

# IF YOU CALL YOURSELF A THOUGHT LEADER, YOU PROBABLY AREN'T ONE

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
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CEO, DOUBLE FORTE

By: **Gina Riley**



# IF YOU CALL YOURSELF A THOUGHT LEADER, YOU PROBABLY AREN'T ONE

I've been a fangirl of Lee McEnany Caraher since 2018 when I purchased a copy of her book *Millennials & Management* and her subsequent book *The Boomerang Principle*. After years of built-up disconnect and misperceptions between generations in the workplace, she brought fresh insights and thought leadership about bridging these gaps to build better workplaces in ways I had not seen before. And as it turns out, her ideas about building strong intergenerational work cultures are relevant today in a post-pandemic, hybrid working world.

After listening to an episode of her *Everything Speaks* podcast, "If You Call Yourself a Thought Leader, You Probably Aren't One," I immediately reached out to request an interview to go deeper on the topic. There is so much noise and confusion between the idea of being an influencer versus being a true thought leader, I wanted to break down her perspective and advice for those who want to be known for their areas of expertise.

A communications expert, Lee is also the founder and CEO of Double Forte, a national public relations and digital media agency based in San Francisco that works with beloved consumer, technology, and wine brands.

Let's jump right into our conversation!

**Gina**

*What is your definition of a thought leader?*

**Lee**

A thought leader is a person whose opinion is sought out based on their knowledge and experience to help them figure out what to do. They offer solutions, insight, and guidance to people. What they say matters because their advice is applicable, and it works. If you must call yourself a thought leader, you probably aren't. Leaders are validated and called thought leaders by other people, not by thought leaders themselves.

As we speak today, I am putting in my LinkedIn search engine the term 'thought leader.' Let's see what happens... 56 people in my direct network and 1,190,000 people on LinkedIn call themselves thought leaders in their headlines. Wow!

*"People want to know how you can help them. Stop worrying about being a profound thought leader and focus on being helpful to people."*

**Gina**

*What do people do that makes them thought leaders?*

**Lee**

First off, they **share insights or guidance in a lot of ways**. They might write a book, share other people's articles, or make comments on other people's posts. They might have a podcast or are guests on other people's podcasts. They might speak at industry events or even do a Ted talk.

Their **advice is timely**. They know what's going on, what's happening in the world, in

their industry, and in their community both socially and politically. Then, they apply their expertise to the world around them.

The best thought leaders are also **long-term thinkers** looking around corners with a longitudinal approach. They can look out into the future and help people see what's going to happen or what's coming so they can prepare and do things today that will matter later. They are **contextual and holistic in their thinking**. They don't operate in the cone of silence or silos. They can put together seemingly unrelatable ideas and connect the dots by looking down the line for the domino effect in ways most have not thought of before. And thought leaders create a sense of urgency and generate excitement to act now in ways that can help you in the future.

Their guidance and advice are easy to access, which means they **know who their audience is and who would benefit** from their opinions and experiences. Then they find ways to put this into a context and format that is consumable and beneficial to others.

Most importantly, the best thought leaders **share a servant mindset and point of view**. This lends to their credibility and helps them to be seen as trustworthy and break through to people with their advice.



**Gina**

*What does share from a servant mindset look like?*

**Lee**

*"I subscribe to the Servant Leadership model, which is about uplifting people. First, you need to understand people have a choice to follow you or not. People are smart. They will only follow people who serve and care about others so they can succeed and achieve their goals or company goals. Servant leaders take it seriously and are honored to know people follow them despite their other choices."*

Thought leaders keep their comments on social media positive and helpful. They aren't mean-spirited and don't take people down. Not to say you should not correct falsehoods and provide more context, however, negative comments will not make you a thought leader. You can be realistic, straightforward, and controversial without negativity. Look at Gary Vee. He asks his audience if they want to make a lot of money and then tells them they need to work for it.

**Gina**

*How do thought leaders help others "connect the dots"?*

**Lee**

Our leaders need to be able to place their company or solution in a competitive context. They study and know what is happening in the world with different industries and organizations, and they understand and embrace the fact that they are not alone. There are many options in the world to solve problems.



Thought leaders put their products or solutions in a context with their opinions and recommendations that helps customers make the right decision for the customer – not necessarily for the company. This is an incredibly important form of trust-building. If you say your product is the best in every scenario, you are immediately discrediting yourself and your company.

**Gina**

*Why is it important to consider a thought leadership strategy?*

**Lee**

It builds credibility and is hugely valuable no matter where you are in your career. Most people can say they have achieved something and have something to share. Being a good team member is participating and sharing your expertise to help others. This is how you become known for something. Be a dot connector no matter where you sit in the organization because people find this valuable.

I own an agency, so we built credibility and referral networks through our podcast, our work, our blog, my books, etc. We share our opinions and advice freely, which helps build credibility and builds our business.

As an employee, thought leadership helps you build your equity in the company and with the people around you. Be helpful to others by sharing your opinions and credible expertise; you will be considered a subject matter expert.



***"Just remember, you don't have to be called a thought leader to be a thought leader. Don't call yourself one. You will be considered a thought leader when you share your opinion and become known for your advice in a certain category or industry.***

***We all can be thought leaders in our way that pays off over time."***

### **Gina**

*I heard you say on the Leveraging Thought Leadership Podcast that "leadership is communication." What do you mean by this?*

### **Lee**

Thought leaders should first consider their internal audience or their employees. Is your messaging clear, and are they behind you?

People and companies are trying to be agenda setters and problem solvers in a category. Thought leaders are communicating about how to be set up for future success. If you want good partners, customers, and brand loyalty, you need to share your knowledge with everyone – inside and outside the company. You need to stand for something. What is your point of view? Communicate that. People buy from people and brands who help them the most. Focus your thought leadership efforts on getting everyone on the same page with the same messaging.

***"As a leader, if you are not communicating well enough to be understood and followed, you are in trouble. With a multi-generational audience, it is your job to find different modes of communication to talk to people if you want your company to succeed."***

### **Gina**

*How do people figure out their thought leadership differentiator?*

### **Lee**

If you don't know what your values are, then what you communicate will be out of alignment with your ideal target audience. I first think about my audience and the people I care about - potential employees, current employees, and alumni of Double Forte. If I can't communicate and attract the right talent, I can't attract good clients. I need the right talent to drive results that matter.

For example ... I value that my employees think Double Forte matters to them so much they are willing to put their work experience on their resume when they leave the company because it means the experience matters to them. I also care that we taught them life and professional skills they can take anywhere in their career.

We want to work with clients who are doing good in the world and care about the same things. We want to partner with these people and companies because we value making the world a better place. The fastest way to make the world a better place is for Double Forte to help them achieve their goals through better communication. By defining what I value, I have niched my PR firm down to attract the right employees and clients because they know what I stand for because this is what I put out into the world.



### **Gina**

*Who are thought leaders you admire? Who is doing it right?*

### **Lee**

I appreciate thought leaders who help people do a better job and live better lives. People like Brené Brown, Gary Vaynerchuk, Dory Clark, and Malcolm Gladwell. They help people do better, help them solve problems – reduce anxiety, and less friction in their lives.

The best thought leaders worry more about their audience than they worry about themselves. They share what the audience wants to hear, but more importantly, they share what their audience needs to hear and guide them based on their experiences. They don't make things look easier than they are ... they are real.

For example, Gary Vee talks about the grind. You must work. You won't be an overnight success. He has a huge following who want to be Gary Vee. He is generous with storytelling about his life experiences and not having everything handed to him, and he talks his audience through his decision-making processes. He shares that his father did not just give him a wine store and that he became successful despite not having money. While it might not be what people want to hear, he tells them what they need to hear.

### **Gina**

*What do you recommend to people who want to become known as a thought leader? Where should they start?*

### **Lee**

A great exercise is to ask your top five friends what you are known for. What is your

experience? What do clients ask you questions about? Why do people call you, and how do you respond? What are your opinions or points of view in your own right based on your unique experiences, successes, and failures? Are you able to reframe people's questions to help them get to the answer they need or the outcomes they are striving for?

These exercises are a good start to help determine what you are known for and what you have credibility in. As you develop credibility, think about why people should trust you. What evidence do you have to back up your ideas or your guidance? Why will your opinion matter and be valuable to somebody else? Share data, research, and statistics. Share stories of times when things worked and did not work.

I recommend you figure out three to four themes on the topics where you have credibility and are trusted. Then you've got to show up. It's not about parroting other people's work, not to say that you shouldn't refer to others and use that as a springboard to build upon your own.

You also need to know your audience. What problems are they solving right now? Where do they get that information? And be very specific! People have short attention spans, and nobody wants to listen to or read something that rambles and doesn't get to the point.

### **Gina**

*You mentioned a few ways people can showcase thought leadership, such as book writing, sharing articles and making comments, or speaking at industry events. It doesn't have to be a Ted talk, right? What other suggestions do you have?*

### **Lee**

There are many ways to showcase thought leadership! You could shoot a video series, post on TikTok or Pinterest, write articles for industry publications, post on LinkedIn once a week, and sit on a panel discussion. I think writing a newsletter is one of the most valuable things you can do because people must opt-in. Emails are the most intimate thing you can do because the people who subscribe to your emails are voluntarily letting you into their inboxes. Don't worry about having a big list, worry about serving the people you have, and your list will grow.

One person who does a great job with this is Karen Catlin, with a newsletter called Better Allies. She has a book and now has a series on Fridays with five actions you can take to be a better ally at work. She shares not just her work but other articles and information she has curated. Robert Glazer, a well-known leadership mentor, has a Friday Forward newsletter. His blog is more on leadership and his musings based on his experience as Founder of Acceleration Partners.

But you need to be consistent with what you do. Every month you need to do something that moves the ball down the field so that you can be easily found and recognized for your thoughts. Maybe start on LinkedIn and publish a monthly article. Then share other news based on the three or four themes you focus on.

### **Gina**

*What about becoming a podcaster?*

### **Lee**

You can start a podcast, although it requires a lot of hard work.

If you can't dedicate significant time to a podcast and get good at it, I wouldn't do it. However, if you want to be a guest on a podcast, there are organizations where you can seek out guest opportunities or others who place people on podcasts. One such recommendation is Interview Connections. They help you figure out what your topics are, how to hone them down, and then figure out what podcast would make the most sense for you. Then they book them for you. Again, all of this takes time to build up.

Another way to build your thought leadership is to start a Facebook group on a certain topic. A great example is my friends Steven and Eric from Predictive ROI. Their weekly Facebook group discusses building a better sales pipeline. They've built up pages of people who show up online, and they've built a real community of people who are helping each other. They are true servant leaders who give away a lot of free content.

### **Gina**

*What do you recommend people do if they don't think they are getting any traction?*

### **Lee**

You are not going to build an audience of a million overnight. But, if you have been at it for a year or more, ask trusted friends to evaluate what you're doing and ask them for the truth. I try to help people and be this truth-teller if I am asked for feedback.

For example, you might find people think you are winging it and you could be better prepared. Maybe your lighting is terrible on video, creating a barrier with your audience. Don't go it alone! There is no reason you can't get better.

### **Gina**

*A lot of people want to become famous or an overnight success. What would you say to this?*

### **Lee**

***"Thought leadership is not the work of the moment. It takes 18-24 months to become a subject matter expert and to be considered a thought leader on a new topic. It will take up to two years of consistent work to crack the code. It will take persistence, which is half the battle towards becoming recognized as someone whose opinion on a certain topic matter."***

### **Gina**

*What are the pitfalls you see people fall into? What does a poor strategy look like?*

### **Lee**

A poor strategy confuses your audience. Pull together the top three topics under one umbrella and define what you want to communicate and talk about these things in a way that people can hear it.

Thought leaders are reading other thought leaders' content. You could identify ten other people in your sphere and figure out your take on your areas of expertise. Just because someone has said similar things in the past does not mean anyone heard it. Have the confidence knowing the people who need to hear you will hear you.



The road to becoming a thought leader requires a long-term, strategic, and deliberate approach with a narrow focus on a handful of areas of subject matter expertise. Thought leaders become sought out for their advice and seen as credible sources of information. Thought leaders understand and serve their audience and help them connect the dots in ways that improve their personal and professional lives.

### Lee Caraher's thought leadership tips:

- Share insights or guidance in a lot of ways (articles, books, podcasts, commenting on other's work)
- Make it timely and relevant to your industry and apply it to the world around you
- Be a long-term thinker who looks around the corner and sees what will happen next
- Provide context and holistic thinking
- Know your audience and how they will benefit from your expertise
- Share from a servant mindset

As Lee says, *"In the end, if you are not being helpful, you are not a thought leader."*

### CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



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