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It's Your Job To Speak Up To Your Boss (Even If They Don't Want To Listen)

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Over his wide-ranging career in the energy business, Cameron Byers has held numerous senior executive roles, including as president and CEO of BP Energy Co. North America. He is also 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 Byers, in which he shared his insights on how executives can sometimes develop a subordinate mindset if they have a difficult boss -- and how it is their responsibility to speak up.

Q. What have been some important leadership lessons for you personally?

A. The biggest eye-opener for me was when I moved into my first CEO position from the chief operating officer role. Naïvely, I thought it wouldn't be very different, because I was pretty much running the company as the COO anyway. But moving to the No. 1 position is a whole different ball game. Everything you say and do, even your body language, has a multiplier effect.

And suddenly everyone wants to speak with you, internally and externally. That's why it's so important to have a great team working for you, so you can focus on the strategic challenges. Because at the end of the day, your responsibility is to ensure that if you get run over by a bus, you better have a legacy that can continue without you.

Q. I imagine your experience is similar to what the senior leaders you're advising are facing. What are the most common themes you hear?

A. The first consistent theme that comes up is the lack of time and space to really focus on the strategic issues and the inability to be able to manage that. If you don't get a better handle as an executive on how you manage your calendar and time, there are ramifications that flow through the rest of the company. As a consequence, your organization is exhausted, and your team is not managing the priorities of the business, or themselves.

Q. So how do you resolve that?

A. The No. 1 thing that you should be focusing on as a CEO or C-suite executive is getting a diverse, powerful, productive team around you, because that enables you to empower and to entrust a team so that you can be very clear about what you should be focused on, like the strategy, as opposed to being dragged into the day-to-day.

Q. What else do you hear?

A. If they are C-suite or one level below the C-suite, they are often complaining about their boss. The biggest complaint is that they feel undermined by their boss, because they're going behind their back to micromanage their direct reports.

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Another problem is their boss blocks them from being able to present to other senior executives in the company. A third bucket is that their boss is not available – it's very difficult to get time with them. Or if they do get time, then their boss doesn't listen to them. There's no desire to hear others' opinions. It's very much, "This is the way it's going to be."

Q. So what do you advise them to do?

A. What I find fairly consistently is that individuals, particularly if they've been in big corporations for a long time, become very subordinate in their thinking. And so I tell them a couple of things. One is that you were hired for a reason, and that one of the implicit reasons for being hired into a senior role is to challenge your boss in a constructive and rational way.

Whether the boss likes it or not, it is your responsibility to share your ideas. Your boss may not be behaving in a way that they accept that readily, but from a business perspective, that's your responsibility. You weren't hired just to do what you were told.

The second thing I tell them is, "Look, you have more power than you believe you have, and I mean power with a small p. You're not a slave to the business you're in. You're not a slave to your boss. You're given a job description when you come in, and part of your job is to expand and change that job description to what you feel it should be."

I also try to get them to explore the external world to give them an idea of what their market value is. Knowing your market value gives you more confidence to have discussions with your boss without the fear of being fired.

And if they are having trouble with their boss, the best opening gamut for them in those conversations is to say, "How can I help?" Their bosses are struggling just as much as they are, if not more. So the offer of help can start to build a relationship of trust with the boss. Part of it is figuring out what your boss responds to well, and then adjusting your style to them.

Q. How else do you help the executives you're advising solve the time-crunch problem?

A. We start with their goals for the year, and then focus on whose help they need to achieve those goals, and how much they need their help. We look at their calendar and go through each of the meetings they have. Then the light bulb goes on – they are spending all this time with the wrong stakeholders, and it's not helping them achieve their goals. So we focus on the three most important goals, and the meetings that are most important to drive them. It's surprising how many meetings they start crossing off their schedules.

Q. What has been the toughest conversation you've had to have with a client?

A. A couple come to mind. One is that I get frustrated and concerned when I hear a lot of complaining of lack of resources and support. I had to say to one client, "Nobody wants to hear it anymore. You need to shape up and start taking more risks and making more decisions. Don't blame it on other things. And what if you can't get any more resources or support. What would you do? You'll be surprised at what is achievable with limited resources or different ways of finding those resources. So instead of complaining, you need to figure out how you're going to do this without waiting for permission to do it."

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The other tough conversation I've had is where my client won't fire someone they should fire, so that they can create the strongest, most diverse, powerful team to support them. They might say that they can't fire the person because they're close to the CEO. And I'll say, "So what you're telling me is that you're going to be a less productive person and have a less productive team because you can't make that decision. You've got to do it."

The hard conversation is basically telling them, look, you're not acting as responsible executive. You're acting as if you're a kid at school. And I use that analogy, and I've had somebody actually shout at me in response and be very defensive about it. But I pushed back and said, you are here and being paid all this money to make these tough decisions, so go out and do what you need to do and don't wait for permission to do it.