



Customer Journey

Jim

Jim's journey explores leadership presence, empathy, decision making, managing low performers, and helping talented employees grow.



CUSTOMER JOURNEY: JIM

Meet “Jim,” a VP of Research and Development in a multi-national pharma company navigating shifting organizational demands, rapid leadership changes, and pressure to keep his team functioning.

His journey explores leadership presence, empathy, decision making, managing low performers, and helping talented employees grow.

Each post explores a real coaching conversation or leadership challenge from that journey.



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Leadership Starts with the Little Clues

You pride yourself on being logical and data-driven — so why do the small emotional signals at work keep catching you off guard?

Jim was smart, focused, and spoke at a fast clip that matched the pace of change at the Fortune 500 pharma company where he worked.

A VP of Research and Development, Jim was very clear about his coaching goals.

“My goal is better leadership presence. I’ve been here for five years and I’ve just been promoted. I now manage a team of 20. We have constant change and pressure. Better leadership presence will help me keep them performing highly while shielding them from the chaos from corporate.”

Yet, over the course of the months we worked together, **Jim came to see that effective leadership is not all about presence. It’s more about the fundamentals of dealing with human beings**, giving people what they need to succeed, tuning into their state of mind, understanding their problems, and making communications more personalized.

Together those fundamentals result in a leadership style that exudes a polished executive presence.

Moving From Logic to Empathy

When we started, Jim admitted that emotional intelligence wasn’t a strength. “I’m a scientist, so I’m very logical. I expect others to be the same.”

After our first session, I asked him to keep a journal for two weeks noting emotional shifts. What is happening when you feel your emotions go from negative to positive or the other way around? Try to articulate what you are feeling and why.

Jim approached this exercise like a scientist. He kept excellent data for two weeks.

“The first thing I noticed was that I was annoyed with one of my direct reports, Abishek. It was a clear pattern. It happened when he put me and my boss on email with an external partner.

Jim explained that it was inappropriate to cc his boss. At a company of this size, it was important to limit emails to the people impacted.

He talked with Abishek and noted that he didn’t do

that with other projects. Abishek replied that Jim’s boss had a vested interest in the project.

“Abishek was right, but still, if everyone emailed Charlie with details about the things he’s interested in, what would happen to his inbox?”

Abishek understood. It’s better to include Charlie only when we have results. Jim said he would let Abishek email Charlie when they had news.

Jim was pleased that the problem was resolved in one conversation.

“When I thought about it from Abishek’s perspective, it made sense. So, I helped him see it from Charlie’s perspective. Then we agreed and aligned on how to include Charlie.

“What helped was taking care of the annoyance when it was a small thing, and before Charlie got annoyed. I think paying attention to those little clues will help me get ahead of situations better.”

This would be a theme that we would come back to throughout his time coaching. Jim paid more attention to little emotional clues and spent more time thinking from the other person’s point of view.

Jim’s Leadership Values

One of the first things I ask coaching clients to do is define their leadership values. Leadership values become a compass during difficult decisions and help leaders consistently show up the way they want to be remembered.

Here are Jim’s leadership values:

- Slow down and be patient, take a breath
- Be self-aware of my own emotions, be aware of my impact on others
- Listen first, empathize, have an open mind
- Collaborate, solve problems together, be curious
- Use a coaching approach to management: use the GOOD model of conversation

Managing Amid Chaos: Anticipate Questions

Leadership keeps shifting above you, and now you're responsible for recommendations on the call nobody else wants to make — how do you prepare someone new for a decision that can't be undone?

Jim's organization was global and vast, with constant leadership changes above. New leaders often brought new perspectives and priorities. And teams often found themselves with projects left behind by leaders who had moved on.

In one session, Jim wanted to make sense of the experience of one leader he had seen who had moved around a lot.

"Getting an international assignment is an important part of moving up here, but it doesn't always work out."

Jim had watched as Marie came from France to the US two years ago. She assumed she would get a promotion on coming back to France. But she went back last fall, and two people above her had changed. A new guy got the job she was expecting. She was furious. Now she's back in the US so her kids can finish high school.

"What do you learn from that?" I asked.

"Well, two things," he said thoughtfully. **"First, if you get an international assignment, make sure it's going to work for you and your family because you might stay longer than you think. And second, even if you do get the assignment, travel home at least once a quarter and know what's going on."**

"Great lessons," I said. "What changes are affecting you now?" Jim was getting ready to make a trip to France soon. That team had a new leader, Pierre.

Besides building a relationship, Jim needed Pierre to resolve a researcher contract with a very prestigious professor in France. He had missed deadlines and hadn't produced anything of value.

"We have 30 days until the next payment, and it's up to Pierre to decide. I have to recommend that we cancel the project or keep paying him."

I said, "What questions will Pierre ask?"

"Right, I'll need answers for him."

1. What are the financial implications? I'll get

budget scenarios for if we pull out or if we don't.

2. How will this impact our relationship with the research partner we worked so hard to get?

Looking back, Jim said they should have made separate contracts for the different projects. There are several researchers involved. But they were so eager to get it, that everything is in one contract.

At this point, Jim had lost trust that this professor in particular will ever deliver. After some consideration, Jim decided to recommend to withhold payment.

"If we don't pay, it will go to legal for renegotiation. It will be painful, but I think it's our best path forward."

The worst-case is that they lose what they paid and have to get the research done another way.

The best-case scenario would be that they renegotiate and get timelines and deliverables.

What's your goal with Pierre?

"To convey that this is an important financial decision he must make in his first weeks. We are all frustrated, but we have a glimmer of hope. If the researcher can deliver, it's very valuable to us."

Also, Jim wanted to be sure to convey that whatever Pierre decides, it will not be held against him. Ultimately, it will go back to legal and Business Development and be a collective effort.

"If we do pull out, we need to call the professor to make clear how much we want to work with him before we send the legal letter out. We don't want him to be shocked."

At the end, Jim said, "I'll lay out his choices so they'll be clear and compelling. It's good that Pierre is new because the old leader was really frustrated. Maybe Pierre will bring fresh energy, and we'll find a better way forward."

Managing a Low Performer Through Encouragement

A talented employee has quietly stopped delivering — do you crack down, or is there a better way to bring them back?

Jim came to a session in early December thinking about performance reviews. He had two low performers. Today, we talked about Julie.

“My manager, Charlie, and I have gone back and forth on Julie, whether to list her as meeting or as partially meeting expectations.”

Julie is a very accomplished scientist. At the beginning of this year, Julie’s mentor retired, and her performance changed. Suddenly, she lost the sponsor who most believed in her project.

Jim interrupted his story here to reflect. “It’s interesting how much that human connection means to so many people. The human connection is really a big part of why we work, how we work, and the results we are willing to get.”

A couple months ago, we directed Julie to wrap up the project and report deliverables. If there are more deliverables, she could open a new project.

This was a directive from corporate. Even long-term projects have to show milestones and communicate success along the way.

But Julie didn’t like working this way. She reluctantly wrote up some promising results. Jim told her it was great and asked her for a rough draft of the new project. Julie dragged her feet and missed the deadline to get her funding approved.

“So here is my dilemma,” said Jim. “If I put down as *partially meeting expectations*, she will get a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) from HR. There will be tangible business goals. She will get constant feedback and oversight. It’s a way to get low performers out of the company.”

“Or,” Jim continued, “I can put *meeting expectations*, manage her myself, and hope to get her to a better place next year.”

“What does your gut tell you?” I asked.

“Look, the dream job for Julie would be in the purely research side, but it doesn’t exist anymore. The business needs are too high. My gut says to put *meeting expectations* and then read her the riot act. I would tell her how close she came to a PIP and that she needs to deliver on a different timeline.”

“How motivated would you feel if someone read you the riot act?” I asked.

Jim laughed. “You’re right, the whole tough guy approach would only make her more miserable. She responds to mentorship and encouragement.”

Jim saw she needed a mindset change. “She doesn’t have to change her research approach. She just has to change her reporting approach and show stepping stones along the way.”

Jim also noted that he had to help her understand that when a budget is denied, it’s not because we don’t value the work. It’s because the company has to balance everyone’s needs. She can’t get a big budget every year. It’s a fairness issue.

“I’ll put it as a challenge for her to tease out the short-term deliverables.”

Jim ended, “It will be feed-forward. I’ll let her know I believe in her and give her something positive to focus on. She will know she is trusted and valued.”

Jim felt good about his decision and felt it would be the best outcome for the employee and for the company.

He understood that how the employee felt about her job would determine how hard she worked to get results.

Managing Low Performers by Putting the Right Person in the Right Role

Someone you promoted into a bigger role isn't thriving in it — how do you make a change without it feeling like a betrayal?

"Coaching has changed me a lot," said Jim as we started our session. "I used to be logical about decisions and expected others to be the same. It didn't always work out, and I never figured out why. Now I think a lot more about emotions—my own and others—in decision-making and in communication. I have to make sure my team stays passionate to keep them performing."

Jim also noted that his boss, Charlie, who is a great guy and a mentor, usually considers emotions first when decision making and communicating.

Today Jim was working to understand Mark. Mark started on Jim's team four years ago as a project leader. "He was killing it for the first two years. Then I moved up, and he took my place. He's had a lab team of four since then and reporting to me."

Jim went on: "Last year, Charlie and I gave Mark more responsibility for communication with our local corporate team to make sure our goals align with larger company goals."

Corporate communicated that they wanted R & D to prioritize academic collaborations to get cutting edge innovations. They also wanted a lot of transformation with AI in clinical research.

Jim and Charlie thought Mark could stay on top of these priorities. So, he was made the point person.

"Looking back," Jim said, "I see that decision was rushed. We didn't talk it through with Mark first."

Mark tried to put an academic project on the road map, but the budget was denied. Another local team had a similar project. He was also frustrated trying to champion their digital progress.

After budgets came out, Mark started looking like one of the low performers. They sent him to a conference in Paris, and he didn't take photos to show the team.

On his own lab project, Mark was not performing at the level they expected and was dragging his feet

on his next project. Every time Jim had a 1:1, Jim had to ask questions to pull anything out of him.

"There is a clear sense of frustration from him, especially on the digital side. He's not enjoying the role of being the point person for priorities."

Now, Jim said, they have directives to push even more digital projects on the research side.

Recently, Charlie suggested that maybe Joe could be in charge of new initiatives.

Jim was hesitant. He didn't want Mark to think we're undermining him or going around him. But Charlie advised him to go to Joe first:

Charlie said, "We need a different person who can show progress and passion even if we don't have a clear view. Maybe Joe can do that."

Jim took that as a lesson learned. When you give someone a chance and they don't run with it, you can't spend all your time waiting. Find someone who wants the opportunity.

So, Jim asked Joe if he was open to it. Joe's immediate response was no. But a few days later, Joe came back and said he was open to it. He wanted to try it for six months and discuss.

When Jim notified Mark, of course he was disappointed.

At the end of the session, Jim reflected that he had learned a few useful lessons from watching Mark:

Use 1:1s to help my team be positive, think through their week, and have a vision for success.

Don't volunteer someone for an assignment. Always have them come to it with passion.

If someone is not doing well in a new role, switch them out fast. Make sure the assignment fits the person.

It was another reminder that how people feel about their work determines how successful they are.

Encouraging Career Growth

Someone you mentor is frustrated that they're not moving up fast enough — how do you tell them the truth without crushing them?

While Jim had his fair share of low performers, he had many others who were chomping at the bit to get ahead. Here's how he handled one person who wanted more career growth.

Jonathan was a director, two levels below Jim. They had been friends for a long time and Jonathan considered Jim a mentor.

In Q3, Jonathan came to Jim to discuss his goals. "I often get this request from my team, and I tell them not to come in with goals alone, but a list of skills they need to develop to reach them. That usually gets them to think a little harder."

With Jonathan, though, the meeting quickly turned into a conversation about his frustration. He felt that no matter what he did, there was nowhere for him to go. He just felt trapped.

Jim told Jonathan, "If you tell me that my position is where you want to go, let's get you prepared."

Jim reflected on the situation. "I understand his frustration. He doesn't think anything will change."

He noted that Jonathan had outstanding technical skills, but very poor leadership skills in the beginning. He would roll his eyes, give big sighs, knit his eyebrows, and in general, showed impatience and disrespect with his body language.

Even though Jim saw a lot of improvement this year, Jim didn't think Jonathan was ready to be promoted yet.

Then Jonathan suggested that if the management track didn't work, could he get promoted to the technical track?

In our session, Jim considered the option. "I have mixed feelings about this. It plays up his strengths, but it also might be a compromise. Once he is in the technical side, there is no going back, and he might feel stuck there too."

In coaching, I asked Jim to think in broader terms. What was driving his desire to move up?

"Maybe I should ask him," said Jim. "It's not about money. Maybe he's jealous of two other team members at his level who are being promoted."

Jim reflected: **"Promotions get harder the higher you go. He gets outstanding ratings on his performance, but sometimes there are people issues. This is the kind of place where that matters. You need the whole package to move up."**

But even as a technical leader, he needs to be more supportive. "It's just an expectation here," Jim said.

Jim wanted to be strategic in his approach to this topic and planned how to work through the conversation.

1. Start by discussing the gap he sees for leadership at either track.

2. Then ask, in three years, where do you see yourself? Find out what he really wants to do.

Jim wanted to communicate empathetically and get him to see that urgency was not in his best interest.

The whole conversation helped me clarify a few things with Jim.

Supportive leadership skills like empathy and listening matter.

There are fewer promotions the higher you get. The stakes are continually raised, and you have to keep improving.

Take time to help people understand their best pathway forward.

These principles are true at many companies. Understanding how to get from where you are to the next level is not always easy.

In my experience, I see that a lot of people get 80% of what they need to move up, and stall there. Getting the extra 20% is rare and often pays off.

Leadership Presence Starts with Leadership Fundamentals

You want more executive presence — but you learn that presence isn't something you project. It's something you earn.

In coaching, I watched Jim grow from an outstanding technical leader to an empathetic and encouraging mentor and people leader.

Like many other science leaders, he had relied on logic and focused on getting things done.

By the end of six months, he had done a wonderful job learning how to use empathy strategically to motivate his team and keep the right people on the right path for their own growth.

As we wrapped up coaching, I asked Jim to reflect on his coaching journey.

“What’s been helpful for me,” Jim said, “is breaking the coaching homework down into small actions, like the journal about emotions, and being aware of my impact on others, and defining my leadership values.”

In a way that Jim couldn’t have anticipated, he said, he didn’t work directly on leadership presence, which is what he wanted from coaching when he started.

Instead, we worked on the leadership fundamentals that contribute to leadership presence:

- Getting control of his own emotions
- Being more empathetic
- Incorporating emotions into the decision-making process and into communications.

“Actually, I have changed my whole leadership style because of coaching. I used to be very logical and expected others to be the same. But now I realize how important the emotional part is. How people feel about their job is really a huge part of performance.”

Ultimately, with Jim, what started as a desire to improve executive presence became a deeper understanding of leadership itself.

Leadership presence was not something he learned to project.

It was something that emerged as he became more intentional about how he led other people.

Jim told me in our last session, "when I started coaching, I was just interested in executive presence, but now I realize that the fundamentals are really important."

He went on. **“Being a leader is really about dedicating myself to values and practices that help other people be their best, tuning into others and being aware of the impact of conversations and decisions.”**

As I reflect back on Jim’s journey, what stands out to me is his transformation from a leader with a focus on results and data to a real leader, focused on giving his team what they need to be successful. **Instead of results, he prioritized making them feel encouraged, cared about, challenged in ways they could handle.**

He really learned to listen to them and to deliver feedback in a way that would motivate them. Instead of being just a scientist, he became a warmer, more encouraging, and more empathetic human being. Those were the traits that helped him motivate his team in a dynamic, global corporation.

As with most of my clients, Jim learned to focus less on what he needed from his team, and more on what they needed from him to be successful.

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*I help people learn how to use
what they already have.*



Key Leadership Lessons

Jim's story shows that executive presence isn't something you project—it's something you earn through how you lead others.

- Executive presence isn't something you project — it's something you earn by noticing the small things everyone else misses.
- If you wait until a problem is big enough to demand your attention, you've already waited too long.
- Your best decisions weigh both data and how people affected by it will feel.
- Before you write someone off as a low performer, ask whether they're just in the wrong role.
- Cracking down on someone who's struggling rarely gets you as far as believing in them does.
- The more you invest in helping your team grow, the more they'll trust you to lead them.

Continue Learning

- [The Leadership Framework](#) — Confidence, empathy, and trust: the three foundations behind every client breakthrough.
- [Empathy at Work](#) — How Good Leaders Unlock Motivation and Performance

If any of this sounds familiar, you don't have to figure it out alone.

If Jim's story resonates with you, you may be navigating a similar leadership challenge.

I'm here to help. Book a quick call. No pitch, no pressure — just a conversation about where you are and whether coaching might help.

[Book your call here](#)

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