Issue 039 • ON LEADERSHIP • NOVEMBER 5, 2026 • 14 MIN READ

Make It So: Leadership Lessons from Captain Jean Luc Picard.



By Tommy Lee



AI generated illustration.

Leadership Lessons I learned from one of my favorite characters, in honor of Sir Patrick Stewart, 1940 to 2026

On October 28, Sir Patrick Stewart died at his home in Los Angeles. He was 86. His family said he had Alzheimer's disease and Lewy body dementia. Most of the world knew him as Captain Jean Luc Picard of the starship Enterprise in Star Trek: The Next Generation, and later as Professor X in the X Men movies.

The Next Generation was one of my favorite shows, and it is still my favorite of all the Star Trek series. I loved the characters. And Picard was just a wonderful leader. He was even keeled and not emotional, but he was also confident.

Picard is a fictional character. But for seven seasons and four movies, the writers and one great actor showed millions of people what a good leader looks like. In 1995 Wess Roberts and Bill Ross even wrote a whole book about it, *Make It So: Leadership Lessons from Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Here are the lessons from Picard that I think still hold up 30 years later.

The man behind the captain

Stewart grew up poor in Mirfield, in West Yorkshire, England. The house had an outside toilet and no central heating. His father beat his mother. Stewart later talked openly about it, and about how his father's shell shock from World War II played a part.

In his 2023 memoir, *Making It So*, he wrote that from his father, "I drew Picard's stern, intimidating tendencies. But I like to think that my mother is in the captain, too, in his moments of warmth and sensitivity."

He didn't hide from that story. He used it. He became a patron of Refuge, a charity that helps women and children escape domestic violence, and an ambassador for Combat Stress, which helps veterans with their mental health.

He spent 16 years with the Royal Shakespeare Company. When he was cast as Picard, not everyone wanted him. Gene Roddenberry, who created Star Trek, didn't want a bald, middle aged Englishman, and Stewart said Roddenberry never really accepted him. His friend Ian McKellen told him not to take the part because he had "too much important theater work to do." He took it anyway.

Jonathan Frakes, who played Commander Riker, told Variety, "Patrick had set his high bar from the moment he showed up." But that high bar caused a problem early on. In the first season, Stewart thought the cast was goofing around too much. He called a meeting and lectured them. When Denise Crosby, who played Tasha Yar, said they needed to have some fun, he told her, "We are not here, Denise, to have fun."

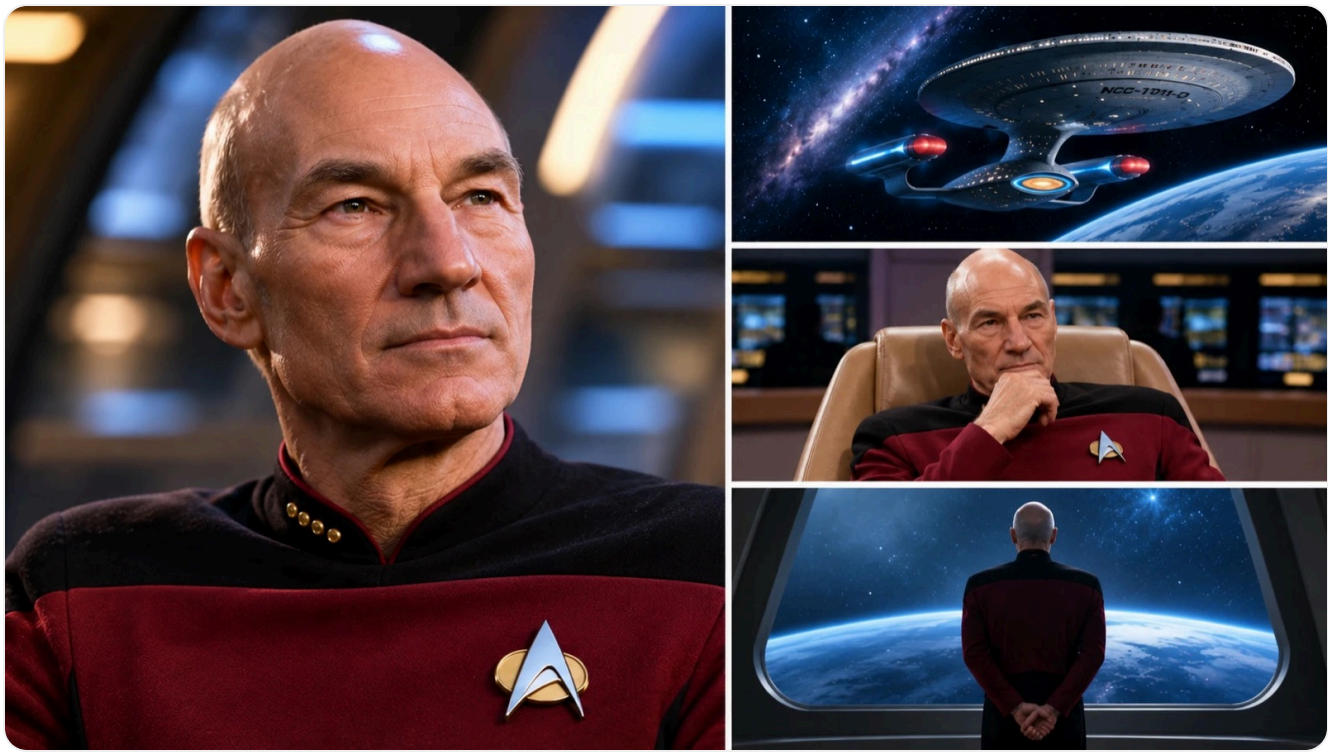
Afterward Brent Spiner and Jonathan Frakes came to his trailer. Spiner told him, "People respect you... But I think you misjudged the situation here." In his memoir Stewart owned it. He wrote that he "had failed to read the room, imposing RSC behavior on people accustomed to the ways of episodic television," and, "I didn't handle it well."

He changed. He told Graham Norton that his early Picard “was very authoritarian and very commanding but was way too stentorian,” and that he got better by watching his American castmates play with “the same openness and freedom.” Years later LeVar Burton said that of all the knights and dames he had known, Stewart was deep down “the silliest.”

What Picard meant to people

In 2023 Stewart told NPR that fans would come up to him and tell him what the show had done for them. One told him, “I was going to end my life, but I couldn’t because I wouldn’t be able to see ‘Star Trek’ anymore.”

Stewart said the show “was about truth and fairness and honesty and respect for others,” and that for some people, “in a sense, we were ministers.” He said playing Picard gave him “an idea of how I might become a better person.”



AI generated illustration.

1. Hear your people out, then decide

Watch almost any episode and you see the same thing. When there is a problem, Picard calls his senior staff into the observation lounge. He asks questions. He lets them disagree with him and with each other. Then he makes the call and says the two words everyone remembers: “Make it so.”

I loved how he asked his team for input, and people could always disagree with him. He didn’t lead by committee, and he didn’t lead alone. He listened first, and then he owned the decision. How many leaders do you know who do only one of those?

Look closer at how he set it up. Picard didn’t just invite disagreement. It was built into the job. In the very first episode, Picard asks his new first officer, Will Riker, about the time he refused to let his old captain beam down into danger. Riker tells him he won’t back off from that position. From then on, part of Riker’s job was telling the captain no.

Amy Edmondson at Harvard calls this psychological safety, the belief that you won’t be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. When Google studied what made its best teams work, psychological safety was far and away the most important factor. Most experienced leaders say they want pushback. Fewer have built a role or a habit where pushback is expected. Who on your team has the job of telling you no?

Stewart saw it the same way. In 2020 NPR asked him what we can learn from Picard. He said Picard was a great listener and would only speak when he felt everyone had said what they believed.

He lived it off screen too. Jonathan Frakes directed him in a lot of episodes. Frakes said, “My best note to Patrick always was, ‘Think faster,’ and he’d say, ‘Great, Johnny, perfect. That’s really good.’” The star of the show took notes from the guy who played his first officer.

And when he decided, he decided. “Make it so” ended the discussion. Listening is not the same as consensus. Teams can handle a leader who disagrees with them. What wears them out is a leader who never closes the debate because they don’t want to make the call.

2. Tell the truth, even when it costs your own people

In “The First Duty,” Wesley Crusher is a cadet at Starfleet Academy. His flight squad tries a banned maneuver, and one of the cadets, Joshua Albert, is killed. Then the squad lies about it at the inquiry.

Picard had known Wesley since he was a boy, and Wesley's mother, Dr. Beverly Crusher, was the ship's chief medical officer. He confronted him anyway: "The first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth." Then he gave Wesley a choice: "Either you tell Admiral Brand what really took place, or I will." Wesley told the truth. The squad leader, Nick Locarno, was expelled, and Wesley had to repeat the year.

What makes this episode worth studying is how the lie happened. These were not bad cadets. Locarno was charismatic, and he made loyalty to the squad the highest value. When Wesley wavered, Locarno told him the cover up was "To save the team! That's more important than you, and more important than me." Once a team believes that, telling the truth feels like betrayal.

Every experienced leader has seen some version of this. A strong team, a leader people love, and a culture where protecting each other slowly becomes more important than the mission. It usually doesn't start with a big lie. It starts with "let's handle this internally."

Notice also how Picard handled it. He didn't go over Wesley's head first. He confronted him privately and gave him the chance to make it right himself. That let Wesley keep his integrity, not just his career.

Loyalty to your people never means covering for them. Is there something on your team right now that everyone knows and nobody is saying?

3. Know what is true and don't let pressure move you

In "Chain of Command, Part II," Picard is captured by a Cardassian officer named Gul Madred. Madred tortures him and tries to break him by making him say he sees five lights when there are only four. When Picard is finally released, he shouts, "There are four lights!"

Then he does something leaders rarely do. He admits to Counselor Troi that by the end, he was beginning to believe there were five.

That admission is the real lesson. Picard was one of the strongest leaders on television, and he still almost gave in. Pressure rarely breaks people all at once. It wears them down until the false thing starts to sound reasonable.

Sociologist Diane Vaughan studied the Challenger disaster and called this "the normalization of deviance." Engineers at NASA and its contractor knew the O rings were a problem. But each time damage showed up and the shuttle came home fine, the risk got redefined as acceptable. Little by little, the unacceptable became normal.

Most of us will never be tortured. But we will sit across from a board, a major donor, a boss, or a market pushing us to call something what it isn't. Usually it is something small. A number rounded up. A problem renamed a "challenge." A staff issue we decide not to see. Decide ahead of time what you will not say, and keep counting the lights out loud.

4. You can do everything right and still lose

In "Peak Performance," Data, the android officer, loses a strategy game to a visiting master and starts to doubt himself. He steps away from his duties. Picard tells him, "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness. That is life."

Then Picard reminds him the ship still needs him. So Data goes back and plays Kolrami again. This time he doesn't play to win. He plays for "a standoff. A draw," and he keeps it going until Kolrami gives up in frustration.

Poker players call the trap Data almost fell into "resulting," a term Annie Duke made famous in her book *Thinking in Bets*. It means judging a decision by how it turned out instead of by how good the decision was. Experienced leaders do it all the time. A good hire who leaves gets called a bad hire. A smart bet that didn't pay off gets called a mistake, and the team quietly learns to stop taking smart bets.

So when something fails, ask two separate questions. Was it a good decision with what we knew at the time? And what would we do differently now? Sometimes, like Data, the answer is to stop playing the game the way the other side wants you to.

5. Stand up for the person with the least power in the room

In "The Measure of a Man," a Starfleet scientist wants to take Data apart to study him. Starfleet rules that Data is property. Picard fights it in a hearing. "Starfleet was founded to seek out new life. Well, there it sits! Waiting." The judge rules that Data "has the freedom to choose."

Picard used his rank to protect someone who had none. That is what position is for.

The harder part of this story is who Picard was fighting. It wasn't an enemy. It was his own institution. The judge ordered his own first officer, Riker, to argue the other side. Riker did his job and did it well. He nearly proved Data was just a machine.

Picard was losing, so he went to Guinan, who ran the ship's lounge and often saw what he couldn't. She helped him see the bigger question. If Data could be copied and owned, Starfleet would be creating "whole generations of disposable people." Picard named it: "You're talking

about slavery." He went back into the hearing and stopped arguing about whether Data was a machine. He asked what kind of people Starfleet wanted to be.

Two things we can learn here. First, the hardest stand you take will usually be against your own side, and Picard took it inside the process, not around it. Second, you need a Guinan, someone outside your chain of command who helps you see the real question.

6. Learn the other person's language

In "Darmok," the Enterprise meets the Tamarians, a people who speak only in references to their own stories. "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra." Nobody can understand them. Their captain, Dathon, takes himself and Picard down to a planet to face a danger together.

Slowly, Picard figures out how they talk. Dathon is badly wounded, and he dies while Picard is telling him an old story of his own, the story of Gilgamesh. Back on the ship, Picard tells the Tamarians in their own way, "I understand your sacrifice, Captain."

What is easy to miss is how badly Picard misread Dathon at first. When Dathon tossed him a knife, Picard thought he was being challenged to a duel and refused it. Dathon actually wanted the two of them to fight the creature together. Picard saw a threat where there was a partner.

The universal translator could translate the words, but not the meaning. Picard only understood once he had gone through something hard alongside Dathon.

Ray Bakke taught us to "exegete the culture." Before you try to lead people from another culture, learn how they talk and what stories they live by. Picard didn't make the Tamarians learn his language. He learned theirs.

If you lead across cultures, you will misread people. Start by assuming you don't understand yet. And real trust usually comes from facing something hard together, not from a better translation.

7. Be honest about what you are carrying

In "Family," Picard has just been captured by the Borg and used to attack the Federation. Afterward he goes home to his brother Robert's vineyard in France. The two of them end up wrestling in the mud, and Picard finally breaks down. "They took everything I was. They used me to kill and to destroy."

There is more to that episode. Before the breakdown, Picard was seriously thinking about leaving Starfleet. An old friend told him the Atlantis Project, a huge ocean project on Earth, needed a director, and they wanted him. It was his brother Robert, who had always been hard on him, who pushed until the pain came out. Afterward Robert put the choice plainly: “below the sea with Louis” or “above the clouds with the Enterprise.” Picard went back to the Enterprise.

Experienced leaders know this pattern even if we don’t talk about it. After a crisis, hurt doesn’t always look like hurt. It looks like a sudden urge to quit, start something new, or move far away. It’s an excuse to walk away. Sometimes that is the right call. Often it is the pain talking.

Leaders get hurt. The strong ones admit it and take time to heal before they make big decisions or go back to the bridge. Patrick Stewart lived that too. He talked openly about his childhood when a lot of men of his generation never would. Who in your life is honest enough to push you until it comes out?

8. Don’t let the fear of mistakes keep you small

In “Tapestry,” Picard gets a chance to undo a reckless fight from when he was a young officer, the one that left him with an artificial heart. He takes it. But in that new life he played it safe, never took risks, and ended up a cautious junior officer nobody noticed.

He asks to go back. “I would rather die as the man I was than live the life I just saw.”

In that safer life, Picard asks Troi and Riker why he was never given more responsibility. Troi answers, “Hasn’t that been the problem all along?” He had big goals but was never willing to do what it took to reach them. Riker agrees that to get ahead you have to take chances and stand out. He never had.

This lesson is for experienced leaders more than young ones. The longer you lead, the more you have to protect: a reputation, an organization, staff who depend on you, donors who trust you. Caution starts to feel like wisdom. And slowly you can become the careful officer who never makes a mistake and never does anything that matters.

What risk did you take at 25 that you would talk yourself out of today? Your mistakes are part of what made you. Don’t spend the rest of your life trying to avoid them.

9. Be hard on people because you believe in them

In “Lower Decks,” Ensign Sito Jaxa had been part of that same flight squad cover up from “The First Duty.” Picard is harsh with her about it. When she comes back to his ready room to challenge him, he tells her, “It took courage to face me,” and that he was harsh because he wanted to assess her for a very important mission.

Picard doesn’t order her to go. He offers, and she volunteers. She has to pose as a Bajoran prisoner so a Cardassian agent working for the Federation can get back across the border. She doesn’t come back. Picard tells the crew she was lost in the line of duty and calls her “the finest example of a Starfleet officer.”

Picard’s harshness wasn’t his normal way. He had asked for her to be assigned to the Enterprise in the first place, and he told her himself it was an assessment. He needed to know if she could stand in front of him and own her worst mistake, because the mission would ask a lot more of her than that.

And then he carried the cost. He was the one who chose her. Experienced leaders know this weight. When you believe in someone enough to give them the hard assignment, you also own what happens to them.

He held her to a high standard, and he gave her a second chance. Her worst mistake didn’t get the last word. That is grace, and grace is not soft. Do the people on your team know you believe in them that much?



AI generated illustration.

What his crew said

Wil Wheaton was a teenager when he played Wesley Crusher. The day after Stewart died, he wrote, “He never treated me like I was a kid; he always treated me like I was an equal, a fellow artist.” And, “He made me a better actor, just by being in scenes with me.”

Jonathan Frakes said, “We’re always told to play tennis with a better tennis player. When you act with an actor like that, you get better.” LeVar Burton said simply, “He was family.” Marina Sirtis, who played Counselor Troi, said, “It was more than an honor, it was the privilege of my life to work with him.”

Brent Spiner, who played Data, the android Picard fought for in “The Measure of a Man,” wrote on Facebook, “My dear friend… I don’t even know where to begin right now. The bridge feels entirely empty without you.”

Gates McFadden, who played Dr. Beverly Crusher, posted, “Great memories, unforgettable man. Rest in Peace.” A few days later she wrote an essay for Variety about what made Picard last: his kindness, his compassion, and his commitment to doing what was right. She also wrote, “Even though I knew he was very sick, somewhere in my mind, I hoped I would see him again.”

Would the people who work with you say you made them better?

Engage

In 2018, at 78, Stewart announced he was coming back to play Picard in a new series. He said he wanted “to explore new dimensions within him” and see “what comforting and reforming light he might shine on these often very dark times.” He also said he didn’t want to “continuously say ‘engage’ or ‘make it so’ for the sake of it.”

In one of the very first episodes, Data tells Picard something may be impossible. Picard answers, “Things are only impossible until they’re not.”

When Stewart died, tributes came from all over. As Wil Wheaton, who played Wesley Crusher, wrote,

> ***“Godspeed, Captain.”***

Tommy

Issue 039 · On Leadership · November 5, 2026



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tommy Lee is the founder and president of Resource Global, a network that teaches, mentors, and connects emerging Christian marketplace leaders in cities around the world. He writes about faith, leadership, work, and AI at tommyplee.ai.

Read more issues at tommyplee.ai