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**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# In a New Job? Before Taking Action, Listen First and Understand the Role

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*[Note: This article was published as part of our original*

*"Leadership Moments" series. The series has since been changed to "Leading in the B-Suite" for a new focus on conversations about race in corporate America. The first interview in that series is [here](#).]*

**Patrick Gournay** has deep CEO experience at companies that include The Body Shop and Dannon. He is also a colleague of mine at **The ExCo Group**, a senior executive mentoring and leadership development firm. Gournay shared powerful insights about challenges that leaders face when they move into top roles.

**Q. What are the themes that come up most often when you're advising senior executives?**

A. How you manage your time is foundational in any kind of leadership conversation. And that conversation usually leads to not just how do you manage your time, but how you manage your business and your life. What's important for you, what should your focus be?

That conversation usually happens in the context of a transition, because we are working with people who are often new in their roles, as a CEO or C-suite leader. What is the new job? It's also about understanding that you cannot just repeat what you did before. You have to reinvent yourself and the way you operate as a leader in those new situations.

**Q. What is the playbook for moving into a new role so that you**

## have impact?

A. One of the most important things is to be able to listen first and learn the business. Too often, people feel they are supposed to jump into a new role and immediately have a new strategy. But that's not how reality works.

Often, when you are offered a CEO or C-suite job, the company is doing it for a reason. There's usually an expectation from upper management to do things differently or more aggressively or to turn things around. The first step is to take the time to really understand what you're dealing with before you start acting.

*"You have to develop your own vision for the business."*

You want to spend time with all your stakeholders and experts to get a fresh view of the business. You have to forget whatever your particular boss, or bosses, are telling you to do. You have to develop your own vision for the business, and then develop it with your team so that they will own the adventure and the goals.

There are folks who do that very well and others who have a hard time being in the driver's seat because they are religiously listening to what their boss has to say. It's a demanding job and for you to do it well, you need to have your own drivers. You need to get your adrenaline going, and that comes with saying, this is what I believe I have to do.

**Q. What have been key leadership lessons that you learned over the course of your career?**

A. In my 20 years of being a CEO, working with and developing teams has been the part that I enjoyed doing most. It was very rewarding. The most frustrating part of a CEO's job for me was having to deal with the board of directors.

**Q. Why?**

A. More often than not, boards are more focused on governance than business dynamics. They have a fiduciary responsibility and they need to protect themselves. And when it comes to business matters and strategy they tend to look at it from their past experience and war stories without consideration to the unique nature of the business they are controlling.

I always recommend to new CEOs to be very careful of that, and to make sure that you never consider board members, even the most business-oriented ones, as personal advisors. Their interest is not in you. Their interest is in the business and practicing good governance. But you have to invest time in those relationships, and that was not something that I did as much as I should have.

One of the most interesting things in mentoring work is that you realize how many mistakes you've made in the past, and that helps you guide people not to make the same mistakes. It sometimes can be difficult because it forces you

to go back to the past and say, why did I do that? Why didn't I do it differently?

**Q. Other lessons?**

A. Being ahead of the curve, and being one step ahead of your current success and really assessing your situation, is critical. Your biggest competitors a few years from now many not be the ones you're competing against today. Don't consider things as they have been in the past. Things are going to happen that will disrupt your industry, creating new situations that you may not be prepared for.

That can create a sense of anxiety for a lot of leaders. They are never happy with what's happened. That is clearly a good thing for the business. It can be hard to manage those feelings from time to time, because it's very demanding, but it's part of being a CEO or someone who wants to really take responsibility for their business — not just now but in the future, as well.

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You can find that in founders more because, in a sense, they are the business. Managers can go into a new job, make some short-term changes, and then move on to the next job after a few years. Founders are there for a longer period of time and they have to make sure that

they are capable of permanently questioning and challenging the status quo and thinking about the new idea and trying to see around corners.

That's why a good CEO should not spend too much time running the business. I had a boss who said to me when I was starting to get more responsibility, "You are paid too much to work." He meant that at these levels, you're paid to think, not to work. But people in leadership roles often get distracted, and they don't have the time to think.

The measure of a leader is to be able to learn, synthesize and drive the business.

**Q. If you were on a board choosing among two CEO candidates, what is the X factor that you would looking for that separates one from the other?**

A. Guts. Somebody who has enough independence to tell you what they think and not just what you want to hear.