a desire to learn; it's a strategic tool that

directly impacts team dynamics and overall company success. HBR has explained the role of curiosity in leadership:

- **Minimizing Conflict:** Curious leaders approach disagreements with a mindset of inquiry rather than judgment. By asking "What's going on?" instead of "Why did you do that?", they shift the focus from blame to understanding. This approach helps to uncover the root causes of conflict, often revealing underlying issues or miscommunications. By genuinely seeking to understand different perspectives, curious leaders create a *psychologically safe environment* where team members feel heard and valued, which de-escalates tension and fosters more constructive dialogue.
- **Promoting Collaboration:** Curiosity encourages leaders to be less of an expert with all the answers and more of a *facilitator* of collective wisdom. By asking open-ended questions like, "What if we did this differently?" or "How can we approach this problem?" they signal that they value diverse viewpoints and expertise. This empowers team members to contribute their ideas, leading to a sense of shared ownership and more robust solutions. A curious leader's willingness to listen and learn from others builds trust and rapport, which are the foundations of effective teamwork.
- **Fostering Innovation:** A curious mindset is the engine of innovation. HBR's research has shown that curious employees are more likely to think deeply about decisions, generate creative solutions, and adapt to changing conditions. Leaders who model curiosity by questioning the status quo and encouraging experimentation create a culture where new ideas can thrive. They recognize that innovation doesn't just come from a dedicated "innovation department," but from a workforce empowered to explore, challenge assumptions, and learn from both successes and failures.

2. Be Proactive

The second rule, being proactive, highlights the need for initiative. Sirota's career trajectory exemplifies this principle. At Warner, he did not wait for digital disruption to arrive fully formed; he actively engaged with emerging platforms to anticipate challenges and opportunities. At Merlin, his proactive stance has meant negotiating fair terms for independent creators before inequities could take root.

For leaders, proactivity should mean moving beyond reaction. In practical terms, this could involve identifying inefficiencies in a company's processes and proposing solutions rather than waiting for directives. Proactivity is particularly valuable in volatile industries, where the ability to anticipate shifts can mean the difference between resilience and obsolescence.



Proactivity in organizations often means being the first to identify and act on opportunities that competitors may overlook due to their size or bureaucracy. For example, a small IT services business owner noticed increasing client inquiries about cybersecurity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Anticipating demand, he proactively invested in cybersecurity certifications for his team before competitors recognized the trend. This six-month head start enabled him to capture significant market share and boost revenue by 60% in that segment.

Sirota's emphasis on proactivity aligns with Peter Drucker's concept of "entrepreneurial management," which stresses actively shaping the future rather than passively reacting to it (Drucker, 1985). Peter Drucker's concept of "entrepreneurial management" is a management philosophy that applies the principles of entrepreneurship to any type of organization, not just new startups. Drucker argued that in an era of rapid change, all organizations—large or small, for-profit or non-profit—must be entrepreneurial to survive and thrive. The core idea is that an organization must be structured to systematically and continuously innovate. This involves:

- **A Systematic Search for Opportunities:** Drucker identified several sources of innovation, including unexpected events, incongruities, changes in industry structure, and new knowledge. Entrepreneurial management is about proactively and methodically looking for these opportunities rather than waiting for them to appear.
- **Innovation as a Discipline:** Drucker saw innovation not as a flash of genius but as a deliberate and purposeful practice. It's a key function of management that must be planned, organized, and executed with discipline.
- **Decentralization and Empowerment:** To foster an entrepreneurial culture, Drucker advocated for a decentralized structure where decision-making power is pushed down to those closest to the action. This empowers employees to identify and act on opportunities, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability.
- **Focus on the Customer:** Entrepreneurial management is deeply customer-centric. Innovation is only successful if it creates value for the customer. Therefore, the organization must be constantly looking for ways to meet customer needs and desires in new and better ways.

3. Be Intentional

Intentionality, Sirota argues, involves clarity of purpose and action. Leaders must not merely act but act with a clear vision of what they want to achieve and why. At Merlin, his intentional leadership has been evident in partnerships with digital platforms designed not just to maximize revenue but to uphold fairness and access for independent creators.



For leaders, being intentional means aligning daily actions with long-term goals. For example, aspiring executives may choose to spend time networking in industries that align with their passions rather than pursuing opportunities that offer immediate but misaligned rewards.

Intentionality becomes crucial when resources are limited and every decision must count. For example, a leader might decline short-term lucrative projects that do not align with the company's core competencies and values. While this may seem counterintuitive for a growing business, the intentional focus can be critical for building a strong market reputation, ultimately leading to premium pricing and client referrals that more than compensate for the declined work.

Resource constraints in organizations make intentional leadership not just beneficial but essential. Leaders must be intentional about where they invest their limited time, money, and human resources. This might mean choosing to excel in one geographic market rather than spreading thin across multiple regions, or focusing on perfecting one service offering before expanding the portfolio.

The principle of intentionality closely aligns with Simon Sinek's "Start with Why," which asserts that effective leaders and organizations are motivated by a well-defined sense of purpose (Sinek, 2009). Simon Sinek's "Start with Why" is a leadership concept centered on the idea that great leaders and organizations don't just communicate what they do, but rather, they communicate why they do it. This concept is visualized by "The Golden Circle," a model of three concentric circles:

- **What:** The outermost circle represents the products or services a company offers. This is what most organizations communicate first and is the most visible part of what they do.
- **How:** The middle circle represents the processes, values, or unique selling propositions that make an organization different or better than its competitors.
- **Why:** The innermost circle is the core purpose, cause, or belief that drives the organization. It answers the question: "Why do we exist?" This is not about making money; that's a result. The "why" is the purpose that inspires action.

Sinek argues that most organizations communicate from the outside in (WHAT to HOW to WHY), which can describe what they do but fails to inspire. In contrast, great leaders and companies—like Apple or leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.—communicate from the inside out (starting with WHY). This approach connects with people on a deeper, emotional level because it speaks to the part of the brain that controls behavior and decision-making.



By starting with "Why," a leader can build trust and loyalty. People don't just buy a product; they buy into the purpose behind it. This creates a powerful connection that motivates employees and customers to become advocates for the cause, not just the company.

4. Cultivate Intuition and Self-Reflection

Sirota emphasizes the value of self-reflection and intuition in effective leadership. Following meetings, he typically assigns time to evaluate performance and identify potential areas for future improvement. This reflective approach fosters greater self-awareness and enables continual refinement of his leadership style.

Cultivating intuition involves learning to trust one's informed instincts. In industries like music and technology, where data may not capture cultural shifts or creative trends, intuition becomes a vital complement to analysis. For instance, Sirota's move from Warner to Facebook demonstrated intuitive foresight, recognizing that social media would become central to music distribution and monetization.

For leaders, this rule emphasizes the importance of balancing analysis with gut instinct. Reflective practices such as journaling, mentoring, or mindfulness can help cultivate intuition and emotional intelligence.

In organizations where leaders frequently make decisions without complete information, *a combination of intuition and reflection can be highly beneficial*. By adopting regular reflection practices, leaders can review significant decisions and their outcomes, enabling them to identify patterns and refine future choices based on *informed instinct*, for example, anticipating client behavior even when initial financial terms seem less advantageous. In many cases, clients with whom leaders established a natural rapport led to longer engagements, increased referrals, and higher satisfaction ratings.

Leaders can benefit from a simple weekly 30-minute reflection to evaluate successes, failures, and insights. Even in major corporations with analytics teams, leaders often need to trust their intuition, making the development of sound instincts a strategic asset.

Brené Brown (2018) highlights the importance of vulnerability and self-awareness in leadership, concepts that align with intuition and self-reflection. In her 2018 book, *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown makes a powerful case for the importance of vulnerability and self-awareness in effective leadership. She challenges the conventional, "armored" style of leadership that emphasizes control, perfection, and having all the answers. Instead, she argues that true courage and influence come from a place of authenticity and emotional openness. Here is a brief explanation of her key points:

- **Vulnerability as a Measure of Courage:** Brown defines vulnerability as *"uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure."* She fundamentally reframes it not as a weakness, but as the most accurate measure of courage. A vulnerable leader is not one who overshares, but one who is willing to have difficult conversations, give and receive feedback, admit mistakes, and "rumble" with uncertainty. This courage to be imperfect creates an environment where others feel safe to do the same, fostering innovation and risk-taking.
- **Self-Awareness as the Foundation:** For a leader to be vulnerable, they must first have a deep understanding of themselves. Brown emphasizes that "who we are is how we lead." Self-awareness means being in touch with your own fears, emotions, and personal history, and understanding how they influence your behavior. She explains that a lack of self-awareness can lead leaders to "work their stuff out on other people" by projecting their own insecurities and pain onto their team, which creates distrust and a toxic culture.

In short, Brown's work highlights that great leadership is not about being invulnerable, but about embracing your own humanity. By combining the "professional will" of a great leader with the "personal humility" of a vulnerable, self-aware individual, a leader can build a culture of trust, empathy, and courage that allows the entire organization to thrive.

5. Be Humble

The final rule—humility—is perhaps the most counterintuitive in a world that often associates leadership with charisma and authority. Sirota demonstrates humility by actively seeking feedback, acknowledging mistakes, and adapting his approach. His leadership at Merlin is not about imposing dominance but about serving the needs of independent creators.

For leaders, humility is essential for learning and growth. It means acknowledging limitations, valuing the contributions of others, and avoiding the arrogance that can accompany early success.

In organizational settings, humility can involve understanding that achievements result from the efforts of all team members and that leaders may not always have complete information. Leaders who seek feedback from junior employees about industry developments can gain valuable perspectives, as those involved in daily operations often observe details that may not be visible from a strategic position.

In situations where teams are typically smaller and more interconnected, humble leadership is not just morally sound but practically necessary. Leaders who acknowledge when they're wrong or admit they don't know something creates an environment where



team members feel empowered to speak up, share ideas, and take ownership—crucial elements when every employee's contribution significantly impacts overall success.

This reflects Jim Collins's idea of "Level 5 Leadership," which involves both humility and professional will (Collins, 2001). Jim Collins's concept of "Level 5 Leadership," introduced in his book *Good to Great*, describes the highest tier in a hierarchy of leadership capabilities. A Level 5 leader is defined by a paradoxical blend of two core traits:

- **Personal Humility:** These leaders are modest, self-effacing, and shy away from public adulation. They attribute the success of their organizations to others, external factors, and even luck. They are focused on the long-term well-being and success of the company, not on their personal gain or legacy.
- **Professional Will:** Alongside their humility, they possess a fierce, unwavering determination to achieve the best possible long-term results for their company. They set high standards and have an almost stoic resolve to do whatever is necessary to make the company great. When things go wrong, they look in the mirror to assign blame to themselves and take full responsibility.

In essence, Level 5 leaders are ambitious, but their ambition is for the cause and the organization, not for themselves. They are "plow horses, not show horses," quietly building enduring greatness by setting up a system for the company to succeed long after they are gone. Collins's research found that this specific type of leadership was a key ingredient for companies that made a sustainable leap from "good" to "great."

Similarly, Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset highlights humility as a prerequisite for learning and resilience (Dweck, 2006).

Critical Reflections

With the theoretical foundation and practical applications established, we now turn to examine potential limitations and broader implications of Sirota's framework. Sirota's framework is not without limitations. Its simplicity, while appealing, risks being dismissed as common sense. Moreover, its application may vary across industries. In highly regulated or risk-averse contexts, for instance, proactivity or intuition may need to be tempered with caution.

For leaders specifically, resource constraints may initially seem to limit the application of these principles. However, the opposite is often true: these rules become more essential when resources are limited, as they guide leaders to make the most impactful decisions with available resources.

Nevertheless, the universality of these rules makes them adaptable. They provide a flexible foundation rather than a rigid prescription, which is particularly valuable for emerging leaders who must often adapt principles to their unique contexts and constraints.

Practical Implications for Young Leaders and Executives in SMEs

For emerging leaders, Sirota's rules can be operationalized as follows:

- **Curiosity:** Commit to weekly reflection and active questioning. In resource-constrained environments, this might involve dedicating 30 minutes each Friday to reflect on the week's lessons and upcoming challenges.
- **Proactivity:** Identify one area each month where you can take initiative without waiting for permission. In organizational settings, this might mean proposing process improvements or identifying new market opportunities.
- **Intentionality:** Articulate a personal leadership vision and ensure daily actions align with it. For emerging leaders, this includes being selective about opportunities that align with core competencies and values.
- **Self-reflection:** Keep a leadership journal to review decisions and outcomes. This is particularly valuable in organizations where decisions have immediate, visible impacts.
- **Humility:** Seek feedback from peers and mentors regularly. In smaller organizations, this includes actively soliciting input from all team members, regardless of hierarchy.

Leaders can implement these practices without significant financial investment. The key is consistency and intentionality rather than elaborate systems or external resources. By embedding these practices into their routines, young executives can cultivate leadership habits that are sustainable, adaptable, and impactful, particularly in the dynamic environment of smaller businesses where agility and authentic leadership are paramount.

Conclusion

Jeremy Sirota's five rules for success provide a pragmatic yet profound framework for leadership in the digital age, with particular relevance for leaders of small and medium-sized businesses. Rooted in his diverse career across law, technology, and music, these rules—curiosity, proactivity, intentionality, reflection, and humility—offer guidance that is both timeless and timely. When compared with established leadership thinkers, Sirota's philosophy stands out for its emphasis on curiosity as the starting point of sustainable leadership.



For leaders and executives, the message is clear: success is not about adhering to rigid formulas or projecting authority. It is about cultivating curiosity, acting with purpose, reflecting on experience, and embracing humility. These principles are not only financially accessible but often more impactful in smaller organizations where every leadership decision reverberates throughout the entire company.

In highly competitive markets where organizations need to build and maintain unique advantages, these five rules provide a framework that leverages these natural strengths. By internalizing these principles, emerging leaders can position themselves not only to succeed personally but to foster organizations that are innovative, inclusive, and resilient—qualities essential for thriving in today's competitive landscape.

The path forward for business leaders is not about having all the resources, but about making the most of available resources through curious, proactive, intentional, reflective, and humble leadership. In this approach lies the key to building businesses that are not just successful, but sustainable and meaningful.

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