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Art of Leading

Powerful insights from top leaders.

"So Much of Navigating This Difficult Time is About the 'How' of Leadership."

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*In our interview, **Michelle Peluso**, SVP, Digital Sales and CMO at IBM, shared compelling insights on leading through the*

pandemic, as well as memorable lessons on time management and the art of building a high-performing team.

Q. What are your thoughts on leading through this crisis?

A. Leadership is always the sum of the *what* and the *how*, and so much of navigating this difficult time is about the *how* of leadership – how we’re showing up for our teams, how we’re showing up for our clients, how we’re showing up for the world.

We’ve had a senior team meeting almost daily on the state of the state. Our first concern is the health and safety of the more than 350,000 people we have around the world, many of whom perform mission critical work. For all the teams working from home, a lot more empathy and communication are required. That connective tissue is more important than ever before.

Q. So much of being a leader right now is a balancing act of messaging.

A. It’s really critical to acknowledge the realities but provide hope. None of us has a crystal ball, so you have to be clear that there will be continuing degrees of uncertainty. That’s why agility is so critical right now, because we’ve had to pivot a lot of things really quickly, and we’ve had to work at a rate and pace that is intense.

And everybody is facing a different set of challenges. Maybe they have an elderly parent in their home, or they have an immunocompromised

person in their family, or maybe they have children at home, or maybe they have a spouse who's been laid off. Everyone's grappling with the magnitude of this crisis. That's why empathy is so important right now.

Q. Leading a team in this virtual environment creates its own challenges.

A. So much of what we have to do as leaders right now – and this is probably the hardest part about the virtual experience – is just to look for those signs of how people are doing. It's harder virtually when there are 15 people on a screen. You have to really train yourself to know who needs help or maybe who isn't coping as well.

The most difficult part for me in this virtual world is not having those moments in the hallway or getting coffee, when you can read somebody and know they need more support. We're all adapting and learning ways to try to do that virtually.

*"It's one of those times when
team matters an awful lot."*

A great team is very adaptable, and a great team can absorb stress and pressure from a colleague and share the workload. A great team is a better sensing and processing mechanism than an individual. It's one of those times when team matters an awful lot.

Q. It's been six years since I interviewed you for my Corner Office

series in The New York Times. How have you evolved as a leader?

A. I'm even more ruthless about how I use my time now. What are the priorities? What outcomes am I driving? I just have a lot less tolerance for meetings that take 60 minutes even though they need just 15 minutes.

I've tried even more to be really clear about my goals for the next 90 days. Is the way I'm using my time aligned with those goals? What can derail me? Do I have the right focus and the right people helping? I've just gotten more focused on that extraordinary asset of time and on investing it in ways that produce the best return.

Q. That's a big challenge for everyone. What are your tips?

A. I take the time to write down the outcomes I really want to drive in the next 90 days. When I do that, I'll also print out my calendar from the past few weeks and ask myself, what would I have changed?

Second, I don't schedule standing meetings for indefinite amounts of time. I may say that for the next three weeks, we have to focus on getting this digital experience right, and so I want a stand-up every other day for the next three weeks. I'm not going to say, let's schedule this one-on-one meeting or staff meeting for the same time each week or month in perpetuity.

I also have a chief of staff, and her job is to make sure that anything that gets on my calendar is aligned with my priorities. I also don't

schedule hour-long meetings. Every time someone asks for 30 minutes, I will give them 20 minutes max, and when people ask for an hour, I'll give them 40 minutes max. So I compress things. I do a lot of things in 15-minute increments. I also don't like presentations with big decks, so I really try to push people to tell me a story. Show me the data and what it means so we can drive to a conclusion.

"I think teams can solve the vast majority of things themselves."

I think teams can solve the vast majority of things themselves, and my job is to help set mission, to be clear about outcomes, to step in when there are real obstacles, to keep people on pace, and to inspire people to do their best work.

Once you free yourself from feeling the need to make most of the decisions as the leader, and if you genuinely believe that incredible things happen when you give your teams space — and that even when they get it wrong, they'll learn and get better — then that enables you to rethink your role and your time and where you can add the most value.

Q. To build a high-performing team, you need great players. What qualities do you look for when you're hiring?

A. I put a real premium on curiosity. More and more, I appreciate how

the life of a skill is short, which is why it's so important to be an avid learner. Second, I've always put a real premium on team and humility. Different skills coming together produces better and more powerful results, so I've always valued people who can extract the best not just from themselves but those around them.

And then we add a spice of courage. It's the time to try bigger things, bolder things, and you've got to have that inherent competence and resilience to be willing to be the one to raise your hand, try something big, try something bold. And if it doesn't work, you learn from it and pick yourself back up. You need the audacity to dream big and the grace to propel yourself along even when you fall.

Q. What do you want to be better at as a leader in coming years?

A. I'm thinking about this so much right now in the pandemic, but I would say to deepen my ability to move things at tremendous scale quickly. From a personal leadership perspective, I think the clock gets reset every morning. Every night when I go to bed, I think about the things I could have done better — I could have been more empathetic, for example, or I could have been clearer up front about that project, or I should have listened better.

That's the beauty of this mantle of leadership. You earn it, and every day the clock starts again. You always have the opportunity to show up better for your teams. You always have the opportunity to deepen your ability to inspire and get the best from your team.

And moments like this remind you of that. It's a smack in the face because your tried-and-true ways aren't available to you anymore. I can't walk the halls, I can't pop into join people's stand-up meetings, I can't see how people feel, I can't drop by a happy hour. So I need new ways of leading. The principles are the same, but the methods have to change. So it's another wakeup call, and another reminder that we can always, always get better.