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# Working With a Challenging Boss: Start By Controlling What You Can Control

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*Over his wide-ranging career, [Alan Dean](#) has held many senior roles, including as CEO of N Brown Group in the UK. 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. Dean has a smart take on dealing with the all-too-common challenge of having a difficult manager.*

**Q. You've spent many years in leadership roles. What were the most important leadership lessons you've learned.**

A. I've seen both good and bad leaders across the different careers I've had. I was extraordinarily lucky to be given a huge amount of responsibility at a very young age in Rothschild's. They didn't know what to do with young graduates and they exposed us to big corporate deals well beyond our experience and age, so I watched and learned from leaders through the lens of transactions. I've also worked for an extraordinarily difficult leader who was a bully. I had five years in that company, and I expected him to fire me. But before I actually left, he got sacked. So I stayed and he went.

**Q. What are some of themes that come up time and again in your conversations with senior leaders?**

A. Their relationship with the CEO. Some clearly do not have a good relationship with their CEO, and so we spend a lot of time talking about how to make the best out of that dysfunctional relationship. And often it has to do with their sense of the CEO's performance. I try to get them to concentrate on what they are in control of, and how they can do a good job, rather than becoming particularly preoccupied with the performance of the CEO.

**Q. There are plenty of bad bosses out there. And some CEOs just prefer to keep their distance and not have much face-time with their direct reports. What should people do in those situations?**

A. It's difficult to direct the executive I'm mentoring to say to the CEO, "I think it's about time you had more one-to-ones with me." It's either part of the CEO's makeup or it isn't. And so they have to become more self-sufficient, and to focus on their job and their team.

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In one particular engagement, the executive was talking so much with me about the performance of the CEO that I said to them, "Please stop it. Get on and concentrate on your job. If it's really as bad as you say, the CEO is not long for this world." And the following week, the CEO was fired.

**Q. This gets to the core question of how the CEOs view their leadership teams. For some, they treat them as an actual team, but for others they are just a collection of individuals who are a team in name only.**

A. It's not unusual for CEOs to say they want to have more of a team. But there are companies that work quite well where the CEO prefers to work in an individual, one-on-one basis, and the team really isn't much of a team. I tend not to think that every CEO is wired the same way in regard to their teams. They may get just as good a result by having really good one-to-ones. I have a personal preference that the best leaders have really good teams, but the team members I often talk to frequently find themselves not feeling very team-like.

**Q. What else do you see accomplished executives struggle with that might surprise an outsider?**

A. Sometimes they are not as good as they can be at navigating difficult relationships. But the first step is to really understand the way they are wired, to form an idea of the best way they can actually deal with such challenges. Part of our work with the client is making them as self-aware as possible, and to be aware of their communication style and also the way

they deal with conflict. Those types of conversations help them navigate how they might deal with people with different communication styles and different approaches to conflict.

And by “conflict,” I don’t mean they’re fighting with one another. I just mean that their wishes don’t accord with whomever they’re talking. Sometimes they just need the ability to talk it through with somebody and hear themselves talking, and a lot becomes clearer in the process.

**Q. Right, but some colleagues really are difficult in ways that make it hard for people to do their jobs effectively.**

A. I don’t see that all that often, but when I do, I ask my client to put that colleague in a metaphorical box, to basically contain what they’re doing and allow them not to interfere with their normal operations. If they don’t have control over the situation, that’s not very easy. But in general, we’re fairly forgiving in the UK of that kind of performance, perhaps less so in the United States.

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The main thing I always come back to is to make sure the other’s person’s behavior is not clouding the judgment too much of my client. Again, the advice is not to confront the situation but largely to let it go, and not let it bother them. Ignore it. If I detect that it’s becoming too big on their radar and that it’s getting too much volume in terms of the way they look at the world, I tell them the only person that that is actually causing difficulty to is themselves. It doesn’t cure the other person. I stopped thinking long ago that I can influence anybody else. I can only help my client form the best possible response.

**Q. What is the five percent difference that separates a great CEO from a good CEO?**

A. Authenticity. In their role as leader, they are wholly one system, congruent with themselves as a human being. They’re not in the role of leadership. That to my mind is an edge. I can see the difference. It’s a matter of the journey through life that gives them a better sense of meaning, as distinct from playing the role of a leader. I don’t think it’s nature. It’s their experiences through life -- what they’ve seen, what they’ve heard, how they factor it in, who they’ve talked to, the whole gamut.