



## Does Your Leadership Team Pass the "Golden Age of Management" Test?

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**Adam Bryant** [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

*Over his wide-ranging career in business, **Bruce Gordon** has held numerous senior executive roles, including as CFO of the Disney Interactive Media Group. 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. Here's the conversation I had with Gordon, in which he shared smart insights on decision-making, time management, and setting a high bar for leadership teams.*

**Q. What are some of the common themes that come up with the senior executives you advise?**

A. A big challenge for them is knowing when to be directive with their team and when to allow them to do what they want to do. I typically follow the 90/10 rule, which is that you really don't weigh in unless it's a major issue, which happens about 10 percent of the time on decisions that involve, say, a certain amount of money, or that might affect the CEO, or that raise questions of brand risk. Other than those, I encourage my clients to let go.

Another hard part of being in senior roles is that it can be very difficult at times to make tough decisions about people who report to you. Very few people are bad at their job, but

many are not as good as they must be. People have a hard time getting over that hump of saying, you're a really good person and you're really good technically, but you don't have the level of strategic and operational chops that I need. So it becomes a qualitative decision, not a quantitative decision. And that is a very difficult one for many people, including me when I was in senior positions.

**Q. How do you help people think through that?**

A. I have two sets of benchmarks. One is what I believe it means to have a golden age of management with your executive team. In my 30 years at Disney, I only had three golden ages, and they each lasted about two to three years. After that, people get promoted. In a golden age, every single person on the team is not only aligned with the strategy, goals, values and objectives, but they are also really good in their own right. And the best thing about golden ages is that they are so much fun. When you have that, the sum is much greater than the parts.

And so the test becomes, "Will this person allow you to create a golden age?" Then you can have a conversation about the risks of replacing the person or not replacing the person.

**Q. What if the executive you're mentoring comes back to you and says, "It's a fair question, but don't I owe it to them to give them some coaching, even though my gut says they're probably not going to get there?"**

A. At these senior levels, there are things you cannot teach. Strategy is a premium skill, and it is very difficult, if not impossible, to teach that to somebody who doesn't really have that peripheral vision. It's more of a question of what's missing. If it's judgment that's missing, I don't think you can teach that. If it's strategic chops, I don't think you can teach that. You owe the person a tough discussion, but I don't think you owe them the time that will allow them to get there on certain types of shortcomings.

**Q. When the executives you advise talk about their bosses, what issues come up?**

A. People can be too deferential to the people they report to, or they worry that being candid will be too risky. I typically say, "What's the worst thing that could happen?" They'll talk about losing their boss's confidence. Then I will point out that the worst thing that could happen is that they could get fired. My clients, who are at senior levels, will say to me, "Well, that's not going to happen." And even if it did, they have decades of experience and could get another job. It helps free them up to just have the conversation with their boss that they want to have.

*"The best thing about golden ages is that they are so much fun."*

**Q. What's your advice around the universal struggle of time management?**

A. It boils down to really being religious about your calendar and making sure that all your meetings count and that you don't take part in meetings with more than five or six people. Because if it's more than that, then you're not at the point where you have enough information to weigh in — almost by definition, people are still ideating in meetings of that size. Preparation for meetings is really important. You shouldn't go into any meeting where you say, "So, what's this meeting about?" That happens more than you might think.

**Q. What is the toughest conversation you've had with someone you're mentoring?**

A. The toughest was with someone who had a really bad thing happen to him early in his life. He told me that he brings it up a lot at work, and it was clear to me that doing so probably made many of his colleagues uncomfortable. I said to him, "I know that you might find it liberating to do that, and I know that it did help define you. But that's not really appropriate to be talking about at work." That conversation helped turn around his work life.

**Q. What insights have you gained about corporate cultures over the years?**

A. The biggest problem is the dark side of collaboration — how many people are you going to talk to about a decision before you make that decision? And sometimes you have to do a lot of work beforehand to get everybody to agree with a decision, and then the meeting is just to announce the decision that's already been made. I think that hurts corporate cultures. You should strive for meetings where you critique without criticizing and you disagree without being disagreeable. That drives to better ideas. But there are cultures where being candid is not encouraged.

**Q. What have been key leadership lessons in your own career?**

A. I've developed a few guiding principles over the years. One of them is to spend your time helping B students become A students, rather than C students become B students. Another version of the 90/10 rule is that you should spend 90 percent of your time on 10 percent of your decisions and 10 percent of your time on 90 percent of your decisions. And when you see a character flaw or a personality issue in an employee, you should always assume that it's not happening for the first time.

**Q. Where does your drive come from?**

A. Both my parents ran their own small businesses. That made my mother a bit of a trailblazer in her own right. They both ran on fear. I let go of the fear part, but I think that's where the drive started for me. Another thing that's contributed to the success I've had is to be the person who would always go the last mile. Anybody can do the first 90 percent, but very few people can do the last 10 percent. It's not fun. It's about really making sure something is truly finished, rather than fading out toward the end.