



Leadership Moments: Make Sure Your Strengths Don't Become A Weakness

Published on June 11, 2018



Adam Bryant



Over his wide-ranging career in business, Paul Block has held numerous CEO and board roles, including running Revlon International, and working extensively in China and Brazil. He is now a colleague of mine at The ExCo Group, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm. In these "Leadership Moments" interviews, I'll be focusing on key lessons that executives learned during their careers and their best mentoring advice that they've given to their clients over the years. Here's the conversation I had (edited for space) with Block, in which we talked about the challenges of jumping from an operating role to a strategic one, the art of listening, and the importance of being open to change and new perspectives. Follow me here on LinkedIn to see future interviews.

Q. What separates truly great leaders from good leaders?

A. Humanity. You have to show up and meet people in your company – even if it means a trip to visit the general manager in each of the 43 countries where you operate – and spend time with them. And in those meetings, the leader can only talk 20 percent of the time, and the person they're meeting should be talking 80 percent of the time. If it's anything more than 20 percent, you're doing something wrong.

Q. What are some of the common themes that come up in discussions with your clients?

A. One frequent conversation is trying to understand what really drove them to achieve so much and is still continuing to drive them today. What was it in their childhood that made them need and want the security and stability that comes with success? And very often there is a need to compensate for a void in their childhood – perhaps it was something with their parents, or because they were not treated with respect in society.

It's important that they understand, and that they are self-aware, of how this background script has made them very successful as an operator. Because many of them are moving beyond those operating responsibilities and into strategic responsibilities. They now have to become a source of inspiration for their team, for the company. The drive that made them successful at delivering monthly or quarterly numbers is not necessarily the same drive that they need to stand back and inspire people. They have to learn new behaviors. Often that means showing them how they could have handled situations differently.

Q. Not everybody can make that leap, though.

A. I've had to pass along the tough news to a client that their bosses believed they weren't going to succeed in the company after giving them a promotion, because they're not growing into the new job. I will warn them up front that this is a hard moment, but that they are going to end up being better, happier, more comfortable, less anxious, less insecure down the road. People with a strong enough psyche can learn from scar-tissue moments like that. But there are a lot of people who are destroyed by their scar tissue. People have to recognize that their career is not their life.

Q. What else? What are other themes?

A. The only constant is change -- the need to respond to technological change or broader societal changes. I work with my clients to help them recognize that they have to be as flexible and malleable and open to the outside world as they can be.

A lot of people are constantly on the same trail in terms of how they think about the world, and the more they walk that trail, the more they deepen that groove, which limits their peripheral vision for being sensitive to what's happening in the market and what their competitors are doing.

It's about helping them stand one rung higher on the ladder and have some perspective on what's going on out there. If you're following a strategy that is non-dynamic and doesn't have tolerances for change, then you're doing something wrong.

It takes a certain kind of leader to willingly give up the strength that brought them and the

company to where they are today. The most valuable executive is the one who brings a combination of insight and inspiration so that they get the broader team to change course if they have to. You want people to be able to shed their own toolkit and open up to different areas.

Q. What about your own career? What were the most important lessons you've learned?

A. The thread that runs through all the work I've done is being sensitive to what people envisioned as their problem and being able to walk in with a solution in hand.

Q. And what about managing and leading the people who've worked for you?

A. Is it any different? People can be very defensive, and there is such a tendency to presume that they know all the answers. It would be great if you could inject a little syringe full of humility into people to have them not just put on the mask of being humble, but truly be available to discuss things with their staff. That's one of the keys, I think, to being respected at an organization.

I learned this lesson myself the hard way. Thirty years ago, I had a meeting with my vice president of public relations at Revlon, and I said to her, "Let me tell you how to do your job." I wasn't listening to her at all. It's like telling your customer what they need. I figured out that that approach never works.

Q. When you were hiring and building teams, what was your favorite job interview question?

A. It's not a question, per se, but I'm really looking for their ability to demonstrate to me that they're not the kind of person who has to stay within the lines in how they think. So as much as possible, I will try to disarm them and push them out of the lines. If we're in my office, I will move my chair next to them – instead of on the opposite side of the desk -- to break the predictable structures of the interview. It's about being open to change.

Q. That theme of being open to new things has come up a lot in our conversation.

A. I learned it myself when I was doing business in countries like China and Vietnam when I was working at Revlon. If you want to be a bad guy and an ugly American, you'll never be successful. You want to be somebody who is a sympathetic and empathic listener and really enjoys people.

On one trip in Beijing, I sat down for a 14-course lunch with 17 people I didn't know. When the first service came out on a big silver platter, it was fried scorpions and fried grasshoppers. I reached out with my chopsticks and I took a scorpion, and I bit into it, and I swear you could hear the crunch in Tiananmen Square. It was horrible, but they all smiled because I was accepting them.