

A. I spend a lot of time talking about one-on-one communication, whether it's with their own bosses or customers or people who work for them. They often feel out in a position often want to check with me on whether what they're feeling is appropriate, and if it's something that they need to care of. And my answer is always, yes, what you're feeling is appropriate, and yes, you need to deal with it.

It's about choosing the right words and the right length of conversation. I often encourage them to make the conversation briefer than what they otherwise might want, and to be firm and clear and get the message across.

Q. Other tips you give them for having these conversations?

A. I tell them it's got to be timely. They can't wait for a month. Second, I tell them not to dance around it, and to be somewhat direct. Say, "I'd like to talk to you about something that came up in today's meeting. Here's what I saw, here's the impact it had, and here's my take on it." Then you engage them by asking, "What do you think? Are you aware of that? What do you want to do about it?"

Q. Were you always pretty comfortable with those tough conversations?

A. No, but over time, I realized that this is probably one of the most important things I do as a leader, and I have to be good at it and I need to embrace it.

Q. Some people really don't like conflict, though, and a lot of managers want to be liked by their employees.

A. In many situations, though, your responsibility is to be the leader. You need to be firm and say, "I've listened to all of the input. I appreciate what you've shared with me. This is the decision that I've made and now is the time for everyone to get behind that and move forward."

Sometimes managers have a tendency to want to talk too much, to want to be too collegial, too inclusive, too collaborative. There are times when that's appropriate and there are other times when you need to make a call as the leader.

The other thing is that in today's work environment, we have so much more to do. Everybody complains about spending too much time in meetings. I guarantee you there are people sitting in those meetings thinking, "Come on, already. Let's make a decision."

Q. The time crunch is a big problem for everyone.

A. It's a two-pronged problem. People do fill up their schedules. It makes them feel busy and vital and essential and that they're using every possible minute to work on the business. But it's also the reality that leaders' time is in great demand from their company, customers and subordinates.

The subordinates all want to have mindshare with them, and my clients often talk about how they don't get enough time from their own bosses. Bosses are really busy, their subordinates desperately need time with them, and they have clients and customers who want and need their time. It is a juggling act.

Q. What other mentoring advice have you given over the years, including in your roles as an executive?

A. The main thing is to work hard, add value and do things that lead to significant accomplishments. If a resume says, "I supervised this, I led that, I was the project manager of this," it's interesting, but it doesn't tell me what you accomplished.

What difference did you make? I really tried to orient people around thinking about their purpose, and if the company is paying me \$1 today, did I give them \$2 of value? Or better yet, \$3 or \$5? Because at the end of the day, that's what it's all about. That's what's going to get you noticed and the kind of career advancement you want.

I do hear a lot of people say, "I've been here for two years, nobody's talking to me about a promotion." My questions would be, "What have you accomplished? What have you learned? What experiences have you had? How have you grown in those last two years to make you qualified and valuable for another assignment?" It's really about what you've accomplished and added to your toolkit, as opposed to how much time you've spent in a position.

Q. What's the X-factor that separates a great CEO from a really good CEO?

A. It's having a good sense for who the people are in the organization that can really make things happen. And it's not just about the high potential people who can grow to be leaders. Learn who the entrepreneurial people are in the organization, the people who know what's really going on down at the working level that you can tap into and motivate, activate, engage with, learn from, and inspire.

And it's not just for the sake of making everybody feel good. The leader is not the social captain of the boat. Do it for the sake of truly understanding the wellbeing of the organization and the market, and then figuring out how to respond.

Q. What mentoring advice do you give to women specifically?

A. It goes back to the importance of adding value. Focus on “What am I here for? What am I supposed to be doing for my company?” more so than, “woe is me.” Sometimes women do have real grievances that need to be dealt with, but then I will also say, “So that’s the situation. What are you going to do about it? How are you going to take ownership of that and turn that around?” If you can’t get your voice heard, or you can’t do something, then take ownership of that, figure out what you’re going to do about it and how you’re going to change it.

But the number one focus should be on, “What am I here for? What is the contribution I’m supposed to make?” If you come from a position of adding value and making a difference and making a contribution, then you can talk about some of the obstacles that are keeping you from being even more effective in the job you’re doing. But if you’re not adding value, then you shouldn’t be complaining about all the things you’re not getting.

Q. What’s your favorite job interview question?

A. “What questions do you have for me?” The quality of an interviewee’s questions will give you an insight into what’s important to them and how they think. Usually by the time someone gets to me, they’ve interviewed other people in my organization. They should have done their homework.

I will tell them up front that I’m going to leave time at the end of the interview for their questions, and that the quality of their questions is very important to me. But you’d be surprised how many people say to me, “I’ve asked all my questions of others in your organization and I feel like they’ve all been answered. I don’t really have any questions.”

I’m an engineer by training. In everything I do, I ask questions. I’m constantly testing to see if my perception is accurate or if I need to change what I’m thinking. I cannot fathom that somebody wouldn’t ask questions, especially if they’re looking for a new job.

Q. You’ve had a lot of success in your career. Where does your drive come from?

A. I’ve just always been very interested in taking on new and bigger challenges and never, ever giving up. I remember a formative experience when I was younger. When I was in fourth grade, we moved from a small town to a bigger town where the school system was a lot different than what I had come from. My new classmates were a year ahead of where I was in math. I kind of panicked about it, but I never gave up.

Once I got going on the math, I just kept going, and I ended up becoming an engineer. It was just a habit and a personality trait that I had -- I’m going to figure this out, and I’m going to make it work.