



Why Alicia Bassuk Believes Leading Others Begins with Knowing and Leading Yourself

This NBA and WNBA championship ring-holding leadership advisor shares the morning writing ritual that changed her life, an approach to interviewing potential job candidates that gets beyond canned responses, and her belief that information gathering is critical to effective management. Find Alicia's book [here](#).

Alicia Menendez: Alicia Bassuk's clients call her everything from Olivia Pope to Yoda, which means something when you advise individuals and teams on how to be better, more effective leaders. Alicia's work with the Toronto Raptors as special advisor to the president, GM and head coach earned her an NBA championship ring. She then went on to add a WNBA championship ring with Chicago Sky. Alicia's here to share how she coaches her clients, some of whom are operating at the top of their fields to "beast it out", how understanding management as information gathering can change the way you manage and why leading others requires you to first know and lead yourself.

Alicia, this is my first other Alicia interview. Thank you for doing it.

Alicia Bassuk: Yeah, I'm so happy and I'm so curious, who were you named after?

Menendez: I am not named after anyone. My mother wanted to name me Alison Jane, and my Cuban father was like, "Mm-mm, no." And so Alicia was their compromise name.

Bassuk: Got it. I was named after my mom's best friend in Buenos Aires, Alicia, and then they had a massive falling out and then they became besties again, fortunately, so I only met her very late in my life.

Menendez: Alicia, you to me are a person who is naturally curious. You are curious about people, you are curious about systems and how they operate. What was it about the way you grew up that cultivated that sense of curiosity?

Bassuk: I think that it's probably something that happens to a lot of people who have parents who are immigrants. In my case, my parents came to this country when my mom was 18, my dad was 23. And my mom spoke high school English and had her high school degree. My father was the first in his family to go to school past middle school, and he did not speak a word of English and has had to figure life out. And I was observing that through my whole childhood, trying to see what was going to happen next and what were they going to do and how could I help them to do it. This in a way shaped me to have these very keen observational skills and to be a very interested person. And what I mean is I'm interested in so many little details of the way things work.

Menendez: One imagines that someone who is a leadership strategist, advisor coach is themselves a natural born leader. Is that true for you?

Bassuk: To learn to lead other people, the first thing that you have to do is learn to lead yourself. And in that way, I am big time constantly trying to figure out how to lead myself, which is how do I learn and grow? How do I develop my character? To do that, you have to really

dig deep and you have to both look at yourself and look at the things around you and you're looking really for just two things. One is red flags or pain points. So what isn't quite right? And usually what you'll find is that there's a whole lot underneath that little pain point and you just dig into that.

And then the other thing that you're looking for is basically leverage points. What are things that you're finding that are actually details that if you do something with those, you're going to accelerate your growth? And that's where you really see that you are thriving, that others are thriving. And so you do that for yourself, you do that for other people.

Menendez: What is the most common problem that your clients come to you with?

Bassuk: The most common problem that my clients come to me with is that they're trying to do something big. As my client who's a hip hop artist describes it, I work with people who are trying to beast it out. Okay. They're winners that are hitting a snag and so they want help to accelerate their beasting it out.

Menendez: Beast it out is way cooler than level up, which is the terminology that I think is most common.

Bassuk: So for example, I was approached by the general manager and head coach of a women's basketball team and they were three weeks from the playoffs, which is really late in the season. And they were not having a good season. So super talented team, excellent coach, they were just eeking it into the playoffs and there is nobody, and I mean nobody that thought that they were championship contenders. Not the media, not the fans, not even the players themselves or the coaching staff thought that they could win the championship. And this head coach called me, said, "I've tried everything possible to get this team to level up and there's just something off. I don't know how to fix it." And so I looked at the talent, I looked at the coaching staff, I looked at the competition and I said, "Okay, here's the deal. I will only take this on if you, like I do, believe that you actually can win the championship this year. I said that we can only do it if we have a pretty serious and unconventional intervention here. Are you willing to do this?" So he said, "Yeah, let's do it." A few days later, the team came over with the head coach for dinner at my apartment. We all talked. There were tears shed. There were angry words. They left. The head coach called me the next day from the practice facility and he said, "This is a disaster. Morale is at an all-time low. What have you done?" And I said to the head coach, "Just hold the line. Whatever you do, don't apologize. Don't show any doubt. Just hold the line. And I guarantee that in three days this team will start winning and you will win it all." And for three days it was terrible and after three days they just started winning and winning and winning all their way to the championship.

Menendez: But explain this to me. What happened and what was the line that he was holding and what did it shift inside of the team?

Bassuk: So the whole question about winning is about unifying everybody. And this is the one thing, Alicia, that is different about the way that I am approaching this work, is that I seem to have x-ray vision into what unifies people. It's almost like The Matrix where it's xs and os to me. There are ways to look at a group of people and really see them as whole human beings. And if you can use that kind of a filter into the way everybody's communicating and relating to one another, you can very quickly improve any situation.

Menendez: Were they unified around the fact that they hated him and you for having that dinner?

Bassuk: They were unified around that they actually had the possibility of winning a championship, that all the skills and talent necessary was right there for them to take it if they wanted enough.

Menendez: Alicia, you are a big believer in the power of routine. You argue that embracing routine and ritual for you changed everything and you have a pretty powerful morning routine. Walk me through your morning routine.

Bassuk: There's a writing prompt that you can use every single day for the rest of your life. It will never get old, and that is what are you willing to do to become who you want to be?

Menendez: Can you give me a sense, not to get too personal, but a sense of what that can look like? Because it would be easy to just for me to turn that into a to-do list, to be like, I want to be the type of person who makes dinner for my family, so I'm going to go grocery shopping. I'd like to reverse engineer to justify the things that I already plan to do.

Bassuk: If that's what comes out for you, that's fine and it will be like that for several days, maybe even several weeks, and it's like the layers of an onion. Eventually you will not be writing about going to the grocery store. Eventually you're going to get to some of the deeper, more important topics around your growth. This exercise of asking yourself, what am I willing to do to become who I want to be? It forces you to think harder, but not with effort. It just sort of in a meditative state, you just relax into thinking harder about who you want to be in this lifetime. What happens is when you begin to face situations which historically have triggered you, have challenged you, have led to negative results for you, once you're asking yourself this question, you begin to write your own narrative in that moment. So when you're faced with that thing because you've been writing about it each morning, you're able to use a different part of your brain to actually make a choice about handling something differently. And that different way makes itself apparent to you.

Menendez: What are the questions you need to be asking yourself to define for yourself who you want to be? Or am I being too cerebral about it? Is it something you feel more than something you get to carve out, write down and then you're done?

Bassuk: So you have to start by taking the pressure off yourself. You don't have to know the answer right now. Your horizon is going to extend as you practice by asking yourself this. After several weeks, your pen is going to surprise you. You're going to start writing things before your brain is even registering that you have that thought. All the things we can imagine, they're in us. We just haven't been paying attention to them. We haven't let them surface. And if we're quiet and we're writing and we're wondering and we're thinking, these things just start bubbling up and it's actually delightful as they present themselves.

Menendez: Alicia, how did you even get into basketball?

Bassuk: I was a college athlete. I played lacrosse though. I didn't even play basketball and actually I wasn't very good. And I always tried to get into professional sports, but it's possibly the most difficult sector to get into. And so I decided to do something that I advise my clients to do, which is when you realize what you want to be, what you want your life narrative to be, you have to just begin preparing yourself in a really serious way as if it could happen at any moment.

And so I fooled myself into saying, "Okay, this is imminent. I am going to be approached by an MBA team at any moment. I have to be prepared." And so I really started studying everything that I could get my hands on, talking to people, reading every industry rag, and I started quizzing myself. Okay, how many teams are in the NBA and can I name all 30? And then getting into the coaching staff and the history of the players and everything, and

I would watch hours and hours of basketball every night and gain a deeper understanding of the technical aspects of basketball. This went on for almost three years and the movement never came, but I kept believing it was going to come, so I kept preparing and one day I ended up in a meeting with the president of a team and he immediately saw the value in working with me.

Menendez: Alicia, so many of our listeners are building teams, hiring folks. You have an approach to interviewing that has proven to be more revelatory than our traditional approach.

Bassuk: Yeah. I wrote about this in an article for Harvard Business Review years ago is how to get people off of canned responses. So that's really the idea is that... My brother said something that is so true, which is when someone has a really good job interview, what it tells you is that they're a really good job interviewer. That's about it. So how do you get them off of those prepared responses and allow them to reveal themselves? So that's what all the techniques are about is the person is revealing themselves if you have them off of those prepared answers. And the hardest work is for you as a listener, are you actually catching all that they are revealing in that interview?

Menendez: Can you give me an example?

Bassuk: One of the most important things in leadership is does the person take initiative? Are you waiting to be asked to do something? Are you constantly thinking? I would say leaders think about two things constantly, whether they're aware of it or not. The greatest leaders are thinking, what can I do to improve this and what's missing here? And they're just repeating that constantly in their mind. One way to know if somebody's taking initiative is when you ask them a question, and a great way to ask what is to conventionally asked is what are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your weaknesses? You're going to get these prepared answers, right? Instead to ask, "If I spoke with the people who you recently have worked with, what would they tell me you would benefit from working on?" Okay, so they're going to tell you then.

Menendez: Woo, that was surgical, precision.

Bassuk: And then you keep your mouth zipped, okay? You are now in that listening mode. And what you're listening for is are they going to end with? And so here's what I did to work on that so that I no longer have that shortcoming. You should not have to ask them, so what did you do about that? Are you taking a class on that topic? Or don't even bother asking, because if they didn't tell you, then they are not taking that initiative. That's pretty much the end of the interview right there.

Menendez: Alicia. You work with so many do-gooders and so many people who are socially conscious, that's a big part of your work being values aligned. And I think that that type of person wants to be able to both be uber successful and feel that they are giving back. I certainly deal with this constant existential question of, am I doing enough? Am I contributing enough? What is your counsel for someone who has a heart of service and is still trying to find ways to be of service?

Bassuk: Something that I am not going to talk about more than just a mention, which is the importance of mentorship, especially for our people. And I especially focus on young professionals of color and young women of color specifically because there's the most need for that and they have the least mentorship and the world needs them the most in leadership positions. What I want to talk more specifically about though a piece that I think will help everybody who's mentoring, which is understand the importance of one somebody seeing the potential in another.

I want to just share this one client engagement that I had with a CEO where the COO had been dismissed unceremoniously, and they very quickly needed another COO. They had no successor in place, very political, high profile organization. They also had no CEO successor and they really needed that COO to be the CEO successor as well. As I was working with the CEO and talking about this, I overheard in a very quick throwaway mention that there was a emerging leaders program with three leaders in it. It was a program that was limping along where they were trying to develop leaders of color who had historically been marginalized from leadership positions at this organization. So I grabbed onto that and I said, "It's great that you have that program. I'd love to meet with those three." And I sat with them for an hour and a half. And in this hour and a half, this one man barely said a word. So at the end, I pulled him aside and I asked him, "What's going on here? Because you might fool a lot of people by just not talking a lot. And then when you did talk, you basically were just using filler words. You didn't really say anything. But I'm not fooled by it. I know that something's going on. That's just not something that someone does for no reason." Most people would've just written this guy off. And what I have learned in mentoring, and this is very important for all of management, do not make assumptions about people. If you want to know something about them, just ask them the question. You have to look at management as a series of information gathering so that you are learning more and more about the other person. And so rather than make an assumption that this individual is inept and somehow sliding by at this company, I asked him, "What is going on?" And he said to me, "Look, I never asked to be here. I got my first job here decades ago just fixing things like a mechanic. And then someone a few months later told me to do a different job. And I'm a military vet, I'm just trying to do my job. I'm just trying to keep my head down and they keep giving me these bigger jobs, but I never asked for them. And that's how I've survived here by not just not talking too much, I just keep my head down and do my job." And we went on to talk for another 20 minutes and I went to the CEO's office and I said, "I found your next COO. This guy is incredible, and he's also your successor as CEO. I can just tell. I have a lot of data points of what we need in leadership, and this guy is it." So be that one somebody for other people that sees the potential in them.

Menendez: Alicia, thank you so much for doing this.

Bassuk: Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina To Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Good Pods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

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