



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

Working in a Matrixed Company Can Be Frustrating. Don't Take It Personally.

Published on November 6, 2019



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

[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](#).]

*As a former executive vice president at Intel, **Tom Kilroy** has deep experience navigating a matrixed organization. He is now a colleague of mine at **The ExCo Group**, where we specialize in mentoring senior executives and working with leadership teams. Tom shared smart insights around key patterns he's seen in advising leaders.*

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

A. A big one revolves around the challenges they face in navigating the enterprise. How do you get things done, especially in a matrixed environment? The first step is not to take things personally because the natural tendency can be to recoil. You're getting blocked, the right things aren't getting done and it can be easy to just start complaining about it instead of attacking it and trying to break through.

Some people might say they don't want to be political, but politics are everywhere and you need to understand that it's just the way companies work. There are agendas, people are competitive and want to do their jobs, so it's an inevitable consequence. So then the question is, how do you navigate the politics?

Feeling frustration doesn't accomplish anything, and I'll point out the consequences of being stalled and not being able to move forward. When you're in these difficult situations, sometimes it's just not going to work. But if you don't speak up in a constructive way, you're guaranteed not to address the problem.

Q. Other common themes?

A. Making the tough call with people who aren't working out is another. At almost all levels and across different industries, there is a tendency to let things linger. I remember early in my career, I was interviewing for a management job and the interviewer said, "So how many people have you fired?"

It was a great question. Inevitably, people struggle with it. But again, you have to think of the consequences of inaction, not just for that person, but also for those around them. Most of the time, it's obvious when you have to make a decision on a person, and you need to realize that you're being viewed as weak by others by not addressing it. You're tarnishing your own credibility as a leader.

*"Too often leaders settle
because they want to hire
quickly."*

The same is true about making tough calls on hiring. Those decisions are critically important because once you bring somebody on, it's an

investment in terms of getting the person integrated into the organization. But too often leaders settle because they want to hire quickly and get on with it instead of not settling for anything less than the best candidate.

When they pull the trigger too early on a hire instead of being patient, and they realize after four to six weeks that they made a mistake, generally they don't address it and figure they just have to deal with it. And now they're in a predicament.

Q. When you're advising clients about this, what do you tell them in terms of how high to set the bar in terms of whether to keep someone on their team?

A. It boils down to being fair to the individual, and ensuring you are investing in their development. Are you doing everything you can to help them and giving them access to resources to help them? You can't have too quick a trigger. I always say be direct and fair. Maybe you're not understanding everything and you should give the person the benefit of the doubt.

Ask questions, learn how they feel about it, and give them an opportunity to turn things around. In the gray areas, your instincts might be leaning one way but then you have to ask yourself whether you really have the full picture. If you do, and you feel like you've been fair, then you can't delay and you have to make the tough calls.

Q. You were in management and leadership positions for 30 years.

What were key lessons for you?

A. In one of the early companies I worked with, I had a manager who asked me, “Are you in your comfort zone?” And I answered, “Yeah, I’m feeling pretty good.” And he said, “Good, well, you need to find a way to get out of your comfort zone.” The message was that you have to stretch yourself.

And that lesson was important years later when the CEO of Intel asked me to step out of my sales management role to lead Intel’s largest business group. We had a good relationship, and I looked at him and said, “You’re crazy.” And I meant it, because I didn’t have an engineering background.

It was pivotal for me because I had to figure out how to start over and reboot myself to understand how I was going to add value. I told the new team that I was going to ask a lot of questions, and I needed them to invest time to help me learn and understand their part of the business.

I probably had more impact and key learnings in my four years in that role than at any other time in my career. If I didn’t have that moment of being yanked out of my comfort zone, I would have never had that experience.

Q. What about lessons from earlier in your career as a first-time manager?

A. When you're young, you can get too caught up in your title, not wanting to look weak and thinking that you're supposed to know everything instead of asking questions and being a good listener. Again, it's about asking good questions with the intent to really listen.

Q. What are your insights on the biggest momentum killers in corporate cultures?

A. It's usually from a lack of clarity or consistency in terms of whether the leadership team is bought into the desired behaviors of the culture. To me, the key test of cultural values is whether the leadership team and the CEO are being held accountable to them.

Accountability is a critical part of a successful culture, but is it exemplified at the top of the corporation? You can't get buy-in for values throughout a broad organization of tens of thousands of people if they don't see the senior leadership team living by them.