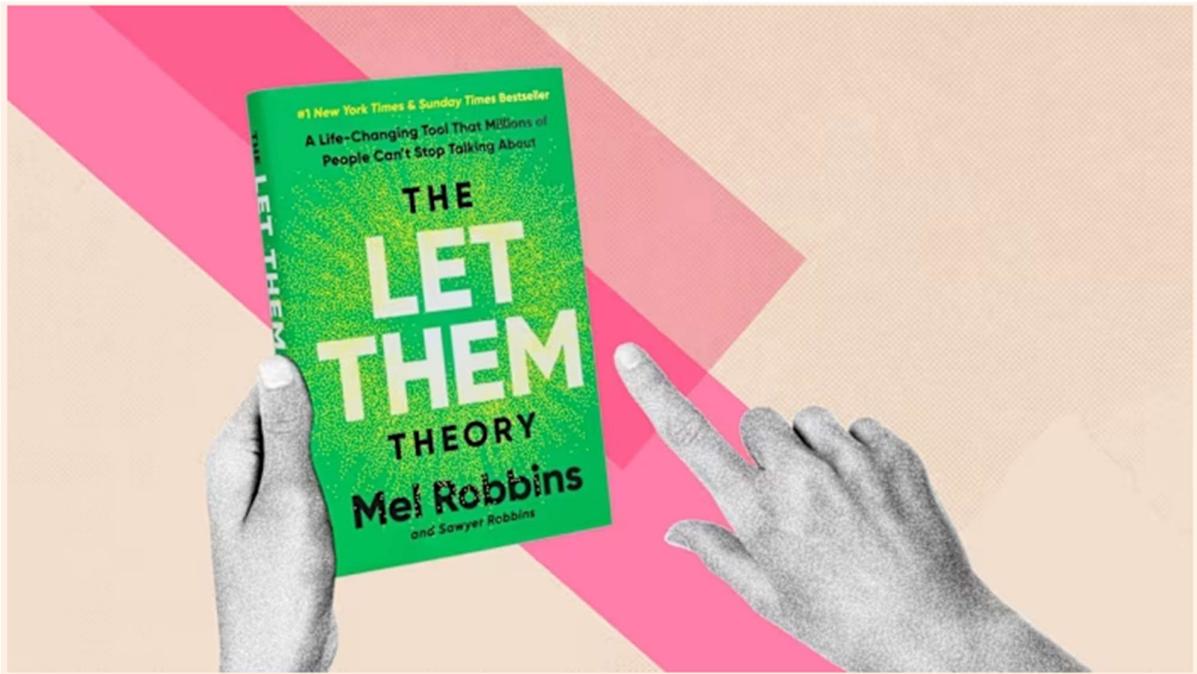


Could a self-help hit transform your management style? The Let Them Theory has viral appeal, but readers are divided about whether it can be a blueprint for leadership. Could a self-help hit transform your management style?



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What if two short words could serve as a blueprint not just for personal relationships, but your approach to management, leadership and work?

According to some fans of last year's biggest self-help book, this could be the case. The two words? Let Them.

Since its publication just over a year, Mel Robbins' The Let Them Theory has become a cultural phenomenon, selling some 8mn copies. It advocates a simple philosophy: stop trying to manage the concerns and judgments of others and let them get on with things while you take responsibility for yourself.

And while it was originally targeted as a self-help book, "Let Them" could be appearing in a boardroom near you. Since its publication, Robbins has been featured in The CEO Magazine, been endorsed by corporate coaches, and praised on LinkedIn by leaders at top employers. With executive coach David Gerbitz she has written an additional chapter applying Let Them to leadership, encouraging a hands-off approach in which workers are given resources and goals, but allowed to pursue them in their own way.

London Business School professor Randall Peterson says value in these kinds of informal management strategies lies in their accessibility. This is certainly what attracted Jo Cox, the CEO of an energy analytics company. She stumbled across Let Them when listening to Robbins' leadership podcast on the way to work,

and says the book helped her recognise what is not in her control and stop trying to “own everybody’s problems” in her work and personal life.

“The theory was obvious, but no one has explained it that simply,” Cox says. She believes it has struck a chord with women juggling high-level leadership roles with other responsibilities. “As a woman who feels like they have to do it all, sometimes you have to let go.”

The approach helped with challenges such as a recent incident when anonymous participants in a town-hall meeting posted abusive messages. Rather than taking comments to heart or ignoring them, a “Let Them filter” helped Cox recognise the abuse was not personal, and gave her the confidence to reiterate boundaries. She made clear that if abuse continued colleagues would lose the right to speak, and the problem stopped.

While she still feels she is “carrying a lot of weight of delivery, delivery, delivery”, she can now “manage what I’m prepared to let go” and has space to prioritise other tasks, like exercising regularly.

Lloyd Gordon, a recruitment CEO, describes Let Them as “like a release” from stress about things beyond his control. “If you allow yourself to be sidetracked . . . you’re in a worse position yourself.” He says the book has taught him to set clear parameters, share his experience and trust employees to learn the lessons themselves if they choose a different track.

Other management experts, however, are sceptical. Peterson says the hands-off approach is right in discouraging micromanagement. But he thinks it a short-sighted approach to leadership because “if you make it only about the individuals, the team won’t succeed”.

Executive coach Sarah Allen-Short describes Let Them as “an excellent self-regulation technique” but not a leadership strategy. Setting boundaries is appropriate for personal relationships, she says, but in business settings leaders have a responsibility to step up to challenges and conflicts. “I worry that it’s an excuse to abdicate responsibility for things that you can influence,” she explains, adding that if “applied unfairly” it could have a disproportionate negative impact on those at the bottom of the career ladder.

Still, the book offers readers plenty to chew on. At Waterstones, which shortlisted The Let Them Theory for book of the year, head of books Bea Carvalho said the title helped readers “not only with life problems and events but in changing their overall mindset with long-term, life-changing impact”.

Robbins’ team did not respond to request for comment, though in a recent interview she described the theory as “a tool that helps you to rise above the noise”, and in the leadership-focused chapter encourages readers to reflect. “True leadership comes from you,” she writes. “Your mindset, your actions, and your ability to influence, not control.”