



Leadership Moments: Are You Keeping the Right Score With Your Employees?

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Over a 30-year career, [George Napier](#) held the CEO title at several companies, including Prince Sports, Benetton SportSystem USA, Meridian Sports and RockShox. He is also a colleague of mine now at The ExCo Group, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm that I joined after 18 years at The New York Times, where I created the "Corner Office" interview series on leadership. In "Leadership Moments," I'll be focusing on key lessons that executives learned during their career. Here's the conversation I had (edited for space) with Napier. Follow me here on LinkedIn to see future interviews.

Q. You were a CEO for 20 years. If you were to write a letter now to yourself as a first-time CEO, what would you say?

A. What I didn't understand initially was that it was more than just results that mattered. Early in my career, my entire focus was on delivering results, and more than people expected. I had to learn not to hold others to the same standard as I held myself. Some people may not be motivated by that standard, and it would be unfair to assume that they failed if they didn't. They may be fantastic, so you can't measure them against the wrong standard.

Q. And so how you do that without lowering standards or sacrificing urgency?

A. Let me use an analogy. If you play golf, most people measure their performance on a given day around the score. At some stage in life, you realize that you're not good enough to be worrying about the score, and that something else is more important, like how you enjoyed the day or how many pars you made. They're a subset of the game that may be more relevant to you.

I play a lot of golf, and I changed the way I thought about the sport once I realized it wasn't just the score that mattered. In a similar way with employees, you have to use standards that are fair and focused on where they really have to perform.

Q. What else would you tell your younger self?

A. There's a point to be made about progress versus perfection. When I was younger, it was

all about getting it right all the time and spending less time celebrating the progress. You have to recognize when things are going well for the organization and the team.

I was also communicating less effectively because I was focused more on how people did the work. As I matured, I realized that “why” is really what drives people. If you can rally them around the why, they will figure out the how and you can be a resource.

Q. What were some early influences for you?

A. My parents moved from the Middle East, and sacrificed a reasonably privileged life to move to Canada. My mother didn't adapt very well to what happened. My father refocused on building a new life from nothing. He just kind of figured it out.

So I observed the contrast of those different approaches. My father also wasn't good at conforming to authority. He would challenge what people said and figure out a better approach. There's a level of persistence that's required to fuel that behavior, and a level of confidence that's needed to ask questions.

Q. You've been an ExCo mentor for seven years. What has surprised you about the kind of conversations you're having with clients?

A. A lot of people don't like to confront issues and have tough conversations. So I try to shift their perspective by asking them, “What's the purpose of the conversation and what's the outcome, the benefit, if it's an effective conversation?”

If you shift your focus from the conversation being complicated to a compelling benefit, then maybe you can feel better about why you're having the talk. It's no longer about the conflict, and more about solution if you do well.

Q. What are some of the tougher conversations you've had with people you mentor?

A. It's usually about their career. Sometimes if a person doesn't get the promotion they wanted – not because they didn't deserve it, but maybe the timing wasn't right – they might start criticizing their organization.

I'll often challenge that by saying, “That is loser talk. I don't see you as a loser, but you're sounding like you are to me, and it doesn't feel like you're actually taking stock of what you have. If you can't find a place in your current work that's going to bring value and is going to be enjoyable for you, you may need to consider leaving or doing something different. But sitting here complaining about it is unlikely to be a solution.” That conversation often refocuses people.

Q. What's the 10 percent difference between a really good CEO and a great CEO?

A. It's critical to know which priorities are really going to drive value and improve the

performance of the business. I think too many CEOs and managers think that their priority list has to be ten things to show they are thorough and have thought about every aspect of the business. But you can't have an impact on ten things in any given cycle.

You really need to give yourself time to be able to do three or four things exceptionally well. You can really add value that way and build momentum.