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For Leaders, Setting the Right Speed of Change Can be a Tricky Balancing Act

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John Schuster has deep experience as an entrepreneur, author of many books and articles on leadership, and now as a mentor at our firm, The ExCo Group, where we work with senior executives and leadership teams. John shared smart insights on self-awareness, the pace of change and a company's "emotional force field."

Q. What are the themes that have come up most often when you're working with senior executives?

A. There's always an organizational quagmire set of things to go after, whether it's strategic or operational or cultural. I call it a quagmire because it's never an easy fix from my experience. If they have to dig into organizational stuff, sometimes it takes strategic cunning and sometimes it takes operational prowess and persistence.

Sometimes they have the proverbial peer from hell or boss from hell and they have to navigate that. You then have to assess what tools and skills they have, or don't have, to address these challenges. And you look at what you might be able to change and what can't you change.

Another is self-awareness — getting a sense of your blind spots and getting a perspective on yourself as a leader. In many ways, I think leadership is a self-awareness game, fundamentally. There can be raw power in those conversations, because those are often the least-tapped areas, and there can be big payoffs because those blind spots can really get in people's way.

Q. Do you find that there are some blind spots that are more common than others?

A. I would say pace is frequently not understood. Leaders can go too fast so that people can't keep up, or move too slowly, which happens a little less often, so that the change doesn't get enough steam behind it.

Pace is a tricky one because CEOs get conflicting feedback on everything, so they have to sort through it and make their own decisions about the speed of change — how uncomfortable are they going to make people, and how uncomfortable does the organization need to be, while also making sure there is management support and operational consistency so that you don't make people crazy. It's a tough one to calibrate, and you can be right one day and wrong the next.

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Another set of blind spots is what you could call team blind spots. The common ones are that there are favorites, while others on the team are underused. There are also the political blind spots in terms of who's presenting the truth versus who knows how to manipulate the boss.

Blind spots are so broad ranging, but generally there's a problem that they haven't really confronted or seen about themselves, and they always thought it was a strength. That could be things like having to be the smartest guy in the room, and they don't realize how they're cutting people off and interrupting them. That makes for tough team dynamics.

Q. Through the executives you work with, you get windows into different corporate cultures. What are the patterns you see there?

A. The classic ones are lack of forthrightness. Is there frank, open communication? Another is a very limited capacity for innovation, and people with great ideas either get cut off or don't have enough sponsors to keep their innovations going. And these days, with so much disruption, that's a killer.

I'm also interested in understanding what I call a company's "emotional force field." What does it feel like to work there? That's the hardest thing to maintain, and to keep people engaged and motivated long-term. I fly Southwest Airlines pretty often, and I continue to be impressed with how they pull that off.

For me, the bottom line is, does it feel good to work there, at job after job after job and month after month

after month? It's not going to be like that all the time, of course, because there's too much change, and everybody has to be mature enough to work through difficult times when it's high stress and maybe your rewards aren't as great. But over time, what does it feel like?

Q. But is that just another way of saying culture?

A. Culture is a set of management and leadership practices that create an emotional environment, and the emotional force field is how all the symptoms show up from the systems, including those that maybe weren't very well designed or managed or led.

You can put a really good manager inside a system that's bad, and before too long, the emotional force field starts to improve. You can put a really bad manager inside a place where there's all kinds of good practices, and it doesn't take long before the emotional force fields start to go downhill fast. A lot of it is based on the personality of the leader or the personality of the leadership team.

Q. What's been your best hiring question over the years?

A. "Do you consider yourself a lucky person?" You get all kinds of interesting responses. You learn how positive they are or you hear a sense of gratitude or you hear that they think it's a matter of timing and seizing opportunities. With others, you'll hear their philosophy that there's a reason behind everything, even though at the moment it looks like luck. That's reasonable to me.

But I like it when people say things like, yes, I am lucky and they have some strong expressions of gratitude. They don't attribute too much to their own skill. During the interview process, you're asking people to toot their own horn a lot, and I like the humility that can come out with someone saying, "Yeah, I am lucky to have met the right people at the right time and to have the opportunities I've had."