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Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

What Are the Three Critical Levers You're Going to Pull to Drive Growth?

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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](#).]

*In our conversation, **Jim Mannebach**, my colleague and one of our mentors at **The ExCo Group**, shared insights about the importance of prioritization and focus in business, and why being patient for progress in your career can be so challenging.*

Q. What are the themes that emerge most often with the executives you're advising?

A. One that is fairly common is prioritization – getting people to focus on the critical few things rather than pursuing many more that they would like to do or think they should do. There's not a set playbook for that, but I try to help introduce the idea of a discipline around these discussions.

For instance, with prioritizing drivers of value, first you have to decide, "What is the value? What is success?" If you were an investor in the discussion, you'd ask, "What are the key drivers of value? How are you going to make money?" It can't be ten things, and it's not even five things. It may only be three things that the organization could and should do. The first step is to identify those three critical drivers of value creation, and then develop tactics around those and a monitoring process to ensure execution.

It's the last point that people struggle with the most, because when they think about strategic planning or tactical implementation, they often forget about monitoring execution. If there really are three things that are going to drive value, we better be on top of these in a regular cadence, whether it's weekly or monthly. It's not just about defining something and then placing it on a shelf.

When you develop tactics, it's important to monitor progress in a crisp way, but it's equally important to challenge whether the tactics are still relevant as you progress. You can't be a slave to a particular course of action, because the world changes pretty quickly, and consequently you may have to tweak or make wholesale changes to the tactics.

Q. What are the challenges you see in different corporate cultures?

A. Insecure bosses are probably one of the biggest problems I see. They feel like they have to be the smartest person in the room, rather than revel in the fact that they've got really bright people who are smarter in certain areas. That can be a real momentum killer for companies.

If you're comfortable in your own skin, it will be okay to have somebody who's barely out of college knowing more about a particular topic than you'll ever hope to know. Isn't that what you're after?

Q. Blind spots are a big challenge for all executives. What are the most common ones you see?

A. They start with people just keeping their nose to the grindstone and

working too hard, and not coming up for air to look at the business and asking whether what they're doing still makes sense. Consequently, there can be forces affecting the business that they didn't anticipate.

It's easy to say in hindsight, "We should have known about that." But often the early indicators are there, and if you take the time to reflect on them, you can challenge the business model in a robust way, especially if you bring others into the process to challenge your thinking.

Q. What were some key leadership lessons you've learned over the course of your life?

A. Earlier in my career, I can remember a number of people pointing out that I could seem to be in too much of a hurry to get to the next level or the next promotion. Somebody I worked with coached me on the fact that the jobs will come if you're just patient and continue to perform. He was absolutely right.

With some of the younger people we are mentoring, I can spot the same impatience that I had back then. It's the desire to move fast. Part of it is just being human. When we start to slow down as we get older, it's because we don't have that much time left on the clock. The weeks and years fly by. But when you're younger, they seem to crawl, which can make people feel like they have to move faster. I often give that counsel to people to slow down.

Q. It can be hard for people to slow down if they're ambitious.

A. True, and I've lived that myself. I have a knack for being able to look at what appears to be a lot of disparate dots, and then draw connections between those dots pretty rapidly. Because of that ability, I can get too far in front of my team or other stakeholders, and then they start to get uncomfortable with how fast I'm moving. What I consider moving decisively they may see as moving recklessly. I learned over time to make sure I was fully considering all the stakeholders as I was trying to exploit opportunities.

Q. What were big influences for you earlier in life?

A. My parents were divorced when I was 16, and my mom and my grandmother were the biggest influences on my life. They both worked constantly, maybe too much. That's what instilled my drive in me. They were the role models for that.

The downside of that is that they didn't really understand how to enjoy relaxing, and I don't really know how to do that either. I don't get the concept of two-week vacations like my European colleagues take. I've got to be in motion. I've got to be doing things. I just can't operate that way. My mother and grandmother were transformative role models, but I wish there would have been a little more balance and relaxing on the other side of the equation.