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# The Struggle With Defining "Strategy:" What is Your Competitive Advantage?

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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](#).]*

**Richard Rankin**, one of our mentors at **The ExCo Group**, has deep leadership experience as the former CEO of ACH Food Companies. In our conversation, he shared smart insights about why companies struggle with defining their strategy, and why leaders need to focus more on performance when evaluating their teams.

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

A. There often is a surprising lack of clarity around what they are trying to do strategically. I spend a lot of time trying to get people to crystallize what they're trying to do, not in their day-to-day routine, but to drive change and support the organization as it moves forward.

**Q. I hear this theme a lot. Why do so many leaders struggle with this simple question of what they are trying to accomplish?**

A. You've got to take the time to work on it. If you're under a lot of pressure, then what is urgent gets done and what is important doesn't necessarily get done, and strategy's one of those things that you can put off.

It's also really difficult to do. The strategy should define how you are going to win, so there's this notion embedded in it of competitive advantage and how you're going to position your company. Lots of companies struggle with that. And it shows up in leaders' inability to explain to the organization in a concise way where we're going.

The best strategy is not just written by a CEO. It should be written by the team. That way, you get buy-in, and that takes a lot of time and a lot of effort.

**Q. Other themes?**

A. We talk a lot about how to navigate their organization, using persuasion and building a network of allies to get their point across. If you want to drive change or a new initiative, you should sound out your point of view with other people to understand where the opposition lies and what the difficulties will be to achieve what you want to achieve. People often struggle with that.

Another is helping people evaluate the quality of the people on their team. I often find the people I'm mentoring could be more thoughtful about the staff they have — whether they are up to the job, can be coached to do the job or have to go.

**Q. Those are often subtle judgment calls. What's your framework for helping them think about that?**

A. When I talk to people about the performance of a member of their

team, you often hear that they're really nice, great team player, very loyal, been here for ages, etc.

I will then say, "That's very interesting but irrelevant to the discussion we're having. We're assessing performance here, not whether you like somebody. What are their objectives? How are they doing against their objectives?" That helps build a framework for the discussion.

*"Often people avoid making the hard decision, but also avoid putting in the effort to make them better."*

If the person on their team is coming up short, then I'll ask, "What feedback have you given them about their performance? And if you put effort into developing this person, are they going to reach the level that you want them to? And if not, then you have to make the hard decision." Often people avoid making the hard decision, but also avoid putting in the effort to make them better.

**Q. What are the most common blind spots you see in your clients?**

A. My clients often don't understand the impact they have on people. They think their connection is better with their people than it really is. One element that contributes to that is the deference to authority, something I see more of in the United States than in the U.K.

People in authority may think that they've got a good relationship with their team, and they're getting genuine discussions and feedback. But in reality, people are feeding back to them what they think they want to hear. It takes work to break through that to get honest feedback. That also requires a genuine interest in hearing other points of view.

**Q. What are the most important leadership lessons you've learned?**

A. Early in my career, I believed that life would be easier if people left their personality at the door when they came to work. But then I moved into roles where I was faced with getting a much bigger organization to work for me. My success was going to be created by them.

My company sent me off to see a management coach who asked me to do something that seemed odd in the moment. I was going on a skiing holiday, and she told me to go make a friend while I was on the trip. We talked about the importance of sharing something personal and surprising about yourself to connect with others.

It sounds so simple, but that coaching had the desired effect, and I began my development into someone who could make an emotional connection with people in the organization, and that was absolutely fundamental for me to be able to become a CEO. We changed the culture because my relationships with people were so important.

**Q. Where did this notion of “check your personality at the door” come from?**

A. Early on, I expected work to be more of an intellectual exercise. It was going to be about analysis, logic, clarity of perspective and problem-solving. Fast-forward 30 years, and I now understand that it's about getting the right people and getting the best out of them.

Analysis only gets you so far, as it describes the playing field you are on, making clear your assumptions. But it doesn't actually determine what you need to do. Back then, I thought business was just a mathematical problem, but now I understand that it's a human problem.

**Q. What were big influences for you when you were very young?**

A. My mother was always encouraging me to do better. "Whatever you do, Richard, give it your best shot," she would say. Now, the inverse of that is that what I was doing was never good enough. I got scholarships for my secondary school, became captain of the school rugby team and played a lot of sports, including squash and cricket. I wouldn't say I was a leader of a pack or anything like that. I was far too conventional to be sort of a rebel. I was just a good citizen of the school and reasonably successful both academically and on the sports field.

I had a discussion with one CEO I worked for about the ups and downs of being driven by insecurity. Insecurity can be a tremendous driver, as it was for me early on. It pushes you to prove yourself to yourself all the time. However, there is a downside, and the downside sometimes is that you don't make decisions that you ought to make because you're too uncertain. Insecurity can be great up to a point, but then you do have to get on with things and make a decision.